



LAURA HIRVI

# Identities in Practice

*A Trans-Atlantic Ethnography of Sikh Immigrants  
in Finland and in California*

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# Preface

Every person who has crafted a written ethnography based on fieldwork knows that the text, which is presented here, is not a final product but a document that reflects a certain point of saturation in the process of making it. He or she also knows that this is not a written proof of a loner's skills but rather a piece of work that represents collective efforts. If I look in hindsight at this book's entire production process, and equal it mentally with a journey, it becomes clear that I, here in the role of the author and researcher, could not have made the trip without the valuable support of various kinds of companions. This written ethnography, I dare to argue, is in that sense a kind of reflection of what human beings are able to create through collaboration.

Now it appears that often in life we fail to grasp the chance to thank others for the help they have given us; the moment flies by too fast and gets swallowed in the roar of everyday life. Luckily, however, the preface as a ritualistic act offers scholars the valuable opportunity to acknowledge those who have encouraged them to make this journey, and who have supported and accompanied them along the way. In this regard I would like to thank first of all Professor Laura Stark (University of Jyväskylä) and Professor Hanna Snellman (University of Helsinki) who have guided me through the challenges that I encountered in this academic chapter of my life. I am grateful for your continuous willingness to offer me advice and I cherish the fact that both of you always gave me the feeling that you believe in me. This kept me grounded in moments of doubt and encouraged me to continue walking through, no matter what. Thank you so much, Laura and Hanna!

Likewise I would like to use this opportunity to thank University Distinguished Professor Caroline Brettell (Southern Methodist University) and Professor Laura Huttunen (University of Tampere) who were both kind enough to reserve some of their valuable time to give me great constructive feedback concerning this text at hand. In the course of my research I also received immense support from the Department of History and Ethnology (HELA) and the University of Jyväskylä. Not only did they support this research through various kinds of research grants, but also, and more importantly, they offered me an intellectual environment in which I found it highly stimulating to work. The numerous discussions with colleagues and the feedback that I received from them in connection with various seminars

were especially helpful in this regard and contributed significantly to the making and progress of this ethnography.

Further, I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the financial support that I received from NOS-HS, which enabled me to craft this study as a member of an international and interdisciplinary research project. With reference to the NOS-HS project, I would like to thank especially project leader Kristina Myrvold (Assistant Professor, Lund University), whom I admire for her vision, her enthusiasm and her efficiency. In particular, I would like to thank Kristina for her continuous striving to support young scholars like myself and to introduce them into the academic world. Likewise, I would like to thank my dear NOS-HS colleagues Knut A. Jacobsen (Professor, University of Bergen) and Ravinder Kaur (Associate Professor, University of Copenhagen) for their thought provoking comments, which I had the privilege to receive over the years. In connection with our annual project meetings I also had the great opportunity to learn from experienced scholars, and it is clear to me that this work has tremendously benefited from the comments I received from Professor Eleanor Nesbitt (University of Warwick), Professor Kim Knott (Lancaster University), Professor Doris Jakobsh (University of Waterloo), Senior Associate Nicola Mooney (University of the Fraser Valley), and Dr. Brian Keith Smith (UC Santa Cruz). In this context, I would also like to express my deep gratitude to Professor Eleanor Nesbitt who was kind enough to do the proof reading of this book. In addition, I want to thank all the members of the 'Sikhs in Europe'-network, which was founded by Kristina Myrvold; the discussions I had with many of you were greatly valuable for this study and had an important impact on my intellectual thinking!

While NOS-HS took me on a tour of the Scandinavian countries, Fulbright and the Ellen and Artturi Nyyssönen foundation gave me the unique chance to spend the academic year 2009-2010 at UC Santa Barbara in California. In this period of my studies, I had the great privilege to collaborate with Professor Gurinder Singh Mann (UC Santa Barbara), whom I want to thank for his tremendous support and for putting me in touch with junior and senior Sikh scholars. Thanks to Prof. Mann I had the chance to meet, amongst others, Professor Emeritus Bruce La Brack (University of the Pacific) and Professor Karen Leonard (UC Irvine) who both took the time to talk with me about my research in Yuba City. Thanks to Karen Leonard, I later on also had the honour to meet Professor George Marcus (UC Irvine). The conversations I had with Professor Marcus were extremely inspiring, and his passion for ethnographic fieldwork is not only impressive but also 'contagious'.

In addition, I would like to express special thanks to Professor Tuomas Martikainen (University of Helsinki), who supported my research and my academic career in many, many ways. This ethnography has also greatly benefited from the comments that I received from Senior Lecturer Miikka Pyykkönen (University of Jyväskylä) and Adjunct Professor and University Lecturer Suvi Keskinen (University of Turku). Besides the already mentioned institutions, I am also very thankful for the financial support that I received from the City of Helsinki, the Finnish Concordia Foundation and the

Finnish Cultural Foundation, through which I was able to conduct fieldwork, participate in conferences and work full-time on this research.

At this point, I would also like to express my deepest gratitude for the help and support that I received from my dear family and friends. You were the ones who encouraged me to walk this way and backed me up throughout the journey. I want to thank you all for the many shared and precious moments of joy, sorrow, laughter and talking that helped me to keep my balance. Especially, I want to thank my parents, Dieter and Riitta, for giving me the confidence to pursue my (academic) dreams in life. My husband Jukka I would like to thank for his open-minded attitude and his willingness to support my work as a young female researcher. Our daughters Jade and Leonie I would like to thank for their great travel spirit and for being the sun in my life that shines like the sun during Finnish midsummer. Special thanks go to my brother Karlo for his technical support and to my mother-in-law Ulla and sister-in-law Johanna for their constant childcare support. In addition, I would like to thank Michael Stark, Julie Stark and William 'Dub' McFarland who all three were tremendously helpful during my fieldwork in Yuba City.

I would also like to thank Ashgate for the permission to use in Chapter Two parts that had been already published earlier on in the chapter: 'Sikhs in Finland: migration histories and work in the restaurant sector', in *Sikhs in Europe* ed. Knut A. Jacobsen and Kristina Myrvold (Farnham etc.: Ashgate, 2011). At this point, I also want to thank the anonymous reviewers of this book for the insightful comments that helped to improve the quality of this study.

But where would this study be without the willingness of Sikhs in Helsinki and in Yuba City to participate in this research? What would I write about if they had not taken precious time to talk with me and allowed me to peek into their lives and their experiences by inviting me to their homes and to various social events? I want to thank all Sikhs in Helsinki and Yuba City from the bottom of my heart for your trust, patience, hospitality, and for your kind willingness to support this research. This work is dedicated to you. All I am left to say to my travel companions is: *Bahut dhanyavaad, kiitos, danke*, thank you! And to those of you who now embark to reading this ethnography I wish a *bon voyage!*

Espoo, 28 February 2013,  
*Laura Hirvi*



# 1 Setting the Scene

In today's world, an ever-increasing number of people migrate from one place to another. Scholars have been interested in exploring the impact of human migration on the lives of immigrants who leave behind a familiar setting in exchange for settling in a place which initially appears to be strange. Wishing to examine how people who are faced with such situations carve out a place for themselves in the societies in which they have settled, this study focuses on the ways in which immigrants and their children negotiate their identities. In the ethnography that unfolds in the following pages, the focus is on examining the experiences of self-identified Sikhs, who migrated to the metropolitan area of Helsinki (Finland) and to Yuba City (California), and the impact that this event had on their lives as well as the lives of their (grand-) children. Due to their long migration history and their vast global dispersion, Sikhs, who originate from the area of Punjab in Northern India, provide an especially interesting case study for exploring the impact that the experience of migration has on people's lives.

In particular, my intention is to offer empirical data that highlights the manner in which people with a migration background position themselves or are positioned by others in the cultural, social and religious lifeworlds they are embedded in. The three specific research questions that I seek to address in this study are: Why and how do Sikhs migrate? How do they negotiate their identities through the practices that they carry out in their everyday lives? What impact does the surrounding context have on this process? Focusing on these research questions that help to highlight the causes and consequences of Sikh migration to Helsinki and Yuba City, I intend with this ethnographic, contrastive research to add to a continuously growing body of literature on South Asian immigrants in Finland as well as in California, and on the Sikh diaspora in particular.

Trying to reach a deeper understanding of the various ways in which people may live their lives is essential in a world where more and more people with different cultural backgrounds move closer and closer together, hence increasing the need for mutual respect that I see as the basis for people's attempts to understand each other. Ethnographers who have as one of their main aims the making of the unfamiliar more familiar to themselves and others are especially poised to further the growth of mutual

understanding. They do so by creating ethnographies that explore the manifold manifestations of culture, and by telling stories 'of life as it has been lived and is being lived at this very moment' (Escobar *et al.* 1994: 223).

Culture, as defined in this study, is seen as a fluid matrix of meanings that guides people through their everyday lives. It offers people a set of norms, values and customs that they can follow. This cultural matrix is far from being fixed, finished, or final but is continuously (re-) shaped through practices carried out by human beings who are entangled in it (see Gilroy 1992: 57). Following anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1984:158), my point of departure is that being enmeshed in cultures shapes the way people see, feel, act, and think in this world and navigate through it. At the same time, cultures condition the process through which people negotiate identities. Hence, I consider the relationship between people and cultures to be of a reciprocal character: people make cultures and cultures make people. By conceptualising the relationship between cultures and peoples in this manner, I acknowledge the constraining forces of cultures, yet at the same time I strive to recognise human beings as active agents who over the course of time have the capability to change the elements of which a cultural matrix is made. The urge to change and challenge the hegemonic cultural matrix is a characteristic of many subcultures (see, for example, Schwöbel 2008).

The capacity of human beings to transform a cultural matrix becomes also particularly evident when looking at the case of immigrants, who move from one place to another by bringing some cultural baggage along with them (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:7). The 'stuff' of which cultures are made may change in the course of this journey, just as any culture changes in the course of time. People who, for example due to migration, have come into close contact with alternative cultural maps for how to navigate through life appear to be often well aware of the powerful role they – as human beings – play in modelling cultures. This awareness comes to the fore in a statement by one of my Yuba City informants<sup>1</sup> in which he reflects on how he perceives that the experience of migration and of living in America has influenced his life. As Suraj<sup>2</sup>, who is now retired, explains:

I was born in India, I came to this country, and my culture came with me. Things that are not good in it, I get rid of them; the things that are good in my culture, I take in; things that are good in this culture, I take them in.

The purpose of this ethnography is to describe and analyze the ways in which Sikhs negotiate their identities. In this study that is based on 69 interviews with self-identified Sikhs, my intention is not to speak for my

- 1 I use the term 'informant' to refer to Sikhs in Helsinki and Yuba City who participated in this research by providing me with the large bulk of information upon which this ethnography is built.
- 2 Throughout this ethnography I ensured the informants' anonymity by using pseudonyms in the form of Sikh names. Only in cases where informants are referred to in their public roles as politicians or presidents of cultural organizations, for example, do I use their real names. More specific information concerning the interviews and interviewees can be found in Appendices One and Two.

informants but rather to transmit in the following pages the understandings and insights I reached regarding a lifeworld that Sikhs living in Helsinki and Yuba City allowed me to take part in. I hope to take readers on an imaginary journey, at the end of which they will know more, however partial, than they did before regarding the process through which Sikhs migrants in these two destinations carve out a place for themselves in their new contexts of settlement. The bridge I seek to build with the help of this ethnography is hopefully one that not only academics, but also a larger audience, will find possible to cross.

### *Research Questions and the Trans-Atlantic Contrast*

My first research question, ‘Why and how do Sikhs migrate?’ seeks to clarify the causes and circumstances of migration. To better understand the implications of the experience of migration, I explore the ways in which Sikhs position themselves in relation to others in different areas of life. Thus, the second objective of this study is to address the following research question: how do Sikhs negotiate their identities through the practices that they carry out in their everyday lives? As various scholars have pointed out, immigration provokes profound questions about identity (see, for example, Foley and Hoge 2007: 191). The reason for this can be explained through anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s (2002: 68) argument that identity becomes most important the moment it is threatened. The feeling of threat may be caused by the fact that immigrants are often, with regard to their ethnic and religious background, only a minority in the country in which they live and in their everyday life they might feel that they have to face the majority’s demands for adaptation, adjustment, assimilation and/or integration. How immigrants respond to these claims is reflected in the ways they negotiate their identities. Immigrants’ descendants, too, who grow up with different and in some instances perhaps contradictory cultural frameworks, have to position themselves against the backdrop of such expectations.

My assumption is that the process through which people negotiate their identities comes to the fore in people’s everyday practices. Hence, I focus in this study on examining the ordinary, day-to-day practices that Sikhs carry out in their everyday life, such as dressing, eating, and working. Practices of everyday life also provide the basis for longer-term ritual structures and symbolic events in the life-cycle. Therefore, I also explore in this study practices as carried out in relation to annual religious and cultural festivals as well as practices that Sikhs perform in relation to important life-cycle events such as weddings. Examining the question of how Sikhs with an immigrant background negotiate their identities through the practices that they carry out in their everyday life is of great importance as it helps us to better comprehend the complex strategies through which they position themselves and are positioned in the societies of which they are a part.

In order to better understand the roles played by the socio-political and cultural contexts in this process I decided to juxtapose the two case

studies of this research. Hence, my third research question asks what impact the surrounding context has on the process through which identities are being shaped. The research design of this study contrasts the experiences of immigrants and their descendants who share a similar religious, ethnic and cultural background but have settled in two different immigration contexts.<sup>3</sup> The need to include a comparative analysis in the field of migration studies has been pointed out by various scholars including geographer Russell King (2002; see also Brettell 2009). According to King (2002: 91), micro-scale studies focusing on one specific case study yield insights that apply to the studied group but may differ in many regards from similar groups somewhere else, and hence in order to claim a higher degree of representationality he argues that scholars need to make more use of comparative analysis.

Agreeing with this line of thought, the comparative approach across the Atlantic that is built into the design of this research seeks to achieve a higher degree of representationality for my research results. But although I focus in my study on a similar immigrant population in two different receiving contexts, I do not conduct a systematic, 'controlled comparative analysis' (Brettell and Hollifield 2008: 14) of the ethnographic data at hand. Rather, the juxtaposing of the two cases ran throughout the research process and shaped the final script that materialises itself in the written ethnography. In order to emphasise that this research is not based on the sort of systematic comparison that, for example, anthropologist Steven Vertovec (2000: 21ff.) had in mind when outlining a list of factors that should be taken into account when conducting a comparison, I use the terms 'contrast/ contrastive' instead of 'compare/ comparative' to describe the manner in which I have made use of the two case studies at hand.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the advantages of applying a contrastive perspective are similar to those that anthropologist Nancy Foner (2005) outlined for the comparative approach. One of the gains of building a contrast *a priori* into the research design is that it helps to create an increased sensitivity to seeing what is unique and what is more general in the experience of migrants and their children who are living in two different receiving societies. The juxtaposing of two case studies can also support the posing of new research questions, which in this study helped to shed new light on the much more

- 3 Contrasting the experience of Sikhs across the globe is not only done in this ethnography, but also by my Sikh informants, who occasionally engaged in such comparisons (see Chapter Six). While Sikhs in Yuba City seem to prefer to take Sikhs in Canada as a reference point for juxtapositions, Sikhs in Finland compare themselves more often to Sikhs in the UK and North America. From the perspective of those making such comparisons, Sikhs in these countries (Canada and the UK) have a longer migration history and therefore can be seen to highlight some of the future challenges, but also the opportunities, of Sikhs in Yuba City/ Helsinki. The fact that Sikhs in both countries engage in such comparisons across national borders demonstrates that the significant 'others', against whom identities are being negotiated, are not only to be found in the country of residence but also on a global scale.
- 4 See also ethnologists Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren (1982: 111ff.) who highlight the advantages of using the technique of contrast in the studies of cultures.

researched case of Sikhs in Yuba City. Further, applying the contrastive perspective helps ethnographers to spot differences and similarities between the two case studies, inviting them to reflect upon the role contextual factors may play in explaining them (see Brettell 2009). In this vein, applying a contrastive approach not only helps to reach a better understanding of the experience of migration, but can also reveal a great deal about the receiving societies (Foner 2005: 3-4). By juxtaposing both cases, and by further contrasting them with previous studies focusing on Sikh immigrants, either in the same location or somewhere else, this research design intends to produce a fruitful dialogue, through which I hope to highlight differences and also overlaps between the cases.

### *Why Sikhs in Helsinki and Yuba City?*

The reasons why I chose to focus in this study on Sikhs in Helsinki and Yuba City are several. For one, being the child of a migrant myself, I was interested to explore in more detail what impact the experience of migration has on the shaping of identities. As my case study, I wanted to take migrants from India, because I felt familiar with their cultural background due to the fact that during my undergraduate studies I had lived in different parts of India for about eight months. Sikhs who originate from the area of Punjab appeared to provide an especially interesting case study for scrutinising the experience of migration due to their long migration history and their vast global dispersion. By 1920, Sikhs already constituted a global community<sup>5</sup> with Sikh temples (*gurdwaras*) in many places around the world, including Hong Kong, London and Stockton,<sup>6</sup> and today it is estimated that there are around 2 million Sikhs living outside India (Mann 2004: 71,106).

Sikh migration overseas began in the period following the British annexation of the Punjab in 1849, when Sikhs started venturing abroad as soldiers of the Indian Army or as workers in the police and security services (McLeod 2000: 242). Hong Kong and Australia were two of the earliest destinations for Sikh migration (Tatla 1999: 48-49). The first Sikhs to set foot on Australian soil did so in the 1880s, and from there, some voyaged further to New Zealand and Fiji (McLeod 2000: 250). About a decade later, Sikhs started migrating to East Africa, but post-independence Africanisation policies forced some of them to leave the African colonies in which they had been living, and many of them decided to go to the United Kingdom, where they arrived as 'twice migrants'<sup>7</sup> in the mid-1960s (Bhachu 1985). Permanent Sikh settlement in the UK, however, had started already earlier in the 1920s (Singh and Tatla 2006: 44 ff.). In North America, the first Sikh

5 In this study 'community' is understood as a fluid and context-dependent concept.

6 The first gurdwara in the United States was opened in this city, located in California.

7 This term was coined by Parminder Bhachu (1985) who used it in her study to refer to Sikhs who migrated twice: first from India to East Africa and then from East Africa to the UK.

immigrants began to arrive at the turn of the century. Sikh migration to Canada reportedly was triggered by a visit from Sikh soldiers in 1897, as a result of which Canada became known in India as an attractive country for economic advancement (Nayar 2004: 16). After Canada began tightening its admission requirements, more and more Sikhs migrated to the United States (Leonard 1992: 31). Increasingly, Sikhs also began migrating to different parts of Europe including the Nordic countries where today about 14,000 Sikhs are to be found (Jacobsen and Myrvold 2011: 9).

One event that caused an increasing number of Sikhs to apply for political asylum in countries such as Germany, the UK and Canada was the attack on the Golden Temple in 1984 (Tatla 1999: 58ff.). Indira Gandhi, who was at that time the prime minister of India, gave the Indian army the order to storm the Golden Temple, which is a Sikh gurdwara located in Amritsar, Punjab. Her intention was to suppress through the so-called 'Operation Bluestar' a Sikh separatist movement. When the Indian army attacked the Sikh temple, they killed hundreds of Sikhs who had gathered there (Tatla 1999:1). Sikhs living in India and abroad interpreted the assault 'as an act of sacrilege' (Tatla 1999:113) and it led to a strong interest amongst Sikhs in India as well as those, who were living abroad, to create their own independent Sikh homeland called Khalistan. Soon after the Operation Bluestar, the Sikh bodyguards of Indira Gandhi killed her in an act of revenge. The period following these events was marked by severe struggles between Hindus and Sikhs in India, leaving Sikhs with the feeling of being persecuted in the country that until then they had perceived as their homeland.

Eager to find a safer place to live, a few Sikhs ended up migrating to Finland. But Sikh migration to Finland had begun already a couple of years earlier, in the early 1980s. Finland was therefore added to the map of Sikh migration destinations rather late if considered in the broader context of Sikh migration history, but relatively early if evaluated in the context of Finland's own immigration history (see Chapter Two). Since the beginning of Sikh migration to Finland in the 1980s, the community has grown considerably in size. Today, my estimate is that there are roughly 600 Sikhs currently living in Finland. This estimate is based on my fieldwork observations and on the fact that in 2010 there were, according to the Finnish *Population Register Center*, 421 persons registered in Finland with the last name *Singh* and 154 with the last name *Kaur*, both of which are typical Sikh surnames rarely used by ethnic Indians of other religions.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the fact that in 2011 there were 770 people listed in Finland as speaking Punjabi (see Table One), which is the mother tongue of many Sikhs,<sup>9</sup> can also be seen to support the argument that the number of Sikhs living in Finland lies somewhere around 600. Today, the Sikh community consists of men, women and children of all ages. Except for a few, the majority of male Sikhs have cut their hair and

8 Population Register Centre: [www.intermin.fi/vrk/home.nsf/pages/index\\_eng](http://www.intermin.fi/vrk/home.nsf/pages/index_eng), accessed August 11, 2010.

9 Regarding this factor, however, it has to be taken into consideration that many people from other religious backgrounds also speak Punjabi, such as Hindus from Punjab in India, and Muslims from Pakistan.

do not wear a turban in daily life. The number of *amritdhari* ('baptised'/initiated) Sikhs is minimal.<sup>10</sup> Like other South Asian immigrants in Finland (see Martikainen and Gola 2007: 32), the majority of Sikhs have settled down in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, which is also the location of the only public gurdwara in the country. Until now there have been no previously existing studies of Sikhs in Finland, which ultimately motivated my choice to do research on self-identified Sikhs living in the Helsinki metropolitan area.<sup>11</sup>

YEAR	1992	2000	2011
Number of Punjabi Speakers	178	346	770

*Table One: The number of Punjabi speakers in Finland 1992–2011 (Statistics Finland 2012).*<sup>12</sup>

In order to evaluate what impact context has on the process through which immigrants and their descendants negotiate their identities, this study includes a transatlantic contrast. I decided to contrast the case of Helsinki, Finland with the experiences and histories of Sikhs living in Yuba City, California. Yuba City was chosen because of the important role it has played in the history of Sikh migration to the United States of America. Taken together, the geographic locations I selected for this research allow a contrast of contexts in several regards. Yuba City, which according to the US Census 2010 had a population that was close to 65 000, is a rural town located in northern California. The state of California has been characterised by significant immigration, which is also reflected in Yuba City, where Sikhs have been living since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Yuba City, Sikhs make up 13.7 percent (~ 8800 persons) of the city's total population along with others who identified themselves in the US Census 2010 as 'Asian Indian'.<sup>13</sup> Unlike Yuba City, whose economic base is largely agricultural, Helsinki is the capital of Finland, a country that only relatively recently experienced an increase in immigration from outside of Europe. Taken together, all these factors make a trans-Atlantic contrast especially interesting and will hopefully increase our understanding of the dynamics that underpin the shaping of context-dependent identities.

10 I only encountered two in the course of my fieldwork.

11 The metropolitan area of Helsinki includes, besides the city of Helsinki, the neighbouring cities Vantaa, Espoo and Kauniainen. According to the data derived from *Statistics Finland* (2012), metropolitan Helsinki in 2011 had a total population of slightly higher than one million. From now on, the term 'Helsinki' refers to the 'Helsinki metropolitan area'.

12 Based on data retrieved from the online service of Statistics Finland, accessed July 8, 2012.

13 There are no official statistics on the size of religious groups in the United States. Based on Sikh residents' own estimates, there are approximately 8,000–10,000 Sikhs living in Yuba City and its neighbouring cities of Marysville and Live Oak.

## *A Brief Introduction to Sikhism*

Because the focus in this study is on Sikhs, it is important to give the reader unfamiliar with Sikhism a short overview of this ethno-religious group. Sikhism originated in the fifteenth century with Guru Nanak (1469–1539) as its founder. Its roots are considered to be in the Punjab, which is a predominantly agricultural region. In 1947, when India gained independence from British rule, the country was divided into India and Pakistan, and the new border between the newly constituted countries divided Punjab in two. Due to the religious split that had caused the partition of India at that time, the great majority of Hindus and Sikhs living on the Pakistani side of Punjab migrated to India and correspondingly many Muslims residing on the Indian side migrated to the newly founded state of Pakistan. In 1966, the Indian part of Punjab was divided further based on the declared mother tongue of its inhabitants, forming the mostly Hindu speaking states of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, and the state of Punjab with a majority of Punjabi speakers.

Sikhism is a monotheistic religion, whose devotees believe that there is only one *Vahiguru*<sup>14</sup>. As Balveer, one of my informants in Yuba City who was born and raised there and who is now in his forties, puts it: ‘We believe in one God, and he is the almighty creator, and he is everything’. The followers of Sikhism are called Sikhs, which means ‘disciple’ in Punjabi, and they meet for congregational worship in a Sikh temple, called a gurdwara. After death, Sikhs strive to liberate the soul from the cycle of *samsara* (cycle of rebirth) to be united with God (Takhar 2005: 8). Sikhism is not a proselytising religion, but new converts from non-Sikh families are allowed to join the fold. Before he became the first *Guru* (spiritual guide), Guru Nanak got married and worked in Sultanpur. Due to Sultanpur’s geographical location and its role as a leading centre of Islamic learning, the city attracted Muslim scholars, traders and pilgrim travelers from various religious backgrounds. Thus, Sultanpur was a very vibrant city offering its inhabitants a rich way of life, which assumedly influenced Nanak’s worldview (Mann 2004: 20). In the late 1490s, Nanak had a spiritual experience after which he decided to leave Sultanpur in order to spread the divine message to other parts of the world. Leaving his wife and his two sons behind, he started travelling in the company of a Muslim named Mardana in India and beyond (McLeod 1997: 2). On his journeys, Nanak visited pilgrimage sites irrespective of their religious affiliations (Mann 2004: 21). When roughly 20 years of travelling came to an end, he bought a piece of land in Punjab close to the River Ravi, where he founded the city of Kartarpur.

During Kartarpur’s foundational period, Nanak’s family formed the core of the community and others joined them over the years. Living in Kartarpur, Guru Nanak was eager to reveal to others the path he had discovered for himself (Grewal 1990: 39). While on this path, *Vahiguru*, the creator and sustainer of the world, should be kept in constant remembrance (Mann

14 According to the Sikh scholar Gurinder Mann (2004: 15) *Vahiguru* is ‘the most frequent epithet for God’.

2004: 15). But in Nanak's view religious life was not meant to be detached from worldly life, and Nanak emphasised during his time in Kartarpur that hard work (*kirat*) and social commitment to the community should play a central role in the life of a Sikh. In order to achieve liberation from the cycle of samsara, Nanak's teachings did not demand asceticism but rather stressed the importance of work and worship (Nesbitt 2005: 21). According to Satwinder, who moved as an adult to California somewhere in the 1990s and who is now in his sixties, this is what distinguishes the teachings of Sikhism from those of Hinduism. As he explains, in the Hindu religion:

[...] it was considered that to become religious you have to renounce everything, everything, go to jungles, [...] that is the only way you can attain God. But the Sikh religion said no, you can attain godliness, being a perfect human being, living in the society, marrying a person, and then having a family, raising a family, working hard, giving charity to people who need [it].

The message of Guru Nanak's teachings is remembered and cherished through the hymns that he composed during his life. After Guru Nanak, there were nine other Gurus, of whom Guru Gobind Singh (\*1666; †1708) was the last human Guru. During his life as a Guru he built Anandapur (literally 'town of ecstasy'). There, during the *Vaisakhi* festival in 1699, he inaugurated the *Khalsa*, the 'community of the pure', whose mission it was to carry out 'divine justice on earth' (Mann 2004:42). Sikhs are initiated into the Khalsa by a rite that is called *khande di pahul* (initiation with the double edged sword) also referred to as *amrit sanskar*, after which male Sikhs usually add Singh (lion) to their names and females add Kaur (princess). In this life cycle rite (sanskar) Sikhs who want to be initiated have to drink and are sprinkled with sweetened water called *amrit*, which Sikhs consider to be the nectar of immortality. Sikhs who are initiated into the Khalsa are called *amritdharis*. *Amritdhari* Sikhs have to wear the *five Ks* as part of the *rahit*, which is the Khalsa code of belief and conduct. The five Ks are the following:

*Kes* (hair)  
*Kangha* (comb)  
*Kirpan* (sword)  
*Kaccha* (cotton breeches)  
*Kara* (steel of iron bangle)

In introducing the five Ks, it is said that Guru Gobind Singh gave the Sikhs a distinctive identity, to ensure that a 'Sikh would stand out in a crowd of thousands' (McLeod 1997: 47). Guru Gobind Singh was the last human Guru. After his death the *panth* (community) and the *Granth* (the book) started to function as the Sikhs' Guru (Nesbitt 2005:38). *Granth* refers to the *Guru Granth Sahib*, which is the sacred book of the Sikhs that is written in *Gurmukhi* script. Sikhs consider the volume to be the embodiment of the Guru and they therefore treat it and take care of it as such (Nesbitt 2005: 40). This is reflected, for example, in various practices carried out in relation to the *Guru Granth Sahib*, such as laying the scripture down to rest at night.

In Yuba City Sikhs at the Tierra Buena road gurdwara have reserved two separate rooms with beds for this purpose, while Sikhs at the temple in Helsinki take the Guru Granth Sahib in the evening to rest on a pillow placed in a closet.

Many of my informants in Helsinki, but even more so in Yuba City, describe Sikhism as a ‘beautiful’, ‘modern’ and ‘practical’ faith and are eager to emphasise that Sikhism promoted social and gender equality already at a very early stage in its history. Baldev, who came to Yuba City as a student in the mid 1950s and who is now in his seventies, describes Sikhism in the following way:

The essence was equality and compassion, equality irrespective of your caste, because the Sikh religion condemns the caste system, they condemn that the young widow jumped into the fire when the husband died, Guru Nanak condemned that [...], the Sikhs are very proud of the fact, when even Christianity did not give equal status to women, a Sikh Guru said men and women are absolutely equal. We did not quite practice it, but that is what they were teaching.

Tajender, who is in his late forties and who migrated to Yuba City in the 1970s together with his parents, explains that for him the core of Sikhism’s teachings is based on Guru Nanak. He ‘was so much against rituals, myths, stereotypes, racism, and prejudices; he wanted to enlighten everyone. Hey, there is one God, he loves us all, he created us all, he wants us all to work hard, to share our earnings with everyone, and pray in his name, and be a good neighbour’. But like Baldev and many other Sikhs I met in the course of my study, Tajender criticises the manner in which Sikhs often fail to translate the values taught by their religion into their practised everyday lives. Across the Atlantic Komal, who is in her mid-thirties and has been living in Finland since she was a young girl, similarly points out how she feels that the religious teachings are not reflected in her lived experience:

Laura	Basically the Sikh faith teaches that all people are of equal value...
Komal	Yes, from the religious side Sikhism is probably like that but not all Sikhs are like that, they also value some people lower and some higher. This [idea of equality] is only in the books.

Like Sikhs elsewhere in the diaspora (see Jakobsh and Nesbitt 2010: 4) Tajender, whom I interviewed in Yuba City, blames cultural traditions for the lack of translating Sikhism’s teachings into practice. Discrimination by caste or gender was one of the most frequently mentioned examples where cultural practices were seen to inform behaviour that contradicted Sikhism’s religious teaching of equality. Noor, who is in her thirties and was one of my research participants in Yuba City, provided an example of such a cultural practice that runs counter to the value of equality, namely the Indian custom of distributing sweets on the occasion of a boy’s birth but not a girl’s birth, deriving from a cultural framework that considers boys to be more valuable for a family than girls:

What blows my mind here is that people, well-educated people – education should mean that you are smarter, wiser; it doesn't, because well-educated people do the same stuff. I knew, this is a few years back, a guy, I am assuming, I think he had his Master's, yeah, and then he married a woman. She definitely had a Bachelor's, she was working on a Master's. They had a son, they handed out sweets, you know how they do, then they had a daughter, and then they would not do it. You would think, that well educated and financially well-to-do, stable people, they would do. No, they do not have the balls to do what is right. 'People do not do that, so we do not do that.'

In other words, many Sikhs with whom I talked see a discrepancy between taught religious norms and culturally informed practices. The assumption guiding this ethnography is that what people consider as their religious and cultural background provides them with a set of values, morals and a particular worldview that informs their practices and also colours the process through which they negotiate who they are in relation to others. Thus, in order to reach a deeper understanding of the complex process through which Sikhs' construct their identities in response to a particular situation, it is important to incorporate 'religion' as an analytical category in this work.

### *Previous Literature on Sikhs in California and South Asians in Finland*

When I conducted interviews with Sikhs in Yuba City, informants occasionally asked me whether I had already read the published research on the Sikhs by Margaret A. Gibson, Bruce La Brack or Karen Leonard. All three scholars conducted research amongst Punjabi Sikhs in Yuba City, and the ethnographies that emerged from their research projects are still being read and appreciated by at least some of the Sikhs I met in Yuba City. Their monographs (Gibson 1988a; La Brack 1988; Leonard 1992) also left a visible and significant impact on the body of research on Sikhs in California, each adding their own unique perspective to the question of how the experience of migration impacts the lives of individuals and communities. The trained anthropologist La Brack, for example, conducted extensive fieldwork and his study provides a detailed overview of the history of Sikh migration to California, showing the impact of structural constraints such as laws and political events in India on the Sikh community and its development in the new context of settlement. Gibson, whose background is in the field of anthropology and education, also made use of ethnographic fieldwork methods. In her study she explored the school performance of Punjabi Sikh youths in an American High School by paying special attention to the linkages between home, school and community and the forces that advance and hinder Punjabi students' success in school. Her findings showed that Sikh migrants in California readily adopt a strategy of selective adaptation while at the same seeking to preserve a 'separate identity' (Gibson 1988a: 24).

Four years after the publication of La Brack's and Gibson's works, the

anthropologist and historian Leonard (1992) published her book entitled *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans*, based on a study in which she focused on the cross-cultural marriages of ethnic Punjabi men and Mexican women in California. Since a number of her informants were Sikhs from Yuba City and the area surrounding it, her research findings are relevant to my attempt to position this study in a larger body of research with which my own study is in a dialogue. In her work, Leonard used written sources, as well as information gathered via ethnographic fieldwork, to skilfully draw a picture that shows the shifting character of the ethnic identities of the Punjabi-Mexican families with whom she worked.

In Finland, my point of departure concerning existing research on Sikhs differs significantly from that in California. When I entered the Finnish Sikh landscape in 2007, I was the first ethnographer in Finland to do so. Consequently, nobody told me about previous ethnographers who would have left their positive or negative imprints on the memory of Sikhs in Finland. Neither did I find any previous research conducted on this particular religious immigrant group. Hence, one aim of this study is to render Sikhs visible in the Finnish context and to acknowledge their presence and their contribution to the collective process of shaping Finland's cultural and religious landscape.

Although there are no previous studies that would focus in particular on exploring the experiences of Sikhs living in Finland, there are studies that have been conducted on South Asian immigrants in Finland. One is a doctoral dissertation authored by sociologist Akhlaq Ahmad (2005), and the other a publication based on a study conducted by religious scholar Tuomas Martikainen and anthropologist Lalita Gola (2007). Ahmad's study is valuable because it offers a detailed picture of the role played by social networks in gaining access to the Finnish labour market. But due to its focus on the occupational histories of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent, Ahmad's research offers little insight into the cultural lifeworlds of these people and the way they experience their everyday life. In this regard, the study by Martikainen and Gola is more revealing. Based on statistical data and semi-structured interviews, their work seeks to scrutinise the experience of women who have migrated from India and Nepal to Finland. In one chapter, dedicated to the analysis of the data gathered via the interviews, Martikainen and Gola touch upon a number of themes that offer interesting insights. Due to the scope of their study, a more thorough contextualisation of the data is lacking, but in sum their work fulfils one of its formulated goals, namely to provide 'elementary information upon which subsequent research can stand' (Martikainen and Gola 2007: 8).

The present study builds on the body of research created by its predecessors, hoping to add a new layer of understanding and insights to the research topic at hand. In line with some of the previous studies conducted in Yuba City, I continue to explore what impact specific migration trajectories and contextual factors have on the experiences of Sikhs living abroad and on the manner in which they construct their identities. Further, recognising that there is a lack of in-depth research on Indian immigrants living in Finland, with this study I seek to fill some of the gaps by providing deeper

insights into the experiences of Sikhs in Helsinki. Unlike previous research conducted on immigrants from the Indian Subcontinent living in the area of Helsinki, this study sets out to highlight the various pathways through which Sikhs carve out a place for themselves in the cultural worlds in which they are embedded. On the whole, my aim in this research is to add new knowledge to the field of Sikh and migration studies and to contribute to the development of identity and practice theories.

### *Identities Reflected in Practice*

In the course of everyday life, people are constantly engaged in the process of trying to figure out who they are and want to be in relation to others. Also those who have emigrated from one country to another have to deal with this set of questions in the intimacies of their quotidian life. But other than those who have not gone through the experience of migration immigrants have to face in daily life demands and expectations 'to adapt', 'acculturate', 'assimilate', 'accommodate', 'incorporate', or 'integrate' (in) to the socio-cultural context in which they have settled. This provokes profound questions related to identity and forces not only immigrants but also their children to reflect on their body of traditional cultural and religious practices, if these are perceived to be at odds with the norms and values which are dominant in the 'mainstream' society.

Seeking to explore how people with a migration background develop a sense of self while being embedded in such a context of expectations and demands, I follow a widespread trend in anthropological research by studying migration through the lens of identity (Vertovec 2007: 963). Utilising the work of cultural and identity theorist Stuart Hall (1990, 1992, 1996, 2002), I conceptualise 'identity' in this research as something fluid and flexible, negotiated in relation to others in an ongoing process that is marked by different modalities of power. Especially for immigrants the question of power can have a deeply constraining affect when other people may deny them the right to identify as full members of the societies in which they have settled. The situational outcome of these identity negotiations always depends on the specifics of the context surrounding it, and hence I agree with Hall (1992: 277) when he argues that people may assume different identities at different times.

The situational and context-dependent character of identities is illustrated in the following example, in which I ask my informant Ravneet and her husband who are both in their thirties whether they consider themselves to be Indians, Finns or Sikhs. Although this is an abstract and provocative question, the interviewees' efforts to answer it are illuminating in so far as they hint at the complexity that accompanies the process through which they negotiate who they are in relation to others. Here is how Ravneet and her husband Bhagat replied to this question:

Ravneet	We're not pure Sikhs
Bhagat	No, we aren't.

- Laura            The stronger identity is...
- Ravneet        Indian, yes. That is what we are on the exterior and that is where we are from.
- Bhagat         If someone asks I can say 'Indian', and he may ask where and what is this, then I can say that I am a Sikh from North India.

The interview excerpt demonstrates that in the Finnish context Ravneet, who has been living in Finland since her very early childhood, identifies herself in the first place as Indian, and as it becomes clear she relates this to her physical appearance as well as her parents' place of birth. Also her husband, Bhagat, who arrived in Finland in his twenties after having married Ravneet, identifies himself in the first place as Indian and states that he would only reveal his religious as well as more specific ethnic background when being asked to position himself in a more nuanced manner. However, if both of them had to address this question in a context outside of Finland, they argue that they would identify themselves as Finns, as the following excerpt shows:

- Laura            If you were in Italy, for example, and you visited friends, and someone asked you where you are from, what would you say?
- Ravneet        Probably that we are from Finland. Totally from Finland!  
*(laughs)*
- Bhagat         From Finland, yes. If he asks more then I can say [from India] but first I say from Finland.

The situational and context-dependent character of identity is also highlighted in the following excerpt taken from a conversation I had with college student Sajan, who was born and raised in Yuba City:

- Laura            Talking about identity, how would you describe who are you? How would you answer that question?
- Sajan            How would I answer that question? It is kind of, depends on where the question is being asked. I mean, if you ask, I am American but I am pretty closely tied to my Indian roots. Religiously, yes, I am Sikh.
- [...]
- Laura            Do you feel like you are Punjabi or Indian?
- Sajan            I am most definitely. In high school, it was more general that you are Indian, because everyone in high school was Punjabi here [in Yuba City]. You are just Indian or Punjabi here, whatever. [...] And now when I went to University, I noticed there are all sorts of Indian people, so now I distinguish myself as Punjabi as opposed to Gujarati, or South Indian. It is more prominent in college, most definitely.

As Sajan's example makes clear, the situational construction of identities has to be seen as a result of interaction with others and is based on acts of differentiation (Barth 2010). In the context of Yuba City, where the majority

of students at school were Punjabis, he felt no need to highlight his Punjabi identity. However, at college, where he came across other Indian ethnic groups, he wanted to distinguish himself as Punjabi, as he said.

Acknowledging that identities are situational and constructed in relation to the context and to others implies recognising that who I am/ we are is not a fixed essence but rather based on an ongoing process of positioning that emerges out of the dialectics of self-identification and being identified by others (Hall 1990: 226; see also Malkki 1992: 37). The continuous process through which identities are being constructed is also related to the question what identity positions are available (or not) to the subjects in a specific context and the question how people 'perform', resist or re-negotiate them (Hall 1996: 14). If we consider for example Ravneet, who has been living in Finland since she was a toddler and who speaks perfect Finnish, it is interesting to note that in the context of Finland she does not claim the identity of a Finn. Instead, Ravneet identifies herself in the first instance as 'Indian' and attaches this to her physical appearance and to her country of birth. Based on her experience of living as the child of Indian immigrants in Finland, Ravneet has perhaps come to the conclusion that this is the most intelligible position to claim when being asked about her identity. Outside of Finland, however, (where she perhaps feels that no 'mainstream Finns' are present to question her claim?) she feels confident to claim a Finnish identity.

As Ravneet's example already suggests, the process of negotiating identities is rarely a free play, where people could randomly pick and choose with what or whom they want to identify themselves. Instead, the process of negotiating identities is conditioned by the particular historical, political and cultural contexts in which these negotiations are carried out and the inherent question of power. This becomes evident in Rana's account below, which provides an insight into the external and internal dynamics that underlie the construction of his identity, and highlights how structural constraints, in this case racism, places limits on who he can imagine or claim himself to be. As a young Sikh growing up in Helsinki, he says that he always tried to fit in when going to school, because he did not 'want to be the black sheep in the group':

But there were some situations, where it was just not possible anymore. I remember after school, I started hanging out with four Finnish friends, and we walked along the street, and they were my good friends, they never said anything to me. So we were walking on the street, and then someone, who had exactly the same [skin] colour like me, dark eyes and dark hair, walked by us, and out of a sudden they would cry 'Look, there goes a *neekerii!*'<sup>15</sup> And then they laughed, and perhaps I also laughed on the outside. But then later on at home I always thought: 'what am I then? Do they think of me [the same way]? How am I different than the dude who was walking on the other side of the street?'

Sociologist Rogers Brubaker and historian Frederick Cooper (2000: 11) argue that scholars who, as I do, utilise a postmodern conception of identity

15 This word in Finnish is adapted from the English word 'negro', and has derogative connotations.

often do so by emphasising in their writings 'standard qualifiers' through which they seek to indicate that identities are constructed, malleable or in flux. I would add that authors of such studies, grounded on a postmodern understanding of identities, usually conceptualise identities as something that people 'fashion/ shape/ create/ craft', 'maintain/ preserve', 'transmit', 'assert', 'affirm', 'display', 'claim', 'express', 'contest' and/ or 'negotiate'. As Brubaker and Cooper argue, the problem with such an approach is that researchers have begun to use these words almost automatically, with the consequence that these expressions are at risk of becoming 'mere placeholders, [...] rather than words conveying a meaning' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 11). Hence, in order to avoid a clichéd usage of expressions, I strive to fill them with meaning by drawing upon my ethnographic data throughout this study in order to make explicit how identities are actually 'done' and 'performed' in people's everyday life.

To be able to do so, I focus in my analysis on highlighting the role that I consider 'practices' to play in the shaping of identities. My premise is that identities are not something someone possesses, but rather something that people do and negotiate in an ongoing manner through their practices that they carry out in daily life (see Jenkins 2008: 5; Duits 2008). Hence, in line with anthropologist Dorothy Holland and her colleagues (1998: 5), my understanding is 'that identities are lived in and through activity and so must be conceptualised as they develop in social practice'. In short, identities are understood in this work to be constructed through practice, and consequently practices reflect the process through which identities are being negotiated. The notion that identities are continuously moulded and transformed through practices that people perform in their daily lives can be partly traced back to ideas put forward by sociologist Erving Goffman (1982). In his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman used the metaphor of theatre to describe how people, seen as actors, perform their selves in everyday life on an imaginary stage. What role actors set out to perform depends on the specifics of the situation, and the observers in the audience are seen to play a crucial role in determining this situation. They do so by taking part in a dialectic interaction with the actors, in the course of which the observers themselves become actors, too.

In Goffman's (1982: 78–79) model, actors acquire the skills for performing their roles through socialisation. In the model put forward by practice theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1990: 73), people unconsciously acquire what he calls a 'habitus' through 'practical mimesis'. According to Bourdieu (1990: 53), it is the habitus, which could be defined as the social structure internalised in a persons' bodily habits, that provides the 'principles which generate and organise practices', and which bestow on actors a feel for the game (Bourdieu 1990: 66) that is played in a particular social field. In other words, the habitus provides dispositions for how to act in a specific social field, the latter being understood as a social arena with its own rules and inscribed power relations. Learning how to play the game through practical mimesis bestows on actors a cultural repertoire consisting of internalised skills, habits and dispositions. It is this knowledge that people rely on and that informs their actions as it provides them with a sense of how to play

the game according to socially agreed upon rules. In their practices, people embody the dispositions instilled in them by the habitus and thus reproduce the habitus of a social field within its own limits. In this model, the habitus which people help to maintain through their actions is seen to shape them in turn.

For practice theorist Michel de Certeau (1984: xvii), people are not mere actors or performers who simply embody the cultural rules which seek to guide their behaviour, but are 'poets of their own act, silent discoverers of their own path', who through their practices, as performed in daily life, create unforeseeable trajectories. And although the people who are creating these trajectories use the vocabulary of the cultural system in which they are embedded, the emerging 'trajectories trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor capture by the system in which they develop' (de Certeau 1984: xvii). According to the understanding of de Certeau then people are creative agents who use the cultural maps they have at their disposal in an innovative manner and thus find new paths of agency.

This understanding is similar to the ideas put forward by anthropologist and practice theorist Sherry Ortner, who in her model brings culture into the discussion. For Ortner (2006: 219), culture constructs 'people as particular kinds of social actors'. But, as she continues, people as social actors, 'through living, on-the-ground, variable practices, reproduce or transform – and usually some of each – the culture that made them'. In other words, cultural frameworks offer people a script for how to navigate through their everyday lives, what habitus to display, and what roles to enact. But through their performed actions on-the-ground, people are capable of modifying over time the scripts underlying a performance and thus – often in an unconscious manner – they gradually transform the rules that guide their future practices (see also Stark 2011: 31; 2009). It is at these moments that cultural change occurs.

The need to reflect on how to act in the world becomes especially clear in the case of immigrants and their descendants who find themselves in situations in which they are confronted with several – sometimes perhaps contradictory – cultural maps that compete for the right to guide their behaviour. Faced with such situations, actors are pushed to come up with improvisational practices, or 'tactics' to use the vocabulary of de Certeau (1984), to be able to steer through their everyday life. Through applying such tactics, people often engage in inventive acts through which they constitute themselves in relation to multiple others and create new ways of being in this world and of navigating through it.

Considering identities as something that gets negotiated through practices requires a more detailed definition of 'practice' as understood in this study. Ortner (1984: 149) considers practice as 'everything that people do'. Together with her colleagues (Dirks et. al 1994: 17), she further asserts that practice can take many forms, from small mundane activities to the large-scale practices of resistance. With reference to the framework outlined by Ortner, Catherine Bell (1992: 79) states that any action carried out by human beings can be seen as a practice 'if the theorist establishes its relationship to structure'. In other words, to consider an action as a form of

practice, we as researchers have to show up how the structure informs an action and how this action in turn constitutes and possibly transforms the structure it derived from. Based on these insights, the definition of practice as applied in this study sees it as an action that is conditioned by discursive constraints and normative expectations. These constraints and expectations derive from the structure out of which the practice emerged, but are also constituted and re-shaped through the repeated performance of the practice itself. A feature of practice as understood in this study is that through mere repetition, practice helps to maintain the system as well as traditional notions of identities. But practice can also take the form of tactics, in which case it has the ability to contribute to the systemic transformation and foster the creation of new identities.

In this study, I am concerned with ordinary practices as performed by people in their everyday lives. My objective is to explore the ways in which people position themselves or are positioned by others through these practices. What are the concrete acts through which people seek to shape, maintain, transmit, claim, express, perform and ultimately always negotiate their identities? In this study, I consider eating, dressing, working, and forms of speaking, together with practices carried out in relationship to the celebration of important life cycle events as acts that are crucial to the process through which people negotiate their identities in everyday life. These categories of practice have emerged from the data as meaningful with regards to the processes through which people seek to constitute themselves in relation to others and through which others try to ascribe identity positions onto them. Thus, I decided to examine in my ethnographic analysis these daily moments of 'identity work in progress' in more detail, and to present my findings in chapters that are structured along the larger socio-cultural arenas around which I saw these practices being clustered. Together, these spheres can be seen to represent some of the significant areas of life in which people engage in the act of negotiating and crafting their sense of self.

The objective of this research is to examine and shed light on some of the moments in which Sikhs mediate between the cultural frameworks in which they are embedded and how this is reflected in their everyday practices. In contrast to other studies that have been eager to explore the issue of identity in relation to Sikhs, my main aim is not to achieve an understanding of the historical processes that informed the shaping of Sikh religious identity (see for example Oberoi 1994). Rather, I am interested to explore the continuous 'play' through which self-identified Sikhs in two different migration destinations negotiate, against the background of particular contexts, who they are or can imagine themselves to be, not only in religious terms but also with reference to other cultural factors that inform the shaping of identities. With the help of my specific ethnographic case studies, my focal concern is thus to highlight the complex ways in which immigrants and their descendants position themselves in the cultural, religious, and social worlds in which they are simultaneously embedded. The 'identities in practice' lens allows me to do this. The challenge in applying such an approach is how to portray the people with whom I worked not as robots that are programmed

to follow particular cultural rules and to act out social roles, but as human beings who meander through life, desperate, sad or truly happy, wondering what they should do (Abu-Lughod 1993: 27).

### *Diaspora and Transnationalism*

One lens that helps to make better sense of the continuous process through which Sikhs in Helsinki and Yuba City craft their identities is the theoretical and analytical framework emerging from the concept of 'diaspora'. Initially, scholars used the concept of diaspora to grasp and describe the experience of Jews and their exile from the Holy Land as well as their dispersal to different parts of the world (Safran 2005: 36). Over time, the term was also applied to the situation of other ethnic or religious groups who had experienced a forced or voluntary displacement from an original centre, had been dispersed to various locations around the globe, and maintained the idea of a homeland. Today, there exist a plenitude of definitions for what characteristics a group must display in order to be treated as a diaspora. Rogers Brubaker (2005: 5) argues that there are three criteria that seem to be crucial to all of these definitions and that are usually understood to be constitutive of diaspora. These 'core elements', as Brubaker calls them, are 1) dispersion, 2) an orientation to a 'homeland', and 3) the maintenance of boundaries.

According to Brubaker (2005: 6ff.), boundary maintenance involves the preservation of identities that are distinct through time with regard to those of members of the host societies. Concerning the issue of dispersion, as framed in definitions of diaspora, it is usually expected that members of a particular migrant group need to live in more than one location outside what is perceived to be their original centre – as is the case, for example, with Sikhs from the Punjab who are scattered around the world, having established themselves in cities as distant and disparate as Helsinki and Yuba City. The second point, namely that immigrants need to display an orientation to a 'homeland', usually implies the idea of expressing solidarity with the homeland and an interest in maintaining relationships with it. Further, it is assumed that people who belong to a diaspora cherish a myth or memory of the homeland to which they perhaps seek to return one day.<sup>16</sup> Brubaker's last criterion – the 'maintenance of boundaries' – may refer to both the majority group's eagerness to maintain social and cultural boundaries via forms of discrimination and exclusion and the immigrants' aspirations to preserve their own distinctiveness in religious and cultural terms. However, as sociologist Thomas Faist (2010: 13) points out, recent discussions related to diasporas transcend the idea of cultural distinctiveness and are increasingly

16 Based on the interviews conducted with Sikhs in Helsinki and Yuba City, this study understands 'Punjab' to constitute the ancestral homeland of Sikhs. For a more elaborated discussion of the meanings of the homeland in the context of the Sikh diaspora, see the work of Sikh scholar Brian Keith Axel (2001: 199), who reminds us that the homeland may mean 'different things to different people'.

concerned with exploring processes of cultural innovation that are seen to be triggered by people's experience of migration and settling in a new context.

Scholars working in the field of diaspora and migration studies usually consider Sikhs to constitute a diaspora, since they are seen to fulfil the above-mentioned criteria (see for example Tatla 1999; Safran 2005: 36). One event that is usually seen to have played a crucial role in producing amongst Sikhs living abroad a strong sense of constituting a diasporic community was the attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar in 1984 (Tatla 1999; Sökefeld 2006). Building upon this body of previous studies, I treat Sikhs who are living in Helsinki and Yuba City as belonging to a Sikh diaspora and analyze their experiences by applying this particular framework to bring to the fore moments that reveal a diasporic consciousness. By diasporic consciousness I refer to the awareness of being part of a globally dispersed community, for which Punjab constitutes the central point of orientation, as well as the desire to identify with this community.

In order to be able to find a vocabulary that would allow us to adequately grasp the experience of migrants living in the contemporary world, it is necessary to highlight yet another important theoretical and analytical concept, namely that of 'transnationalism'. Closely related to the concept of diaspora, transnationalism followed the former as an analytical concept with which to work and think in the field of migration studies. Transnationalism is understood in this context to refer to social relationships as well as cultural, economic, political and religious practices performed across state borders that help to create the perception in the minds of the participants of a fluid social and cultural space. One of the publications that had a significant impact on the way in which transnationalism is currently used and understood in the field of migration studies is an article written by the anthropologist Nina Glick Schiller and her colleagues Linda Basch and Christina Blanc-Szanton (1992) entitled *Transnationalism: a New Analytical Framework for Understanding Migration*. In this seminal work, the authors argue for the need to create new conceptual tools in order to grasp the experiences of migrants whose lives transgress national borders (1992: 1).

As various scholars have been eager to point out, immigrants' engagement with border-crossing activities is – like migration itself<sup>17</sup> – not a new phenomenon but one that was taking place long before the most recent waves of immigrants spread out into the world (see, for example, Foner 2007). Nevertheless, due to the development and reduced costs of information and transportation technologies, the frequency of interaction has considerably increased, resulting in unique conditions in the late modern world (Portes *et al.* 1999; Vertovec 2009). The Internet and cheaper flight tickets, for example, play an important role in bringing people and places

17 Migration is not a novelty of the present but 'human beings have always moved in search of new opportunities, or to escape poverty, conflict or environmental degradation' (Castles and Miller 2009: 2), while others, such as slaves, were forced to move (Lewellen 2002: 124). What is different about contemporary migration, however, is that today more and more people from more diverse origins are moving faster and faster to all kinds of places for a great variety of reasons (King 2002: 94).

into closer and more frequent contact and in enabling the performance of transnational linkages and practices in everyday life. The transnational social and cultural field that people create through their practices is multi-sited, spanning in many cases not only immigrants' home and host countries but also other sites in the world where relatives, friends and co-religionists live (Levitt 2009: 1227). Sikhs in Helsinki and Yuba City, for instance, are often in contact with relatives and friends in India but also with those who are living in countries such as the UK and Canada, or, as in a few cases, in Italy, Spain and Germany. People who maintain such transnational contacts contribute to a process of creating and maintaining a sense of belonging to a transnational community that may take on the characteristics of a diaspora.

What is crucial about the concept of transnationalism is that it breaks with previous assumptions according to which people negotiate their identities within the context of a single nation state. Instead, the idea of transnationalism acknowledges the possibility that people may shape their sense of self with reference to social and cultural worlds that ignore and transgress national borders. However, the act of maintaining transnational ties does not prevent the incorporation of immigrants into the society of their new country of settlement (Levitt and Schiller 2004). Instead, the transnational lens allows us to acknowledge and grasp the mobile dynamics that underpin the multi-sited processes through which people with a migration background craft their sense of self and belonging.

### *The Doing of Ethnographies*

So far, I have used the term 'ethnography' to refer to the written account in which I present my research findings. But ethnography also refers to the fieldwork method in which researchers closely observe, record, and participate in the everyday life of the people they study (Marcus and Fischer 1999: 18). This research draws on data gathered by means of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Finland and California between spring 2008 and spring 2012.

I started my research project with the fieldwork in Finland. The first interview that I conducted was with a Sikh woman and her daughter. On my way to the meeting, I was extremely nervous. After all, I was about to enter a family's home as a stranger, asking them questions that they might find intimidating. When I arrived there, it was dark and cold outside. The landscape was covered in snow, as is typical for Finland in January. I rang their doorbell, and after opening the door, the mother, who was dressed in a brightly colour *salwar kamiz*, consisting of a pair of loose trousers and long shirt, welcomed me into their home. Next to her stood her teenage daughter, who was wearing a pair of grey tracksuit trousers and a pink T-shirt with the word 'Punjab' written on it.

Having removed my shoes, I followed them to the living room where I was offered a seat on the couch. The interview and the whole meeting eventually turned out to be the kind of meeting of which every fieldworker dreams. Not only did they verbally share with me their thoughts and experiences

concerning their lives enfolding across borders, they also showed me pictures and a home video documenting their travels to India and the celebration of important life-cycle rituals. Further, the children of the family gave me a tour of their house in which they opened up doors to a prayer room as well as to their wardrobe that was packed with traditional Indian dresses and jewellery.

Later on, I also got introduced to their cousin and aunt who are also living in Finland and who dropped by for a visit. I also met briefly the father of the family who just had returned from his work in the restaurant that he owns. When I was about to leave, the mother of the family invited me to stay for dinner, which consisted of *roti* (Indian type of bread), *dal* (lentils), rice, salad and curd served on typical Indian steel plates that they had imported from India, as they explained. Similar visits to my informants' homes or to their workplaces, together with visits to other permanent or more fleeting sites, gave me access 'to lived experiences which incorporate but transcend language' (Amit 2000: 12), and I recorded my observations in the form of field notes and with the help of photographs.

With some of the persons I met I became very close, and in a few cases I would even say that the person whom I had initially met as an informant became a friend. Being friends with people one has met as informants can 'enhance and deepen analysis, while helping to protect against the tendency to present others as rule-following robots' (Davies 1999: 80; see also Cerwonka and Malkki 2007: 98). However, from an ethical perspective, such a change in the nature of the relationship between informant and ethnographer can be seen as problematic (Amit 2000: 2). The informants-as-friends might want to provide information to the ethnographers only in their role as friends – but not in their role as researchers. And even if the researcher and informants are not 'friends', the relationship of trust that sometimes develops in an interview situation might have motivated informants to speak about things that they were willing to share with me as a person, but not with the larger audience of my ethnography. A partial answer to how to deal with such dilemmas and how to avoid harming those that I interviewed is to make sure that the informants' anonymity is secured throughout the course of this book. In order to accomplish this, I did not only use pseudonyms according to ethnographic convention, but also amended contextual details regarding particular informants when necessary as long as it did not reduce the reader's ability to reach an understanding of my interpretations.

In Finland the fieldwork that had started in 2008 lasted until spring 2012. In those years, I made repeated visits from my hometown Jyväskylä to Helsinki, where I visited the gurdwara, participated in social and cultural events, or met with Sikhs in their homes, at their work places, or in a café, for example. I also kept in touch with Sikhs, who were living in Helsinki, by the help of phone calls, emails and the social media (see Hirvi 2012). In Yuba City, California, I gathered data by means of ethnographic fieldwork for approximately three months during the autumn of 2008. I visited Yuba City a second time in the autumn of 2009 and stayed there for a week to observe and participate once more in the annual Sikh parade. Conducting fieldwork within such a limited time frame forced me to prepare my trip carefully and to work very efficiently right from the beginning. As I have highlighted

elsewhere (Hirvi 2012), the experiences of doing fieldwork amongst Sikhs in Yuba City differed in many ways from doing fieldwork amongst Sikhs in Helsinki. While in Yuba City I felt that it was fairly easy to get in touch with Sikhs and to get them involved in my research, I felt that in the context of Helsinki it was very hard, especially in the beginning, to find Sikhs who would be willing to participate in my study. Online tools proved to be very helpful in this initial stage of fieldwork as they assisted me in gaining access to Sikhs and their experiences in the offline world (Hirvi 2012).

Once I had established contact with Sikhs living in Helsinki as well as Yuba City, I tried to take part in as many social, religious and cultural events as possible in the role of a participant observer who was eager to experience the many ways in which Sikhs in Helsinki and in Yuba City go about living their lives. Like other scholars studying migrants (see, for example, Weissköppel 2009; Paerregaard 2008: 28), the most important sites in which I was able to carry out my participant observation turned out to be religious institutions, homes, shops and restaurants, as well as events that had been organised by my informants. During fieldwork, I took roughly 1 500 photographs that assisted me in recollecting the events and places I visited. This was especially important in the Yuba City case study, where my geographical location did not allow for quick visits to refresh my memory. In addition, I collected data through numerous informative conversations as well as semi-structured interviews with self-identified Sikhs who had an immigrant background, including established members, newcomers, youth, and expatriates whom I had met, for instance, at the gurdwara, or whom I had found with the help of the Internet or through another informant.

The reason why I did not focus on a more specifically defined group of people in terms of age, gender or migration background is mainly because when I started my fieldwork in Helsinki, I had a hard time finding any informants at all (see Hirvi 2012). Thus I was happy to interview any Sikh who was willing to participate in my research. But also in Yuba City, the limited amount of time available to conduct fieldwork motivated me to interview all of the members of the Sikh community who showed an interest in my study. The decision to focus in this study on *self-identified* Sikhs was motivated by a desire to give people the right to identify themselves instead of ascribing to them an a priori fixed identity position. Adopting such an approach allowed me to investigate and highlight in an empirical manner the complexity of meanings that people who consider themselves Sikhs attach to the concept of Sikh identity.

The language spoken in the interviews was either English or Finnish, which I translated later on into English. With regard to language, anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (2003: 202) points out that a traditional ethnographer would be expected to communicate with the informants solely 'through their own language'. In the case of interviews conducted either in Finnish or in English with Sikhs who had also been born in their current country of residence (Finland/ US), this demand was fulfilled, because the language of their respective country of residence was their own language as much as, or often even more than, the language they learned from their parents (usually Punjabi). In the case of the interviews with immigrants who had



*Sikh gurdwara in Helsinki, low building with curtains on the side.*

migrated as adults, the communication took place either in Finnish or English, depending on the respondents' preference. In those interviews, the research participants' language skills, as well my own skills in Finnish and English, were sufficient to not require an interpreter. This had the advantage of reducing an additional interpretation instance that would have inevitably accompanied the act of translation by a third party (see also Davies 1999: 113). Instead, I took advantage of the informants' own abilities to translate thoughts from their original native language into the language of our conversation. Doing so, I argue, supports a mode of communication in which the power to give meaning to speech is negotiated by researcher and informant. The drawback of the decision to only conduct interviews with Sikhs who were able to speak English or Finnish is that people who only spoke Punjabi – often less-educated, elderly, and/or more recent immigrants – are underrepresented in my sample of research participants.

During fieldwork, and when interviewing people, I made it clear that I was an anthropologist collecting material for my study. Before interviewing and recording the interviews, I explained the nature of the research project and made sure to receive the informant's consent to participate in the research. Altogether, I interviewed 69 Sikhs. The interviews usually lasted between thirty minutes and two hours, and were taped with the help of a voice recorder. In addition to audio recording, I also recorded some of the interviews in writing. In Yuba City I ended up interviewing 40 people, eighteen female and 22 male Sikhs as shown in Table Two. In contrast to the Finnish case study, the relation between those who migrated as adults (immigrants) and those who either arrived in Yuba City before reaching adulthood, or who were born in the country in which their ancestors had settled (immigrants' descendants), is better balanced.

In Helsinki, I interviewed 29 Sikhs, out of which more were male (sixteen) than female (thirteen), as Table Three shows. In the Finnish case study, I interviewed clearly more immigrants (twenty) than immigrants' descendants (nine). Concerning the former, it must be pointed out that five of the informants and their spouses were at the time of the interviews expatriates. By 'expatriates' I mean in this study persons who have been sent by a company in their home country to work for a limited period of time in another country, and who are supposed to return to the sending country after the work project in question has come to an end. Two of the Sikhs whom I initially interviewed as expatriates decided later on to stay in or return to Finland after their work as an expatriate had ended.

Female	Male	Immigrants	Immigrants' descendants
18	22	18 (7F, 11M)	22 (11F, 11M)

*Table Two: Profile of Informants California (Total: 40).*<sup>18</sup>

Female	Male	Immigrants <sup>1</sup>	Immigrants' descendants
13	16	20 (7F, 13M)	9 (6F, 3M)

*Table Three: Profile of Informants Finland (Total 29).*<sup>19</sup>

Roughly two thirds of the people I interviewed in Finland were in their twenties and thirties. In Helsinki, the youngest of my informants was around the age of eighteen while the oldest interviewees were in their sixties. In Yuba

<sup>18</sup> See also Appendix Two.

<sup>19</sup> See also Appendix One.

City the youngest of my informants were around the age of sixteen while the oldest of my informants was in his early nineties. Around half of the people I interviewed in Yuba City were in their thirties and forties. While in the case of Helsinki the majority of people whom I interviewed worked in jobs related to the restaurant sector for reasons that I have elaborated elsewhere (Hirvi 2011), the professional background of the Sikhs whom I interviewed in Yuba City was much more diverse, and many were working in jobs that demanded a higher education.

In order to obtain data concerning a specific topic upon which I had not gained sufficient information by means of participant observation or interviews, I distributed two questionnaires with which I hoped to gain further information. In Finland, I handed out the questionnaire in the Helsinki gurdwara with the intention of gathering additional information concerning the respondents' working careers. Altogether fifteen people responded to this questionnaire. The other questionnaire I distributed in Yuba City's high schools with the intention of reaching Sikh youth. At one school, I asked the school's Punjabi club to distribute the questionnaire, after having met four of its members for a short group interview in which I introduced my work. In another school, I accompanied one of my informants to his Punjabi language class, where I had the chance to talk with the students and to explain my project. After class, the teacher handed out the questionnaire with the instruction to return it a week later. As it turned out, the latter method was far more effective. Altogether I received twelve of the questionnaires back. In addition to the questionnaire, I received from three students of the aforementioned Punjabi class an essay they had written on the Sikh parade. Further data concerning the Sikh parade I collected by conducting short interviews with about twenty Sikhs and non-Sikhs when I visited the event in 2009.

### *Some Reflections on the Researcher's Position*

When researchers begin their fieldwork they are accompanied by their 'autobiographical baggage' through which they are positioned and position themselves within the field sites they enter (Mitchell 2010: 8). Who they think they are, or are seen to be, has an impact on the field they end up studying, and their personal experiences influence the unfolding ethnographic analysis. Thus, as ethnologist Outi Fingerroos (2003) points out, reflecting on the researcher's position in the field is important because it helps the reader of an ethnography to evaluate what advantages and disadvantages were related to the researcher's role, and what constraints possibly existed with regard to achieving an understanding of studied persons or groups.

Anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker (1966: 9) wrote as early as the mid 1960s that a scientific discussion of fieldwork methods should include the relevant details about the observers: the roles they play, their personalities, and other relevant facts concerning their position and functioning in the society studied. But the call to exercise a greater degree of reflexivity in the making of ethnographies reached the ears of a larger audience only

after having been explicitly formulated in a book edited by historian James Clifford and anthropologist George Marcus (1986) some twenty years later. The postmodern quest for reflexivity requires ethnographers to highlight their own powerful role in the making of ethnographies. Hence, I recognise that the final text inevitably bears my imprint. As anthropologists Judith Okely and Helen Callaway (1992: xi) explain, 'like fieldwork, the process of writing and the creation of the final text involve a series of choices which depend on the selective interests of the ethnographer'. In the context of this study, for example, it has been I myself the author of this text, who has been in the position to select the quotes and narratives of my informants to be included or excluded, and who decided into what contexts to place them (see also Hastrup 1992: 122). In doing so, power was exercised that renders the relationship between researcher and informant inevitably unequal.

To unpack some of the autobiographical baggage that I consider to be significant for the outcome of my research, I start by explaining that I myself, like some of my informants, grew up in a bicultural and bilingual home, with a mother who had migrated in her early twenties from Finland to Germany. This possibly made it easier for me to relate to my informants' migration experiences, and share with them the experience of having two cultural reference backgrounds and of thinking and talking in different languages. On the other hand, my German father, my protestant background and my skin colour made it easier for me to merge whenever I wanted to into the mainstream societies of both Germany and Finland. Second, for the reader of this ethnography it is crucial to know that during my undergraduate studies I spent some time in India, where I worked for four months as an English teacher in two different schools, one of which was located in Shimla (Himachal Pradesh) and the other in Khurda (Orissa). Due to my accommodation, which was first in a school dormitory and afterwards in the school director's home, I was able to experience very closely the everyday life of the people with whom I lived. This time spent in India taught me to appreciate the advantages of living in a collective society, but at the same I also felt its constraints. Perhaps this autobiographical experience improved my capacity to grasp some of the thoughts of the teenagers in this study, who had grown up outside of India and described how they struggled to find a balance between the various cultural expectations concerning their behaviour that they felt they were faced with.

Reflecting further on my autobiographical baggage, it can be assumed that my basic Hindi skills acquired during two years of language studies at the Freie Universität Berlin in Germany, as well as my basic Punjabi skills acquired during my stay as a Fulbright student at UC Santa Barbara (California), were both beneficial to my attempts to get in contact with Sikhs I met in the field. Initially, I had a hard time approaching Sikh women who had migrated as adults to Finland.<sup>20</sup> Soon, however, I discovered that when trying to start a conversation with them, saying a few words in Hindi often allowed me to enter their social circle. The following field diary extract,

20 Michael Angelo (1997: 67) faced similar problems in his study on Sikh immigrants in New York.

documenting one of my first visits to the gurdwara in Helsinki, highlights this point further:

[...] After having talked to the younger woman who had grown up in Finland I felt encouraged enough to talk to one of the elder women sitting together with some other women. I started the conversation by making some comments about her children. Next, I told her that I spoke a little bit of Hindi. It seemed that she as well as the other women sitting around her, immediately got more interested in me and so I continued by giving an example of my Hindi skills. I said: '*Namaskaar. Mera naam Laura haim. Main Jyväskylä se hum.* (Hello, my name is Laura. I am from Jyväskylä)'. Their reaction was overwhelming; they broke into friendly laughter and nodded approvingly while saying how great my Hindi was. I could almost see how the barrier between them and me crashed and disappeared for the rest of the day.<sup>21</sup>

Once I had made an effort to speak one of the mother tongues of their country<sup>22</sup> – regardless of my mistakes – many Sikh women seemed encouraged to talk with me. Perhaps by talking Hindi I had taken on the role they themselves said they usually occupied in conversations with Finns, and for a moment, the power relationship had reversed and I was the one making mistakes when speaking. At the same time, my Hindi skills might have worked as evidence of my genuine interest in their native home country. The news that I knew some Hindi spread quickly throughout the congregation, and after that, several people approached me in the gurdwara, asking about my Hindi skills, as in the following example:

Later, when I was just about to leave [...] I realised that many of the women were kind of waiting to talk to me. As I said earlier, the effect that I spoke some (and only some, I want to emphasise!) Hindi, was intense and all of them wanted to talk to me and hear my Hindi all of a sudden. They asked where I had learned Hindi and also whether I had been to India.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, it could be argued that my partial familiarity with my informants' or their parents' native country, paired with my rudimentary Hindi skills, had a positive effect on the progress of my fieldwork as it helped to establish a rapport between my informants and me. As mentioned, especially with women of the first generation, these particular skills and knowledge helped me in the effort to make first contact. But although these initial contacts transformed over time into closer relationships, they only rarely reached the level at which women who had emigrated as adults felt comfortable enough to give me an official interview. Instead, they preferred to refer me to a male acquaintance such as their husband, explaining that they did 'not

21 Field notes Laura Hirvi (March 23, 2008).

22 Most Sikhs I met during my fieldwork speak Punjabi as their mother tongue, but Hindi is very close to this language and usually they had no problems in understanding what I was trying to say.

23 Field notes Laura Hirvi (March, 2008).

know enough about the religion' or had 'nothing interesting' to say.<sup>24</sup> This was more the case in Finland than in California, although in the latter setting too I encountered situations where women referred me to their husbands. Perhaps my attempts to persuade these women to participate in my research might have been more successful if my Hindi skills had been more advanced, so that I could have explained to them the nature of the research project and conducted the interviews in their mother tongue. On the other hand, their reluctance might be attributed to cultural constraints giving male members of the family the right to represent the family when interacting with outsiders.

Reflecting further on the positions that a researcher assumes while conducting fieldwork, I agree with anthropologist Kirin Narayan (1993: 671) who argues for the need to see 'each anthropologist in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations'. This also supports the general assumption guiding this research that identities are not fixed, but are situational and fluid in character, continuously negotiated anew in relation to others. Hence, ethnographers' positions are shifting in the field and continuously under negotiation. Trying to pin down a researcher's position, as if it were a fixed state of being that would stand eternally untouched by its environment, is thus a fruitless enterprise. Instead, reflective accounts of a researcher's position should highlight the researcher's changing, and sometimes even contradictory, identity positions occupied in relation to the people worked with (Sherif 2001).

Thus, on some occasions, when I visited informants in the bars in which they worked in the middle of the day, I was identified as a Finnish or 'Western' woman at the same moment that Sikhs, males as well as females, offered me an alcoholic drink – a gesture unlikely to be acted out in relation to an Indian Sikh woman staying in Finland. And being considered a non-Sikh woman as well as a 'researcher' were the positions that probably gave me access to, and the right to speak in, Sikh men's weekly meetings at the gurdwara, in which female Sikhs never participated and in which unmarried Sikh men usually did not say much. Occasionally, I was also identified as the *gori* (white) person, as in the following interview with a Sikh man in Yuba City. I had told him that visiting the large gurdwara on Tierra Buena Road did not seem difficult for someone from outside the local Sikh community:

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| Harsimran | They are used to it, they are used to it. Like when I saw you the first time that day, I saw you with [Jaipreet at the Tierra Buena Road gurdwara], it was normal. |
| Laura     | Yeah, it is not a big deal.  |
| Harsimran | Someone is here, some white girl is here, she wants to eat something. Not a big deal. Yeah. It is all normal, nothing new.   |

In other cases, however, when I had been in contact with people for a long time, I was considered more as a friend. In summary, these accounts prove that the identities of researchers are as complex, relational and situational in character as that of the people they study.

24 La Brack (1988) reports similar experiences.

## *Ethnographic Analysis*

As the authors' interests shape the ethnographies that they eventually help to produce, it is important to highlight the ethnographic manner in which I analyzed the data. As anthropologist Laura Huttunen (2010: 48) reminds us, in order to be classified as research, ethnographic texts must accommodate both the wish to offer the reader a rich description of the researched object as well as the intention to present an analysis and interpretation of the gathered research material. In what I would call 'ethnographic analysis' the actual process of analyzing data is not a stage that can be neatly separated from the phase of data collection, but is present from the beginning to the end. In my case, this meant that the process of analyzing the data did not begin when I sat down at my desk after having accomplished most of my fieldwork, but instead began already much earlier on a subconscious level. Throughout my data collection, I continually reflected upon what I had heard and seen in the course of my fieldwork. At other times, I analyzed what I had heard or seen during the process of writing field notes.

The ongoing analysis of my data was accompanied by an interest in finding theoretical concepts that would assist me in reading my data and structuring my analysis. 'Identity' was one such concept, but I felt it did not suffice to help me understand the processes that I was observing or that were being explained to me. For a long time, I had the feeling that whenever I tried to make sense of the data I had gathered, I was looking at a text that grew blurry before my eyes. While looking for a proper pair of glasses, I continued working with the data. Right from the beginning, I began to transcribe my interviews. Each day, I tried to reserve one hour for this task. This means that the voices of my informants accompanied me for months and years after our original conversations had ended. And although the process of transcribing data thus stretched over a lengthy period of time, it kept me engaged with the people I had interviewed for a much longer period of time than I had actually spent physically in the field. Sitting at my desk, often a cup of coffee next to me with headphones plugged into my ears, the intimacy of the original interview seemed to return for those moments I was engaged in transcription. Listening to my informants' words and their voices for a second or third time, after meanwhile having met and talked to other people, triggered many new ideas and associations, and often served as a source of inspiration for the writing process. Producing the written ethnography was vital for my analysis, since it pushed me to weave the analysis into a greater whole.

Going through my transcribed interviews and my field notes, I made use of computer software called TAMS. In TAMS, researchers create codes and attach them to excerpts of their interviews while reading through them. I used codes that were based on certain themes that I had discussed with my informants in the course of the interviews, such as home, religion, dress and so forth. As I realised after coding the data on Sikhs in Finland, the usage of sub-codes, such as 'Food\_preparing it' or 'Food\_Indian', was not really effective, as often the sub-codes would overlap and were later on more easily retrieved by searching for the more general codes, such as

'food'. Coding the data in this manner made handling such a huge data set easier. It enabled me to group together excerpts from various interviews that were related to one specific topic and allowed me to read them all at once when necessary. Eventually, my continuous engagement with the research literature led me to a reading in which I started to see 'practices' as playing a significant role in the making of identities. As a consequence, I began to structure my analysis accordingly by continuously triangulating the data within identity and practice theory. What were the practices of Sikhs that I had observed in the course of my fieldwork? What practices did they mention or describe in the interviews? And what role did these practices play in the process of shaping Sikhs' identities? In order to approach an answer to the last question, I tried to produce a 'thick contextualisation' of the data at hand. Following Laura Huttunen (2010: 42ff.) I use this term to refer to a form of analysis in which ethnographers cross-read their material by contrasting the transcribed interviews, for example, with other material that they have accumulated through their fieldwork such as information gained via participant observation, from reading newspapers, and from conducting research online. The final interpretation rests upon the thick contextualisation of the data at hand.

### *The Problem of Naming*

Before concluding Chapter One, let me briefly address some issues related to what one could call 'the problem of naming'. The following situation that took place in the course of my fieldwork in Helsinki will help to highlight the points I am trying to make. A mother and her teenage daughter had agreed to meet me for an interview. A few weeks later, I was sitting in their kitchen with the digital voice recorder being placed between us on the dining table. The daughter told me about an incident in which one of her school's study advisers once approached her after class.

- |          |   |
|----------|---|
| Laura    | What did the study adviser want to know?  |
|          | Daughter He wanted to know, whether foreigners and the Finnish schools, how they could develop, whether we would need our own student counselling. I have been living in Finland so long.             |
| Laura    | Have you been living here all your life?  |
| Daughter | Well, I was born here, so it doesn't affect me so much, [it instead affects] the immigrants; but I am not totally an immigrant, but I'm not a hundred percent Finn either. I am somewhere in between. |
| Laura    | Is that in your opinion a good thing or not?  |
|          | Daughter Well, in my opinion that is a good thing...  |
| Mother   | [You are] Finnish, you are born here and you have been brought up here.   |

In this interview, the daughter and her mother bring to light the process underlying the shaping of identities, which rests among other things on the act of identifying and being identified. The daughter who has lived in Finland all her life is identified at school by her study adviser as a person who would know about the needs of ‘foreigners’ at school. The daughter positions herself somewhere ‘in between’ an immigrant and a Finn. But as her mother’s statement suggests, she is clearly uncomfortable with the term ‘immigrant’ being applied in relation to her daughter and is eager to claim for her the identity of a Finn, due to the fact that she was born and raised in Finland. When a couple of minutes later I ask the daughter how being a descendant of immigrants has affected her life, the mother reacts by exclaiming, ‘We are not immigrants!’ whereupon the following dialogue ensues:

- |          |  |
|----------|--|
| Daughter | Mother, you are [an immigrant].  |
| Mother   | No, I am not.  |
| Daughter | Yes, you are, because you, you haven’t been born here.   |
| Mother   | But I am not an immigrant.   |
| Daughter | Yes, listen to me: an immigrant is a person who comes from one country to live in another country. |
| Mother   | Yes, but we are not these [ <i>says something in Punjabi</i> ]                                     |
| Daughter | We are not <i>these</i> , but it is so stupid because [it is all] mixed up                         |
| Mother   | Refugees, we are not refugees. <sup>25</sup>   |

This interview excerpt highlights in a vivid manner the way in which identities are claimed and relational and constructed through acts of differentiation. At the same time, the excerpt can be seen to demonstrate in a striking manner the complexity of meanings that accompany a single term. ‘Who to call what type of immigrant and on what grounds?’ are the questions mother and daughter ponder in their discussion that takes place against the backdrop of their experience of living in Finland. On the one hand, there is the mother who wants to identify her daughter as a Finn because she was born in Finland and has been raised there. On the other hand, there is the daughter, who claims to be ‘somewhere in between’ an immigrant and a Finn and who assigns her mother the identity of an immigrant based on the fact that she was born in Punjab and not in Finland.

Scholars working in the field of migration studies would consider people who were born in one country but migrated to another country before reaching adulthood to belong to the category of ‘1.5 generation’. Sociologists Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut (2001: 24), for example, apply in their own study conducted in the United States a definition of 1.5 generation that refers to those who were ‘born abroad but brought at an early stage’ to the country of settlement; whilst the ‘immigrant second generation’ includes those who are ‘native born’ but ‘of foreign parenthood’. But to apply such categories to the empirical data is often problematic. How should one refer, for instance, to

25 I was asked by the mother to disguise her identity as best as I could when referring to this excerpt of the conversation, therefore I chose in this instance to leave out the reference to the exact interview.

a person whose mother arrived as an adult immigrant to Finland and whose father belongs to the 1.5 generation? Should we refer to people like them as the 2.25 generation? The question I see arising from this discussion is how useful in fact are such homogenising categories, which reveal little about the complexity underlying each individual's experiences? Further, when keeping in mind that researchers not only describe but also help to construct the social and cultural worlds they study, the question emerges: to what extent is the usage of expressions such as 'immigrant second generation' or 'immigrant youth' adequate when applied to those who have not migrated themselves?

Seeking an apparatus of terms that would somewhat better reflect the particularities of the biographies I encountered in the course of my fieldwork, I decided to use in this study the term 'immigrant' only when referring to people who have in fact migrated themselves. If they did so before reaching adulthood, this information is provided when relevant for the discussion of the data. When referring to the descendants of immigrants, I use interchangeably expressions such as 'immigrants' (grand-) children, 'descendants of immigrants' or 'immigrants' descendants' while the latter two may also refer to immigrants' grandchildren, grand-grandchildren and so on. Another term, which I use in this study and which can be used to refer to immigrants as well as to their descendants alike, is 'people/ Sikhs with an immigrant background'. In order to go beyond the stereotypical image that emerge from using a particular terminology, I take each personal history on a case-by-case basis in order to illuminate how factors related to age and migration histories relate to the process through which identities are being formed in a particular context.

### *What about Caste?*

When starting my fieldwork, I was aware that the teachings of Sikhism condemn discrimination based on caste. Nevertheless, the literature that I had read prior to conducting my first interviews suggested that caste still played a considerable role in shaping the practices and identities of Sikhs living outside Punjab and a body of recent ethnographic studies confirms this (see e.g. Lum 2011; Moliner 2011; Takhar 2011). Based on his own ethnographic research, the renowned Sikh scholar Hew McLeod (2000: 249ff.) argues that asking about a person's caste affiliation is very simple. By contrast, Sikh scholar Opinderjit Kaur Takhar (2011: 166), who has conducted extensive research on the topic of caste in the context of Sikhism, admits that conducting research on this topic can at times be difficult, as the issue is sensitive and therefore causes informants to hold back information.

At the beginning of my fieldwork in Finland, I asked Sikhs whom I met at the gurdwara or interviewed at their home about their caste affiliation. In response, I was usually told in a brusque manner that there was no such thing as caste in the Sikh religion. For a while, I continued asking about the significance of caste during encounters I had with Sikhs in Finland. But like Bruce La Brack (1988: 361) in his fieldwork conducted among Sikhs in Yuba City, I soon got the impression that caste was a sensitive issue, and the usage

of this word was mostly avoided by my interviewees. If they mentioned it at all, it was usually in a context of condemnation. In Yuba City, my informants all expressed condemnation of caste when the subject came up in conversation, but admitted that despite the long history of settlement in California it still played a role in guiding the practices of some Sikhs. This is especially the case when it comes to marriage, as Noor, who grew up in Yuba City, explained: ‘you can talk to somebody with a different caste, you can be friends with them, but don’t you dare to marry them.’ The intergenerational transfer of knowledge concerning the caste system, as Noor explains, occurs through Sikhs’ manner of talking about others using caste as an identity marker: ‘Don’t you know ‘Sue’ of this caste?’

All Sikhs I talked to in Finland and in California clearly wanted to distance themselves from the caste system. Thus, when asking about their caste affiliation, I felt very uncomfortable, since I was asking them to identify as something they did not want to identify with – at least not in front of me, a non-Sikh. Such a situation is revealed in the following interview I conducted with Sajan, a university student who grew up in Yuba City:

- |       |  |
|-------|--|
| Sajan | [...] The caste system unfortunately is still quite the issue in the culture here, and I sit here and talk with kids my age and they talk about the caste system, and quite frankly, I ask them, what do you know about it, why would you do it, and I am a big promoter of eliminating the caste system most definitely, [...], but I see other people who still see it as a prominent issue. |
| Laura | So do you know what caste you are, are you aware of it?  |
| Sajan | [...] I mean people talk about it, you are this, you are that, and quite frankly I do not identify myself as anything, although I am aware of what I am supposed to be kind of thing, but I would not go so far as to say I am this, I am that...  |
| Laura | May I go as far as to ask what it would be?  |

Here I pushed the boundary and as a response to my question, Sajan tells me his caste affiliation. But did I have the right to ask him to do so? Do questions such as these contribute to a process through which the caste system is kept alive? After all, he clearly stated many times before I asked for his caste affiliation that he ‘would not go so far as to say’ that he belongs to this or that caste. Yet I pushed him to do so. Should I have pushed others as well on this issue? Would it have been my responsibility as a researcher to delve into these issues, to provide a better understanding of the process and the dynamics that continue to fuel the caste system outside of India? Based on my own ethical principles I felt that in pressuring my informants to speak about their caste affiliation while ignoring their obvious unwillingness to do so, I offended many of the Sikhs I talked to by forcing upon them an identity with which they did not want to identify. Thus I eventually decided not to ask about my informants’ caste affiliation anymore, although I knew that as a result a deeper analysis of the role that caste plays in the shaping of Sikhs’ identities and practices would be missing from this ethnography.

## *Outline of this Book*

This book is organised according to themes that emerged from the ethnographic analysis and which were relevant to the central questions of this research. At the same time, the structure of this ethnography can be seen to follow roughly an imagined time line. Consequently, it begins with highlighting the early phase of migration, then goes on with a discussion of practices related to the initial phase of settling down in the new country of residence, and this is finally followed by an analysis of events that occur at the stage of post-migration.

Chapter One has already introduced the methods as well as the theoretical framework of this study. Chapter Two will give an overview of the migration histories of Sikhs in Yuba City and Helsinki, thus providing the reader with an idea of why and how Sikhs migrated. In Chapter Three, I highlight the different meanings that 'work' can play in the life of Sikhs and in the process through which they negotiate and claim identity positions. In the chapter that follows I will then go on to discuss in more detail how Sikhs construct and perform their situational identities through various forms of dress and dressing practices, while focusing in particular on the role that the Sikh turban plays in this process. I then continue in Chapter Five with an analysis of a number of selected religious and cultural sites. My intention is to point out how these sites serve as important venues through which Sikhs have the possibility to maintain, transmit, display, negotiate, re-shape and also claim identities in dialogue with fellow Sikhs as well as non-Sikhs alike. Before offering some concluding thoughts concerning the findings of this study, Chapter Six sets out to explore in more detail the practices that Sikhs perform in relation to important life-cycle events, such as birth and weddings. In addition to exploring the transnational dimension that these practice often gain as an outcome of migration, I seek to bring to the fore the role that they play in the process through which immigrants and their descendants negotiate their identities.

## 2 Migration Histories

The concept of human migration implies the mobility of people. It refers to a process in which people move from one geographical defined location to another for different kinds of reasons. Migrants might either move within their current country of residence or immigrate to another country. In this study I am interested in exploring the latter phenomenon by scrutinising in an ethnographic manner the case of Sikhs who have immigrated to Helsinki, Finland and Yuba City, California. The following chapter sets out to address the first research question of this study, namely how and why Sikhs migrate. This question is mostly addressed in a rather descriptive manner with the intention of providing the contextual background information that is needed to better understand the analysis that is presented in the chapters that follow, although I will also draw attention to some of the moments that are related to the actual migration phase and that reveal the situational and context-dependent character of identities.

### *Yuba City and Sikh Migration*

#### THE 'ARRIVAL STORY'

Traditionally, anthropological accounts start with an 'arrival story' depicting how the fieldworker arrived in the field. Arrival stories told by fieldworkers such as Bronislaw Malinowski (1987 [1922]) can be seen to serve as a narrative device that seeks to escort the reader to the field via an imagined journey. It can be also seen to serve as a rhetorical device through which ethnographers strive to validate their accounts and establish their own authority by convincing the reader that they have 'been there' (see Pratt 1986: 31ff.; Davies 1999: 216).

If my ethnography were to follow the conventional mode of such an account, it would probably start by asking readers to picture themselves standing in San Francisco's airport in the middle of the night. This would be followed by a few words depicting my first impressions of the location that I had just entered and was now driving through: a vibrant city, whose lights were sparkling in the darkness of the night, full of hills and bridges. Next,

perhaps some lines regarding the first night spent in a motel, being kept alive by jetlag and my three-year-old daughter's restless energy, followed by breakfast consisting of American pancakes and bacon next to a big cup of coffee. The arrival story would then go on to describe the car-drive through the warmth and fields of California, heading towards the rural town of Yuba City. Along the way, Sacramento's skyscrapers, which suddenly pop up out of the landscape but are quickly left behind as a fleeting image in the car's back window, orchards and farms bordering the road, which lead us towards the final destination. In the distance shimmers the silhouette of the Sutter Buttes, known as the world's smallest mountain range and a familiar landmark cherished by Yuba City's inhabitants, Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike. And at the city's outskirts, one can notice the gurdwaras, which visually announce the Sikh presence in this town.

In the preface to *Mama Lola. A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, Karen McCarthy Brown (2001: xi) points out that 'in the classic ethnographic research situation, the anthropologist is the one who crosses culture borders (such as they are), learns the local language, and manages to figure out how the system works by interpreting local practices.' But in carrying out research among migrants, it soon became clear that the experiences of a fieldworker partly overlap with those of immigrants. Therefore, the 'arrival story' is not only an essential part of the ethnographic account presented here but also plays a significant role in the biographies of the immigrants studied. Thus, when arriving at San Francisco airport and travelling from there to Yuba City by car, I followed the same route taken by many Sikh migrants before me. In the following excerpt, for instance, Ramjot offers a glimpse into his Yuba City 'arrival story':

You know what, I can remember the time when my wife and I got married back in India, my wife was from back here [=Yuba City], and we got married and the time she picked me up at the San Francisco airport, and from Highway 99 she took Highway 113, and I was wondering, 'look at all the trees here, oh my gosh, where can we end up?' [*laughs*], and that is it, I came to Yuba City, and here I am.

Unlike my arrival story, however, his arrival was not temporary but eventually resulted in his becoming a citizen of the United States. Like many recent Sikh immigrants, I had the luxury of arriving in California by plane holding a valid visa in my hands. By contrast, the journey of the first Sikhs to this area was not nearly so comfortable. In order to reach North America, they had to go through many hardships; a fact of which their descendants are still very much aware. Once these early Sikh immigrants had reached California, they faced the same hostility faced by many other immigrant groups who arrived in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Prior to Sikh migration to California, Canada had attracted many Sikh immigrants. But increasing racial opposition and the implementation of a more restrictive immigration policy in Canada motivated Sikhs to try their luck further south, and eventually increasing numbers of them ended up in California (Gonzales 1986: 42; Leonard 1992: 31). Whereas in 1870, the number of foreign-born

Indians in the entire United States was only 586, by 1920 it had risen to 4,901.<sup>1</sup>

This first wave of Sikh immigrants consisted mainly of illiterate labourers from agricultural and/or military backgrounds, and, like the first Sikhs who would later arrive in Finland, they were mostly males who were travelling in groups (La Brack 1988: 68–69). These men were both bachelors and married, but came without their families (Leonard 1992: 24). As Bruce La Brack and Karen Leonard (1984: 528) note, ‘lumber mills, railroads, and agriculture provided the jobs’ for the early Punjabi pioneers.

Starting from 1917, America’s immigration policy became more restrictive with the passing of the Immigration Act that prohibited certain Asian groups, including Indians, to immigrate to the United States. Six years later, in 1923, the Supreme Court decided in the case of ‘US versus Bhagat Singh Thind’ that Indians, ‘though Caucasians, were not “white” and thus not entitled to American citizenship (Gibson 1988a: 40). Those Indians who had received American citizenship prior to the decision made in the ‘Thind case’, were considered to have ‘received their documents ‘fraudulently’ and therefore the US government revoked their citizenship (Gonzales 1986: 45). These legislative changes that have been described as a form of ‘institutionalised discrimination’ (Alba *et al.* 2009: 17) had a direct impact on the lives of Sikhs in California. The Alien Land Law, which had been passed earlier in 1913 and which prohibited persons without American citizenship from owning or leasing land, also now applied to Sikhs in California. Further, the immigration act passed in 1917 made family reunion or transnational marriage practices impossible. At that time, the number of Sikh women of marriageable age was low in California, and thus some Sikh men married Non-Indian women, in many cases Hispanics (La Brack and Leonard 1984).

Thus, until 1946, when the Luce-Cellar Bill was passed, re-establishing migration from the Indian subcontinent and granting Indians naturalisation rights, the only new arrivals from India were a few hundred students and some three thousand ‘illegal’ immigrants, ‘who jumped ship in Atlantic Seaports’ (Gibson 1988a: 41) while some others entered the country by crossing the Mexican border (La Brack 1988: 72). Accounts of those adventurous migration journeys have survived in the form of legends told within families. Suraj, for example, who moved from the Punjab to Yuba City in the mid 1950s in order to study at the local college, told me the migration story of his two uncles who had arrived before him. Both of them had left India at some point during the 1920s when they were around twenty years of age. The older one, who was already married, travelled first to Trinidad without his family. From there he continued to Cuba, where he worked for five years in the sugar cane industry while picking up some Spanish language skills. These language skills were probably useful in Mexico, where he ventured next, and where his younger brother joined him. The two of them walked through Mexico for six months with the intention of crossing the border. Suraj recalls what his uncles told him about their travels:

1 Gibson and Jung (2006, Table Four). ‘Data on country of birth are based generally on the political boundaries of foreign countries existing at the date of the specific decennial census’ (Gibson and Jung 2006: 6).

It took them six months to walk. And they say they were so thirsty, there was no water around for miles. They saw a tractor, [after] half a mile, and they thought, 'Where there is a tractor, there is water in the radiator.' They walked over, losing [i.e. loosening] up the bottom, and they drank that water right out of the radiator. [laughs] [...] Those things are still vivid in my memory. And so they had some real hardship. They were in Mexico, and they were going to come to California. Well, the Mexican government put them in jail. One guy was a wrestler. [...]. And so he said, 'How do we get out of jail?' They did not want to break out. So the word got around that one of them was a wrestler, so they wagered with the police chief, who was also a wrestler, and the Mexican guy challenged the [pause] – you got the idea? And he said, 'Ok, if I pin you, you got to let us go. Ok?' He said, 'Ok, good enough.' So all the prisoners got together, formed a ring around them, and here are these two guys, and he said they were so desperate to get out of Mexico, he was determined to pin the guy down, and so they wrestled and he pinned this guy down.'

According to the story, after getting out of the Mexican prison, the uncles paid some money to a *coyote* (a guide leading illegal migrants across the border), who smuggled them into the United States. After having spent some time working in Arizona, they started walking along the railway tracks at night and finally ended up – via the towns of Bakersfield, Fresno and Stockton – in Yuba City sometime in the 1930s. But only after the passage of the Luce-Cellar Bill in 1946 were they able to apply for American citizenship and to sponsor their family members to join them. By the time the older brother was joined by his wife, they had been separated for almost thirty years.

Heroic stories like these form an integral part of the larger Sikh migration history. Furthermore, as in the case of British Pakistanis studied by anthropologist Pnina Werbner (1990: 1) in South Manchester, it could be argued that these shared memories and legends of early Sikh immigration help to foster a feeling of community amongst Yuba City Sikhs. In addition, narrating such legends functions as an important means by which the older generation seeks to transmit values, which they consider important, to the younger generations, thus preparing the grounds based on which they can negotiate their identities.

In Suraj's family, these stories of hardship were told, as he explains himself, to teach the younger generation to 'never give up, to work hard, and to succeed'. Partly, these stories are also told to remind the descendants and the more recently arrived immigrants not to take their present situation for granted. Their purpose, it could be argued, is to make the 'newcomers' as well as the Sikhs who have been growing up in California sensible to see and understand the historical context from which Sikhs' present position in Yuba City originated.

Balveer, who also listened as a child to the story of how his great-grandfather had reached Yuba City via Mexico, seems to have internalised this lesson. Reflecting on his own position in relation to his ancestors, he says: 'four generations later, things are completely different, we did not see near what they [our ancestors] have gone through. I sometimes can get a little emotionally tripped up just thinking of what they actually have put

into it,' and adds a bit later that he has the 'utmost respect' for his ancestors and their deeds. In a similar vein, four teenage girls whom I interviewed in a group interview at their high school express in their statements an awareness of the hardships their ancestors went through while bringing to the fore how they think that their ancestors' decision to immigrate to the United States has impacted their lives as women:

- Laura            When you think about the American dream, do you have one? Or your family, when they came here, that they have accomplished an American dream?
- Geet             Well, I do not think that I could do what my parents did. They came here: it is hard to just move to another country like that and start over, 'cause college and stuff, it is really expensive to do that kind of stuff. I do not know, they did a lot for me.
- (All)             Yeah.
- Amanpreet     Yeah, we appreciate our grandparents and everyone who came here.
- Geet             If you think about it, my life, if I had been raised in India to high school level, it would not have been the same, it would have been a lot different.
- Laura            So you are happy?
- Geet             Yeah, I am happy that they came here!
- Laura            So the chances are better here?
- Geet             Especially for women, if you live in certain parts in India, that are more countryside, there are not a lot of opportunities for girls. Amanpreet In the countryside it is still, they still live the same way than they used to back in the days.
- Kareen           No education.

The interviews conducted in Yuba City suggest that the story of migration usually has a strong heroic character and is often told from a male perspective in which the hardships attached to the actual migration journey are being emphasised. This particular kind of migration story has carved out for itself a firm place in the oral tradition of many Sikh families I encountered during my fieldwork in Yuba City, and it seems to play a pivotal role in the process through which Sikh immigrants and their descendants construct their identities in the context of California and the United States in more general. Taking into consideration that the grand narrative of the United States depicts is as a country of immigrants that provides equal opportunities to rise from rags to riches to all those who are willing to work hard, it could be argued that the interest to maintain and pass on such heroic migration stories plays a pivotal role in the efforts through which Sikhs seek to claim for themselves a rightful position in the larger American society.

## FROM 1946 ONWARDS

The situation for Indians either living in the US or wishing to migrate there improved significantly after the introduction of the Luce-Cellar Act in 1946, which legalised Indian immigration and granted Indians the right to become naturalised citizens (Gibson 1988a: 42). Four Sikh men, whom I interviewed for this study, arrived in Yuba City in the 1950s as students. Harbinder, who was 92 years old at the time of the interview, is one of them. When he came to the US, he says, he 'had a dream'.<sup>2</sup> His dream was to become a journalist, and therefore he applied with a Bachelor's degree attained in India to various universities in the United States. Of the ones that accepted him, Harbinder finally chose Stanford, where he got his Master of Arts degree circa 1956. But making a living was not easy, and in order to finance his studies, he had to do manual labour. In 1965 there occurred again a significant change in the US immigration policy, when the quota of new Indian immigrants allowed to enter the US per year was raised to 20,000, thus annulling previous policies that were meant to keep out non-Europeans and also some categories of Europeans (Castles and Miller 2009: 14). However, even more significant for the future of the Sikhs in Yuba City was the abolishment of restrictions on the number of annually issued family reunification visas. These amendments can be seen to have led to a revitalisation of the Indian community in North California (La Brack and Leonard 1984: 535).

After the introduction of laws supporting family reunions by allowing US citizens to function as sponsors and petition for green cards for their immediate relatives, a great number of Sikhs migrated to Yuba City through family networks. The significance of family migration networks is highlighted in the data gathered for this research project. Out of 27 immigrants whom I interviewed in 2008, and who were born outside of Yuba City, twenty stated that a relative had sponsored them.<sup>3</sup> Out of these twenty, seven women and one man came to Yuba City as marriage migrants. Some of the spouses also migrated from other countries to California. Raveena, for instance, moved to California from the UK after her marriage to a Sikh man in Yuba City. Her uncle, who lives in Yuba City, assisted in arranging this marriage.

Stories told by those Sikhs who have lived their whole lives in Yuba City also point to the important role family networks played in the establishment of the Sikh community in Yuba City. Noor, for instance, explained at the beginning of the interview that she was 'born and raised here', but her father, who was the oldest son in his family, came in the mid 1960s together with one of his brothers from India to Arizona. They had an uncle living there, who had filed a visa petition for them, but he passed away right before they got there, so they continued to Yuba City where they had other family members living. Around 1975, Noor's father went back to India and married Noor's mother, who then came over to the US. The impact of the legislative changes

2 He used this expression very consciously and most likely with reference to Martin Luther King's famous speech.

3 Five others came with the help of a student visa and two of those had relatives in Yuba City. Two others entered American territory with a tourist visa, and once in the US, they were granted asylum after having applied for it.

which occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century can be seen from the figures representing the foreign-born<sup>4</sup> population in the US contained in Table Four. In 1960, there were only 12, 296 foreign-born individuals from India living in the United States. In 1970, the numbers had already increased to 51,000, and ten years later this figure had quadrupled to 206,087. As Table Four demonstrates, from 1980 to 1990 and from 1990 to 2000 the number doubled from decade to decade. The American Community Survey of 2010 reveals that the number of foreign-born from India has continued its significant growth.

Year	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
Foreign Born from India	12, 296	51,000	206,087	450,406	1,022,552	1,780,322

*Table Four: Foreign-born population from India in the US since 1960.<sup>5</sup>*

The number of Indians has been rising in Yuba City as well. According to the US Census (2000), in the year 2000 there were 2,360 people, which is 6.4 percent of Yuba City's total population, who identified themselves as Asian Indian. Today, there are 8,863 self-identified Asian Indians living in Yuba City, and they make up 13.7 percent of the rural town's total population (US Census 2010). How many of these are Sikhs is impossible to say, as there are no official statistics in the United States that would count people based on their religious affiliation. Sikhs themselves estimate that there are approximately 10,000 Sikhs living in Yuba City and its surrounding area, including the neighbouring cities of Marysville and Live Oak.

#### MOTIVES TO MIGRATE

So far, this chapter has roughly outlined who migrated to Yuba City, how and when. The next question that needs to be addressed then is: 'why'? Why do Sikhs migrate to Yuba City? Why do they leave a familiar setting in exchange for an initially unfamiliar place? What motivates them to travel across the ocean and put down roots on virtually the other side of the globe? Two of my informants mentioned the wish to escape India in the aftermath of 1984, when the Indian army attacked the Golden Temple in Amritsar, as a reason why they decided to leave their home country. During this Operation Bluestar, as it was called, Satwinder, one of the two informants, explains that 'we had no intentions to come here as far as money was concerned, we were well off there', but it was the tension between the Hindu and Sikh populations and the related turmoil in India that motivated him to leave his original home country and to apply for asylum in the United States. Others, such as Bhagwan, left the Punjab in order to be close to their beloved ones. Bhagwan

4 Anyone who was not a US citizen at birth (Gibson and Jung 2006: 3)

5 Figures for 1960–2000 are based on Gibson and Jung (2006, Table Four); Figure for 2010 is based on US Census (2010).

and his wife came to the US at the turn of the millennium, after Bhagwan had retired from his work in the Punjab. 'What should we do in India,' he asks, 'when our children and grandchildren are in the US?' Family, he goes on to explain, is after all 'the most important thing for Indians.' Now he and his wife live with their son's family, and help to take care of their children.

In addition to reasons related to security and family, previous research on Sikh migration has suggested that Sikhs' decision to migrate has been motivated by population pressures in the Punjab and the wish to maintain the family's status by avoiding a fragmentation of the family land holdings at the time of distributing the inheritance (La Brack and Leonard 1984: 527; Gibson 1988a: 39; Dusenbery 1989: 4ff). Thus, migration can also be seen as a strategy that is undertaken in order to enhance family prosperity through sending home money that has been earned abroad, which can be used for buying land, the building of a nice house, or for arranging the marriages of women in the family (Dusenbery 1989: 5; McLeod 2000: 243).

In addition to strategies for the maintenance and enhancement of family status, another significant factor that encourages Sikhs to migrate is the quest for economic opportunity. As Jaipreet in Yuba City explains, the decision of his ancestors to migrate was not motivated by 'the fact that they were poor there [in India], but [by] the simple fact that they knew that America was something which was possibly better in fact. So it was not being poor *per se*, but knowing that there is a better avenue, a better possibility as well.' In India, as many of my informants pointed out, the options for climbing the social ladder are much more limited due to corruption. As Santokh, who came to Yuba City when he was ten years old and who is now in his thirties, puts it: 'In India many things are good, a lot more social life and stuff, the only bad thing about India is corruption.' In order to circumvent the structural constraints that they see imposed on their lives in India, many Sikhs decide to leave the Punjab, and are willing to pursue 'opportunities anywhere in the world to make a better life for themselves and their families' (Dusenbery 1989: 1). The idea of America as a country that provides better possibilities for success travels within the extended transnational family network. Following sociologist and political economist Stephen Castles (2002: 1150), this knowledge of 'other societies and the opportunities they offer' can be considered a form of cultural capital. Tajender, who came to Yuba City with his family when he was in high school and who is now in his mid-forties, explains the route through which the image of the US as a country of opportunities has travelled within his family:

Actually, my mum's brother came in 1968 as a student, he came here [to the US] as a student, he did his civil engineering, his PhD, and he felt it was a much better life here, and my mum was only educated up to fifth grade, and so obviously she did not know much about the world, and neither did my dad growing up in the village. [He] didn't know much more about the world, what was in their little village in India, maybe, a bit about Punjab, so [...] my mum's brother visiting India, saying that you got to come over there, the kids will have a much better future, and my parents were not quite sure, but eventually he was able to twist their arm, and eventually we moved here in January 1975.

Today Yuba City claims a special place in the master narrative of Sikh migration to the US. Local Sikhs often portray the city as an important gateway through which many Sikhs are said to have initially started their life on American soil. As Satwinder, who has been living in Yuba City for about fifteen years and who is now in his sixties, explains:

[...] if you go to New York there are other people, you know, if you tell them that you are from Yuba City, there will be one or two people who say 'you know what? I was living in Yuba City, my mum stayed in Yuba City' and they still have links to Yuba City. It has become the Punjab of the United States. People came to Yuba City and from here they went to other places.

This observation receives support from La Brack (1988: 433ff.), who writes in an update to his initial research on the Yuba City Sikh community that 'increasingly, the area is used as a half-way station where recently landed immigrants can get their bearings, visit their relatives, and learn about how things work in America.' When I asked Sikhs what they thought were the reasons why their ancestors decided to settle down in Yuba City, they explained that the first settlers liked the area because it reminded them of the Punjab. But more importantly, the first Sikh immigrants chose Yuba City as a place of settlement because it offered them the opportunity to farm, as I will elaborate in the next section. Concerning the similarities of Yuba City's landscape with that of Punjab, I heard many Sikhs who described Yuba City and its surrounding area as the 'Punjab of the US' (see also Leonard 1999: 292).

In order to offer evidence for this argument, they would refer to the similarities between the Yuba City area and the Punjab in terms of both climate and landscape. According to Prem, who migrated to Yuba City in the mid-1970s together with his wife and children and who is currently in his mid-sixties, the area around Yuba City 'looks like the Punjab. It is just like Punjab. Punjab is basically an agricultural state, and this is exactly like Punjab, definitely like Punjab, you have the same, the mustard field, the yellow flowers [...]'. And Balveer, who is around forty and has lived in Yuba City all his life but has visited the Punjab a couple of times during holidays, points out that like the Punjab, the area of Northern California where Yuba City is located has *panj ab* (= five rivers) which surround the area.<sup>6</sup> Due to these similarities, he argues, Sikhs who arrived in this area felt that they 'belonged' to this place.

Following Karen Leonard (1992: 34), who observed the same practice of comparing Yuba City to the Punjab in her study on Punjabi-Mexican marriages in California, it could be argued that this act of imposing familiar landscapes on the surroundings in which immigrants have settled, serves as a means to help them create an attachment to the land they have settled in. Generating such allegories is an act of translation through which the unfamiliar landscape, in this case Yuba City, is transformed into something

6 See also Leonard (1992: 35): the five rivers described by the source quoted by Leonard are the Feather, American, Bear, Yuba and Sacramento River.

more familiar that immigrants find easier to embrace. Framing the new landscape in a Punjabi vocabulary thus can be interpreted as a tactic through which Sikhs seek to position themselves as part of the Yuba City landscape. Yet at the same time, this practice of translating a landscape into a familiar vocabulary can be seen to highlight the significant role that Punjab still plays in the memory of many Sikhs living in Yuba City, thus reflecting the diasporic consciousness of those who are making such statements.

### *The Migration Histories of Sikhs in Finland*

Prior to the 1980s, Finland was a country characterised by a strong outward migration. Finns had been migrating in significant numbers to, among other places, North America and Australia since the mid-nineteenth century, and after the Second World War, a significant number migrated to Sweden. However, the early 1980s marked a turning point when the net migration flow to Finland became positive, which means that more people migrated to Finland than emigrated from it (see Statistics Finland 2009). However, as migration scholars Jouni Korkiasaari and Ismo Söderling (1998: 14) point out, until the end of the 1980s ‘some 85 percent of the immigrants coming to Finland were return migrants (mostly from Sweden)’ and only in the 1990s has the number of immigrants with foreign origin significantly increased. The numbers of foreign nationals living in Finland, including Indian nationals, highlights the increase of immigration to Finland. According to information retrieved from the online database of *Statistics Finland (2012)*, in 1990 there were a total of 26,255 foreign nationals living in Finland, out of which 270 were Indian nationals. Twenty years later, in 2010, the number of foreign nationals had considerably grown to 167,954, out of which 3,468 were Indian nationals. But when did the first Sikhs immigrate to Finland, and why did they choose Finland as their destination? When I asked Gurmeet, Why just Finland?, she gave me the following answer:

Gurmeet            That is what I have been wondering many times myself, why just Finland [*laughs*]? But I think it was my uncle who had come here first and he said so many times that Finland is a nice and beautiful country and one can find work here and that we could perhaps come here.

During my first visit to the gurdwara in Helsinki, sitting on the floor in the temple’s kitchen, sipping Indian tea (*chai*) and eating a biscuit, I asked an elderly Sikh man seated opposite me why he had migrated to Finland. He gave me the following answer: ‘All Sikhs have their own reasons why they came here, and they are all different; some came because of work, some because of marriage and some because of their relatives.’<sup>7</sup> Indeed, his statement together with Gurmeet’s response to my question why out of all countries her father had decided to immigrate to Finland reveal some of the main reasons why

7 Field notes Laura Hirvi (February 5, 2008).

Sikhs have immigrated to Finland. As I will elaborate in what follows, those reasons often overlap and are gender dependent. The first group of Sikh men allegedly arrived in Finland in 1979, which is considerably later than the start of Sikh migration to North America and Britain, for example, but fairly close to the migration timeline of Sikhs to other Scandinavian countries (See Jacobsen and Myrvold 2011: 10). Those early pioneers to Finland entered the country primarily in search of better opportunities. Reportedly, the first Sikh men travelled to Finland in a small group, and like the early Sikh immigrants in the UK and East Africa (Singh and Tatla 2006; Bhachu 1985), the members of this group shared an apartment in Helsinki to reduce their living costs.

Mahaan, who arrived in Finland in the early 1980s, only a couple of years after the pioneers, explains that he ended up in Finland because he had been working on a ship. Once the ship had docked in Helsinki, he got off, started studying at the local university and then settled down permanently after marrying an ethnically Finnish woman. Also Gagandeep entered Finland quite soon after the arrival of the Sikh pioneers. A friend living in Sweden had recommended Finland to him as an alternative destination for migration. Thus, he applied for a place to study in both Sweden and Finland, and after receiving a letter of acceptance only from a university in Finland, he came to Helsinki. Both cases vividly demonstrate that the final migration destination is not necessarily decided *a priori*, but is rather influenced by chance, opportunity and suggestions from others. Other Sikhs who migrated after the first settlers chose Finland as a destination mostly because of family reunification or due to the information they had received via a relative or friend already living in Finland. Frequently, friends and relatives have helped in the migration process by providing jobs, thus helping to fuel the process of chain migration. Hence it can be stated that in some cases, work and family are the overlapping reasons which explain why male Sikhs in particular leave India in order to migrate to Finland.

While the majority of these migrants seem to migrate directly from India to Finland, some Sikhs have come to Finland via a transit country such as Sweden or Germany. These journeys do not always run as smoothly as the traveller would wish, as Sagar's migration story reveals. Sagar, who is now in his fifties, left India in the late 1970s by accepting a job on a ship. In those days, he recalled, the rumour in Punjab was that access to European countries was only possible via the UK or by working on a ship. Sagar chose the latter option but was constantly seasick and finally decided to disembark in Germany, where he applied for political asylum. He liked it there, but after one of his cousins in Finland persistently invited him to visit, he decided to do so in order to see what the country was like. When he reached the Finnish border, however, immigration control did not allow him to enter the country, nor could he return to Germany, as he had unknowingly broken his residency obligation. Looking back on this experience today, Sagar regards his past hardship with humour, when he laughingly summarises: 'At the Finnish border they told me to go back to Germany or India, and at the German border they told me to go back to Finland or to India.' Fed up, and with no other alternative, he eventually returned to India with the intention of staying there for the rest of his life. However, he returned to Finland after

a couple of years because one of his relatives had meanwhile migrated there.

Those like Sagar who were already married prior to migration usually brought their families to Finland only after finding a regular job that enabled them to provide for their families' livelihoods. Furthermore, bringing over a large family at once was often financially challenging for the first wave of Sikh immigrants and, therefore, some families migrated gradually, leaving, as in one couple's case, their two oldest children behind with a relative in India, only to reunite with them a few years later in Finland. Thus, as some of the cases discussed in the context of Sikhs' migration history to California reveal, the decision to migrate can result in the temporary separation of the family. As interviews in both countries reveal, enduring this situation can be emotionally very difficult for the parties involved. Komal, who was five years of age when her father left India on his own to look for work in Finland, still has some memories of this period:

I remember when I was little, we always waited for my father to come from Finland to India. He did not come every year, there was a smaller break, I do not remember that, but I always remember how I slept and my father woke me up and took me on his lap, I still remember that. Because there [in India] you have these mosquito nets, and I slept in beds like that, where there was a shelter like that on top so no mosquitoes would come in. And my father took me on his lap, and I was little, this is what I always remember that my father came from Finland to India. But I did not know what Finland was at that time, of course, a small child cannot know because we did not talk about it in this way.

As in the case of Sikh women who migrated to Tanzania and Britain (Mand 2010: 355), the dominant reason given by female Sikhs who had migrated to Finland independently of their parents was their marriage to a Sikh man already settled in the country – none of the women in my study was married to an ethnic Finn.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Sikh women in Finland, I know of only one case where a woman migrated as the grandmother of a family, and another who came to Helsinki as the domestic worker of an Indian expatriate. None of the other Sikh women I interviewed or talked to in the course of fieldwork mentioned paid work, political turbulence or study as a reason for their migration to Finland, but stated marriage as their primary reason.

In addition, two of my male informants ended up in Finland because they married Sikh women already living in the Helsinki area. Two other male informants gave the turmoil in India in the 1980s as the reason for leaving their original home country. While one of my male informants also mentioned 'looking for adventure', education was only once explicitly indicated as a cause for coming to Finland. In contrast to those Sikh immigrants who now work in bars, restaurants or pubs, the five Sikh expatriates whom I had interviewed explained that they had come to Finland because of their or their husband's work. The two of them who decided to

8 The findings are supported by Tuomas Martikainen and Lalita Gola's (2007: 22, 41ff.) study of sixteen Indian and Nepalese women in Finland of whom only one was married to an ethnic Finn.

stay in Finland after their contracts had ended by applying for a position in a Finnish based company, explained that they considered Finland to be a safe, peaceful, and clean country to live in. Also they said that they appreciated the working conditions in Finnish based companies. In comparison to India, there was less hierarchy in the workforce and the workdays were on average much shorter. One couple I talked to would have liked to stay in Finland but eventually moved to the UK where the husband had received a job offer after his contract in Finland had come to an end. They said that due to the shorter working days that the husband had in Finland they had more time than they had in India to socialise with friends and to communicate with their parents in India.

With regard to the process through which immigrants and their descendants negotiate their identities, it is interesting to note that, similarly to many Sikhs in Yuba City, quite a number of informants in Helsinki emphasised in the conversations that they had not left India because of poverty or unemployment. For example, Nalin, who is in her mid-thirties and who came to Finland as a marriage migrant, explained to me that some Finns whom she encounters through her current customer service-oriented work think of India solely as a poor country. She blames the media, and in particular documentaries shown on Finnish television, for portraying simplified images of India that reinforce such assumptions. As Nalin says, the Finnish people she talks to often do not understand that she actually had a well-paid job prior to migration. As it appears, she wants to distance herself from being identified as someone who was forced to immigrate to Finland for the purpose of escaping poverty. Instead, she wants to claim the identity of a person, who was already well off in India and whose decision to leave her original homeland was based on choice. Similarly to Nalin also Jodh, who is in his thirties and who came to Finland as a teenager together with his parents, stressed in a conversation that we had at his restaurant one day that he and his family did not emigrate from India because of poverty. Rather they were eager to improve their chances of moving forward in life, which due to corruption would be harder to achieve in India, as several interviewees explained. In other words, Jodh seems to be eager to stress that in his case it was ambition and not poverty that fuelled the migration of his family.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

This chapter has highlighted the multiple and overlapping factors that have motivated Sikhs to immigrate to Finland or to California. An aspiration that many Sikh immigrants seem to share, independent of their gender, time of migration or their chosen country of settlement, seems to be the wish to improve their family's standard of living by leaving India and moving to another country that is believed to provide them with better opportunities to enhance their economic standing. In India, Sikhs feel that their desire to climb the social ladder is often thwarted due to corruption that makes it hard to get ahead simply through hard work. In both case studies, it was

male Sikhs who functioned as pioneers and who were later on joined by their families. This chapter has shown that the decision to migrate tends to have a considerable affect on the everyday life of families. This is especially the case if families have to endure a phase of separation when the father goes abroad alone at first in order to earn money that would allow the rest of the family to join him later on. As previous studies have highlighted, the movement of people across national borders is not unrestricted but is conditioned by laws that seek to regulate it (see, for example, Brettell 2002). As a consequence families might be separated and spread across countries for years, if not decades. Thus, legislative regulations might force the nuclear family to adopt a transnational character.

Further, as many of the individual cases discussed in this chapter have demonstrated, the migration journey is seldom a straightforward process but rather resembles a twisted and looped line marked by moments of serendipity. Looking at the migration histories of Sikhs in Yuba City and Helsinki, it became clear that in both settings transnational family networks as well as transnational marriage arrangements have played throughout history a crucial role in stimulating and facilitating the migration of Sikhs to Finland and California. In addition to marriage, also work and education were mentioned as reasons for why Sikhs have migrated to California and Finland. In both countries, I also met a few Sikhs who mentioned the political situation in India in the mid 1980s as a motive for leaving India and settling somewhere abroad.

The act of immigrating not only impacts the way families go about living their everyday lives, it also affects the ways in which a person is being identified by others. By leaving India and by settling in Finland or the United States Sikhs gain in their native homeland the identity of 'someone who has left India' while in their new home countries they are being identified by others as 'immigrants'. In the case of Sikhs in Yuba City it appears that Sikhs are eager to cherish, through the narrating of heroic stories, their historically acquired status as immigrants, which could be interpreted as an attempt to claim a righteous place for themselves in their adopted homeland, the United States, which rests on the grand narrative that depicts it as 'a country of immigrants'. Further, in this chapter I have suggested that as a consequence of having immigrated to Finland and California Sikhs need to learn how to live with being identified at times with someone who comes from a 'poor country' and to be looked at as someone who was forced to migrate. Eager to challenge and to deconstruct these ascribed identity positions, many Sikhs are keen to point out that they were actually quite well off when living in India, thus carving out for themselves a more positive social identity which rests on the image of an ambitious person, whose decision to migrate rests on a conscious choice.

### 3 The Meaning of Work

Work plays an important role in the process through which immigrants gain a foothold in the countries in which they have settled. Participating in working life provides people with the financial means to carry out their everyday life, and it also might provide them with a chance to practise and improve their language skills with co-workers or customers. Further, by engaging in paid labour immigrants might have the opportunity to become part of a larger social network and to establish acquaintances and friendships that go beyond the family and ethnic community circle. At the same time, a workplace constitutes a crucial site for negotiating identities. Also the nature of the work that individuals carry out has a strong impact on shaping their sense of self and on the ways in which others identify them.

With these thoughts in mind, I set out to explore in this chapter the relationship between work and the process of constructing identities. To begin with, I take a closer look at the work histories of Sikhs in Yuba City to illuminate the dynamics that inform the ways in which Sikhs carve out a place for themselves in the labour market of their new homelands. At the same time, I try to show how these efforts are linked to aspirations of positioning themselves better in the class hierarchy not only of their respective countries of settlement but also in their original home country. I then go on to examine in more detail how Sikhs in Finland negotiate their identities at and through work. Finally, I address the manner in which I see the rhetoric of ‘hard work’ to be involved in the process through which Sikhs who are living in Helsinki and Yuba City construct their identities in response and with reference to the polyphonic framework of meanings that surrounds them. Before sharing my concluding thoughts, I discuss towards the end of this chapter the future prospects of Sikhs in Helsinki and Yuba City.

#### *Working in Yuba City*

‘WE FARM, THAT IS WHAT WE DO BY TRADE’

It is a sunny weekday morning in the middle of November and I am riding my bike to the gurdwara, where I am supposed to meet Balveer for an interview. Ramjot, whom I had interviewed a week earlier, had helped to

establish my contact with Balveer by calling him on the phone, explaining to him in a mix of English and Punjabi that there was a 'gori [white] chick', who was doing research on local Sikhs and who would like to interview him.<sup>1</sup> Now, a week later, I am on my way to meet Balveer. Halfway to the temple, at the crossing of two main roads, I pass the familiar sign which points the way towards the gurdwara and that functions as one of the many small yet visible indicators of the presence of Sikhs in Yuba City. Three minutes later, after having reached the temple complex, I lock my bike and walk to the gurdwara's office, where Balveer is already waiting for me. His wife has just recently delivered a baby and I see an excited father, who is beaming with pride and joy while telling me the good news. Once seated on the couch, we begin the interview, which will last about three hours. In this period of time, Balveer, who is in his forties and who is a very gifted storyteller, takes me on a journey through time and place, allowing me to share the moments of sorrow and joy that are part of his biography. After the interview is over, I feel positively exhausted, as one might feel after having experienced decades of life squeezed into only a couple of hours.

At the beginning of the interview, I ask Balveer to tell me something about the migration background of his family. As he explains, his great-grandfather arrived in California around 1910 and his son, Balveer's grandfather, followed him some forty years later, around 1950. Balveer's father arrived in Yuba City in 1958 as a young man, and like his father and grandfather before him, he started to work on a farm as a hired labourer. After having married a Sikh woman, who was born in California, and after having acquired enough capital, Balveer's father bought together with his own father the family's first piece of farmland in California. The agricultural enterprise flourished, and soon Balveer's family started sponsoring the migration of numerous family members to Yuba City. Today, it could be argued that Balveer's father is a sort of a patriarch of an extended family network that allegedly includes far more than hundred members, and he is a very successful businessman. Balveer has followed in the footsteps of his male ancestors and identified himself at the beginning of the interview as a 'fourth generation farmer'. Later, he explained that in his family they 'farm, that is what we do by trade'.

Initially, lumber mills and the construction of railroads provided jobs for the first Sikh immigrants in California (La Brack and Leonard 1984: 528). Starting from 1910 onwards, around the time when Balveer's great-grandfather arrived, agriculture also became an important area of employment for Sikhs in California (La Brack 1988: 118). The wages they received were low, and they had to work hard in order to make a living and to be able to save any money. At that time, Sikh men tried to 'form partnerships to pool their capital and labour, leasing land in groups of two to five men' (La Brack and Leonard 1984:529). But the introduction of California's Alien Land Law in 1913, which prohibited persons who were not entitled to apply for citizenship from leasing or owning land, placed serious obstacles in the paths of many immigrants including Sikhs, who were, as it became clear after the

1 After the phone call had ended, I informed Ramjot with a smile that I had understood the term 'gori chick', which caused both of us to break out in hearty laughter.

1923 Supreme Court decision in the ‘Thind case’, not eligible for American citizenship. In order to circumvent this regulation, Sikhs developed defensive strategies in which they bought land in the name of Anglo farmers, bankers or lawyers who were willing to help them out (Leonard 1992: 55). Another approach was to put land in the name of their locally born children who, based on the *ius soli* rule<sup>2</sup> had received American citizenship automatically at birth, and to manage the land for them as their legal guardians (Leonard 1992: 57, 81). With the help of such strategies of circumvention, Sikhs such as Balveer’s father became successful farmers and landowners despite great odds (La Brack 1988: 161).

For many Sikh immigrants who arrived in Yuba City without any higher education or English language skills, farming was the easiest form of livelihood, they were used to doing this in the Punjab. As Kundan says, ‘all of our family members were farming back in India, in the state of Punjab, so they came here, they were starting off as farm labourers in orchards, picking peaches, picking prunes, picking walnuts [...]’. However, as Margaret A. Gibson (1988b: 37ff.) points out, for those who prior to migration had been used to working on their own small farms in India, it was an unpleasant experience to suddenly have to work as a labourer for somebody else. This becomes clear when listening to Satnam’s memories of his childhood. Satnam’s family had moved to Yuba City at the beginning of the 1970s with the help of his mother’s brother, who was already living there. His parents hoped that by moving to the US, they could in the long run improve their and their children’s opportunities to move forward in life. But in the initial phase following their immigration to the US, Satnam’s family, who had owned a small farm in the Punjab, had to work as hired hands for others. Satnam, who is now in his fifties, remembers how this sudden downward turn in their social status affected his family:

- |        |   |
|--------|---|
| Satnam | We had a hard time when coming here, because over there [in India], none of us really worked there, we had a farm, we lived pretty well off, we had people who would cook and clean and all that stuff, and then you come over here, with the eight dollars only, <sup>3</sup> and we had to go pick peaches, and I was only thirteen years old, five in the morning... |
| Laura  | You also had to go?   |
| Satnam | Yes, picking peaches, that was hard, hardest part, and coming home from school, my mum and dad telling me to farm, you know, and that would make me want to go back home, I did not really enjoy that part, I did that for the first four, five years, when I was growing big in high school, come after school and help, whatever they would do, even my mum worked.   |

2 Following this rule, citizenship is automatically given to all those who are born on the national territory (*soli*) of a country.

3 Some other of my interviewees as well said that they or their ancestors came with ‘only eight dollars in their pocket’. Apparently Indian law allowed emigrants to take with them only eight dollars from India in the years around 1965 (See Segal 2002: 387).



*Sign leading to one of Yuba City's gurdwaras.*

As becomes clear from Satnam's account, in those times many Sikh families' children were expected to work in the orchards (see Gibson 1988b: 38, 39). Kundan, who moved to Yuba City around the same time as Satnam, and who is now in his forties, describes how this experience of having to work in the fields differentiated Sikh students from their non-Sikh classmates in school:

Even myself, I would be up at 5.30 in the morning, picking peaches with a good bite of mosquitoes, and that was the hard life. [...] When growing up, we picked peaches, and realised, you go back to school, summer vacations and everybody shared their stories 'Hey, what did you do?', 'Oh, we went to Hawaii', 'We went to Carmel', 'We went to San Francisco' and then 'What did you do?', 'Oh, we were picking peaches', you know, we were not really given the opportunity to go out for sports, for basketball, to football, because practice was in the evening times, and that is when we would go home, and mum and dad would come and pick us up and 'ok, we are going to pick walnuts now'. It was always about work, work, work.

Children's education was supported, but in their free time they were expected to take part in earning the family's income. This experience of working in the fields motivated Kundan to focus on his studies in order to escape the hardships he faced in his childhood, as he explains: 'We went to school, because after you work in orchards, you realise that the only way to get out of this life is an education' and 'if you do not have an education, you are going to be struggling in life.' Kundan succeeded in his goal of escaping working in the orchards for a living, and today he is employed in a prestigious position in the non-agricultural sector. But farming is still part of his life and at

weekends, he tells me with a smile, he and his wife farm a hundred acres of peaches, prunes, walnuts and almonds. In contrast to his childhood, however, farming nowadays constitutes a hobby that offers him a counterbalance to his actual job. 'It is something good for me, you know, I like to go out to the ranch, leave my phone behind and [it is] stress relief for me', he says, adding that farming is in his blood and that at weekends he just needs to get a little dirt on his hands.

Based on my observations, it appears that farming plays a central role in how Sikh identity is constructed in the context of Yuba City. However, it was not only Sikhs like Balveer or Kundan who established a link between farming and Sikhs in Yuba City, but also non-Sikhs to whom I talked in Yuba City would frequently tell me that the great majority of Sikhs work in jobs related to agriculture. Considering that Sikhs, and in particular Jat Sikhs, as well as Punjab itself are also in the context of India closely associated with agriculture and farming (see Wallace 1986), it can be assumed that adopting the identity of 'farmers' has perhaps not been that problematic for Sikhs in Yuba City.

Besides contributing to a process that over time linked the image of Sikhs in Yuba City with the practice of farming, the Sikh pioneers who had worked in jobs related to agriculture had established a reputation for Sikhs as hard-working and trustworthy people in the context of Northern California, as the following account by Baldev, who came to Yuba City as a student in the mid-1950s, suggests:

They [the Sikh pioneers] established a reputation for being trustworthy and hardworking, so when my generation began to come [in the 1950s] we benefited from that reputation. I remember, I used to drive a little Renault, a French car, to [the town of] Chico [...]. And one morning I got in the car, winter, and I just passed [the town of] Gridley, about 20 miles from here, and I saw there was no gas so I said 'I cannot reach Chico, it is empty' and I knew there were two, three little towns or villages on the side, away from [Highway] 99, so I thought 'maybe I can get some gas there', and so I stopped at two places. And then I realised I had forgotten to take my wallet with me and all I had was a 75 dollar check, [...], so I would show it to the guy at the service station, and he said, 'No, I just opened, I cannot cash that', and then the third place, and my heart is sinking, 'How far can my car go?' And he said the same thing, so I was getting in the car and he said, 'Wait, let me see the check again', so I showed the check again, and he said, 'you can fill the tank'. I said, 'What made you change your mind?' And he said, 'Your name 'Singh'', he says, 'I can trust you that you'll come back and pay me'. He had grown up working with the Sikh farm workers, and he used to eat their rotis and their chicken curry so they established this reputation for hard work, and we benefit from that.

Besides illustrating that Sikh pioneers in Yuba City had established a reputation for themselves as a group of hard working and honest people, Baldev's account reveals how names can function as strong identity markers.<sup>4</sup>

4 Lawrence A. Wenzel (1968: 245) also highlights in his study of East Indians in California how names can function as identity-markers.

This is something Sikhs are well aware of, as will become clear in Chapter Six when I discuss the dynamics that inform the practices that Sikhs carry out in relation to the name giving ritual.

#### OTHER OCCUPATIONS OF SIKHS

In addition to agriculture, some Sikhs living in Yuba City also work as entrepreneurs in small businesses, which predominantly serve the needs of other people of Indian background. One of the first of such shops to be founded at the end of the 1960s was *Punjabi Bazaar*. Today, the store sells among other things a variety of Indian cooking ingredients such as *masalas* (spices), eating and cooking utensils that are made out of stainless steel, and fabrics which are used for the sewing of salwar kamizes.<sup>5</sup> Visiting the Punjabi Bazaar for the first time, I was struck by the smell of Indian spices and the sound of Punjabi spoken between vendors and customers. Smells and sounds together with the sight of Indian products like those mentioned above lined up on shelves, hanging on the walls, or piled up on the floor, remind the visitor of India and provide them with a familiar sensual experience (see also Mankekar 2002). The presence of religiously infused products also plays an important role in the creation of such a familiar material landscape. The Punjabi Bazaar, for instance, sells *khanda* symbols to be hung on a car's rear-view mirror.

Since the opening of the Punjabi Bazaar, other small ethnic businesses have followed suit and many of them are clustered on one small road located outside of downtown Yuba City. This spatial concentration is apparently a rather recent development that started only at the beginning of the twenty-first century. According to one of my informants, the clustering of ethnic shops in this particular area is explained by relatively cheap rents there. Today the road harbours a number of shops that sell among other things Indian food, jewellery, clothes, movies and music. Driving through this street one can see shops signs displaying names such as Sari Palace, India Bazaar, Kashmir Bazaar, Delhi Fashion, Bombay Music, Taste of India, Star of India, or Bollywood Music House. Thus, oftentimes, the store's name attests to the cultural and regional origin of the goods and services that are sold inside. Most of the shops seem to depend to a great extent on the spending capacity of other persons with an Indian background, with the exception of Indian restaurants, that must rely on money spent by non-Indian customers.

The reason for this, according to one of the restaurant owners, is that Indians do not like to spend money for food that they can prepare more cheaply at home. And indeed, whenever I went to eat, for example, at the Taste of India, there were many non-Indian diners, thus demonstrating that globalisation does not merely results in a 'McDonaldisation' of the world but also entails a process in which culture moves 'from the rest to

5 I was told it is easy to find someone who would sew the Indian-style apparel. Especially when the harvest season is over, there are many people who offer their sewing skills to earn some extra money.

the west' (Inda and Rosaldo 2008: 20). Indians living in Yuba City often make use of Indian restaurants' catering services, and buy sweets from restaurants when celebrating important life cycle events such as marriages. Indeed, celebrations of important life cycle events, which are accompanied by traditional gift giving practices, are one of the most important forces that fuel the local ethnic economy by motivating Sikhs to shop for jewellery, clothes and sweets.

In addition to farming and the running of ethnic shops, a great number of Sikhs are working nowadays in a wide range of other occupations. Today, Sikhs in Yuba City work as bankers, civil servants, computer specialists, travel agents, truck drivers, policemen, and real estate agents. One can also find many Sikhs of both genders working as teachers in schools, colleges or at universities in nearby cities, or as doctors and nurses in hospitals or private clinics. In Yuba City, two male Sikhs have also served as politicians. In 2006, Tej Maan and Kash Gill, both of whom had migrated to Yuba City from the Punjab with their parents around the mid-1970s, were each elected as one of Yuba City's five councilmembers. Three years later, in November 2009 – more than a century after the first Sikh pioneers arrived in California – Kash Gill made history when he was elected as Yuba City's first Sikh mayor. For Sikhs in Yuba City, this was probably a very important moment in history and a significant achievement, which on a symbolic level can be seen to reflect Sikhs standing within this rural town. The achievement has become part of Sikh history in Yuba City, despite the fact that Kash lost his council seat in the 2010 elections<sup>6</sup> and consequently had to resign from his post. Tej, who had only 49 votes more than Kash, was successfully re-elected as a councilman that year (see Gebb 2010b).

### *Sikhs Working in Helsinki*

#### WORK IN A RESTAURANT

About half a year after I had begun conducting my fieldwork in Helsinki, I started to anticipate what answer I would get when asking Sikhs, whom I met at the temple or at social gatherings what kind of work they, their parents or their spouse were doing in Finland. Usually the answer was that they 'work in a restaurant.'<sup>7</sup> When I asked a Sikh woman, with whom I had become acquainted at the gurdwara in Helsinki, whether their family-owned restaurant would sell Indian food, she replied 'No, just drinks'. Also this, as I soon realised, constituted a rather typical answer to my question. Indeed, out of the seven restaurants I visited, six could be classified rather as a pub

6 The elections were overshadowed by an advertisement attacking Kash Gill, see for further information a newspaper article by Ashley Gebb (2010a) that was published in the *Appeal Democrat*.

7 As already noted in the beginning some of my informants who had come as expatriates to Finland worked in jobs related to IT. I also came across individual cases of Sikhs working in jobs related to education, health care, administration and selling of textiles. (See also Hirvi 2011) There seemed to be a wider variety with regard to jobs when it came to female Sikh immigrants as well as descendants.

in which the selling of alcoholic drinks seemed to constitute the main source of income.

As I have elaborated elsewhere, working in the restaurant sector either as employees or as entrepreneurs has developed for Sikhs in Finland as an established path that many Sikh immigrants choose to follow in order to access the local labour, thus circumventing the restrictions that, for example, a lack of sufficient Finnish language skills otherwise would pose (Hirvi 2011). But what impact does one's occupation, one's position in a business and the daily experience of working and interacting with different kinds of people – customers as well as colleagues alike – have on the process through which Sikhs in Finland negotiate their identities?

How, for example, do Sikhs working in bars reconcile the fact that they do business with the selling of alcohol, the consumption of which their religion condemns? Talking with restaurant-owner Ramjeet about this issue, he admits that Sikhism and working in the restaurant business do not really go well together. But as Ramjeet explains, when he moved as an adult to Finland in the 1980s, his main concern was to make a living. He and many of the Sikhs who followed realised that a career in the restaurant sector was the most promising option to successfully enter the Finnish labour market, and to try to work their way from 'rags to riches' (see Hirvi 2011). By making sure of providing for their own living, it could be argued that Sikhs like Ramjeet were eager to follow one of the Sikh tenets, namely to work for what they eat, as the Guru Granth Sahib advises its devotees to do.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, Sikhs in Finland, including Ramjeet, seem to be aware that the kind of work they are doing is not the type of 'honest work' as promoted by their religion, and in this regard it seems that working in a bar can be seen as a practice that would undermine claims of being a 'good Sikh'. Ramjeet, on his part, seems to dissolve this tension by positioning himself on a path of learning, and at one point, when he has stopped working in the restaurant business, he hopes to indulge fully in his religion. But for now, he apparently considers himself to be at a stage in life where his priority lies in earning enough money to ensure that he and his family can get by in life without the help of others, while dedicating his free time and financial resources to the gurdwara at Hämeentie.

But working in the restaurant sector not only implies that Sikhs have to reflect on the question of who they are with reference to their religious framework of meanings, it also affects the way they see themselves socially positioned in relation to fellow Sikhs as well as non-Sikhs. In a previous publication (see Hirvi 2011) I have argued that the 'Finnish Dream' of many Sikhs in Helsinki is to have their own restaurant one day, because other Sikhs have demonstrated that this is a realistic aim to achieve in the context of Finland.

Being an entrepreneur, as I was told, is desirable because it makes a person more independent as one does not have to work for anyone else anymore. Further, being an entrepreneur seems to be an attractive goal because it

8 GGS: p. 1245, [www.srigranth.org/servlet/gurbani.gurbani?Action=Page&Param=8&english=t&id=384](http://www.srigranth.org/servlet/gurbani.gurbani?Action=Page&Param=8&english=t&id=384), accessed February 16, 2010

appears to be linked to the identity of an immigrant who has climbed the social ladder within the bounds of possibilities in Finland. Hence, in the hierarchical order of Sikhs in Finland, entrepreneurs clearly rank higher than those who are working for them. Also on a transnational scale it can be assumed that Sikhs, who are able to say that they own a restaurant instead of working for somebody else in a restaurant, have an easier time communicating in their former homeland that their migration journeys have been successful. In this vein, they can make sure of maintaining or perhaps even improving their social status in the context from which they emigrated. Further, it can be assumed that especially those Sikh entrepreneurs who are able to facilitate the migration of relatives and friends by supplying them with work permits in the restaurants that they own in Finland are likely to have a relatively high social status as they have the power to decide to whose immigration projects they want to give their precious support.

#### NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES ACROSS AND BEHIND THE BAR

Being an entrepreneur who owns a restaurant is also related to a different form of power that appears to play a rather meaningful role when Sikhs have to negotiate their positions in relation to their customers. Sikhs working in restaurants, bars or pubs said that they often found themselves in situations where they had to debate the question of who they are in dialogue with their customers, the majority of whom are ethnic Finns. For example, those Sikh men who after migrating to Finland, initially continued to wear a turban in their everyday lives felt that they continuously had to explain their appearance and their religious background to customers who were asking them questions related to their particular headgear, which in the context of Finland still constitutes a rather rare sight (see Chapter Four). But also Sikhs, who did not wear a turban in their daily life, reported instances when their customers assigned them the position of the 'other', usually based on their physical appearance.

Jodh, who has been living in Finland since he was a teenager and who is now in his thirties, highlights in the following excerpt how working behind the bar provokes instances in which his customers identify him as a 'foreigner'. Being identified in this way frustrates Jodh and as a reaction he feels an urge to leave the country in which he has been living for half his life and to the wellbeing of which he says he has contributed by working and by completing the Finnish military service, for instance. But being externally identified as a 'foreigner' makes it difficult for Jodh to maintain a sense of being Finnish. The following dialogue was triggered when I asked Jodh and his friend, who also had emigrated from Punjab to Finland, whether in addition to feeling Sikh and Punjabi they also felt Finnish:

- Laura            Do you also feel that you are Finnish?  
Jodh             It comes, but [the feeling] goes away immediately when they, the customers, screw on us. It goes away immediately. No matter how much we do for them.

- Friend Because it is always, when, for example, you stand at the bar, and a new person comes in, then the first question is ‘Which country are you from? Why did you come to Finland?’
- [...]
- Laura But how, when the customers hear that you are from India, what are the reactions?
- Jodh Some, who know Punjab, they praise them, that they are good and are hard working. [...] But a foreigner is always a foreigner. We forget behind the bar that we are black and they are white, but someone always reminds us.
- Friend Someone always reminds us.
- Jodh I have been living here for so long, but that stays in my mind, the foreigner. And then when someone reminds me, then I get angry, and then I would like to leave, one cannot always handle that.

Two years later I visit Jodh at a nightclub that he now owns together with an ethnic Finn. He explains that working in the restaurants business is very tough. You need to stay up late at night, listen to the yelling and cursing of drunken customers, and the next day you do not have much time to spend with your family because you need to sleep during the day. The experiences he had with Finnish customers also had an impact on the way he thought of Finnish people more generally, he says. Partly laughing, he explains that only now that he has started to attend his son’s soccer practices where he has come across other kinds of ethnic Finns, is he beginning to see also a different side of Finland and its people.

In some extreme cases, the interactions with customers may gain a racist character with the n-word featuring distinctively. According to the Sikhs to whom I talked, it is usually drunken customers who are causing such problems. Rana, who has been living in Finland since he was a toddler and who is now in his early twenties, says that based on his experience of working in the family owned restaurant, he has come to the conclusion that the n-word is only used by people who are very weak and who do not come up with anything else to say. Rana says about himself that he is very eloquent in Finnish. Being able to talk and understand Finnish, he continues, has always provided him with a sense of safety, as he felt able to cope with challenging situations, such as the ones he encounters when working behind the bar. As he explains, at work, he sometimes has:

[...] situations, arguments with customers, and they try and try and try and when they understand that this guy is able to speak, then they rely on the last and perhaps most stupid means [and call me the n-word], and perhaps they think that they can make me angry with this somehow, and yes, there are days that I get angry, depends on my mood and what kind of a day it was, but more often I just tell the doorman that ‘show him the way home, his evening ends here’ [...]

What is interesting about the latter part of Rana’s statement, where he describes how he asks the doorman to show a customer the way home, is

that it highlights how the fact that Rana's family owns the place obviously assigns him the power to banish people who insult him, and who possibly also pose a threat to the security of other staff and customers, from the realm of the restaurant. In this vein, it could be argued, he is able to escape the role of the victim claiming instead the position of the one who comes out on top.

In contrast to the negative experiences that Sikhs encounter with their customers described above, the daily interaction with regulars seems to run more smoothly. With reference to the regulars, the question 'who are we?' and who is entitled to claim membership of this entity is, in the concrete setting of the bar, perhaps not defined along national, ethnic or religious lines but through the joint experience of sharing a common social space in daily life. The same seems to be the case with regard to the relationships that Sikhs have with their co-workers and staff who are ethnic Finns and which often seem to have an obvious amicable touch. Experiencing this kind of positive interaction with people, who are deemed to constitute representatives of the mainstream society, most likely makes it easier for Sikhs in Finland to claim and foster a sense of belonging to the country they are now living in and that many now consider as their home.

### *Working out Identities*

In the following section I want to discuss the means by which Sikhs in Finland as well as California seek to actively carve out a positive identity position for themselves by investigating a particular practice that I noticed in the course of my fieldwork and which is related to the topic of 'work'. During the time I spent conducting research amongst Sikhs in Helsinki and in Yuba City, I encountered numerous variations of the following two types of statements, which frequently came up in the course of the formal as well as informal conversations that I had with Sikhs:

- 1) 'We<sup>9</sup> are hard working people.'
- 2) 'We do not depend on social welfare.'

Suraj, for example, who has been living and teaching in California since the mid 1950s and who is now in his seventies, stated '[...] we do not want anything handed down to us on a silver platter, ok, we work hard.' In a similar manner, Daya, who came to Yuba City after marriage and who is now in her mid-thirties, explains with reference to the Sikh last name Singh, which can be translated as lion, that 'Sikhs are lions, they want to fight for their meat, they do not take any leftovers, they only want to have the best.' Across the Atlantic, a respondent to the questionnaire I handed out at the gurdwara wrote under 'Any further comments': 'Sikhs are hard-working and grab the first job available [...]'. Likewise, Ramjeet, whom I interviewed in his restaurant over a cup of tea in Helsinki, was eager to emphasise that he has

9 As it became clear from the context, for some interviewees, 'we' referred to 'Indians', while for others it referred to 'Sikhs' or 'Punjabis' in particular.

relied on the welfare support of the social insurance institution of Finland (KELA) only in cases of illness, implying that he has not used the financial support of KELA for any other reasons such as unemployment benefits.<sup>10</sup>

What are the meanings attached to these remarks, and how can one interpret them with regard to the process through which speakers negotiate their identities? In the style of John Langhshaw Austin (1975), I treat these remarks as ‘performative utterances’ through which a certain action is carried out. In the case I want to discuss here, I argue that the performative utterance can be seen as a form of practice through which the speaker lays claim to an identity. These performative utterances are informed by cultural, religious and social contexts. In the following, I set out to explore some of the dynamic forces that motivate the kind of utterances mentioned above. By doing so, I seek to shed light on the process through which Sikhs strategically position themselves in the lifeworlds of which they are a part.

#### THE CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

In pondering the ideological roots of this verbal emphasis on (hard) work, it could be argued that the teachings of Sikhism stress the importance of working hard as an essential activity that a good Sikh should engage in. In order to reach liberation, Sikhism’s teachings do not demand asceticism but rather stress the importance of work and worship. As Gurinder Mann (2004: 15) writes in his book on Sikhism: ‘Sikhs work toward achieving the ultimate liberation by living a life of social commitment, which includes the core qualities of hard work and service to humanity, while keeping Vahiguru, the sole object of Sikh prayers, in constant remembrance’. This emphasis on hard work is also reflected in a line from a *shabad* by Guru Nanak included in Sikhs’ holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib:

One who works for what he eats, and gives some of what he has, – O Nanak, he knows the path.<sup>11</sup>

For many of my informants, the ethical conduct taught by their religion is summarised in the popular proverb ‘*Nam japo, kirat karo, vand chako*’ which has been translated by Sikh historian Hew McLeod (2005: 140) as ‘Repeat the divine Name, work, and give a share [of your earnings to others less fortunate]’. Although this saying is not a direct quote from a religious text it reflects the manner in which many Sikhs living in Helsinki and Yuba City understand the teachings of their religion. In an interview conducted in his restaurant near the gurdwara in Helsinki, Ramjeet, who came as an immigrant to Finland and is now in his mid-forties, explains this proverb in his own words: ‘In our religion we explicitly stress work, we say ‘*kirat*

10 It is interesting to note in this context that none of my informants in Helsinki explicitly mentioned that they chose Finland as a destination due to the country’s strong social welfare system.

11 GGS: p. 1245, [www.srigranth.org/servlet/gurbani.gurbani?Action=Page&Param=8&english=t&id=384](http://www.srigranth.org/servlet/gurbani.gurbani?Action=Page&Param=8&english=t&id=384), accessed February 16, 2010.

*karo* [work], then remember *him*, and then if there is some money left you distribute it to those who need it.” Balveer, who was born in Yuba City and also grew up there, considers these as ‘the golden rules of our religion’ and explains that he and his siblings have been raised in accordance with these ideals. Hence, it can be stated that with reference to their religious teachings, Sikhs consider work to be a meaningful practice a ‘good Sikh’ should perform. Thus, when Sikhs in Yuba City and in Helsinki place an emphasis on work, it could be argued that through these performative utterances they affirm and maintain their religious identities.

In some cases, I would argue, these utterances may also have a cultural source. Sitting in an office at one of Yuba City’s high schools, I conducted an interview with Suraj, who came to California in the mid 1950s as a student and who is now in his seventies. During our conversation, the retired teacher shared with me his observations and thoughts concerning the local Sikh community. Of those Sikh students who did not succeed in school, he says,

Some became truck drivers, because they had a family to support, and they needed the work, and they would not go into the welfare system. It is just one of the things that Punjabis would not do: they would not go on welfare, because they are thinking it is beneath them and they feel the shame, because there is a stigma attached to anyone who is on the public dole, anyone who is on public assistance. It is a [question of] honour for them.

Analysing Suraj’s statement in the context of the Punjabi cultural framework, one can hear the resonance of two cultural concepts, namely *izzat* (honor) and *dharam* (duty). Both are cultural values that play a central role in Punjabi-Sikh culture and in Indian culture as a whole. Dharam refers, among other things, to the duty to fulfil one’s responsibilities that accompanies the position one occupies in a household (Nayar 2004: 51). Consequently, if the duty of a Sikh man is to provide for the livelihood of his family by following the Sikh religious doctrine according to which a Sikh should work for what he eats,<sup>12</sup> then the failure to do so and dependence on social welfare could be seen to damage the family’s *izzat*. *Izzat*, as religious studies scholar Opinderjit Kaur Takhar (2005: 186) points out, depends on the behaviour of individuals but affects the whole family. Thus, statements like ‘we are hard working people who do not depend on social welfare’ can be interpreted with reference to Sikh religion and culture as speech practices that affirm and maintain a particular cultural identity.

#### CLAIMING THE IDENTITY OF A ‘GOOD IMMIGRANT’

There is another, complementary reading of these statements, which becomes possible when taking into account the larger socio-cultural context in which they have been articulated. According to Finnish normative values, a ‘good person’ seems to be a person who works (Taira 2007: 10–11, 89ff.;

12 GGS: p. 1245, [www.srigranth.org/servlet/gurbani.gurbani?Action=Page&Param=8&english=t&id=384](http://www.srigranth.org/servlet/gurbani.gurbani?Action=Page&Param=8&english=t&id=384), accessed February 16, 2010.

Martikainen and Gola 2007: 65). Mahaan, who has been living in Finland now for over twenty years and who is in his fifties, seemed to agree with this statement when he said in an interview in one of the bars that he owns that 'Finns appreciate people who work.' In other words, in order to become a respectable member of Finnish society, a person needs to engage in (paid) work, and thus speech acts in which Sikhs outline their ethos of hard work can be interpreted as strategic practices through which they seek to position themselves as respectable members of the larger Finnish society.

In addition, performative utterances through which Sikhs in Finland emphasise their willingness to work hard need to be seen and interpreted in the light of the Finnish public discussion surrounding topics related to migration. Of particular interest in this context are the anti-immigration voices expressed on the Internet, but as Suvi Keskinen (2011) points out, these voices can also be read and heard in newspapers and in television-programs featuring politicians characterised by their anti-immigration positions. In sum, these anti-immigration voices have helped to create the stigma attached to the identity of 'immigrants' in Finland. This stigma is discussed in sociologist Magdalena Jaakkola's (2005: 66) research findings, which reveal that in 2003, one third of Finns were of the opinion that many immigrants come to Finland to benefit from the country's advanced social welfare system. That immigrants live like 'bums on social welfare'<sup>13</sup> is an often-heard argument used by anti-immigration activists. The Finnish politician Kai Pöntinen, for example, who ran as a candidate for the National Coalition Party in the European Parliament elections, used the slogan in one of his campaign advertisements 'Put a STOP to immigrant social welfare bums'. The advertisement was published in May, 2009 on the front page of Finland's largest daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* (see Rastas 2009: 51).

Jussi Halla-aho, a public anti-immigration activist and politician in the True Finns party, seems to support this sort of thinking. After the parliament elections of 2011, Halla-aho became an MP who served as the chairman of the parliament's administration committee, which deals with, amongst other things, Finland's immigration policy. In the summer of 2012, Halla-aho resigned from the position after having been criticised for questioning in public the authority of the Finnish Supreme Court, which had convicted Halla-aho for violating the freedom of worship in his blog writings. Halla-aho discusses in his provocative blog writings issues related to migration and multiculturalism using harsh words. In 2008, in one of his blog entries, Halla-aho divided immigrants into two categories. The first one, which he calls 'Mamu1'<sup>14</sup> comprises those who work and do not represent a financial drain on the receiving country. The second category, 'Mamu2', consists of those immigrants whose arrival represents a financial drain on the receiving country. While Mamu1 can be 'enriching' for Finland and the country

13 Translation for '*sosiaalipummi*'.

14 'Mamu' is an abbreviation that derives from the Finnish term for immigrant '*Maahanmuttaja*'. This term is officially not considered to be discriminating or racist – at least not yet.

might even need such immigrants, he argues, the category of Mamu2 is not 'enriching' for Finland.<sup>15</sup> Thus, according to his writings, a 'good immigrant' seems to be a *working* immigrant who not only does not represent a financial burden for the state, but also pays taxes in order to maintain it.

When seen against such a background, Sikh immigrants' emphasis on their hard work can be seen as a strategic practice to escape the stigma created by anti-immigrant voices in Finland. The same logic seems to motivate the utterances made by the Sikh politician Ranbir Sodhi in Finland when he was asked by a local newspaper in his function as a councillor for Vantaa City, to engage in discussion with representatives of the True Finns Party, to which Jussi Halla-aho also belongs. According to Sodhi, he asked a representative of the True Finns Party in the course of the discussion how many people he, as a native ethnic Finn had employed. When the answer was 'one', Ranbir replied that he, as an immigrant living in Finland, had employed ten persons in his enterprise, and had paid a substantial amount of taxes over the years, obviously implying that in terms of 'enriching' Finland he was more useful than the politician who belonged to the True Finns Party.<sup>16</sup>

Sikhs are eager to emphasise that they are not 'those' immigrants who live in Finland on social welfare. In the following statement, for instance, Karamdeep, who is in his sixties, distinguishes himself from a perceived immigrant group by emphasising his, as well as his family's, hard work. In doing so, he actively contradicts the stigmatised identity of a state-dependent immigrant, which from his point of view 'refugees' especially seem to embody:

But then there come many refugees, and because of that things get a little mixed up. They [the 'mainstream'] think that all are the same; take money from the state and so on. But in our family we never apply for money from the state, we always work, our whole lives. I work, my wife works, [...].

Several of my informants, who used the rhetoric of hard work during the interviews, did so by reversing the stigmatising process.<sup>17</sup> In the following example, Komal, who is in her mid-thirties, turns the argument that 'immigrants do not work and live off of the state' on its head by pointing to a subgroup of the larger Finnish society, namely the ethnic Finnish alcoholics some Sikhs encounter on a daily basis through their restaurant work and whom they associate with those who typically make racist comments in Finland.<sup>18</sup> Komal states that those Finns, who are against migration,

15 'On myönnettävä ääneen se lähtökohta, että vaikka Mamu1 voi olla Suomelle rikkaus ja vaikka Suomi voi tarvita Mamu1:stä, Mamu2 ei ole Suomelle rikkaus.' [www.halla-aho.com/scripta/maahanmuuttopolitiikan\\_hahmottelua\\_osa1.html](http://www.halla-aho.com/scripta/maahanmuuttopolitiikan_hahmottelua_osa1.html), accessed February 3, 2009.

16 Field notes Laura Hirvi (July 4, 2010).

17 Sociologist Abdi Kusow (2004) observed in his study of Somali immigrants in Canada a similar practice.

18 The statement [or observation] that Sikhs encounter alcoholics at their workplace is based not only on the accounts of my informants, but also on my own fieldwork

[...] think, that the foreigners take their jobs, that if the foreigners were not here, that then they would get a job. Also now there are so many jobs available, so why do people not work? Because they do not want to work, because they are well off with this money that the state gives them. The state nourishes them, and this money, this social [money] that they get, they get more than they would if they worked! Those who think this way [...] become drunkards. They do not do much besides sitting in the bars.

To summarise, it could be suggested that those Sikhs, who make statements emphasising their affirmative attitude towards work, do so at least in part with the intention of negotiating for themselves a positive identity in Finnish society. People who are considered to be part of a minority thus engage in the practice of 'talking back' that challenges and transforms the identities they have been ascribed (see Jokinen, Huttunen and Kulmala 2004: 11). Through their speech acts, they seek to identify themselves with the 'good person' and the 'good immigrant' as defined in the context of Finland. Invoking these statements thus functions for Sikhs as a stigma management strategy used to actively carve out a place for them that is in harmony with Finnish norms. Provided that they are successful in establishing a positive identity position for themselves in the country in which they have settled, it could be argued that their use of language not only describes a world but also shapes it.

In Yuba City as well, Sikhs would often stress their ethic of hard work in conversations with me. Some like Hardit, who came to Yuba City as a young man and who is in his forties now, emphasised in this context that only by the grace of God and by the opportunities provided in the US were he and his family able to achieve any sort of success. In the following, Hardit reflects on the fate of his family:

When we came we had nothing, now by God's grace, and the opportunity in this country, we have above average facilities, whatever we can expect, you know, and we are very happy here, and I can say that we are very lucky that we got the opportunity to move to this great country and we are trying to become a part of this country, because this is our country now, my kids' country.

Hardit's statement functions as a bridge to an alternative reading of the hard work rhetoric invoked by Sikhs in North America. Looking at the cultural context of the US in order to interpret the kind of performative utterances discussed here, it is impossible to ignore the impact that the American dream, with its implied work ethic, has had and still has on shaping and defining the culture of the country known as 'the land of opportunity'. The script underlying the American dream derives from the Horatio Alger myth, which Sherry Ortner (1973: 1341) describes as follows:

The scenario runs: poor boy from low status, but with total faith in the American system, works very hard and ultimately becomes rich and powerful. The myth

experience, where I encountered and often had to deal with drunken people myself when visiting the restaurants owned by Sikhs.

formulates both the American conception of success – wealth and power – and suggests that there is a simple (but not easy) way of achieving them – singleminded hard work.

Following Ortner (1973: 1341), the American dream can be seen as a ‘key scenario’ in American culture. Such key scenarios define a culture’s ‘appropriate goals and suggest effective action for achieving them’ (Ibid.). Bearing this in mind, it could be suggested that like the Sikhs in Helsinki, Sikhs in the US are seeking to carve out a respected place for themselves in their new home country by invoking and referring to their wish to accomplish goals (=success) via strategies (=hard work) that are both sanctioned in the American cultural context. Thus, as in the Finnish case, performative utterances in which speakers emphasise their willingness to work hard reflect speakers’ intentions to claim not only the identity of a ‘good immigrant’ but also that of a ‘good American’. To achieve this end, they, like other immigrant communities in the US (see Alba *et al.* 2009: 5), stress the similarities between Sikh and American values.

To summarise, it could be suggested that by invoking the rhetoric of hard work, Sikhs negotiate an identity position that equally embraces the values of their own religious and cultural traditions and the Finnish or American society. My ethnographic fieldwork suggests that in comparison to Sikhs in Finland, Sikhs in Yuba City appear to be more explicit and confident in their claims to be treated as respected members of the wider society to which they belong. This can be partly attributed to their longer history of settlement, as a consequence of which they are more familiar with what strategies to apply in order to manoeuvre within the political system of their country of residence. I would suggest, however, that the particular characteristics of the receiving context also give them more confidence to make such claims. After all, the popular ‘master narrative’ of the United States argues that it is a country of immigrants, and being aware of this seems to empower Sikhs’ claims to a position of acceptance there. This attitude is also reflected in the following statement made by Kundan, who came to Yuba City as a toddler and is now in his forties, in response to my own reflections on my usage of the term ‘American’ in my field diary.

- |        |  |
|--------|--|
| Laura  | I thought about it, when writing my field diary, when I was describing a situation in which there was a Punjabi American and then I wrote there was an ‘American’ referring to a white American, and then I thought ok, that is not right, you are equally an American.  |
| Kundan | Yeah, that is what I tell people. They ask, ‘What are you guys?’ and I say ‘I am an American’ and so, ‘Oh no, no, no, no’ and I say, ‘Yes, I am an American, I am a US citizen.’ And people forget that, when they say the United States, that these are the states that were united and if you go back to every single person living in the United States, they have backgrounds to somewhere else [...]. |

But while in the United States it seems almost inevitable that Americans can trace their roots outside of the country, the prevailing definition of ‘Finnishness’ is anchored in the idea that there exists an inseparable relationship between people, place, language and culture transmitted via bloodlines (see Huttunen 2004: 135). It appears that the difference between the founding myths of the two countries makes the enterprise of carving out a place of acceptance much harder for immigrants in Finland than in the United States.

Let me end this section with the words of Kushpreet, who has lived in Finland for more than twenty years and who is now in her sixties. I met her on a cold winter morning at a local pub she runs together with her husband and her son. It is January, half past eight in the morning and outside dawn is breaking. I enter the bar and I am welcomed by the scent of coffee together with the sounds of a morning show on one of the local television channels. ‘Do you want a cup of coffee?’ Kushpreet asks me in Finnish after we have greeted each other, and I thankfully accept. Sitting on a table next to the window, my hands tightly folded around the cup to enjoy its heat, I hear how the first customer of the day is asking Kushpreet’s husband, who is working behind the counter, if he can have a pint. ‘Not before nine’ is his answer.<sup>19</sup> Kushpreet and I start the official interview, and over the next half hour she provides me with an overview of her life. I learn about her family, her migration story, as well as about her work history in Finland. At one point Kushpreet explains that she is the type of person who wants to work: ‘As long as I can work, I will work, and if I cannot work anymore, then we’ll see.’

### *Prospects for Future Generations of Sikhs in Helsinki and Yuba City*

Will subsequent generations of Sikhs who have been raised in Finland want to work in the restaurant business? Do they dream of owning a restaurant one day? Or is this option not attractive for the generation of Sikhs, who are growing up in Finland, are fluent in Finnish and most likely better educated than their parents (see also Joronen’s 2002: 163)? The number of young Sikhs who were interviewed for this study is too small to allow for a conclusive answer. Of seven Sikhs who grew up in Finland and are now over the age of twenty, two women are currently staying at home with their children and three women work in jobs for which they needed to get a vocational training in Finland. The only two men included in this sample who are the descendants of Sikh immigrants are currently working in their parents’ restaurant business.

Rana is one of these two men who grew up in Finland, and who currently works in the restaurant owned by his family, thus following the career path of his father. Having arrived in Finland in the early 1990s as a toddler, Rana lived for about two years with his father while his mother was still in India. When he came to Finland, he knew only English and Punjabi. Until third grade, he went to a Finnish speaking school, after which his father and

19 In Finland the law prohibits the sale of beer before 9 am.

mother, who by then had already moved to Finland, wanted him to switch to an international school, reasoning that English was a useful language not only in Finland but also in the rest of the world. He studied for a whole summer and received special tutoring, which his parents paid for, so that he would pass a test allowing him admission to the international school in question. His studies eventually bore fruit and he passed the test, and for a few years made the arduous trip across town to attend the school.

Indeed, the desire to put children in local English educational institutions is very popular amongst Sikh parents in Finland. As Komal, a mother of three children, argues, fellow Sikhs living in Finland seem to think ‘somehow that English is everything and that if you cannot speak it, then you have no life somehow, that it is shameful. [...] And in their opinion their lives, the lives of their children are spoiled because they did not get into the English speaking [schools].’ As Rana’s story above suggests, many parents are willing to make and demand great sacrifices in order to ensure an English education for their children. Ascribing such immense importance to having their children educated in English may derive from the parents’ own upbringing in India, where proficiency in English is seen to symbolise social progress and status as well as membership in the country’s (trans)national elite, as anthropologist Nicola Mooney (2011: 120) highlights in her study on Jat Sikhs living close to the Punjab-Rajasthan border. Being fluent in English was seen by the middle-class Jat families she worked with as one avenue towards improving social standing by means of emigration.

A similar rationale seems to be at work in the Finnish context, where Sikh parents are eager to raise their children to be fluent in English by sending them to English educational institutions. Indeed, many of the young Sikhs I met during my fieldwork in Finland are not only fluent in Finnish as well as in Punjabi or Hindi, which they speak with their parents, but they are also fluent in English. By sending their children to English schools, Sikh parents in Finland seek to ensure that their children will have the best chances to position themselves later on successfully on the labour market. Further, having received an education in English allows young Sikhs who have been growing up in Finland to enter not only the national but also the international labour markets of countries such as the UK, US or Canada, all three of which seem to rank high on the map of desired destinations for Sikh migration.

But independently of the location, parents hope that their children will make something out of the opportunities they have been given, because children’s achievements, it could be argued, are considered to be indicators of whether or not a family’s dreams related to migration have been effectively put into practice. After all, in many cases the decision to migrate can be seen as a tactic through which migrants seek to improve their descendants’ opportunities in life. Rana’s account supports this argument. As he explains, his father travelled around the world ‘not only to look for a better life for himself, but for a better life for his children in the future.’ Nowadays, Rana enjoys working in the family-owned restaurant business and does so by choice. It is perhaps not the job his parents wanted him to have, but his goal is to follow in his father’s footsteps. And one day, he says, he would like to run an even bigger business than his father does, not to outdo him but rather

‘to make him proud, so that he would not have the feeling that he went out into the world in vain – that it was worth it.’ Rana feels that he is in a good place for achieving this aim, because Finland is a ‘place of opportunities’, as he says, where work and studies are rewarded.

The wish to please their parents together with the desire to meet their family’s expectations for success in education and working life also seem to guide the career choices of young Sikhs growing up in California. Kundan, a long-time resident of Yuba City who is now in his forties, explains that in his view, young Sikhs who have been growing up in the United States are not simply satisfied with achieving the American dream of their parents’ generation, but they are eager to carry this dream ‘to the next level’. They want to be even more successful, and a good position in working life is a necessary prerequisite for achieving this goal. Thus, as Margaret A. Gibson (1988a: 209) points out, the career choices made by Punjabi youth are guided by pragmatic considerations. The goal is, through formal education, to obtain a job that is as ‘good’<sup>20</sup> as possible with a ‘good’ income. At the same time, both a good job and a good income are considered to be important for climbing up the social ladder and earning respect, not only in the Sikh community but also in the larger society in which they live.<sup>21</sup>

The desire to improve their standing in the context of the Punjabi community, and to position themselves better in the class hierarchy of the societies in which they are embedded, seems to generate a competitive spirit among Sikhs in Helsinki as well as in Yuba City.<sup>22</sup> Bhagwan, who since his retirement in India has been living in the US, describes this competitive spirit as a sort of constructive envy, in which thoughts such as ‘he has a car, I also want to have a car’ motivate people and pushes them to work hard. To ensure the family’s progress, ‘typical Indian parents want [their children] to become a doctor or engineer’, as Hardit, who came to Yuba City as a young man and is now in his forties, explains. Kundan, who is of the same age as Hardit, highlights in the following what he thinks are the reasons for this:

Here [in Yuba City] is a huge push for, now in our Punjabi culture, for engineers, for doctors, you know, pharmacists, so they [the parents] are pushing [...] and why, you ask the question why, why are they pushing that, because [...] the parents want the life of an engineer, which is very, very good. I mean, you are starting off sixty-five to seventy thousand dollars a year, in the beginning, you

20 See Mooney (2011: 90ff.) for an excellent discussion on what ‘good’ may refer to in the context of the Jat Sikhs she worked with in her ethnographic research. Her findings apply by and large also to the understanding that Sikhs in Finland and in Yuba City have of this word and its complex meanings

21 This argument is supported by Kathleen D. Hall (2002: 165) who writes in her study on Sikh youth in Britain that ‘working-class parents in particular hoped that by getting a good education and entering a profession their children could avoid the racism they had experienced’.

22 The competition seems to be present also in other Sikh communities. For example, in her study on Sikhs in Vancouver, one of Kamala Elizabeth Nayar’s (2004:171) informants states: ‘There is a lot of competition in the community, like who has a bigger house, and therefore there is a lot of pressure to make a lot of money ...’

have the weekends off, excellent profession, good room for advancement, and in the eyes of these Indian people: 'Oh, you are an engineer, oh wow.'

Indeed, a great number of the young Sikhs I met in the course of fieldwork in California were working as, or in the process of becoming, software-engineers or some kind of professionals in the medical field. A few were also studying law or economics. However, as in Gibson's (1988a) study, the number of Sikhs who had received or were planning to get a formal education in the social science or the humanities was minimal since these fields of education do not provide the social security parents wish to obtain for the whole family through their children's professions; nor are they considered to provide their children with the means needed to embark on their struggle of positioning themselves higher in the dominant class hierarchy.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

This chapter has shown that while the first waves of Sikh immigrants in Yuba City ended up working in jobs related to farming, Sikh immigrants arriving in Helsinki have tended to take jobs in the restaurant sector, with the exception of those who arrive as expatriates with a pre-arranged contract. In Yuba City, farming is still a practice closely related to the image of Sikhs, although today Sikhs also have a strong and visible presence in a much wider array of other occupations. Despite the different trajectories for entering the local labour market, there are overlaps between Sikhs in Helsinki and in Yuba City when it comes to parents' expectations for the future of their children. In both settings, Sikh parents hope that their children will secure jobs that are deemed as 'good'. Getting a 'good' job is not only significant for securing financial well being but is also related to increasing a family's *izzat* by improving its social status.

Considering the fact that many Sikh families made the decision to migrate with the objective of improving their economic standing, the wish to see their children succeed in life is also important in so far as immigrant parents would like to feel that their efforts during the migration and settlement process were not made in vein. In Yuba City, the desire to push their children into 'good' jobs is revealed in parents' eagerness to send their children to colleges and universities so they can become doctors or engineers, for example, while in Helsinki it manifests itself in Sikh parents' strong desire to offer their descendants an education in the English language so they are better equipped to enter the international as well as national labour market.

Further, I have highlighted how work and the workplace constitute meaningful sites for the process through which Sikhs negotiate who they are in relation to fellow Sikhs as well as non-Sikhs. In addition, I have argued in this chapter that Sikhs who use performative utterances in which they refer to their hard work ethic seek to carve out positive identity positions for themselves in their respective contexts of settlement. Through these performative utterances, they claim to be recognised as 'good' people in the context of their new home countries. They do so with reference to their

religious and cultural values related to the work ethic. Hence, their claims of being good Finns /Americans are not based on an abandonment of their own values, but instead are informed by a re-interpretation of them in light of the new contexts of their settlement. As a consequence of this, religious and cultural values related to 'hard work' are supplemented with new layers of meaning.

## 4 Identities Negotiated through Dress(ing)

It is summer in Finland and we are sitting in the living room of Harleen's spacious house, drinking a cup of hot, tasty chai (Indian tea). According to Indian custom, Harleen's adolescent daughter has prepared and served the beverage for the family's guest, whose role I adopted the moment I accepted the invitation to visit their home. In the corner of the room, the television has been switched on and is now broadcasting via satellite a soap opera in the style of Bollywood. Sitting on a white leather couch, I take some of the proffered spicy snacks from the table in front of me and listen to Harleen's thoughts about life in Finland. In the course of her reflections, Harleen, who moved to Helsinki as an adult and who is now in her forties, elaborates among other things on how her dressing practices changed after migrating to Finland some fifteen years ago. When at home or visiting the gurdwara, she still wears the salwar kamiz, consisting of a pair of loose trousers and long shirt and a scarf (*dupatta* or *chunni*), which is often referred to as the 'Punjabi dress' (Kapur 2010: 104) or 'Punjabi suit' (Bhachu 2004: 11). According to Harleen, the salwar kamiz suits her, and nodding in my direction she says, 'But what you wear, suits you. You would look strange if you would wear a salwar kamiz.'

Although she likes the salwar kamiz on herself better, Harleen prefers to wear a pair of jeans and a shirt when working in the family owned restaurant, most of whose customers are ethnic Finns. If she dressed in Indian clothes, which are often much more colourful than typical Finnish clothes, people would stare at her and ask her questions about why she is wearing such clothes, and she does not like that, it makes her feel uncomfortable. Harleen's account demonstrates well how our lived experience with clothing, how we feel about it, depends on how others evaluate our carefully crafted appearances (Hansen 2004: 373). Thus in order to avoid feeling uncomfortable when at work, Harleen decides to wear what her customers would consider to be normal clothes, thus using dress as a tool to communicate a particular kind of identity. Her strategic dressing practices may be grounded in her experience that when dressing in local fashion non-Sikh Finns respect her more<sup>1</sup> because they interpret her dress as a sign of her willingness to embrace

1 In her research on European women staying in Varanasi, India, anthropologist

mainstream Finnish cultural practices. If she wore a salwar kamiz, members of the broader society might interpret it a sign that she rejects Western values.

As Harleen's case suggest, the experience of migration has an impact on dressing practices. In her book *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* Joanne Entwistle (2000: 7) describes the act of getting dressed as 'an act of preparing the body for the social world, making it appropriate, acceptable, indeed respectable'. As Entwistle points out, what is deemed to be appropriate depends on the situation and the particular norms inherent in it (Entwistle 2000: 6, see also Tarlo 1996: 16). Harleen's case demonstrates this: when at home or when visiting the gurdwara or other sites that bring alive the Sikh community in the context of Finland, Harleen feels comfortable wearing the salwar kamiz because in such settings onlookers not only accept but also expect her to wear the Punjabi suit. Following Preeti Kapur (2010:104), who conducted research on Sikh women's dress in India, it could be argued that by wearing the traditional dress at these particular sites, she communicates her group membership and an orientation toward the Punjab as a significant point of reference in her life. Yet at work, the context is strikingly different and motivates Harleen to fashion her identity, as reflected in her choice of clothes, differently.

The analysis I present in this chapter rests on the assumption that daily dressing practices reflect the continuous play through which people position themselves in the cultural worlds of which they are part, and that dress can thus be seen as 'a kind of visual metaphor for identity' (Davis 1992: 25) as well as for the process through which identities are being negotiated. By choosing to wear a particular item of dress, people can, for example, perform visually their affiliation to a specific occupational group or subculture (see Snellman 1999).

My intention in this chapter is to highlight the significant role that dress and the practice of dressing play in the process through which people negotiate their identities (see also Tarlo 1996). In the following, my focus shifts from Sikh women's dressing practices towards the Sikh turban worn by male Sikhs. Until recently, the literature on this headdress has tended to focus on its historical evolution rather than its role and meanings for the everyday lives of today's Sikhs (Singh 2010: 206). Providing further insights into the latter is one of the aims of this chapter. By analyzing the turban and the practices related to it, I want to highlight the role this particular item of dress plays in the shaping of the identities of male Sikhs. Further, the intention of this chapter is to bring to the fore the impact that context has on this process. To do so, I examine the various and shifting meanings that Sikhs as well as non-Sikhs have ascribed to the Sikh turban. The questions

Mari Korpela (2006: 9) observed similar strategic dressing practices among her informants. Some of the women she talked to explained that they choose to wear Indian clothes such as the salwar kamiz in public while at home they prefer to dress in Western clothes. According to Korpela (2006: 7), one of the reasons why women choose to dress in local clothes in Indian public spaces is because it considerably reduces the amount of harassment they receive from Indian males.

‘who wears a turban? When? Why or why not, and what meanings do people ascribe to it?’ guided me through the ethnographic analysis that is presented in the following. By the help of this chapter, I hope to add to a growing body of literature that seeks to create a more complex and nuanced understanding of contemporary Sikh dress practices.

### *The Turban as an External Marker of Religious Identity*

The turban, which in Punjabi is called *dastar*, is a head covering worn mainly by adult Sikh men<sup>2</sup> and non-Indian Sikh converts of both genders, who belong to the 3HO organisation that was founded by Yogi Bhajan.<sup>3</sup> While in Yuba City the turban and the salwar kamiz are both common sights on local streets their appearance in the urban context of Helsinki is much more unusual. The cloth used for the tying of the turban can be of different material and is around five meters long, but can also be longer depending on the style in which the turban is being tied. First, the hair is knotted on top of the head (*jura*) and then it may be covered by a *patka* (head covering made out of a thin cloth), around which the final turban is tied. Tying the turban can take up to fifteen minutes and requires practice. Sikh youth often wear the *patka*, which is much lighter in weight than the turban, and male toddlers often only have their hair tied in a bun, the *jura*, which is covered by a white kerchief. The colour of the turban can vary and may be chosen according to the occasion. According to the website Sikhwomen.com:

Orange and Navy are traditional Sikh Khalsa<sup>4</sup> colours also worn on days of religious observance or special commemorative events. A shade of Pink or Red is worn on a special day such as one’s wedding, engagement or to celebrate other major events. [...] Western Sikhs<sup>5</sup> commonly wear White as part of their daily Sikh garb. Black and Navy are more popular with the younger generation and also worn at more formal events such as black tie dinners and parties.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to red and pink, my informants also named maroon as a colour for a turban typically worn by a Sikh groom on his wedding day. In everyday life, the colour of the turban might simply be chosen according to personal taste or fashion, as Hardit’s wife explained to me. In her case, her husband makes sure he wears a turban that matches the colour of her salwar kamiz and of his own shirt. Thus, Hardit’s dress practice is grounded in his aesthetic choices. But at the same time, he says, he considers it mandatory for a Sikh

2 In both Helsinki and Yuba City I encountered female non-Indian converts wearing a turban. Additionally, I saw in Yuba City a few young Sikh women wearing a turban, but none in Helsinki.

3 3HO stands for ‘Healthy, Happy and Holy Organization’. To find out more about 3HO and the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere that originated in the 1960s in California, see for example Opinderjit Kaur Takhar (2005: 158–178).

4 Community of initiated Sikhs, established by Guru Gobind Singh.

5 ‘Western Sikhs’ refers to converted Sikhs.

6 [www.sikhwomen.com/turban/Color.htm](http://www.sikhwomen.com/turban/Color.htm), accessed March 18, 2011.

to wear a turban, because the Guru Granth Sahib, whom he considers to be his teacher, has told him to do so.

Today, the turban plays a pivotal role in communicating on an external level the religious identity of a Sikh (Singh and S. Tatla 2006: 127).<sup>7</sup> It helps to protect and maintain the uncut hair (kes) of Sikhs in a practical manner (McLeod 1999: 58). Kes is one of the five Ks that Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, is believed to have introduced to Sikhism and that are today mandatory for amritdhari (initiated/ baptised) Sikhs to maintain as part of their daily appearance (McLeod 1997: 125ff.). In addition to the command to keep any bodily hair in an uncut condition (kes), the five Ks include kangha (wooden comb), kaccha (cotton undergarment), kara (bracelet), and kirpan (sword). Like the externally visible elements of uncut hair, bracelet and sword, the turban, too, indicates that the wearer is part of a particular group. Arjan, a senior high school student who cut his hair after his arrival in Yuba City, seems to agree that the turban functions as a form of dress which signals group membership, as his following comment suggests.

[The turban] is a good symbol, you know, if someone is wearing a turban, you can say 'This is a Sikh, you know? But now, when somebody looks at me, they will be confused, 'Is he Punjabi, is he Mexican, is he what?' but if I had a turban on my head, they can say 'Oh, there is a Sikh!' That is like a very, very good symbol. You can, like, recognise the people, 'Oh, here is a Sikh!'

Being recognised as a Sikh due to the wearing of a turban is what happened to Charan, who is in his mid-twenties and initially came to Finland as an expatriate. When he was travelling by train in Helsinki, behind him stood a person from India, who greeted him with '*Sat Sri Akal*, how are you?'<sup>8</sup> For the person who gave the greeting, it was easy to recognise that Charan was a Sikh 'because of my appearance [...] the turban, the beard'; but for Charan it was difficult to identify the other person as Indian, let alone a Sikh, since he was of 'fair skin colour and clean shaven', and wore no turban. Various sites devoted to Sikhism on the Internet, which scholars consider to be a growing source of authority especially for young Sikhs,<sup>9</sup> proclaim that one purpose of the turban is to make its wearer stand out in the crowd so that others can identify the person as a Sikh. For instance, on the website Sikhnet.com one can find the following explanation of why Sikhs wear turbans: 'When you choose to stand out by tying your turban, you stand fearlessly as one single person standing out from six billion people.'<sup>10</sup> Balveer, who is approximately forty years old and was born and raised in Yuba City, only recently started wearing a turban following his father's decision to do the same. In the

7 The turban is not part of the five k's that initiated amritdhari Sikhs must wear on their person, but in the course of history it has become one of the most important signs of Sikh identity. The reasons for this historical transformation are debated in Sikh studies (see Cohn 1996; McLeod 1999; Axel 2001).

8 *Sat Sri Akal* is a common greeting used amongst Sikhs, means '*Vahiguru* is truth.'

9 See, for example, Jakobsh and Nesbitt (2010: 11); Singh (2010: 212).

10 [fateh.sikhnet.com/s/WhyTurbans](http://fateh.sikhnet.com/s/WhyTurbans), accessed September 1, 2008.

following, he discusses the responsibility that he sees as accompanying his being a visible representative of his religious group:

It is like a uniform, we were given this identity by Guru Gobind Singhji, and if you are given this identity, with the *panj k*, the five Ks, it should be a uniform, like, for example, [...], let us say something is happening, the way I look, I should not be seen at the wrong place at the wrong time, you see what I am saying? Or on a different note, let us say that somebody needed help, you should be looked upon like somebody they could rely on, instead of somebody they should fear, you see what I am saying?<sup>11</sup>

From the context of our conversation I understood that Balveer was saying that Sikhs with a turban should be aware of the responsibility that comes with wearing such a visible outfit. Similar to the Muslim women studied by anthropologist Emma Tarlo (2010: 64) in Great Britain, who felt that by wearing the hijab they became representatives of Islam, many Sikhs also felt that by wearing a turban they became representatives of Sikhism. Therefore, it is important that Sikhs who wear a turban behave in a respectful manner, because only then will others see the 'uniform', to use Balveer's expression, as signifying a person upon whom one can rely and whom one does not have to fear. Otherwise, if a Sikh with a turban were doing something wrong, it would have an impact on the image of turban-wearing Sikhs in general. Hence, this example highlights how the decision to wear a turban might guide the moral conduct of the person wearing it, or as Tarlo (2010: 64) puts it, with regard to Muslim women and the hijab, it could be also argued that the turban constitutes for the persons wearing it a 'material reminder of how they should and should not behave'. At the same time, wearing a turban on a daily basis in the country to which Sikhs or their ancestors once immigrated can be seen as a diasporic practice, since it contributes to the process through which a distinct identity is maintained after migration.

### *The Meanings of the Turban in the Aftermath of 1984*

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the Sikh turban as an identity symbol has been ascribed a political connotation. Conflicts between India's Hindu majority and the Sikh minority escalated in 1984, when the Indian Army attacked the Golden Temple in Amritsar in order to quash the Sikh regional autonomy movement (Singh and Tatla 2006: 20). In the aftermath of this event, the dispute between the Indian state and Sikhs striving for an independent homeland, Khalistan, turned extremely violent. Linked to these developments was a politicisation of the turban and its meaning. During this period, the turban together with the long beard, both of which are typical for the appearance of amritdhari Sikhs, became a marker used by Indian soldiers and policemen seeking to identify people who were anti-government and

11 Similar points of views were expressed by young British Sikhs interviewed by religious scholar Jasjit Singh (2010: 213).

pro Khalistan in their orientation (see Axel 2002: 417ff.). It appears that by the 1990s it had become a common practice with the Indian police to identify amritdhari Sikhs as terrorists (Axel 2001: 132). During that time, Sikhs wearing turbans had to face strong anti-Sikh sentiment in their home country and became targets of violence. The prevailing political climate made everyday life for turban-wearing Sikhs and their families complicated, as Satwinder, who moved to Yuba City in the aftermath of 1984 as an adult together with his wife, remembers:

- Satwinder I was running into problems, when I was travelling by road, my car was several times stopped, and I was harassed by the military forces, and one time, they did not signal us to stop, so we did not stop while coming from Amritsar to Jalandhar. And then they started whistling, all the people with guns came to the road and then we had to stop, and they said, 'We were this close to shooting you guys because you did not stop' and I said, 'Well, I did not see you stopping us' and he said, 'No, no, this guy said "stop"' and I said, 'I was in a car [driving] sixty km and I did not see the hand sign', and as the climate was [then], anybody in police uniform can stop you.
- Laura Was that before 1984?
- Satwinder That was in 1986, or 1987. And I had another incident [...], me and my wife and kids, one was nine months, and the other one was three years, they stopped us on a very hot June day and they said, 'Just park your car on the side', and we stopped there and it was like two to three hours, and I had to argue with them, and once I showed them my identity, my business cards, trying to show them what I do, would they believe? [They said:] 'If you do not shut up we'll shoot you.'

The political circumstances motivated some Sikh families, like that of Satwinder, to leave India and to move to countries such as the US and Finland. In order to ensure the success of this endeavour, Ramjeet, who is in his mid-forties and lives now in Helsinki, explained that for him it was necessary to stop wearing his turban. In the political atmosphere of the time, he explains, 'our state thought that everybody who had a beard and a turban was a terrorist.' In order to make it onto the plane that would eventually bring him to Finland, he untied his turban, cut his hair and beard, and removed the name 'Singh' from his name, because 'every Singh was seen to be a terrorist, they thought like this.' He did this in the morning before his departure to Finland and 'in the evening the plane left.' In other words, for the purposes of making it out of the country, Ramjeet felt he had to hide his religious identity by changing his outward appearance and by removing 'Singh', the typical last name for male Sikhs, from his full name on his passport.

In contrast with this, some Sikh immigrants who were living in Yuba City at the time of the attack on the Golden Temple reacted by reaffirming their allegiance to Sikhism and by expressing their solidarity with fellow Sikhs in India who were directly affected by the turmoil. Tajender, for instance, who

is in his mid-forties, recalls how the dressing practice of his father, who was living in Yuba City at that time, changed as a response to the events that occurred in the Punjab in 1984:

- Tajender      My father has a full length [beard and hair] now; he changed after 1984, when the Indian army attacked the Golden Temple in 1984. That really shook the Sikhs to the core, an attack on the Golden Temple, which is the heart and soul of the Sikhs, no matter where they are living. That kind of woke them up, because people were, I am not sure, how many Sikhs wore a turban in Yuba City back then, [...] the Sikh leaders, they all used to be clean shaven. Boy, I mean, Indira Gandhi, I am not sure if her goal was to eliminate Sikhs, but she did the Sikhs a favour, she really woke them up. After that, everybody, it became almost fashionable to have the big beard and the turban.
- Laura            Was this related also to Khalistan?
- Tajender        Yes. The Khalistan movement, but some, who did not believe in Khalistan, they definitely believed in their faith.
- Laura            Was it a strong statement that 'I am Sikh and I stand with the Sikhs'?
- Tajender        Yeah, yeah, I mean it is hard to get into people's head, but it certainly woke them up, 'What are we doing? Followers of our Guru, and Gurus sacrificed so much, and we cannot put a turban on our head?' [...] So people started thinking like that, and a lot of them in Yuba City were farmers, they did not go to the office, so who is going to tell them, hey, you need to shave.

In other words, the attack on the Golden Temple reminded Sikhs of their religious roots<sup>12</sup> and motivated them to assert their religious identity in public through their clothing in context where they were not likely to be arrested or persecuted for it. As a consequence, it can be argued that the turban was transformed into a 'symbol of group solidarity' (Tatla 1999: 100). It is important to note that the manifestation of solidarity through dress among Sikhs stretched across national borders. This makes it evident that the Punjab still played an important role in the lives of many Sikhs in Yuba City. The expressed orientation to the 'original centre' from which Sikh migration began brings to light a diasporic consciousness that came to the fore most powerfully after 1984 (Tatla 1999).

### *Sikhs in the US after 9/11*

Some twenty years later, the Sikh turban became once again linked to the identity of a terrorist, only this time it was not in India. The terrorist attacks

12 Similar to the Sikhs in Yuba City, also Sikhs living in Canada who were interviewed by Nayar (2004: 139) made frequent 'references to Operation Bluestar as the catalyst for embracing the Sikh religion.'

that occurred in the United States on September 11, 2001 ascribed a new meaning to the Sikh turban due to its similarity to the turban worn by Osama bin Laden and his adherents in al-Qaeda who were responsible for the attacks. The effects of this 'mistaken identity',<sup>13</sup> which merged Sikhs and Muslims in the popular imagination due to their appearance (see Stringer 2006: 221), were suffered by the Sikh community in the US as well as in other countries, such as the UK (see Singh 2010), and included verbal attacks, vandalism, assaults and the murder of one Sikh in the US. The most recent tragic event in this series of hate crimes was an attack on a Sikh gurdwara in Wisconsin in 2012 in which a gunman killed six people.<sup>14</sup> It could be argued that after 9/11, the turban was transformed from an article of faith to an object of assaults and harassment (Sidhu and Gohil 2008:59).

One of my turban-wearing Sikh informants was living in New York with his adult son at the time of the attacks. Having read in the news what had happened to other people wearing a turban, he was afraid to leave his apartment in the days following 9/11. When he dared to set foot on the streets of New York again, he sensed an atmosphere of hostility directed towards him, the man wearing a turban. Some passers-by spat on the street in front of him and made rude comments. Luckily though, he says, nothing more serious happened. Some of Balveer's friends and relatives were also made nervous by the situation, and Karanjit remembers, 'There was a lot of fear in people's eyes.' As a precaution, some of them cut their long kes (hair) and removed the turban or alternatively hid their uncut hair under a less noticeable head covering such as a hat. Balveer reported that he himself thought, 'I am not afraid, this is what I am supposed to look like. This is for my beliefs, this is for my religion, this is the way I am supposed to be' and so he decided to continue wearing the turban.

Sikhs in Yuba City emphasised in their interviews that the city remained mostly unaffected by the wave of hate crimes that swept across the United States following 9/11.<sup>15</sup> My informants attributed this to the fact that both Sikhs and their turban are well known sights in Yuba City due the long history of Sikh residence there. In other words, unlike in some American towns, Yuba City had an 'established pattern' (Entwistle 2000: 112) for recognising Sikhs, which explains why the misinterpretation of the turban that occurred elsewhere in the US was avoided in this rural Northern Californian town. Indeed, many of the Sikhs I spoke with recalled the

13 *Mistaken identity: Sikhs in America* is the title of a documentary made by Vinanti Sarkar as a reaction to the attacks on Sikhs in America in the aftermath of 9/11 with the intention to educate non-Sikhs concerning Sikhism.

14 See also Kalra (2005: 76); Foley and Hoge (2007: 138); Jakobsh and Nesbitt (2010: 10). In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks not only male Sikhs wearing a turban but also South Asian Immigrants of other religions became the victims of hate crimes in the US for looking like 'Middle Eastern terrorists' (Purkayastha 2005: 43ff.).

15 Following September 11, 2001, the number of hate crime incidents based on ethno/national origin and religious affiliation increased significantly (Federal Bureau of Investigation's hate crime statistics 2001: [www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/ucr#cius\\_hatecrime](http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/ucr#cius_hatecrime), accessed November 23, 2010).

support they received from fellow Yuba City residents in the aftermath of 9/11. Premjot, for instance, who is in his mid- thirties and came to Yuba City as a little boy, is an amritdhari Sikh who wears a turban. In an interview, he admitted that after the terrorist attacks he initially felt paranoid. For this reason, he explains, he decided to go to a local store to look for some pins that would say: 'I am proud to be an American.' As he explains, at that time he found it strange that although 'we are American citizens [...], we still need to prove that we are Americans, that we are not the bad guys.' In the store, Premjot tried to find what he was looking for without success. Suddenly, an unfamiliar woman approached him and suggested that he should take some ribbons in the colours of the American flag and sew them together into a decoration that he could pin to his jacket, for example:

[...] some lady, I do not know who she was, [...] I had never seen her in my life, and she is looking at the red, white and blue stuff, and I am looking for something, and I cannot find anything, and then she goes, 'There are three different red, white and blue ribbons, separate ones, take these and put them together, sew them together and just fold them around, just like a ribbon', and she goes, 'you need this more than I do, just take it.' And I go, 'Wow', I was touched.

Co-workers and colleagues, too, were reported as having displayed concerns for the well- being of their turban-wearing Sikh colleagues during this period. Hardit's manager, for example, came up to him after 9/11 and said that if anybody gave him a hard time, Hardit should let him know, adding, 'We want to make sure that you are fine.' The manager was as good as his word when Hardit, after stepping out of his office one day, was harassed by a person whom Hardit identified in the interview as a 'homeless guy'. This man started to shout 'Bin Laden' at him and Hardit decided to ignore him. 'But that guy was drunk and he tried to chase me.' Feeling the need to do something about the situation, Hardit decided to go back into his office. There the security guards caught the drunken man who had been following him and called emergency services. And 'then my manager just came and he supported me'. Hardit recalled.

As the accounts presented in this section demonstrate, after 9/11 a number of Sikh immigrants and their descendants<sup>16</sup> were eager to preserve their distinct religious identity as displayed through dress despite the risk it entailed. At the same time, many Sikhs in Yuba City were eager to visibly communicate their solidarity with their home country and their fellow Americans through their attire. In other words, the diasporic interest to maintain cultural and religious traditions was paired with practices reflecting their urge to be seen as Americans. As Premjot's and Hardit's accounts suggest, after the attacks many 'mainstream' Yuba City inhabitants included local Sikhs in their definition of 'us Americans'. But despite these local experiences of solidarity, many Sikhs in Yuba City felt the need to become actively involved in the making of documentaries with the goal

16 Balveer was born in Yuba City. Premjot moved to Yuba City as a young boy, and Hardit came as a young man.

of educating non-Sikhs at the national level about the Sikh religion and its followers living in America. Among others, the Punjabi American Heritage Club in which large numbers of Sikhs are involved sponsored the making of the documentary *Mistaken Identity. Sikhs in America*, produced and directed by Vinanti Sarkar,<sup>17</sup> and many Yuba City Sikhs appeared in another documentary called *Sikhs in America*, which was written, produced and directed by Marissa Aroy and Niall McKay.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly to the findings presented by Tarlo (2010: 45ff.) in her study of female Muslim dress practices in London, the analysis presented in this and the previous section has made clear that political events can indeed have a crucial impact on people's perception of a particular dress at a specific moment in time. However, the impact that political events have on influencing the meanings that are being ascribed to a particular dress form are not only felt on a national level but, in the case of diasporas, also at a transnational level.

### *Cutting the Kes and Taking off the Turban*

Although many Sikhs seem to consider the turban and uncut hair as important external markers of Sikh identity, I only know of five Sikh men in Finland who wear a turban on a daily basis. While one of them only started doing so quite recently, the other four have been wearing a turban ever since leaving India and migrating to Finland. All four emigrated from places in India that are located outside the current state of Punjab, and two of them arrived in Finland initially as expatriates but became immigrants after accepting permanent job offers in Finnish companies. Talking to these last two, it became clear that they considered wearing the kes and the turban as mandatory for all Sikh men, and they expressed their disappointment concerning the small number of turbans they see each Sunday in the congregation. Previous studies of Sikhs living in the diaspora<sup>19</sup> suggest that although the Sikh normative expectation is that male Sikhs should keep their hair uncut and wear a turban, it is not unusual for the majority of Sikh men to be clean-shaven<sup>20</sup> and turbanless in the early phase of settling down in a new country. Also in California, a great number of the Sikh pioneers sat clean-shaven in the first gurdwaras that they had built in that region. But what are the reasons for this? Why do some Sikh men decide to cut their hair and remove their turban?

For Ramjeet, who is in his mid-forties and living in Helsinki now, his decision to do so was related to the events in India caused by the conflict between Hindus and Sikhs which saw its tragic climax in 1984. In order to

17 [www.punjabheritage.org/2002/09/13/first-tv-program-on-sikh-americans-after-911-mistaken-identity-pahs-press-release/](http://www.punjabheritage.org/2002/09/13/first-tv-program-on-sikh-americans-after-911-mistaken-identity-pahs-press-release/), accessed March 31, 2011.

18 [www.mediafactory.tv/2008/04/pbs-sikhs-in-america/](http://www.mediafactory.tv/2008/04/pbs-sikhs-in-america/), accessed March 31, 2011.

19 See e.g. Singh and Tatla (2006: 127).

20 'Clean-shaven' is a term used by Sikhs to refer to those male Sikhs who have cut their long hair and trim their beards and do not wear a turban.

be able to leave India, he had to hide his Sikh identity and thus he cut his hair and took off his turban. Roughly ten years earlier, his brother Sagar, who was a young man at that time, also decided to cut his hair prior to boarding a ship in India that would take him to Europe. 'I was young then, you know, I just thought this was a good idea.' So he removed his turban and cut his hair. But the ship, which was supposed to leave the next morning was delayed and he was told that it would leave only a couple of weeks later. Fearing his parents' reaction if they saw what he had done to his hair, Sagar preferred to wait for the ship's departure in the harbour town, rather than returning home to wait.

Some other turban-wearing Sikh men with whom I spoke in Yuba City told me how they cut their hair and took off their turban shortly after their arrival as young men in the United States. High school student Arjan, for instance, moved a couple of years ago with his family from Hoshiarpur to Yuba City. Soon after, he decided to cut his hair:

- Laura           And when you came here, did you still have long hair?  
 Arjan           Well, I am going to be honest, I have done the biggest mistake  
                     in my life, I cut my hair when I came over here, now I feel  
                     so bad, and I want to let it grow. I do not know when it is going  
                     to happen...
- Laura           I am not judging, you know...  
 Arjan           No, no, no...  
 Laura           And the reason why you cut it?  
 Arjan           Well, you know...right now, most of the Punjabi people they  
                     are not keeping their, their turbans, especially in this country,  
                     like the American born [Sikh<sup>21</sup>] people, they do not keep their  
                     hair. So, I really do not have any reason why I did it, I just did,  
                     I can say.
- Laura           Did your mum and dad know about it?  
 Arjan           Yeah.  
 Laura           And it was ok, I mean, your decision?  
 Arjan           They were kind of little mad at me, why I did it. [...] They  
                     knew I was cutting my hair. I love my parents; they didn't  
                     say anything that time. But I felt so bad. [...] I feel bad now,  
                     there is nothing I can do, just grow back my hair.
- Laura           You think you will do it one day?  
 Arjan           Not sure, maybe...

Sagar and Arjan both cut their hair when they were young men. But when being asked why they did so, both struggled when explaining the motives for their decision, which Arjan calls the 'biggest mistake in my life'. Like Sagar, whose mother is an Amritdhari Sikh, Arjan, too, grew up in the Punjab and thus in a cultural context in which Sikh men are expected to keep their kes and to wear a turban. Acting against this internalised norm was accompanied

21 Earlier on in the interview, he explained that he uses the term 'American-born' to differentiate between those Sikhs who migrated to the US and those who were born there.

in Arjan's case by pangs of guilt. Nevertheless, his present choice seems to be to keep his hair short, which perhaps can be seen as reflecting his wish to integrate better visually with the outward appearance of many American-born Sikhs and other Americans.

The turban is a visible identity marker that clearly differentiates its wearer, especially in the Finnish context where the presence of Sikhs is a rather recent phenomenon. And although it can be argued that Finland is becoming day by day a more multicultural society, a turban wearing Sikh on the streets of Helsinki is, unlike in Yuba City, a rare sight which still attracts gazes, remarks and questions from persons walking by, as my interviews and conversations conducted with Sikhs in Finland suggest. Kamalpreet, for example, who came to Yuba City as a young man and who is now in his mid-thirties, initially kept the turban for a few months after having moved to Finland in the late 1990s. But it was hard, he explains, because 'everyone started asking about it. When I was on the train, they all asked me, in Finnish, and I did not understand. Then they touched it and asked, "What is this?"'<sup>22</sup> Also Deep, who is in his mid-forties and currently working in a bar he owns, gave a similar answer when I asked him why he decided to remove the turban:

Look, I went to work at the restaurant and everybody asked the same thing many times, I could not bear to explain it to everybody, that is why [I took off the turban]. Everyone asked the same thing many times. The whole day and every day, I couldn't bear it.

Both Deep's and Kamalpreet's accounts suggest that the turban in the Finnish context is still an exotic artefact that raises curiosity and draws people's attention. In Finland, the turban is a symbol of difference (Singh and Tatla 2006: 127) that makes its wearer stand out from others. Kamalpreet and Deep finally got tired of the constant flow of questions that they encountered in their everyday lives as a consequence of wearing the turban in Finland and in order to avoid them, they eventually decided to remove their turban and cut their hair. There are a few Sikhs living in Finland, however, who still endure such questions. Originally from Delhi, Karamdeep, who is now around sixty years of age, was one of the first Sikhs to arrive in Finland in the early 1980s. Since his arrival, he has continued to wear his turban and is very proud of this fact. Having worked for almost fourteen years in the same pub, which he owns together with his wife, his customers' initial questions have ebbed away, he explains. 'Everyone knows me, so now I have no problems, all is quite well.' In other words, once familiarity with the sight of a turban increases the questions fade away.

Eighteen-year-old Jal, who has lived in Finland since his early childhood, never kept his hair long because, as he explains, he did not want to be teased at school. One of his cousin's sons, who kept his hair long while going to

22 Sociologist Amir Marvasti (2006: 537) points out in her study how Middle Eastern Muslim women wearing a *hijab* (veil covering the hair) in the US encountered similar questions by strangers.

school in Finland, suffered the teasing of other students. Two Sikh women interviewees explained that their husbands had taken off their turbans for similar reasons, namely to circumvent harassment and racism. Sitting at a kitchen table next to her husband, Ravneet, who is approximately thirty years of age, told me that her husband cut his hair after he had moved to Finland, because ‘the culture has such a great influence, here people are a bit racist and tease and so it was best.’ Her husband Bhagat adds that another reason why he decided to cut his hair was simply a lack of time. Working and going to school in the course of one day kept him busy and he was not able to take care of his long hair and to tie a turban every morning. Thus, cutting his hair and not wearing the turban were for him partly an issue of convenience.

Those who, like Bhagat, who is now in his mid-thirties, cut their hair and no longer wear their turban, often describe it as a painful and sorrowful experience. In the following examples, it becomes clear how practice of shaping a body can be related to intense emotions and feelings. Bhagat, for example, explained to me that cutting his hair was a deeply emotional experience for him:

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| Bhagat  | If you think that your mother has grown your hair since you were a little child, at least for eighteen or fifteen years; washed your hair every week. [...] Every morning when I went to school my mother combed my hair [...] |
| Laura   | A lot of work.   |
| Bhagat  | A lot of work. Every day, that takes its time. And then washing it and then putting the right appliance so that it would not get dry...  |
| Ravneet | Oil.   |
| Bhagat  | Oil and all, she did a good job. When I cut my hair, I cried.  |

For Bhagat, hair seems to be associated with cherished childhood memories and may be seen to symbolise the relationship between a child and the mother who takes care of his hair. Others, like Deep who also immigrated to Finland as an adult, described how strange and unpleasant it felt the first time he had removed the turban. ‘My head hurt a lot, because in India I always used the turban and here, without the turban, and the cold weather, in the beginning I had a headache.’<sup>23</sup> In other words, practices through which people prepare their bodies to enter the social and cultural worlds also have an affect on the how the body experiences the world and positions itself in it.

The interviews in Yuba City revealed further that for some Sikh parents it can be a very sorrowful experience when sons decide to cut off their long hair. This is revealed in a conversation I had with Satwinder and his wife Chitleen, who are both in their sixties now. They invited me one day to visit them in their home, and kindly offered to fetch me from my apartment. On the way to their house, we picked up a vegetarian pizza, as they reasoned that by that time I was already tired of eating Indian food. As it became evident on

23 Also in Yuba City, some Sikhs I spoke with emphasised the health advantages related to the wearing of a turban.

the several occasions that I met them, religion means a lot to Satwinder and Chitleen and forms a constant in their everyday life. For example, whenever they have a chance, they listen to *shabad kirtan* (devotional music). Once, while I was riding in the car with them for over an hour, Chitleen sat with her head covered in the backseat of the car while listening with eyes closed to shabad kirtan from an Ipod she was holding in her hands. Also, when eating pizza on the day I visited their home, devotional music was playing in the background. A few moments later, we sat in their living room with warm blankets wrapped around us while outside the thick fog of December immersed the rural landscape in silent white. In the course of the interview, I asked them whether they had educated their children according to the Sikh religion, from which the following conversation ensued:

- Satwinder      We did, but to tell you the truth, they are not that religious, and both of them got in the influence of other people, because that was fifteen years ago, and in those days, there were many Sikhs who cut their hair. [...] They had a hard time, because they loved us and we brought them up in a very nice manner like parents should, but then the pressure from the outside peer group was so great that they gave in [and cut their hair].
- Laura            Was that a big thing for all of you?
- Satwinder      Yes, for me and my wife it was the shock of our lives. I mean, it was a very big shock and it stayed with us for several weeks and months. And that happened to many other parents like us.
- Laura            And at the same time, it is also for your boys, it was not easy for them.
- Satwinder      No, it was not easy for them.
- Laura            How old were they when they decided to do it?
- Satwinder      They were like high school age.

In this example, the sons' act of cutting their hair was not only meaningful in religious terms, but also in cultural terms, since through their behaviour the sons disobeyed their parents, thus breaking with the Indian tradition of expressing respect for their elders. Some sons seemed to want to avoid violating this norm, and thus employed clever tactics in order to obtain their parents' consent to cut their hair. An example of this is the behaviour displayed by Premjot's brother. The following response was evoked by my question of whether Premjot had worn a turban when he arrived with his family in the United States in the early 1980s:

Yes, I did at that time. I, originally from birth, we were always on the religious side, [...], we kept [the turban], and when I got to sixth grade, my brother went to elementary or middle school. He didn't want it, he always looked for excuses to cut his hair, and to me, it did not bother me, [...]. And my brother would put gum in his hair and told [our parents] that other kids had put gum in his hair, and he blamed all the kids at school, and finally my dad got fed up and took him to the haircutter, and he said, 'you come, too,' and I asked 'why?' and he said

'today [it is him] tomorrow you will be saying the same thing.' I said, 'OK,' and then I cut it, too.

As this excerpt suggests, young male Sikhs may apply creative strategies in order to gain parental consent for cutting their long hair.<sup>24</sup> They do so, I would argue, with the purpose of maintaining a code of conduct that is in harmony with the Indian cultural mandate, which demands that children show respect for the instructions given by their elders, including their parents. To summarise, while previous studies on Sikhs living abroad have emphasised the fact that Sikh men are forced to cut their hair and remove their turban in order to better their prospects for finding employment (e.g. Takhar 2005: 32), the aim of this section has been to highlight some possible other reasons that may motivate such practices.

### *Situational Dressing*

While it is true that most Sikh men in Finland do not wear their hair long and do not wear a turban, there are many male Sikhs who, like the early Sikh settlers in Britain (Singh and Tatla 2006: 127), engage in situational dressing practices. Deep, for instance, who decided not to wear his turban after being constantly asked by customers to explain the purpose of his head covering, says that he still wears it on specific occasions. 'I always use it when there is a celebration or at meetings [of the Indian political party he is part of] or at the gurdwara.' And Bhagat says that he wears a turban whenever there is an Indian social gathering going on, because then he has the time to tie it, as he explains. At work, however, he, too, prefers not to wear a turban in order to avoid unwanted comments. For their own wedding day, the majority of Sikh man with whom I spoke said that they wore a turban. Jodh, for example, who came as a young man to Finland and who is now in his thirties, gave the following reply to my question of whether he occasionally wears a turban or not: 'in India, when you get married, you always use it, because it is the Sikh religion. I also used it then, because I am already married.' In other words, on the day of his wedding that took place in India, Jodh found it important to wear a turban and thus to visually communicate his cultural and religious identity as a Sikh.

The case of Harleen, whose dressing choices I described in the opening excerpt of this chapter, and the dressing practices of Sikh men, both support the idea that social situations, with their specific set of cultural rules, play a significant role in structuring dress-related decisions (Entwistle 2000: 52). The situational dressing behaviour described in this section also reveals how the surrounding cultural context and its inherent structures have an impact on the experience of individuals who, through their dress-related practices, attempt to cope with those structures (Entwistle 2000: 34ff.). This ability to adapt and perform different identities according to context seems to

24 Another example of such a strategic practice was the case of a young Sikh who cut his hair but initially claimed that others did it as an act of racism (See Singh 2010).

represent for Sikhs in Finland a compromise that bridges the gap between the demands of their religious and cultural traditions on the one hand, and their wish to become part of the cultural context in which they have settled on the other. In other words, the experience of migration may cause immigrants to rethink the manner in which they want to display their identities through dress. As a consequence, many Sikh immigrants in Finland, both male and female, have decided to dress in public according to 'mainstream' custom. They do so in order to avoid trouble, harassment, racist attacks or just the gaze and questions of other people. Adopting such situational dressing practices can be further seen as a means of obtaining respect from others by communicating a willingness to adapt to the prevailing cultural norms of a particular context.

### *Letting the Hair Grow and Tying the Turban again*

Some male Sikhs who cut their hair when they were younger have let it grow again and began to wear a turban when they got older. This is what happened in the case of Premjot, who is now in his mid-thirties and who has been living in Yuba City since he was a young boy:

I can tell by 1991, before I got married, I was Americanised: I did everything like Americans, go out, party, whatever. But then in 1991, after I got married, my life just totally changed, I guess. I stopped drinking, the society I was involved with, they stopped socialising with me [...], and today they are gone, all of them are gone. Even though I see them once or twice, it is not a usual thing. And then, since 1991, my whole life just changed drastically. From 1991 I got on the religious side, and then in 1998 I went to get baptised, I took the amrit.

Taking the amrit, the 'nectar' used in the initiation of Sikhs, implies the obligation to fully follow the Sikh religion's code of conduct (rahit) and this includes among other things the wearing of the five Ks. Thus, when becoming an amritdhari Sikh, Premjot kept his hair uncut and began to wear a turban. What seems to have triggered this change in his life was his marriage to a woman from India and perhaps the prospect of starting his own family. For others, religion seems to become more significant when reaching middle or old age, when people possibly become more conscious of their own mortality (see Putnam 2000: 73). Baldev, who came to Yuba City as a student in 1954 and who is now in his seventies, makes an observation concerning changes in dress practices among some of his friends that supports this idea:

[Jasjit]'s father was clean-shaven, for many, many years, but in the last few years, he has put on a turban, has a beard, but it was his own choice. I guess, people tend to, well, we all think of God when we are older, because we think, 'Well, what is beyond when we die? Who are we going to be accountable to?' So men and women in almost any religion, when they get older, they become more religious.

Another of Baldev's friends turned to religion after the tragic loss of one of his children. As Baldev says, the father was deeply affected, and after this sad experience 'he has gone into religion. He spends lots of time at the temple, volunteering.' Two weeks ago Baldev met him. 'I could not recognise him, beard up to here; he doesn't even tie the beard, it's loose. I could not tell who he was.' In both cases, Baldev interprets the bodily transformations as signs that reflect a transformation in religious terms.

Also in Balveer's case, his decision to start wearing a turban had been significantly motivated by the emotional events that happened within his family. First, there was his father's decision to start letting his hair grow out and to tie a turban. As he stated in his interview, Balveer still remembers this moment very well. Having grown up in Yuba City, he explains, he just wanted to fit in with everybody else. But his father's decision to start wearing a turban motivated Balveer to do the same, as he wanted to follow the path taken by his father, whom he deeply loves and respects and regards as his role model. Already as a small child, as Balveer says, he always said that he wanted to be like his father.

Balveer's choice to let his hair grow and wear a turban, however, can be also be interpreted as an act by which he wanted to repair the family's public reputation which had suffered when one of his siblings married outside the Sikh community. In this case, the turban could be seen as a means of communicating to other Sikhs in the community his good upbringing based on the assumption that 'many Sikh families consider the hair and the turban as indicators of good parenting' (Singh 2010: 215). Through adopting this particular item of dress, Balveer perhaps tried to counterbalance the shame his sibling had brought upon the family by not following the Indian tradition concerning marriage practices. At least Balveer's father was very proud of his son's commitment to the family, which he saw as expressed through his son's dressing practices. Balveer explained that when his father saw him 'in a *pag* [turban] and a beard, then he said, 'When I see you like that [replicates what his father said in Punjabi, then translates it for me:], I feel like I've got two kilos more of blood in me, my blood is just flowing.' Thanks to the religious education his father had instilled in him, taking the step to keep his hair long and to wear a turban was in harmony with his beliefs, he explains. Nevertheless, he initially had doubts whether he could maintain his outward appearance, and he thought to himself: 'Honestly, I do not think that I can do this, but I am going to try as hard as I can.' He explains that he was afraid of what people who were close to him, including his own children and their friends and friends' parents, would think of him if they saw his new appearance.

When Balveer had just begun to let his hair grow and to wear a turban, there occurred an incident at the Canadian border that, in hindsight, seems to have strengthened his decision to wear a turban. Together with his wife and children, he was on his way to the wedding of a relative living in Canada. Balveer's father had already informed the organisers and guests of the wedding party that they should prepare themselves for a big surprise, thus referring to Balveer's new appearance. But when Balveer and his family reached the Canadian border, the officials did not let him enter Canada,

since his appearance did not match that of his passport and driving licence pictures in which he was still clean-shaven. While they allowed his wife and children to enter Canada, 'they would not let me cross the border', Balveer recalls. The border guards had told him, 'Hey, do not worry, [...], we have a detention area between borders' to which he replied, 'What do you mean, either you let me go back or you let me go forward' and they said 'No, you are fine right here until we figure you out'.

In order to avoid further hassle and to end the situation, which Balveer describes as particularly unpleasant for his children, he actually ended up cutting his hair that day at the border. Balveer explains that before this event 'I probably thought I was doing it more so for my dad, you see what I am saying? Like for me to keep my hair, at that time, I thought inside that I was kind of doing it more for him more so than doing it for myself.' But after this incident at the border, he realised that he had been doing it for himself and that the turban and kes were part of him. 'It is a part of me, this is, I am doing it for myself, for my religion, this is my identity, this is my race, this is my religion, this is what I am all about.'

Balveer's case illustrates well the complex ways in which individuals negotiate their identities and how dress forms play an important role in this process. As mentioned previously, Balveer's religious upbringing was significant for his final decision to let his hair grow and wear a turban. Sajan, who was born and raised in Yuba City and who is now in his twenties, received less of a religious upbringing and cited this as one of the reasons why he could not imagine wearing a turban:

- Laura Did you ever think about wearing a turban?  
Sajan I have thought about it, I really, I mean, but I mean, as far as religion for me goes, since I was not taught about it, I really find that I am responsible for learning it on my own now, I guess, and it is something that I acknowledge that it is going to take time to discover different things. I definitely want to sit down and read and hear stories from people. Those are the things I want to do. But I figured these things, I don't know – I can't sit here and tell you the main reasons behind wearing a turban – and that, so at this point I feel I cannot make a proper decision about it and it is something that over time I learn about it and if I find it is appropriate then most definitely.

Sajan emphasised that before being able to make the decision on whether or not to let his hair grow and wear a turban, he first needs to understand the religious meanings of these symbols, especially because the turban is such a visible and strong identity marker. In turn, the decision to wear a kara (bracelet), which is also one of the five Ks, seems to have been much easier for him to make, as the following excerpt highlights. It also shows that Sajan wants to identify himself in public as a Sikh, at least in relation to other Indian students who know the meaning of the kara.

- Laura Do you wear a kara?  
Sajan Yes, most definitely.  
Laura Since when?  
Sajan I did when I was younger, then when I was doing sports, they would not allow you to wear any type of armbands, so for a while I did not, and then when I went back to university I really wanted to be able to identify myself, like I was saying, you have so many different types of Indian people, and so many Indian religions and stuff and it is just kind of...  
Laura So you decided if people see the kara they are able to identify you?  
Sajan Yes.

As can be seen from these discussions regarding the wearing of long hair, turban and the kara by Sikh men, identities are not necessarily stable through time but fluid, continually in the process of being remade and shaped in response to other people one encounters and experiences that one goes through in the course of life. Many Sikhs I talked to, independently of whether they wore a turban or not, also saw the wearing of the turban as one step male Sikhs should eventually take in their spiritual development.<sup>25</sup> But before doing so, it is considered important to understand the meaning and the responsibility that comes with wearing the turban on a daily level. Sajan, for example, clearly feels that he is not yet ready to adopt the turban as part of his daily gear, as his statement above highlighted.

### *Sikhs' Multiple Views on the Significance of the Turban*

- Laura Is there a dispute in Yuba City whether people should wear a turban or not?  
Hardit Yes, that is true [...]. Many people argue, like people who are amritdhari, they believe they are superior to people who are clean-shaven. And people like me, who wear a turban [but haven't taken amrit], they think they are better than clean-shavens. But my personal opinion is that this should not be the case. [...] There shouldn't be any clashes, but everybody is equal. If I am an amritdhari it doesn't mean that the other person who is clean-shaven is not [a Sikh], he is a Sikh, too, internally, maybe, he is working on it. One day he will achieve it, like for me, I am working on it, maybe one day I will achieve [to become an amritdhari Sikh].

The ongoing debate within and among Sikhs concerning the question of what makes a person a Sikh in the religious sense of the word seems in the case of men to be linked to the question of whether or not it is mandatory

25 In a similar vein, some of the Muslim women studied by Emma Tarlo (2010: 64) stated that they did not feel ready yet to adopt the hijab and considered it as a stage in their spiritual development.

for adult male Sikhs to keep their hair long and wear a turban. Views on this matter vary among the Sikhs I talked to in both countries. In the following, I seek to depict the polyphony I encountered in the field regarding this issue, and thus to highlight the heterogeneity of Sikhs' understandings of what a proper Sikh should do, and how he should look.

For Santokh, who is approximately thirty years of age and is an amritdhari, 'a true Sikh is one who obeys all the rules and stuff, but there are certain scenarios. If you have to cut hair, because of surgery and stuff, then that is one option, they need to do that. But if you cut your hair voluntarily, if you go to the barber type of thing, then I do not think that you fall into the category of what a true Sikh is supposed to be, no matter what sub-categories.' And Satwinder, who is in his sixties and is also an amritdhari Sikh living in Yuba City, considers it important that a Sikh maintains the outward symbols of Sikhism, since he considers them to function as reminders of one's religiosity. 'Some people will say that it is in here, but if it is in here [in your heart], then it should be out there, too, it should be both ways.' For him wearing the five Ks as well as the turban is to follow the command that Guru Gobind Singh has given. 'Many things I do not know, but my tenth Guru Gobind told me to do this. He said, "Do this" – he did not say that there is a choice.'

In a similar vein, Charan (approx. 25 years of age) and Sanjit (approx. thirty years of age) from Finland, who are not amritdhari Sikhs but keep their long hair and wear a turban on a daily basis, consider it mandatory for any Sikh man to follow this practice. As Charan explains:

- |        |  |
|--------|--|
| Laura  | And do you understand, that here in Finland, many Sikhs do not wear the turban, for many reasons, do you understand that? It is just an opinion question.                |
| Charan | I think they should use the turban and if at some point in time they have to choose between money or [...] religion, then they should go for religion and not for money. |

Charan equates the decision of someone to cut his hair and remove his turban with a choice between religion and financial success. Sanjit thinks in a similar way, namely that that for those Sikhs in Finland who have cut their hair, making money has been more important for them than staying on the path of religion.

An alternative perspective, especially present among Sikhs in Yuba City, sees that the priority of a person's conduct is more important than a person's outward appearance and that the turban is meaningless if someone looks like a Sikh, but does not behave like one. Raveena, who is in her forties, expresses this way of thinking when she says, 'In our religion it teaches you, I think, it tells you not to drink. And then you see a lot of guys who wear the turban they drink. And I'd rather have a guy that doesn't drink, but cuts his hair than a guy that, you know, I do not like that.' According to Sikhs who think in this way, simply wearing a turban does not make a person a Sikh. More important than external signs are the practices that concretely support and reflect the Guru's teaching. Noor, who is around thirty years of age and who grew up in Yuba City, argues in the following quotation in this way:

That is the thing, we do not appear to be a religious family, cause my dad doesn't wear a turban, we do not go the temple. But that is fine, but I think, it is more – and I am not saying we are better, do not get me wrong – but I think we are more inquisitive, and aware, and we always question what we do, and we think about what we do, we think about 'why am I doing this?' you know? When I walk down the street, am I going somewhere or am I walking aimlessly? [...] You know, you should have a reason for what you do, so we are not religious externally, but I think we are very religious when it comes to how we live, to our actions.

In this context, a few people I talked to in Yuba City suggested that the turban together with the five Ks have perhaps served their purpose in another historical period and that today these symbols are not really necessary anymore. As one of the Sikhs I interviewed for this study elaborated:

[...] all the five Ks, the kara, I do not really do any of that, and again, we do not do it, because, that is our own interpretation. We talk about it at home, because those things were probably necessary in the period, when the religion came about. They are not really necessary anymore, wearing the turban. It is like 'you are a Sikh' from a mile away, in time of war, in time of that, you needed that, to keep clean, you needed the comb. So I could see a need back then, I am not sure how it serves you to be a better person now.

In a similar vein, another of my informants in Yuba City explained that in former times, when Guru Gobind Singh gave the five Ks and the turban to the Sikhs, they all had a specific function. The turban was meant to protect the wearer from the sun, but also from the attacks of the enemy. Since the Sikhs were few in number, the turban functioned as a sign of who was fighting on their side and who was not. But today, the 'fights have changed', as my informants says, and the five Ks as well as the turban do not have the same relevance anymore.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

In this chapter I have tried to identify the different meanings that are attached to the Sikh turban in different cultural contexts. As has become clear, the Sikh turban is interpreted differently in different cultural, ethnic, political and religious contexts (see also Walton-Roberts 1998: 323ff.), and it can be seen to constitute a piece of clothing that plays a significant role in the process through which Sikh identities are being negotiated. The multiple voices that can be heard among Sikhs living in Yuba City, and occasionally also among Sikhs in Helsinki, show that the symbolic meaning of the Sikh turban is far from being fixed but is continuously debated within the Sikh community. Also political events can alter Sikhs' as well as non-Sikhs' perception of a particular piece of clothing at a particular moment in history. Personal experiences and emotions, too, can influence the manner in which Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike relate to the turban and its meanings.

The creative and context specific character of identity construction is

also revealed in the analysis of the dressing practices of two young Sikh women, with which I would like to end this chapter, in an attempt to deepen our understanding of female Sikhs' dressing practices. Similar to the young female Sikhs studied by Kathleen Hall (2002: 176) in the UK, many of the young female Sikhs I encountered in Finland are eager to play with the 'possibilities for "Westernising" the Indian outfit' that they are expected to wear to the gurdwara.

Kavita, who is about eighteen years old and has spent most of her life in Finland, likes the lifestyle in the Punjab, as she told me after having returned from a trip to India. But despite her liking for Punjabi culture, Kavita does not feel comfortable wearing the 'Punjabi dress' and prefers to dress like her Finnish peers instead. This preference became evident when I joined Kavita and her family for their visit to the gurdwara in Helsinki. Perched on the backseat of their expensive car, I sat next to Kavita's mother, who was dressed in a colourful salwar kamiz. Kavita's grandmother, too, who sat in the front passenger seat, was wearing the 'Punjabi dress', although hers was much paler in colour. On my other side sat Kavita with a friend of hers. While Kavita's friend was also dressed in a brightly coloured salwar kamiz, Kavita herself had chosen to wear a currently fashionable pair of black leggings, paired with a kamiz and a chunni (shawl).

With this cross-cultural assemblage of clothing, Kavita not only managed to incorporate two different cultural styles of dress, but also creatively fashioned a compromise by which she displayed both of the cultural worlds of in which she was part. The overall appearance of her final outfit was modest and thus appropriate for the occasion, namely a visit to the Sikh temple, and it demonstrated that Kavita possessed the needed cultural competence to prepare her body for the context she was about to enter. In other words, she was aware of the existing norms within the Sikh community that dictate a modest appearance for young women her age. But Kavita also paid homage to the current fashion trend in Finland by wearing a pair of leggings. Thus, I would argue that Kavita's outfit reflected her agency, since she, like many other young Sikh women her age I have seen at the gurdwara, actively navigated a compromise between her own taste and the expectations concerning dress stemming from her peers as well as from cultural and religious traditions.

A similar agency can be also observed in the case of Satleen, who is about the same age as Kavita and who also grew up in Helsinki. At a birthday party of one of her relatives that she attended in the company of two non-Sikh classmates, Satleen wore an outfit similar to Kavita's during her gurdwara visit. Satleen wore a pair of black leggings and a black tunic with colourful floral decorations bought from one of the local clothing stores, as she explained. The outfit was completed by a pair of Punjabi shoes called *jutti* and golden jewellery (bangles, a necklace, earrings, and rings) that she had bought during one of her visits to India. Before the arrival of the other guests, Satleen put on a bit of make-up together with her two Finnish friends, but not too much, as this would have made her look 'cheap' in the eyes of other Sikhs, as she and her mother made clear to me. They explained that unlike Hindu women who use a lot of make up and dress in revealing clothes, Sikh

women are supposed to dress in an unpretentious manner. Failing to do so would harm the family's *izzat*, because Sikh women are supposed to display in their everyday life a modest behaviour and signal it through the manner in which they dress.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it could be suggested that women's external appearance not only functions as a marker of community boundaries but also symbolises women's gendered positions within the patriarchal family (see Mooney 2011: 63).

Satleen is aware of these external expectations concerning her visual performance of identity and her responsibility to maintain her family's *izzat*, and seems to be willing to conform to them in situations where the Sikh community is present. But, like Kavita, she does so by incorporating creative acts of resistance through re-tailoring the definition of a modest dress according to her own taste, which has been influenced by the larger cultural context in which she grew up. Hence, for the first hour of the birthday party, Satleen was dressed in the type of 'bricolage'<sup>27</sup> outfit described above that she created by mixing elements from the different cultures of which she feels a part.

Later on, however, when the mostly female guests, together with the children, stand up to dance the popular *bhangra*, a traditional Punjabi dance style, Satleen suddenly disappears into the bathroom. A few minutes later she returns, and as I notice to my surprise, she has changed her outfit. A salwar kamiz and a chunni have replaced the leggings and tunic she wore before. When I ask her why she has changed her clothes, she explains that dancing *bhangra* without wearing a salwar kamiz would feel odd and strange for her. Again, we can notice how dress practices are often tightly related to bodily experiences. Satleen's choice to change her dress can be related to practical as well as to symbolic issues. When dancing the *bhangra*, Satleen considered it essential to wear a Punjabi outfit. Her change of clothes might have been motivated by a situational desire to fit in and identify with the other women who are dancing *bhangra*, or perhaps the way in which her body moves when dancing is accustomed to the particular feel of wearing the salwar kamiz.<sup>28</sup>

In sum, it could be argued that similarly to young Muslim women in Britain (Tarlo 2010: 99), young Sikh women such as Satleen and Kavita manage their appearance by accentuate and de-accentuating different aspects of their identities in different situations. These two young Sikh women negotiate their identities against the backdrop of expectations concerning

26 In the South Asian cultural context the responsibility to maintain a family's *izzat* rests with the individual members of a family. The responsibility of female family members is to uphold the honor of their families through displaying a modest behavior; while men are expected to make sure that their female relatives actually behave in a modest way (Ballard 1982: 5; see also Takhar 2005: 186-187; Ballard 2008: 66).

27 'Bricolage' is here understood as a creative act of re-arranging available objects in a novel way and thus giving them a new meaning (Lévi-Strauss 1966; see also Hebdige 1979).

28 Perhaps Satleen thinks like some British people who grew up with a South Asian background, that there is a 'fit between the rhythms in the clothes and the rhythms of the dance movements' (Bhachu 2004: 21).

their behaviours arising from their specific gendered positions. Eager to find a balance, they used clothing to fabricate a bricolage that speaks for their creative capacity to carve out new identity positions for themselves; a bricolage that incorporates and acknowledges the various cultural strands that inform their lives. By so doing, they push the prevailing definitions for how contemporary young Finnish and Sikh women may go about expressing their sense of self.

## 5 Religious and Cultural Sites

In my arrival story presented at the beginning of Chapter Two, I pointed out how the gurdwara buildings located on the outskirts of Yuba City are visible reminders of the presence of Sikhs in the town. Together with the 'ethnic' shops clustered outside the city centre, these religious buildings can be seen as a means by which Sikhs inscribe themselves in the landscape of their new home country. Like in the case of the gurdwara in Finland, Sikhs in California have invested huge efforts into bringing these religious sites alive. In addition to having created various kinds of religious places of worship, Sikhs in Yuba City and in Helsinki have also built in the course of time a great number of other sites of ephemeral or stable character that offer Sikhs living in these countries the chance to participate in cultural and religious practices. Further, as this chapter shows, these sites provide an important arena in which various kinds of identity-negotiations are being staged. Hence, in order to better understand how Sikhs negotiate their identities in reference to other Sikhs, non-Sikhs and across generations I take a closer look at different cultural and religious sites that have been crafted by Sikhs in Helsinki and Yuba City. I chose to use the following sites as a point of departure for my analysis: 1) religious places of worship in Helsinki 2) birthday parties, and 3) cultural organisations in both Helsinki as well as Yuba City 4) the Sikh pre-school, and 5) the Sikh parade in Yuba City. By investigating in more detail the practices carried out in these specific venues or in relation to them, I hope to shed more light on how Sikhs with a migration background carve out a place for themselves in the societies in which they reside.

### *(Contested) Religious Places of Worship in Helsinki*

In contrast to the case of Yuba City, a person walking through the district of Sörnäinen, in which the Sikh temple in Helsinki is being located, would have a hard time noticing the gurdwara. Despite its rather central location on a street with heavy city traffic, the exterior of the former office building, which was converted by a group of active Sikhs into a gurdwara in 2006, seems to melt in an unobtrusive manner into the facades of the buildings

that surround it. And those passing by or visiting would search in vain for a pole with the Sikh flag on top, called *nishan sahib*, outside the gurdwara due to the city's regulations concerning the usage of public space (see Hirvi 2010: 222ff.). Only a keen observer would notice how the Gurmukhi script and the khanda sign visually suggest the presence of Sikhs in this neighbourhood that otherwise is marked by a strong subcultural and multicultural urban flair.

In an earlier publication (Hirvi 2010) I have highlighted how this particular religious place of worship in Sörnäinen, which has been erected by the hard work and funds of Finnish Sikhs, can be seen to constitute a place where Sikhs in Finland engage in practices through which they seek to maintain and transmit their religious and cultural traditions. However, as I pointed out in my concluding thoughts (2010: 230), this applies only to those Sikhs who actually visit the gurdwara. Out of my informants, about ten seemed to visit the gurdwara in Helsinki on a rather regular basis; while seven Sikhs whom I had interviewed said that they would only visit the gurdwara once in a while. In contrast to those who visited the gurdwara more regularly and who had all immigrated to Finland as adults, the latter group consisted mostly of Sikhs who had been living in Finland since they were young. Rana, for instance, who is around twenty years old and who came to Finland as a toddler, explains that now that he is older he does not like to the gurdwara anymore. Partly because of a lack of time, and partly because it does not provide him with the spiritual experience he is looking for, as he explains. In the following, he elaborates why this is the case:

L And the temple, do you go there?

Rana [...] in my opinion, you do not need [to go to the gurdwara], or as my mum always says, it is important to go, of course. I mean I cannot say it is important to go there, it is always nice to go there, but it is not everything. I say God's name when I sneeze, when I start to eat or when I yawn. I say God's name, when I need help; I mention God's name, if I want to thank for something, I mention God's name, [...] I went [to the current gurdwara] a few times, and what I do not like is that the present youth goes there, and it seems it has turned more into a 'gossip cave' than a religious place. Back in the days when we went to the gurdwara people said that you get peace of mind, people found themselves, and also perhaps God, with their thoughts. But today, the few times I went there, the women have their own group there, and talk about dress and jewellery, and about upcoming festivals and past festivals, and the guys do not have the energy to listen to the *kirtan*, the songs there, and so they go to the kitchen to drink some tea and eat some cookies and tell some jokes and some even swear nowadays there, and this is very wrong in my opinion, all these things. So the people, when I see them and they ask, 'Why haven't you been to the gurdwara in a long time?' then in my opinion it doesn't matter whether I go to the gurdwara and join the chit-chat group [there] or rather sit at home and pray ten or fifteen minutes, because the place, the atmosphere and people make it sacred. Otherwise

it is only a building, right? We rented this place, and give it the name gurdwara. But we people make it a gurdwara, we create the atmosphere there.

In this account Rana criticises the behaviour of others, whom he identifies here as the 'present youth',<sup>1</sup> who in his point of view spoil the sacred atmosphere in the temple by performing practices like swearing, gossiping, and telling jokes. Instead of visiting the gurdwara on a regular basis he prefers a lifestyle in which he makes sure he keeps God in his thoughts throughout the day. As becomes clear later on in the interview, his mother played a significant role in teaching him the importance of remembering God at all times, a practice that in Sikhism is referred to as *simran*. In terms of negotiating identities, it is interesting to note how Rana argues, perhaps in response to the voice of his mother who says that 'it is important to go the gurdwara' and in response to those who ask why he does not visit the temple, that from his point of view visiting a gurdwara does not automatically make a person a 'good Sikh'.

What is important, according to Rana's understanding, is that a person incorporates the teachings of Sikhism and pays tribute to them in the practices of everyday life. For Rana, who visited in his childhood, amongst others sport halls that had been rented and converted into religious places of worship by his parents and other Sikhs in Helsinki for the duration of a Sunday afternoon, it is people who through their practice have the power to transform a place into a sacred space and render it meaningful in terms of religion. Likewise, it is people who through their practices can spoil the atmosphere in a temple and dispossess others of the possibility to have the spiritual experience they are looking for.

Others, such as Komal, who has been living in Finland since she was a young girl and who is now in her mid-thirties, explain that they do not like to go to the gurdwara in Sörnäinen as they try to stay away from what Sikhs commonly refer to as the 'gurdwara politics', in other words the question of who is in charge of the gurdwara and who has the power to decide what happens there. Many of the Sikhs to whom I talked in Yuba City and in Helsinki are well aware that the question of power and leadership is causing problems and frictions in many gurdwaras around the world. Komal establishes the global link between the gurdwaras when she says that now, since the Sikhs in Finland have their own gurdwara, 'it is exactly this thing, that there are certain people who want to decide things, and they do not want anybody else to get involved in these matters,' adding that 'it is like this in all the countries where they have a gurdwara.' While her latter statement could be read as a sign that brings to the fore a diasporic consciousness that

1 From the context it is not clear whether he refers to his own generation of young Sikhs or perhaps the latest wave of Sikh immigrants who arrived in Finland in the late 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Knowing him and his family's history it also might be that he just named this group in order to avoid blaming the elders of his own family who belong to the group of Sikhs who founded the temple in Sörnäinen and who are still actively involved in its activities.

links the experience of Sikhs to that of Sikhs living elsewhere in the world, her previous remark makes clear that the gurdwara in Finland constitutes a contested site.

What often seems to be at the heart of those gurdwara conflicts is the question of what practices Sikhs are supposed and allowed to perform at a Sikh temple. In Yuba City, for example, one debate was related to the question whether or not Sikhs are allowed to consume *langar* while being seated on chairs. This appears to be a question that recurs time and again in different gurdwaras around the world. In the case of the gurdwara in Finland the most recent dispute was related to the question of what kind of Sikhism the gurdwara in Sörnäinen wants to promote and how this should be reflected in the practices being carried out there. The debate attracted a great deal of attention in the global Sikh community when in 2009 a few male Sikh members of the Finnish gurdwara board made the controversial decision to change part of the *Ardas*, the Sikh prayer that is recited at the closing of congregational worship in gurdwaras (Myrvold 2007: 322–335). Further, they decided to ban the singing and recitation of compositions that derive from the *Dasam Granth*, the book that is attributed in whole or in parts to Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru.

The decision to implement the actions described above needs to be seen in the context of a larger debate concerning the authenticity of the *Dasam Granth* that has its historical roots in the Punjab but which now has taken on a strong transnational dimension. According to the faction to which the board members of the Sikh gurdwara in Finland belong, Guru Gobind Singh did not write the *Dasam Granth*. Based on this suspicion, that was further strengthened by visits from *kathavachaks* (professional preachers) from abroad, some members of the Finnish gurdwara board decided to ban the singing and recitation of compositions deriving from the *Dasam Granth* inside the gurdwara. This decision provoked a transnational reaction among Sikhs living around the globe that manifested itself in discussions carried out in online discussion forums. Also Sikhs in Finland, who felt that their voices were not heard in the gurdwara in Sörnäinen, turned to the Internet to express their differing opinions and seek comfort from like-minded Sikhs who in geographical terms were more distant but in ideological terms located much closer to them. Many of the Sikhs, who did not question the authenticity of the *Dasam Granth* and who saw it as an integral part of Sikhism, decided to stop attending the gurdwara.<sup>2</sup> (See Jacobsen *et al.* 2012.)

Some of those Sikhs who disagreed with the direction that the gurdwara in Sörnäinen was taking started to attend the congregational worship that a Sikh man has been arranging at least since 2008 on his private premises in Vantaa, a city near Helsinki. Initially this person had been involved in founding the gurdwara in Sörnäinen, as some of the temple's board members tell me. But due to diverging points of view with regard to how to run the gurdwara and what kinds of religious practices should be conducted

2 For a more detailed discussion of the *Dasam Granth* controversy, see Rinehart (2011), and for an analysis of how Sikh communities in the Nordic countries respond differently to the controversy see Jacobsen *et al.* (2012).

there, he separated from the Sörnäinen gurdwara to start his own weekly congregational worship in his spacious home. According to one of my informants, the gurdwara in Vantaa follows the tradition of Baba Vadbhag Singh.<sup>3</sup>

With reference to the splits that occurred over the years in the Sikh congregational community in Finland, it could be argued that religious places of worship not only provide an important setting for maintaining religious identities but also constitute a significant site for negotiating them. Further, as the controversy concerning the Dasam Granth has highlighted, the question of what kind of a religious identity should be practised at a gurdwara is not only negotiated amongst Sikhs on the local level but also on a transnational scale. Ultimately, such debates are also linked to the question of what kind of traditions Sikh parents would like to pass on to the future generations of Sikhs who are growing up in Finland.

Sanjit, for example, who had only recently migrated to Finland together with his wife, said that when he became a parent he started to look at the practices performed at the gurdwara in Sörnäinen in a more critical light, and he and his wife came to the conclusion that the gurdwara in Helsinki does not help to transmit the kinds of religious traditions they would like to pass on their child. Consequently, Sanjit and his wife stopped going to the gurdwara. Due to a lack of alternatives, they are now deprived of the opportunity to participate in congregational worship in Finland. Quite unhappy with this situation, they are now seriously thinking about the option of moving back to India or to another country where they could find a gurdwara that would match their expectations.

### *Birthday Parties and Bhangra*

Birthday parties, which Sikh families arrange for their children throughout the year, provide a significant fleeting site where Sikhs in Finland can gather as a community and celebrate their cultural traditions. Further, in the case of Helsinki as well as Yuba City, it became clear that these birthday parties often also provide important occasions for bringing together families that are spread around the globe. When I visit such a birthday party in Helsinki for the first time it is a bright Saturday morning in the middle of Finland's summer. Ravneet has invited me via a text message to her children's joint birthday party, which is arranged at a rented location in a neighbourhood of the metropolitan area of Helsinki.

I arrive by train half an hour before the event is officially scheduled to start. But the Indian understanding of time is different, as one lady explains to me later on, and one should seldom take the stated starting times of events literally. Consequently, the bulk of the guests arrive at the scene of the party about an hour 'late' from my point of view. Even the host, Ravneet, leaves the venue around the 'officially' announced starting time to change her

3 For more information on this particular tradition see Kristina Myrvold (2007: 439ff.)

clothes, only to return a couple of minutes after the first handful of guests has already entered the room. As in the cases of birthday parties arranged by Punjabis in the UK (Baumann 1992: 106; Nesbitt 2000: 98), in Finland, too, it is the Sikh parents and not their children who usually invite the birthday guests, many of whom are adults. This is a practice that differs from the protocol underlying Finnish birthday parties where children usually invite their classmates and friends, and the parents of those young guests do not themselves attend.

More and more people arrive and the rented hall fills with the shimmering bright colours of saris and salwar kamizes worn by the mostly female guests. Together with the children, there are approximately forty people. Besides me, there are five others, who do not have an Indian background. The only males present are young or teenage boys, and the birthday children's father only briefly enters the hall to participate in the cake ceremony. One of the guests explains that sometimes also men are invited to birthday parties, but then the hosts have to serve alcohol in addition to food, and that would make the arrangement of such festivities more costly. When the birthday in question is considered to be of special importance, some Sikh families decide to throw an even bigger party to which they invite relatives and friends from all over the world. One woman I met at the Finnish gurdwara told me that for her daughter's eighteenth birthday, her family organised a celebration in Helsinki to which they welcomed more than 200 guests.<sup>4</sup> People arrived from the UK, US and Canada.

Likewise, Sunita across the Atlantic tells me that for her recently celebrated twenty-first birthday her family had rented a large hall in Yuba City to throw a big party for her with more than two hundred guests who had travelled from the UK, Canada and India to attend the festivities. Thus, like weddings and funerals, birthday parties can be seen to play a crucial role in the lives of immigrants as they provide a venue for social gatherings through which ties between relatives and friends can be reaffirmed and strengthened (see also Chapter Six). Further, it can be argued that such events are significant because they make visible, for parents and children alike, the extent and character of a transnational extended kin group that is otherwise elusive in nature (see also Bryceson and Vuorela 2002: 3).

In a similar vein, I would argue that birthday parties like those organised by Ravneet are also important in that they help to briefly concretise the otherwise imagined Sikh community in Finland. As in the case of the gurdwara (see Hirvi 2010: 229), these birthday parties provide Sikh youth in Finland with an event-based site that offers them a taste of the concrete 'material' of which cultural traditions are made. Food is but one example of this. Other examples are Indian apparel or the spoken Punjabi and Hindi languages that are present at these social gatherings. A fourth example can be found in the practice of bhangra and *giddah*, which are dance styles that have their roots in the Punjab. Traditionally, *giddah* has been the dance for

4 Another Sikh boy told me in an interview that he was planning to celebrate his eighteenth birthday party in India, because there it is possible to rent even bigger halls for this purpose for less money than in Finland.

women and bhangra the dance performed by men (Mooney 2008: 110). But especially among young Sikh women in Yuba City and Helsinki it seems that bhangra is nowadays more popular than giddah. The following excerpt taken from a group interview I conducted with four teenage girls at one of Yuba City's high schools supports this argument:

- Laura           And concerning the dances, do you do both, bhangra and giddah?  
Geet            We do not do giddah, just bhangra.  
Laura           So you are not so much into that?  
Kareen         It is just that bhangra, anyone can do it, but giddah is much  
                  more like, it is more structures, and it is mostly for girls.  
Laura           So you personally like the bhangra better?  
(All)           Yeah!

The typical beats of the music to which bhangra is danced seem to have a strong power of attraction for most Sikhs I met, independent of age or gender. Kundan, who migrated to Yuba City together with his family when he was a toddler, and who is now in his forties, describes the magic of bhangra in the following way: 'It is the Indian beat, the bhangra beat. Whether you are a dancer or not, as soon as the drums start beating, guess what? As soon as the beat starts you want to get up and start dancing.' And this is indeed what seems to happen the moment bhangra music is played at the socio-cultural gatherings of Sikhs in both Yuba City and Helsinki. While in Helsinki it is mostly birthday parties that provide a setting for where to engage on a collective level in the performance of bhangra, in Yuba City it seems to be especially wedding receptions that constitute popular sites for expressing one's passion for dance, as Noor, who has been growing up in Yuba City and who is now in her thirties, highlights:

- Laura           Where did you initiate your interest in bhangra?  
Noor            At parties, at home, dancing at these parties.  
Laura           It is such a strong thing.  
Noor            The drums, and the beat, it is so alive, and Punjabis are very,  
                  very passionate people and it is a good way to get all this  
                  energy out. I mean there is always a fight at a wedding  
                  reception. But, I mean, so it is a good way to get [the passion/  
                  energy] out of the system. Oh dancing is so much fun, I love  
                  it! If you go to a wedding reception, it is almost like people  
                  are waiting and waiting when the couple comes in – finally,  
                  and you [say] 'Thank God', and then they do the slow dance  
                  and you are [thinking about the bridal couple] 'Hurry up, get  
                  a cake', and as soon as the music starts it is like 'Boom!'

In the context of Finland, it seems that especially for Sikh women, the birthday parties without men are welcome opportunities to live out their passion for this particular dance style. At Ravneet's party, the awaited dance segment starts soon after the guests have finished eating. Someone presses the play button on the portable CD player and the bhangra beat, loud and

demanding attention, starts to fill the air. Girls and women between the ages of five and forty get up and start dancing. In my previously agreed-on position as the event's cameraperson I decide to climb on a chair to get a better angle for videotaping. From this vantage point, the women and girls on the dance floor with their bright dresses become a mosaic-like sea of spinning and twirling colours. Arms and legs move up and down in time to the beat that dominates the room's acoustics. Many of the faces I see are glowing with joy and happiness. While the women seemed keen to test and display their latest dance moves that they have often copied from Bollywood movies, younger girls eagerly imitate their seniors.

Some of the younger boys, too, who are huddled together as a group with their hands deeply buried in their trouser pocket, loitering on the edge of the dance floor, are not able to keep from nodding their heads in time with the music. When I asked one of the boys why he and his friends were not joining their female friends and relatives on the dance floor, he gave me an explanation that revealed his knowledge concerning gender-related expectations related to this particular cultural practice: 'I dance with the men, now there are only the women dancing. We [men] do not move our feet so much as the women when we dance, we move more with our arms.'<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, at the various functions I attended both in Helsinki and Yuba City, I never saw men and women dancing together on the dance floor. Instead, they danced in their own small same-gender groups that consisted of relatives and friends. At a cultural event organised in Finland, I even saw a dance floor that had been divided in half with the help of wooden benches. One half was reserved for men and the other for women, thus visually emphasising and communicating the gender-based separation. When a small girl made the attempt to climb over this 'wall' to join the group of dancing men that perhaps included her father, she was immediately stopped and sent back to the women's side while a boy of a similar age was allowed to enter the male landscape where he was lifted up high to dance in one of the men's arms.

Young Sikh men and women not only learn the rules and dance moves for how to dance bhangra by imitating their seniors but also by watching and practising dance moves that they learn from online video clips. In the following account Rana, who grew up in Finland and is now in his twenties, illustrates this. At the same time, Rana's account makes clear how important he considered it to be able to dance bhangra at his own birthday party in which his relatives and friends from all over the world were going to participate.

Laura	And what about bhangra, can you dance it?
Rana	Well, this is funny. I turned sixteen, and my dad asked me if we should have a big party, and the only reason why I said to my dad 'no' at that time was that I knew I'd have to dance bhangra, and I can't do it. So I said, 'No dad.' And then when I turned eighteen, my dad did not ask me anymore, but arranged

5 Field notes Laura Hirvi (July 4, 2009).

a party. 'Only once in my life is my son turning eighteen, and my son is becoming a man, so let's have a party,' and I was anxious for a long time [thinking], 'What if I have to dance there?' and after all the whole party was videotaped, and I was very anxious, 'Now I embarrass myself.' So two days before my party, I went online to YouTube, I wrote 'Bhangra', and I practised the bhangra moves two days before [the party]. I practised those moves, and I remember, when I came to the party, my mother's sister who lives in England was there at that time as well, she came to the party, and I still remember how my aunt was like, 'Oh my god, where did your son, although he had been living in Finland all the time, where did he learn to dance bhangra so well?' So I learned it in two days.

To summarise, it can be said that for Sikh immigrants living in Finland, birthday parties are significant temporary events that provide a performative space to engage in practices through which to maintain cultural identities and through which to impart knowledge concerning cultural traditions to the next generations. But they also can be seen to provide a performative space in which the body of cultural traditions is interpreted anew and given a new twist, as the analysis of a young Sikh woman's dressing practice towards the end of the previous chapter suggests. In contrast to the experience of Sikhs in Yuba City, where the percentage of Sikhs in the population is rather high and the Sikh culture and religion are omnipresent on a daily level, it can be argued that for young Sikhs in Helsinki these birthday parties are of even greater significance as they provide the only site outside the home, the gurdwara and occasionally arranged cultural festivals where Sikh cultural traditions gain a 'visible' and concrete character. Further, with regard to both Helsinki and Yuba City, it can be concluded that birthday parties often provide an occasion for bringing together families that are spread around the globe.

### *Cultural Organisations*

According to sociologist Miikka Pyykkönen (2007: 121), who has done research on immigrant associations in two Finnish cities, cultural organisations are important for immigrants in so far as they provide sanctioned occasions for periodic gatherings in which immigrants as well as their descendants can meet to practice their cultural traditions (see also Bruneau 2010: 37). Similarly to religious places of worship, they also might provide a platform where identities are being re-negotiated, gaining a new twist or being endowed with a new layer of meaning. Further, many of these organisations often uphold practices through which they seek to link immigrants and their children to cultural traditions, while at the same time some immigrant organisations also might promote practices that further the process through which their members become part of the larger societies they live in (Pyykkönen 2007: 121).

Also in the context of Helsinki and Yuba City, it became clear that voluntary cultural organisations produced a number of temporary sites that were meaningful for the process through which Sikh identities are being constructed and moulded. The locations of these events vary and they may take place in schools that have been rented for this purpose, or in restaurants, which in the case of Sikhs in Finland are often owned by one of the organisers. Since the locations of these particular activities change, it is crucial that they are properly advertised in advance. To do so, organisers make extended use of their personal networks, spreading the word via text messages, emails and more recently also with the help of social media. For example, the president of the Indian Cultural Club Finland, an organisation that has formally existed since January 2005,<sup>6</sup> is a Sikh and has been sending me email invitations to the celebrations for *Diwali*. *Diwali* is an important holiday for Indians and Sikhs celebrate it to commemorate when Guru Hargobind, their sixth Guru, was released from prison in 1619. The *Diwali* festivities in Finland have taken place both in restaurants and in schools, and although in 2009 the majority of participants seemed to consist of Punjabis, the events are targeted towards the entire Indian community living in the Helsinki area, irrespective of regional or religious background.

More recently one of the male Sikhs whom I interviewed for this research in Helsinki founded, together with his friends, the Punjab Cultural Society (PCS) Finland, which focuses on serving the interests of Punjabis living in Finland.<sup>7</sup> The society's first event, Classical Desi Night,<sup>8</sup> was arranged in October 2010 in cooperation with NICE (North Indian Cultural Entertainment) from Sweden, among other organisations. The show hosted different artists who belonged to the Punjabi Virsa Society India that seeks to increase awareness of Punjab heritage (called *virsa* in Punjabi).<sup>9</sup> The artists came all the way from India, which not only gave the organisation but also the show as such a strong transnational character. Traditional Punjabi dance acts and musical performances were part of the programme and were financed to a significant extent by the families involved in the organisation of the festivities.

Interestingly, one of the visitors of this event was Mikael Jungner, who was at that time the party secretary of the Social Democratic Party in Finland. His presence was most likely no coincidence, but a result of his connection to Ranbir Sodhi, who was elected as a member of the Social Democratic Party as the only foreign-born member of the Vantaa City Council in 2008,

6 [yhdistysrekisteri.prh.fi/ryhaku.htx?kieli=1&hakuraja=0&nimi=Indian+Cultural+Club+Finland&kotipaikka=&ensrek=&viimrek=&osoite=&evlu=&orto=&vapaa=&sb\\_haku=Hae](http://yhdistysrekisteri.prh.fi/ryhaku.htx?kieli=1&hakuraja=0&nimi=Indian+Cultural+Club+Finland&kotipaikka=&ensrek=&viimrek=&osoite=&evlu=&orto=&vapaa=&sb_haku=Hae), accessed December 20, 2010.

7 Registered since October 6, 2010, [yhdistysrekisteri.prh.fi/ryhaku.htx?kieli=1&hakuraja=0&nimi=Punjab+Cultural+Society+&kotipaikka=&ensrek=&viimrek=&osoite=&evlu=&orto=&vapaa=&sb\\_haku=Hae](http://yhdistysrekisteri.prh.fi/ryhaku.htx?kieli=1&hakuraja=0&nimi=Punjab+Cultural+Society+&kotipaikka=&ensrek=&viimrek=&osoite=&evlu=&orto=&vapaa=&sb_haku=Hae), accessed December 20, 2010.

8 *Desi* refers to something or someone who is from the Indian subcontinent.

9 [www.pvs0091.com/system/visa.asp?HID=1230&FID=1083&HSID=22816](http://www.pvs0091.com/system/visa.asp?HID=1230&FID=1083&HSID=22816), accessed December 13, 2010.

and was re-elected in 2012.<sup>10</sup> As such, it could be argued that the Classical Desi Night also functioned as an event to stage and communicate cultural traditions to a Sikh as well as non-Sikh audience.

Also in Yuba City one can find an active cultural organisation mostly ran by Sikhs who had established the Punjabi American Heritage Society (PAHS) in 1993, with the intention amongst others of helping transmit cultural traditions to young Sikhs who are growing up outside Punjab.<sup>11</sup> Apart from spreading knowledge concerning the Punjabi culture among American-born Punjabis, PAHS also seeks to 'bring awareness' to other Americans, as they state on their website.<sup>12</sup> In order to achieve its goals, the society has been involved in organising various events such as public seminars. In addition, PAHS organises annually in May the Punjabi American Festival, which in 2010 took place for the sixteenth time. That year, for the first time, the festival included – besides dance and singing performances – a Mr and Miss Punjabi American Talent contest, which was 'open to individuals under the age of 25, who have lived in the US for more than two years.'<sup>13</sup> In addition to their performances, participants in this competition were asked to give a speech on the topic 'Why I am proud of my roots.' According to Hardit, who is one of the organisers of this annual *mela* (gathering) as Sikhs refer to it, the event has been attracting in the past years not only Punjabis, but also members of the mainstream community.

In Yuba City, too, young Sikhs, who have been growing up in California, are actively involved in associations that organise events where members can celebrate cultural and religious traditions and share them with their non-Sikh peers. During a group interview I conducted with four girls at one of Yuba City's high schools, they told me about the Punjabi American Club that had been founded at their school in 2001 on the initiative of a Punjabi student. In 2008, the club had an estimated 130 members, the majority of whom were Punjabi Sikhs. As the girls explained to me, the club participates among other things each year in the school's solidarity week during which different clubs are given the opportunity to present themselves to fellow students, and 'do their cultural thing on that day', as one of the girls put

10 The motivation to become politically involved arose out of Ranbir Sodhi's personal contacts with local politicians, who frequented his restaurant at lunchtime. They asked him to run in the upcoming city council elections and he decided to give it a try. With the help of a dynamic election campaign and the support of a well designed homepage, he succeeded in getting elected at his very first try. In 2011, he ran as a candidate of the Social Democratic Party in the Finnish parliament elections but was not elected. Ranbir is also one of the founding members of the local gurdwara, and is still a very active member of its organisation committee. It appears that in Ranbir's case his active participation in the governance of the temple has supported the development of his civic skills (see Foley and Hoge 2007: 152; see also Putnam 2000: 66), which he is now able to apply to his career as a politician.

11 Already at the time when La Brack (1988:299ff.) conducted his study on Sikhs in Yuba City, there were two cultural organizations which arranged social activities and 'desired to promote an understanding of Indian culture by the larger society.'

12 [www.punjabheritage.org/](http://www.punjabheritage.org/), accessed December 13, 2010.

13 [www.punjabheritage.org/2010/03/26/2010-mr-and-miss-punjabi-american-competition.enter-to-win-a-1000-scholarship/](http://www.punjabheritage.org/2010/03/26/2010-mr-and-miss-punjabi-american-competition.enter-to-win-a-1000-scholarship/), accessed December 13, 2010.

it. For the Punjabi American club members this means that they organise a fashion show in which they display their understanding of traditional Punjabi outfits. The girls usually wear a *salwar kamiz* and the boys might be dressed in a *kurta pajama* (long shirt worn with a pair of loose trousers). Some of the male participants also might wear a turban. During the day they also sell some Indian food, like *samosas*. And sometimes they invite DJs who play some bhangra music during lunch breaks to which people can dance. Through arranging these kinds of events, it could be argued that the members of the Punjabi American Club visually seek to stage their presence in school, while at the same time celebrating their cultural traditions with their Sikh as well as non-Sikh peers within the context of Yuba City's larger cultural landscape in which they seek to position themselves.

### *Yuba City's Sikh Pre-School*

One of Yuba City's most impressive visual markers of the Sikhs' presence in town is the gurdwara located on Tierra Buena Road. It is one of four Sikh temples in Yuba City and is located on the city's western outskirts, where farmland, orchards and a few residential buildings surround it. Further down the road, one can also find a mosque and at the other end of the street a church. Sikhs funded the building of the gurdwara on Tierra Buena Road in the local community. As in the case of the gurdwara in Finland, the temple came into being through the collaborative efforts of a few Sikh families who actively supported the enterprise. One family donated the land on which to build the temple, while others helped to raise capital needed for erecting the actual building. The project was partly financed by private funding, and partly with the help of a loan taken from the local bank (La Brack 1988: 304). As Bruce La Brack (1988: 304) aptly puts it, the style of the temple falls 'somewhere between Indo-Persian and contemporary multi-purpose, [and] is striking when viewed in the context of a Californian agricultural setting'. Assuming that the exterior of a religious building sends out a message to its surroundings,<sup>14</sup> I argue that like churches and synagogues erected by European immigrants in America in earlier periods, purpose-built Sikh temples erected on American soil also visibly reflect the establishment of a religious community (cf. Alba *et al.* 2009: 6).

Just behind the main building of the gurdwara at Tierra Buena Road, one can find the building that accommodates the Guru Ram Das Khalsa Pre-school.<sup>15</sup> During my period of fieldwork, I worked as a volunteer at the

14 See Baumann and Tuner-Zanetti 2008: 33.

15 Some have criticized the preschool for being too close to the gurdwara, not only in physical terms but also in terms of being too closely related to the Tierra Buena road gurdwara management board. The temple is 'full of politics', as one of my informants put it, and therefore he would like to see the pre-school become more independent of the gurdwara, by moving it to a separate site. In the course of this fieldwork there was a plot on Lincoln road under discussion, but the idea was abandoned after it became clear that there were plans to build a shopping mall in that area. The location of the preschool has remained unchanged up to present day.

school once or twice a week. The idea of offering my help came to me after I had visited the pre-school to interview the principal. We agreed that I would come and help the staff on Tuesdays when they needed help the most, as this was the day that the preschool would take the children to the temple and offer them food from the gurdwara's kitchen. In order to announce my presence at the preschool, I posted a description of my project on the school's notice board, and introduced myself as a researcher to the parents when they dropped off their children or brought them to school. Some of the parents also agreed to be interviewed for this study. The preschool had been started on the initiative of four families in 1997. According to two of the founding members, Satwinder and his wife, who now both are in their sixties, the motivation to start this project was the desire to overcome the generational gap between immigrant parents and their children who had grown up in the United States. According to Satwinder, parents and children were disconnected:

[...] The reason for that disconnect was that most people who came here earlier were not very educated and after coming here, they went more into establishing themselves [...] they had to work hard, they spent fourteen hours working on the farm or in the warehouses, they did not have much time for the kids. Kids went to school and came back, so there was not much connection there. Life was hard, we do not blame them. And the facilities, temples, were just for religious ceremonies, but not for imparting the Sikh religion to the kids. And when we came, me and my wife, we thought there is a disconnect there, we need to do something for that, so that is why we got together [...].

In other words, the pre-school was founded out of a perceived need to pass on religious and cultural traditions in a more structured and systematic manner to those children who were growing up far from the country of their parents' origin. Tajender, who was also active in founding the pre-school and who is now in his mid-forties, tells me that they went to Canada in order to adopt the model for their school from Sikh educational establishments existing there. It is interesting to note how, in the following excerpt, Tajender positions Sikhs in America on an imaginary developmental timeline in relation to Sikhs in Canada on the one hand, and Sikhs in Europe (except the United Kingdom) on the other:

- |          |  |
|----------|--|
| Tajender | Yes, we travelled to Canada, they have a huge Khalsa school, it goes up to High school, and then it has about 2,000 students, huge library with Sikh literature. Vancouver is further along than America. It is like America, [it] is much further along than Sikhs in Europe except for England, they have a Khalsa credit union and Khalsa school and so on. |
| Laura    | So you took model from that school?  |
| Tajender | We tried, but we still haven't the numbers like they have. It did not really have the success I wished it would have. It hasn't grown any since the ten years it has been open. Probably some of the blame goes to the gurdwara for not putting too much   |

- effort into it, and some goes to the parents [for] thinking, 'You know, we do not want our kids to become gurdwara preachers, we want our kids to be...'
- Laura American kids?
- Tajender American kids: 'We want our kids to speak English, not like us with broken English, with an accent, we want them to be perfect American kids, they learn our language anyway', so that is what they are reasoning. So with a 10,000 population you only see a few there. It is really a good set up, and they learn all the things what they learn at other pre-schools. In addition to that, they learn about our religion and culture and they learn the language.

Tajender seems disappointed that the educational institution he helped to found has not been able to enlarge its activities, and blames this lack of growth to some extent on Sikh parents, who according to him seem to find it more important that their kids become 'proper' Americans. Yet although the pre-school has not enlarged its activities, its capacities were in full use at the time I conducted my fieldwork there in 2008. About thirty children were enrolled in the school, and all of them had a Sikh background. As the principal of the pre-school emphasised in the interview I conducted with her, children from other religious backgrounds as well are welcome at the school. So far, however, there has been no success in recruiting any, which might be explained by the school's close physical proximity to the Sikh temple that may alienate non-Sikh families. In addition to the principal, three other female staff members were employed at the school at the time of my research. While two of them were Sikhs, who, like the principal grew up in India and migrated to Yuba City as adults, the third teacher had a Mexican background that became evident when she spoke Spanish with her husband and daughter on the phone.

To enter the preschool building, one must first walk through a small fenced playground. Once inside the entrance hall, where children leave their belongings in small boxes marked with their names, a patchwork of signs posted on the wall gives the visitor a colourful welcome. Next to a number of official certificates, announcements and letters written in English there is a poster with a big khanda sign hanging in the left corner of the parents' board. At the bottom of the board one finds a text written in Gurmukhi, the script in which the Guru Granth Sahib is written.

The visually displayed bricolage of cultural and religious symbols continues also in the dining room and classroom. There, one can see numerous posters that help students to learn the English as well as the Punjabi alphabet, and on the walls one can spot pictures with religious content. This visual impression is also reflected in the practices that are performed at the pre-school. The types of activities that I observed during my stay there both assisted in the transmission of Sikh cultural traditions and incorporated elements of the larger cultural context in which the Sikh pre-school is embedded. Punjabi, English, and some Spanish were taught to the children; children visited the gurdwara and consumed traditional Indian food. Children also participated

in the annual Sikh parade, sang religious hymns, and organised a Christmas and Halloween Party.

During the pre-school's annually organised Christmas party, the father of one of the enrolled children explained in a conversation why he and his wife decided to send their children to the Khalsa pre-school. According to him, his wife and he both feel more comfortable talking English, as both of them grew up in an English-speaking country. But although both of them also speak and understand Punjabi quite well, they do not use it for communicating with each other or with the children. Hence, Punjabi language skills are not transmitted within their family. Realising this, he and his wife decided to send their children to the Khalsa pre-school so they could learn the language as well as the culture of their ancestors, while also gaining deeper insights into the religion their parents want them to learn to respect.

As indicated above, the pre-school does indeed support a wide range of practices through which enrolled children are made familiar with the Sikh religion and the Punjabi culture and language. The Punjabi-speaking teachers at the pre-school, for example, are asked to speak Punjabi with the children as often as possible. However, sometimes, as one of the teachers pointed out, she mixes in some English words and sentences, when she has the impression that the children would not otherwise understand her. Part of the weekly schedule is to practise the Punjabi alphabet. While the children are sitting on the floor, one of the teachers indicates with a stick on a poster the letters they are supposed to pronounce. At those moments, the room is filled with the sound of children's voices jointly reciting 'Uraa, airaa, eeree...', familiar to every student of the Punjabi language. Also, colours and numbers are practised in Punjabi. Once in a while, the children also watch a DVD with a Punjabi cartoon that has been especially produced for an audience of children raised in an English-speaking country who wish to learn Punjabi. Halfway through the movie, the popular bhangra<sup>16</sup> beat starts up and suddenly all of the children get up and start to dance enthusiastically, using the traditional moves they seem very familiar with. As one of the teachers explained, to stage this self-invented ritual has become essential for the children when watching this particular DVD. The children's ritual can be seen to highlight the strong appeal of this particular music and dance style, which I also observed on numerous other occasions in the course of my fieldwork, both in Helsinki and in Yuba City (see Chapter Five).

For lunch, children usually bring their own food which, following the practice maintained by Sikh temples, must be vegetarian. Some children bring roti or *parantha* (both are types of Indian bread), others perhaps a slice of cheese pizza or a sandwich with peanut butter and jam, reflecting the food traditions of both their cultural worlds. But on Tuesdays, children do not have to bring their own lunch, since this day is set aside as the pre-school's 'langar day'. This means that all children first pay a visit to the adjacent Dasmesh hall, which is the gurdwara's smaller prayer hall, before receiving their free lunch from the gurdwara's kitchen.

16 In the context of this study, used to refer to a popular Punjabi music and dance style.

The small excursion to the Dashmesh hall begins with the children's heads being covered with a small kerchief in order to show respect to the Guru Granth Sahib inside the temple. With their heads covered in this way, half of the group walks across the small backyard over to the prayer hall. Once inside, they form a line. Now they have to practise one at a time how to show respect to the Guru Granth Sahib by doing *mattha tek*, which means kneeling or prostrating oneself and touching the floor with one's brow (mattha) out of humility and deference to the Guru Granth Sahib (Nesbitt 2000: 80). Having done this, the children go to sit next to each other facing the platform on which the holy book resides. They wait for the teachers to distribute some sweets to them. After the second group has gone through the same procedure and has returned to the pre-school building, the children sit down at the tables and wait to be served the food from the gurdwara's common kitchen that often consists of Indian bread, lentils (dal), vegetables (*sabzi*), curd and some sweet dessert. While some children eat their food with a spoon, others are able to skilfully eat their food with their hands following the traditional Indian style.

The 'langar day' is not the only time that children carry out religious practices in the company of their fellow pre-school students and under the guidance of their teachers. They also have this opportunity when they are invited by the gurdwara committee to perform shabads during the celebrations of the *sangrand* (first day of each month in the Indian solar calendar). For this purpose, the children sit down on the carpeted floor while the teacher asks them to recite the hymn they must practise. During the rehearsal, the teacher corrects the way in which they hold their hands and helps them out when they forget words. The children's families are also expected to participate in the organisation of the sangrand by helping out in the kitchen as a form of *seva* (selfless service). Mostly, it is female members of the family who meet around noon in the gurdwara's kitchen to prepare the food that will be consumed during the sangrand celebrations in the evening.

On one occasion, I had the chance to participate in these preparations. When I entered the gurdwara's kitchen through the backdoor, three gigantic cooking pots welcomed me. The female cook employed at the gurdwara stirred the ingredients in one of the pots with the occasional help of her husband. Together with three other women, I was assigned the task of cutting tomatoes and onions. While we stood around the table, one mother who was about my age and with whom I had earlier talked about her life in Yuba City suddenly began to sing in a beautiful voice a shabad, and Punjabi lyrics filled the air. Soon, others joined in and together the women's singing created a very intimate atmosphere in the facilities of the gurdwara's kitchen.

Some moments later, I joined the other women in making rotis in what could be described as a well-organised chain whose final product was the ready-to-eat Indian bread. My assigned task was to make small dough balls which the woman next to me in line then rolled out into a flat circle, to be baked by a third person before finally being coated with a layer of *ghi* (clarified butter). The dough had been prepared beforehand by the mother and grandmother of one of the pre-school children. Lacking experience, I had a hard time forming the dough balls in the right size, and my limited skills

evoked friendly laughter and resulted in my being given gentle instructions by the women standing around the table. Soon, the woman with the beautiful voice began singing again and before long she was accompanied by others, young and old alike.

By singing together in the kitchen of a gurdwara located on Californian soil, these women crafted a unique landscape of sound while at the same time engaging in the act of expressing their ethno-religious identities. Through their collective singing and preparing of food, these women created a strong feeling of togetherness and comfort that literally brought goose bumps to my skin. Standing there, I felt privileged to be allowed to participate and witness the events unfolding around me. Like anthropologist Laura Assmuth (1997: 259) in her participant observation of women baking bread in Italy, I was impressed and attracted by the 'jovial atmosphere' of this food preparation session. I would argue that the joint preparation of the evening's langar, accompanied by sporadic acts of singing, constituted an important moment that brought to the fore in a vivid manner the practices that support the process through which immigrants maintain their cultural and religious identities. With reference to the pre-school, events such as these suggest that activities involving the pre-school play a crucial role in making the children attending it more familiar with their heritage, and in addition encourage other members of the family to become or remain actively involved in the Sikh temple.

In addition to providing a venue that enables the passing on of cultural traditions to younger generations, the pre-school also hosts and enacts a variety of practices that originate from the more 'mainstream' cultural context surrounding it. Teaching English alongside Punjabi is a concrete example of this, as are the school's efforts to give children instruction in basic Spanish skills. Santokh and his wife, for example, consider it important that their child becomes familiar with both Punjabi and English and think that the Sikh pre-school is meeting their needs in an adequate and balanced manner, as the following interview excerpt highlights:

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| Santokh | [...] in the morning they have a Punjabi class, and after the break they have an English class, so we think both are equally important. Some of my friends here, they actually sent their kids to India to go to school. <sup>17</sup> |
| Laura   | Ok, they sent them to India?   |
| Santokh | Yeah, and they are actually learning Punjabi and how to read   |

17 Indeed, I heard of some cases in which parents decided to send their children to India for schooling. But like Santokh, many other Sikhs living in Yuba City consider this an extreme action to take even if they hope that their children would not drift too far away from their parent's cultural and religious heritage. In this regard, some parents welcome the education offered by the Sikh pre-school in Yuba City. Similarly, all the Sikhs I talked to appreciate that nowadays, Yuba City's schools and colleges offer Punjabi language classes as part of their curriculum, and they encourage their children to take part in these classes. Balveer, for example, says that once his child goes to high school, he will tell him, 'Look, I do not care what classes you have to take for your records and stuff, but Punjabi is a must!'



Women making roti in a Sikh temple in Yuba City.

- Laura                   the Guru Granth Sahib and do kirtan and all that stuff, but...  
 They sent them to this Sikh boarding school?  
 Santokh               Yeah, but I kind of feel it is equally important, like when  
 they come back here, after so many years, they lose some  
 gap [sic], you know. They come back, their speaking changes  
 in a weird way, and they also have an accent problem so they  
 are not fully fluent in English, so I kind of wanted something  
 that is equally, so this was perfect, because [our child] can learn  
 Punjabi at the same time [that he] is learning ABC. Right  
 now [our child] is doing a really good job speaking both  
 languages pretty fluently without having any accent.

In addition to language, the impact of the larger cultural context on the preschool's activities is evident, for example, in the celebrations of Halloween at the end of October, and Christmas – as a cultural event free of any religious connotation – in December, for example. For the Halloween party, the preschool is decorated accordingly, and many children arrive on the day of the party wearing a costume. Looking around, I see a room filled with little princesses, soldiers, witches, pirates, policemen and pumpkin queens, who are all running around and lining up for pictures. The variety of food brought by the parents, following the typical American potluck system, is as diverse as the costumes. Entering the kitchen I see a table that is laid with a patchwork of different foods, such as sodas, tortillas, ice cream, sandwiches, pasta salad, bean-dip, fruit salad, a bowl of rice and *khir* (Indian milk dessert).

The annual Christmas party can be seen as another example of how elements of the larger cultural context have been incorporated into the preschool's seasonal activity schedule. That day, the room is decorated with a small Christmas tree and the parents have been invited to witness how their children give Santa Claus a big hug after having received a present from him. Once all the gifts have been distributed, the children receive permission to open them and the sound of ripping paper and children's voices exclaiming

in excitement fills the air. When I ask one of the teachers why the preschool celebrates Christmas, she explains that ‘we live here, so we should orient ourselves towards what they do.’<sup>18</sup> Following anthropologist Gerd Baumann’s (1992: 102–105) reading of Christmas rituals as celebrated by Punjabis in a suburb of London, it could be suggested that the pre-school’s decision to participate in the celebration of secular rituals related to Christmas reflects the manner in which the school seeks to negotiate its position in relation to ‘others’. Depending on the situation, these ‘others’ can be family members, members of the Sikh community or of the larger community, the latter of which can be defined as the ‘invisible Others’ (see Baumann 1992) for whom the ritual practices – free from their religious connotations – are being performed.

As my ethnographic fieldwork suggests, indeed not only the preschool but also Sikh families in Yuba City as well as in Helsinki celebrate Christmas, although not for religious reasons.<sup>19</sup> Sikh parents may decide to perform such rituals for the sake of their children so that they do not feel left out of a tradition enjoyed and participated in by most of their peers in California. Sajan, for example, explains that his grandparents used to celebrate Christmas mostly for the sake of his father and his father’s sister’s who both grew up in Yuba City. In his own words, his family ‘adapted to it a bit, they just kind of went along with it’. Nowadays, his family gets together at Christmas, not to go to church but for the holiday spirit, as he continues to explain, and they have also started to participate in the tradition of buying and decorating a Christmas tree. That the practice of celebrating Christmas, and especially the custom of giving gifts, quickly becomes a meaningful tradition in the lives of Sikh children growing up in America is well highlighted in the following account in which Balveer, who is now in his forties, vividly and in a humorous manner recalls memories from his childhood. Together with his grandparents, parents, uncles and siblings, he once visited India during a Christmas break:

We were there during Christmas vacation, and yeah, I mean I am a Sikh, but at the same time we respect other religions and we celebrate Christmas [...]. So just being there at the age of four, knowing that you are not going to have Christmas, it was hard for me. I ran downstairs to my grandparents, ‘*Mata* [mum], daddy! Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas’ and I think she gave me a *laddu* [Indian sweet], or something, you know, that sweet candy, and I started crying and crying, and they were like, ‘What is Christmas? Every day is Christmas! You should be happy for what you got, what the Guru has given you.’ But at that age I was devastated, my parents could not shut us kids up, we were devastated that we could not celebrate Christmas there. I remember this, they took us to, it was just a couple of days before my fifth birthday, but I remember it, they took us to the *sunyara*, to the goldsmith, to buy a gold kara [bracelet] and necklace and stuff, at that age, I was like, it was... Even though they say that a gift is a gift you should appreciate, but it was Christmas. What are these? You want toys!

18 Field notes Laura Hirvi (October 28, 2008).

19 Similar to the Sikhs in the UK (see Baumann 1992; Nesbitt 2004).

He continues to explain that ‘being born and raised here, you grow up with those vacations’, and today he celebrates them all with his children, because ‘kids really enjoy’ them. Similarly to the explanation given by the pre-school teacher quoted above, Balveer says that he is of the opinion that ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do’. But although Balveer might follow the practices related to the larger cultural context in which he grew up, he does not do so by simply adopting them wholesale. Instead, he engages in active reinterpretation through which he seeks to make such practices meaningful and harmonic within the larger cultural context of the Sikh religion. He does so by incorporating the celebration of Christmas into a religious framework. As he says, for him the ‘thing about the Sikh religion is [that] we respect other religions, we believe that there is one God, there is one universal God’ and it does not matter who ‘put you on the path, because we are [all] just trying to get on the same path’. Raveena, who like Balveer has been growing up outside Punjab and who is also in her forties, seems to agree with this way of looking at things:

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| Laura   | You follow the American traditions?  |
| Raveena | Absolutely, absolutely.  |
| Laura   | Like Christmas?  |
| Raveena | Christmas, yeah. My son is saying, ‘Mum, we are not Christians’ and I say ‘[Akaar], we live in a Christian nation, and I love Christmas and there is only one God’ and he goes, ‘OK’ |

Like Balveer, Raveena explains that from her point of view, people need to return to religion in the wider sense, instead of maintaining a strict fundamentalist form of religion. After all, she says, ‘religion is supposed to help people, it is supposed to be therapeutic, and not to divide people.’ A similar thought is also reflected in Jaipreet’s account of why he and his wife chose, after some deliberation, to put their children in one of Yuba City’s non-Sikh preschools. As Jaipreet, who was born and raised in Yuba City and who is now in his forties, put it, in the pre-school that he and his wife chose for their children ‘they emphasise the concept of God, but in a non-denominational way’, which he found ‘quite refreshing in fact’.

In sum, my ethnographic research on Yuba City’s Sikh pre-school confirms that educational institutions can be seen as a significant site for raising children with an awareness of cultural, linguistic and sometimes also religious traditions. At the same time, this case study supports Eleanor Nesbitt’s (2004: 13) argument that schools can be seen to play an active role in fostering cultural change. However, what is particularly interesting about the preschool discussed in this example is that it is not a mainstream educational institution, but a preschool run by Sikhs themselves that advocates the incorporation of cultural practices deriving from the ‘mainstream’ culture. The fact that the pre-school integrates various elements deriving from the larger cultural context is worth keeping in mind, if we assume that the cultural and religious resources received within educational institutions influence the process through which schoolchildren and students craft their sense of self.

## *The Sikh Parade*

So far I have discussed examples in which immigrants and their descendants construct particular cultural and religious spaces with the help of physical sites whose geographical location is fixed. But as other studies on immigrant communities have pointed out, immigrants also create sites for communal gatherings that may be of a more fleeting nature (see for example Brettell and Reed-Danhay 2012: 41). This is the case in Yuba City's Sikh parade, the *nagar kirtan*, which is organised once a year. The purpose of this religious ritual procession is to bring God's message through kirtan, the singing of divine hymns, to the city (*nagar*) and thus, it could be argued, the Sikhs involved in the procession create for themselves a sacred space out of the mundane cultural landscape of 'mainstream' Yuba City (cf. Knott 2005).

Each year on the first Sunday in November, a couple of weeks after the harvest has ended, Sikhs from as far away as New York and Canada pour into the streets of Yuba City. For an onlooker like me, observing the parade for the first time, it is a colourful explosion of images and a sensual *mélange* of the cultural world to which the participants of the parade pay tribute via their various performances. Taken in its totality, it could be argued that the parade provides an ephemeral playground where Sikhs can stage their religious affiliation and engage in the shared celebration of their cultural heritage. The parade further offers an opportunity to transmit knowledge concerning religious and cultural traditions to younger generations and to non-Sikhs alike.

By choosing the *nagar kirtan* as an object of analysis, I also respond to religious studies scholar Kristina Myrvold's (2008: 141) call to pay more attention to Sikh religious processions, since they are taking place with greater frequency both inside and outside India. The *nagar kirtan* has already been analysed by Sikh scholar Gurveen Kaur Khurana (2011) who examines many of the meanings that the procession has for Sikhs in Yuba City and for those coming from elsewhere. Her study, however, does not fully address the role that the parade can be seen to play in positioning Sikhs in the context of the wider society. To shed more light on the latter, I treat the *nagar kirtan* analytically as a 'cultural spectacle' (Bramadat 2001: 80) through which Sikhs present themselves to both Sikhs and to non-Sikhs, and I seek to address the following questions in my analysis: What practices are performed in relation to this spectacle, with what purpose, and what to they disclose about the crafting of identities?

I attended and observed the *nagar kirtan* in Yuba City twice, once in 2008 and again in 2009. In 2009, the parade was organised for the thirtieth time. Since the beginning of this event, the number of people attending it has significantly increased. Allegedly the parade that was organised in 2008 drew roughly 80,000 visitors over the weekend.<sup>20</sup> Beside those from Yuba City, there are today a great number of Sikhs who come from different parts of North America to take part in the Sikh parade and the activities arranged

20 [www.appeal-democrat.com/articles/temple-70693-sikh-parade.html](http://www.appeal-democrat.com/articles/temple-70693-sikh-parade.html), accessed July 17, 2013.

around it. Visitors find accommodation at one of the temples, stay with relatives or friends, or rent a room in one of the town's hotels. The festivities begin on Friday with an *akhand path* (uninterrupted reading of the entire Guru Granth) at the temple on Tierra Buena road, and in the evening the programme contains fireworks, which announce the start of the festivities in a manner that is visible not only to Sikhs but also non-Sikhs in Yuba City.

The following day, visitors come to the gurdwara's compound to take part in a variety of practices, such as listening to the reading of the Guru Granth Sahib, enjoying some of the free food that is being offered there by volunteers, or shopping for goods at one of the stalls that have been erected on the gurdwara's parking lot. Sunday is the actual day of the procession, and as my informant Jaipreet elaborates, the purpose of the *nagar kirtan* in Yuba City is to celebrate the 'installation of the Guru Granth Sahib' as the Guru.<sup>21</sup> But, as Jaipreet, who has lived in Yuba City all his life and who is now in his forties, continues to explain:

[In addition to the] formal reason for doing it, I think there is a meaning, [...], a purpose, which goes beyond that, which is mainly, that it is a way to demonstrate to the kids or to ourselves, to reinforce that, I mean, that we are Sikhs. And it serves also to advertise to the wider community as well, that we are the Sikhs, but we are Sikh Americans, though, so it is a vehicle to build bridges and understanding to the wider community as well.

In the following, I discuss some of the practices performed in relation to the *nagar kirtan* through which those participating in it not only 'build bridges' to other Sikhs but also to the wider society of which they are part.

#### MULTISIDED BONDING PRACTICES

In 2008, rain was pouring down on Yuba City on the Saturday before the parade. Together with my daughter, I was on my way to the temple to help decorate the preschool's float. When we arrived at the gurdwara on Tierra Buena road, many cars were already parked on the street leading towards the temple. Having reached the entrance gate, I noticed security staff that had been hired by the parade's organisers. Inside the gates, I could see many people who were busy putting up stalls. During the *nagar kirtan* weekend, these stalls sold clothes, blankets, jewellery, and various items related to the Sikh religion. Eighteen-year-old Arjan, for example, told me in an interview that he had bought from one of these stalls a big *khanda* sticker for his car's rear window. Next to the stalls were various booths where Sikhs, in an act of *seva* (voluntary service), offered free food, which they had prepared for this purpose. Indeed, I would argue that the concept of *seva* is one of the main forces that ensure the organisation of the parade every year. The making of

21 Guru Gobind Singh was the last human guru. One day before he died in an attack, he 'declared that his death would be the end of the human line of Gurus, and that from then on the Panth and the *granth* (the community and the book) would be the Sikhs' Guru' (Nesbitt 2005: 38).

the parade's floats, for instance, can be seen as an act of voluntary service.

That day at the temple, I had the possibility to observe how the parents of the pre-school children engaged in the collective act of decorating the float by using, among other things, handicrafts that their children had made and which displayed little khanda signs with glitter sprinkled on top. They prepared their float in a barn behind the school building, and next to them were other groups busily working on finishing their own floats. Indeed, the preparations for the nagar kirtan usually begin weeks in advance and, according to some of the organisers I talked to, some preparations take place many months before the actual procession. Things that must be organised in advance include food, security, parking, insurance, sanitary facilities and the general programme for the weekend. Throughout the year these seva activities take place behind the scenes, but become more noticeable in and around the gurdwara on Tierra Buena Road in the week preceding the parade. People and cars come and go, portable toilets appear on the fields next to the temple, and women gather to prepare the food while men erect tents on the gurdwara's parking lot. The atmosphere is that of a beehive in which all are eager to accomplish their tasks for the common good. The tremendous efforts, including the substantial financial resources that go into the organising of the nagar kirtan weekend, reveal how important the event is for the Sikhs who annually lend their assistance.

Finally the big day arrives. It is the first Sunday in November, and the pre-school's children and their parents have gathered at the gurdwara to participate with their float in the processions. Fortunately, the rain has stopped and the sun is shining. After more than an hour of waiting, the procession finally begins. The first float carrying the Guru Granth Sahib has left the gurdwara and appears on the street in front of us. Meanwhile, a buzzing helicopter suddenly shows up and showers colourful petals on the procession and the audience, thus communicating the start of the parade to all who can see and hear it. The pre-school's float begins to slowly move forward, with the children seated on top of it and their parents and teachers walking behind it. Like other Sikhs who belong to a float, they form an essential part of the procession by constituting a living, breathing chain that makes the nagar kirtan come alive and gives it its unique shape.

In order to clear the roads for the leading float that carries the sacred text, some men and women walk in front of the procession and in an act of doing seva, sweep the street after others have poured water on it. The troupe of cleaners is followed by a group of Sikhs whose ceremonial attire reflects the Khalsa colours of blue, orange and white. Two of them carry a banner – in blue print on an orange background – which welcomes the onlooker in English to the Sikh parade, thus also acknowledging the potential non-Sikhs in the audience. Behind the banner, spectators see both the American and the Californian flag rippling in the breeze followed by ten Sikh flags that are carried by five male and five female Sikhs. Hence, although the American and Californian flags come first, they are outnumbered by the Sikh flags that follow them.<sup>22</sup> References to the American flag are also

22 I want to thank Professor Gurinder Mann for pointing this out to me.

visible elsewhere. During the Sikh parade in 2009, for example, I saw several banners that combined the khanda with the American flag by filling the former with the colours and patterns of the latter. This act of creating a bricolage out of different symbols can be seen to reflect Sikhs' efforts to mediate between the different points of reference that feature a prominent role in their lifeworlds. The combination of these two flags at public Sikh processions can be interpreted to represent Sikhs' eagerness to communicate that they are a religious community but simultaneously part of the American nation (see also Mann 2006: 168).

In front of the procession's leading float one can see the *panj piare* (five beloved ones)<sup>23</sup> who are walking next to each other in a line. They are also dressed in the Khalsa colours and each of the five men carries a sword upright. The leading float displaying the Guru Granth Sahib is followed by numerous other floats, which represent different Sikh congregations or organisations such as the Punjabi clubs of high schools or universities, for example. The floats in the Sikh parade often display figurative images that refer to the Sikh religion or to its history. Concerning the latter, the procession in 2009, for instance, included a float by the Sikh Students Collaborative that among other things reminded onlookers of the tragic events that took place in 1984 when the Indian army stormed the Golden Temple. On top of the float to which I am referring, a group of about ten Sikhs aged twenty or so enacted these events in a symbolic manner. About seven of them sat on chairs facing the audience with a severe look on their faces, while their hands rested on their knees, tied with a scarf. Behind them, two women dressed in camouflage uniforms impersonated soldiers of the Indian army who kept the group of seated Sikhs under guard. On one side of the float was written 'Remember 1984' in black block letters and on the back of the float was a huge sign that listed among other things the alleged numbers of Sikhs who were killed in the aftermath of the attack on the Golden Temple, together with the slogan 'A community bruised, a diaspora tarnished. Still we rise'.

The message displayed on this particular float made by students reflects what seems to be a diasporic consciousness among young Sikhs. Indeed, many of the floats that are part of the Sikh parade strive to keep the memory of past events alive by using a specific visual language. In doing so, those responsible for making the floats also help to transmit knowledge concerning significant historical events to Sikhs who were born and raised in the United States, thus strengthening the sense of a diasporic identity. But the floats also function as tools 'for Sikhs to educate other Americans about Sikhism' (Mann 2006: 172). In addition, the procession also includes practices that

23 The *panj piare* refers to five Sikhs who first volunteered when Guru Gobind Singh asked who would surrender their heads during Vaisakhi in 1699 when he founded the Khalsa, the community of initiated Sikhs. But instead of actually taking off their heads, Guru Gobind Singh declared them to be the *panj piare* and initiated them into the Khalsa by letting them take the amrit (nectar of immortality). Today, five amritdhari volunteers, who are meant to represent the five beloved ones, lead ceremonial events.



*Nagar kirtan in Yuba City, Sikhs sweeping the floor in front of the procession.*

reference the larger cultural context in which the public ritual takes place. The impact of the surrounding cultural context reveals itself for instance in the food that Sikhs offer for free during this event. Similarly to *nagar kirtan* processions in India (see Myrvold 2008: 149), Sikhs in Yuba City, too, set up 'seva-stations' along the route of the parade, and here Sikhs distribute foods to people who participate in the parade or who come to observe it. However, in addition to serving an array of Indian foods, such as *barfi* (Indian sweets) and *chai* (Indian tea), Sikhs also offer a vast range of mainstream American foods during the parade weekend, such as cupcakes, pancakes, popcorn, French fries, and cotton candy, thus catering to the young Sikhs growing up in the US who are fond of these types of food.

During the festivities, however, people perform their identities through bricolage practices, not only in relation to food but also in relation to dress.

Especially the dressing practices of male Sikh youth reveal a mixture of cultural elements deriving from the larger American context and those of their Sikh heritage. During the weekend, one can see, for example, young Sikh men who follow hip-hop fashion by wearing baggy trousers, loose fitting T-shirts and gold necklaces. But in terms of jewellery their so-called 'bling-bling'<sup>24</sup> does not display the sign of the US dollar but instead the khanda. Thus through their dressing practices, these young Sikh men weave their religious background into the language of the subcultural style with which they want to identify.

Others engage in the play of constructing identities by wearing particular kinds of shirts. In 2009, I noticed at the parade a group of young Sikh men who were all dressed in orange T-shirts. As they explained to me, they were from Yuba City and they had bought these T-shirts especially for the parade, choosing the orange colour because it is one of the colours of Sikh faith. Others wear T-shirts with the khanda symbol displayed in the front or back of the shirt.

During the parade, one can also see T-shirts that integrate elements of the Sikh religion with elements of western popular culture. At the parade in 2009, I saw one teenage boy who wore a shirt that had the same bright blue colour as a Superman outfit. In front was the khanda displayed in red on a yellow background inside a diamond-like shape imitating the 'S' worn by Superman on his chest, while on the back of the T-shirt was the word 'Supersikhi'. The teenager wore this piece of clothing over a ceremonial outfit consisting of a long white shirt, a blue cloth wrapped around his hips like a belt, and a dark blue turban orbited by a white cloth, with the kirpan peaking below his 'Supersikhi' T-shirt. He created his own playful version of how a contemporary young Sikh living in the United States looks when celebrating his religious traditions in public. In this vein, actors like him can be seen to further, through their practices, a process that seeks to challenge and expand the normative possibilities for how contemporary young Americans but also contemporary Sikhs may fashion their identities in public.

T-shirts that combine symbols referring to the Sikh religion or the Punjabi culture with images from American popular culture are sold at various stalls during the nagar kirtan weekend. Turbaninc and Rootsgear are two labels that sold their goods during the Sikh parade weekend in 2009. When I spoke with one of the founding members of Rootsgear, he told me that this was already the third year that he had been coming to the nagar kirtan in Yuba City to sell the company's products. He and his friends initially started making T-shirts that combine Sikh/Punjabi symbols with images from American popular culture for their private use but eventually transformed the activity into a business.

Similarly to the founder of a website catering to the needs of Muslim women in Britain whose founder wanted to make the wearing of the hijab more appealing to his costumers (Tarlo 2010: 171ff.; see also 219), one of the Rootsgear founding members said that their motive for creating *mélange*

24 Bling-bling is a slang term in hip hop culture and refers to flashy and ostentatious jewellery and accessories.

*Young Sikh  
at nagar kir-  
tan in Yuba  
City.*



products of this sort was to make being a Sikh a stylish and cool thing. According to its website, the company seeks to bring its customers 'products that create pride and awareness. Our apparel allows you to connect with your roots and fashionably make a statement with products that approach issues in a way that no one else dares to.'<sup>25</sup> I also spoke with one of the persons behind the other label, Turbaninc, who considers their T-shirts to be another way to stand out, and adds, 'Our religion is based on being different and standing out.' One of his customers, with whom I had a chance to talk, explained that he likes to wear these T-shirts because he is proud of his religion and wants to show this. Further, he thinks that these T-shirts might help to educate other people about the religion and culture of Sikhs.

The above mentioned labels also produce T-shirts which are especially targeted towards Sikh women by incorporating Kaur, the last name used by many female Sikhs, into the fashion label Juicy Couture, resulting in Juicy Kaurture. Yet, at the nagar kirtan I did not see any female Sikhs wearing such T-shirts, and the overwhelming majority wore the traditional Punjabi dress. As one young Sikh woman explained to me, her parents would not allow her to visit the parade in jeans and a T-shirt. They were afraid of what others would say if she failed to show up in a salwar kamiz at a significant community event such as this. Hence, it seems that in the case of female Sikhs the play of identities as reflected through the choice of clothes is more restricted or takes place on a more subtle level.

At the nagar kirtan in Yuba City, one can also see a few non-Sikhs who mingle in the crowd and whose attire provides another platform for

25 [www.rootsgear.com/about.php](http://www.rootsgear.com/about.php), accessed February 23, 2012.

communicating on a visual level. In 2009, for instance, I met at the Sikh parade a group of non-Sikh women, one of whom was wearing a T-shirt which read 'Punjabi Power' while another wore a colourful salwar kamiz that she had bought for herself, as well as one for her daughter, a day earlier from one of the stalls at the temple complex. As these women explained to me, they attended the parade because a dear friend who was a Sikh had invited them to come. Indeed, based on the conversations I had with non-Sikhs, it seems that many of them visit the parade because a Sikh friend or colleague had personally invited them. Others explained that they had come out of sheer curiosity and one woman considered it a 'neat way' to learn more about another culture. What seems to make a particularly positive impression on the non-Sikhs observing the nagar kirtan are the vast array of bright colours, the Indian food, and the great generosity and hospitality displayed by the Sikhs during this event, which means that food and admission are free. One non-Sikh whom I encountered in the company of a Sikh, said that the parade is a 'great thing, it fosters people getting together and being respectful to each other and spending time with each other, getting to know each other, greeting people from out of town, that are Sikhs and non-Sikhs. I think it just fosters more friendship and love and comradeship, I think it is great.'<sup>26</sup> In this sense, the annual nagar kirtan weekend provides a venue that, like other cultural spectacles, can be seen to create a social space in which people from a variety of backgrounds have the opportunity to come together to find out more about each other' (Bramadat 2001: 90).

Although it became clear to me in the course of my fieldwork that everybody in Yuba City knows about the annual Sikh parade, I found the number of non-Sikhs in the audience to be remarkably low. Talking to non-Sikhs whom I met when taking my daughter for her daily visits to the playground, I was surprised to learn how many of them had never visited the Sikh parade that was taking place each year almost right on their doorsteps. However, despite the low number of non-Sikhs observing the annual nagar kirtan on site, Sikhs in Yuba City consider the parade to be an important venue for informing fellow Yuba City residents about the Sikh religion and culture.

In order to convey a positive image of Sikhs in the wider local community, many Sikhs are eager to reduce the negative impacts of the organisation of the nagar kirtan in town. One of these issues is the inconvenience that the Sikh parade causes each year for the residents of Yuba City in terms of the overwhelming number of cars parked on every available street close to the gurdwara on Tierra Buena Road or to the route of the procession. Fully aware of the annoyance that this temporary occupation of space causes for Yuba City residents, the organisers of the Nagar Kirtan try to regulate the parade parking offering alternative spaces where visitors to the parade can legally park their cars without blocking private driveways or the parking facilities of local businesses.

Another problem is the litter left behind by the Sikh parade. For many

26 Interview with a visitor of the Sikh parade, transcribed in Field notes Laura Hirvi (October 30, 2009).

years, the litter on the streets and fields functioned as a visual reminder for Yuba City's residents of the event that had taken place over the weekend. Satwinder and his wife, who have been living in Yuba City for more than ten years now, explain how they realised the need to clean up the litter so that it would not create a negative impression of the Sikh parade:

When we came here, more than ten years ago, we always used to hear in the newspaper, the local community, the white folks here and other people, you know, they, many of them, there are always some elements in the society they do not like, they did not like the aftermath of the parade, people leaving trash and litter everywhere and things like that and our, the Sikh management, the gurdwara management should have thought about it. They never thought about it, then when we came here, one year, two years, we did not get involved, but then I think it was the third year, that [my wife] said, 'Why don't we start cleaning up after this?' So then, what we did, and we were thirteen or fourteen years younger, so [...] we walked behind the whole thing [the procession] and wherever we saw [any litter we picked it up], and people liked it very much.

The media is perhaps the most powerful tool through which Sikhs see the parade as able to communicate with those who are physically absent from it.<sup>27</sup> Each year, the procession receives a great deal of attention in the local newspaper not only through articles related to the parade but also through the many pictures and video clips of this event in its online edition. One event that explicitly aims at educating fellow Americans and seeks to establish an outreach is the 'Open House', which was arranged in both of the years I was present on the Saturday preceding the procession. In 2009, the gurdwara on Tierra Buena Road organised the Open House in cooperation with Yuba City's Punjabi American Heritage Society (PAHS) in the Dasmesh hall behind the temple's main building. The invitation that was distributed via email included among others the following information:

You're cordially invited to an Open House & Reception to celebrate the 30th Annual Nagar Kirtan weekend. Join us for a short presentation to recognise elected officials and dignitaries along with an educational video, Cultural Safari. Cultural Safari is a 17-minute video aimed at educating America's schoolchildren, teachers and school administrators about what it means to be a Sikh American.

When I arrived at the Dasmesh hall on the Saturday in question, organisers as well as guests were standing in small groups in front of the building in the warm autumn sunshine. Some volunteers handed out a leaflet that stated that its mission was to highlight in brief 'the beliefs and practices of the Sikhs'.<sup>28</sup> Once inside, the participants of the Open House took a seat on the floor as

27 See Jacobsen (2008b: 203) for similar findings in his study on Tamil processions in Norway.

28 The content of the leaflet was produced by the Sikh coalition, which had been founded in the aftermath of 9/11, (see [www.sikhcoalition.org/History.asp](http://www.sikhcoalition.org/History.asp), accessed February 27, 2012).

is the traditional practice in Sikh temples. The programme itself included among other things a kirtan performance by teenagers that was partly in Punjabi and partly in English, thus mixing the two languages. Further, there was a screening of a short television documentary called *Meet the Sikhs* and the video *Cultural Safari*, both of which were clearly targeted at educating their non-Sikh audience about Sikhism.

In addition, the programme included several speeches and a keynote lecture by I. J. Singh held in English. In his speech, he argued that although Sikh teachings promote equality between the genders, this is not yet reflected in the practice of many Sikhs, as they are still under the constraints of Indian culture. Sikh scholar Khurana (2011: 244), who also attended and analysed the Open House that was organised during the Sikh parade, makes the following interpretation of Singh's lecture: 'The talk held in English was clearly for Sikh youth unfamiliar with the basic premises of Sikhism.'<sup>29</sup> But in addition to targeting the Sikh youth, I would argue that the talks held during the Open House, including that given by I. J. Singh, were also meant to reach the non-Sikhs present in the audience. This became especially clear in the statements made by a PAHS spokesman, who more than once emphasised in his speech that being a good American and a good Sikh are not mutually exclusive.

Towards the end of the program, local dignitaries, including non-Sikh politicians from the broader Yuba City community, were honoured in front of the audience, and received a plaque which stated that the Tierra Buena gurdwara wanted to recognise these individuals for their services to the Sikh community. By showing this visible mark of respect, the Sikh organisers of this event made a strategic outreach by which they sought to strengthen bonds with non-Sikhs who are influential in Yuba City's public life and are able to support them in their effort to create a positive image of Sikhism. Following Caroline Brettell and Deborah Reed-Danahay (2012: 99), who studied the civic engagement of Indian and Vietnamese immigrants in the United States, it could be argued that through this practice of inviting local dignitaries to make them familiar with the immigrants' religious and cultural traditions, the group in question establishes its 'civic presence and the right to be both respected and heard in the broader local community.'

In summary, it can be said that not only the religious procession itself but more precisely the whole nagar kirtan weekend constitutes one of the important 'event-based sites'<sup>30</sup> at which Sikhs negotiate their identities. For Sikh immigrants and their descendants, the nagar kirtan weekend with its tastes, sounds, smells, and sights provides a great opportunity to experience a sensual world close to the one they would encounter in India (see also Khurana 2011: 234). This particular fleeting site fosters a great array of practices that help to strengthen the bonds both among Sikhs living in Yuba

29 In her chapter, Khurana (2011) does not explicitly point out which year's Open House she refers to, but from her description of the events, I assume that she refers to the same Open House that I visited.

30 Brettell and Reed-Danahay (2012: 176) use this term in their study on Vietnamese and Indian immigrants in the US.

City and with those coming from abroad, transforming the imagined global Sikh community into a concrete experience. Further, the whole weekend during which this particular religious procession takes place can be seen to offer an important means for familiarising Sikh youth, who are growing up in the United States, with their cultural heritage. The Sikh parade in Yuba City is a significant site for the intergenerational transfer of cultural as well as religious traditions (Khurana 2011: 229ff.). Khurana (2011: 234) argues that the Nagar Kirtan's primary purpose is to display 'difference and distinction from other Indian religious communities as well as from the host country'. By contrast, I would suggest that the symbolic language that is consciously used by many Sikhs who are taking part in this cultural spectacle serves as a means through which Sikhs seek to claim a particular identity position by demonstrating to fellow non-Sikh Americans that they identify with the country in which they have settled. In other words, one important message of the nagar kirtan is that although Sikh and non-Sikhs differ in terms of religious identity, they are similar when it comes to the issue of identifying with the United States. This message was also emphasised in the interviews, when Sikhs utilised variations on the following rhetoric to show their allegiance to the country in which they are now living: 'I love this country, and I am proud to be an American'.

Thus, in the diaspora, religious processions become an important vehicle through which participants can signal to others, who are either physically present or observe it via the media, who they are and what is important to them (see Jacobsen 2008a). However, these religious processions are not only public performances of religious identity, they also provide a significant venue through which immigrants can communicate to others, fellow Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike, how they wish to be positioned in the country in which they now reside. As a cultural spectacle the Sikh parade in Yuba City can be seen as a performance through which Sikh participants position themselves as part of the larger American landscape while simultaneously reflecting Sikhs' multiple cultural connections. Perhaps it is especially after 9/11 that Sikhs living in Yuba City feel an increased need to use the annual parade as a platform to communicate their solidarity with the nation in which they live and to stress the message that in addition to being Sikhs, they also aspire to be Americans and to gain the right to be respected as such. The claim to this right can be seen as expressed in a statement made by Tajender, who moved to Yuba City when he was around thirteen years old, and is now in his mid-forties. Towards the end of an interview that I conducted with him at his workplace, he said: '[...] I can listen to Hindi music and be just as patriotic and American as any other guy. People have to learn that, they still think, you have to listen to country music, and have your cross on [...]'.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

Sikhs in Yuba City as well as in Helsinki are interested in maintaining identities rooted in their cultural, linguistic and/ or religious traditions. Living in a context in which the presence of one's own culture and religion in

everyday life can no longer be taken for granted anymore immigrants realise that they need to make conscious efforts to create institutions and events through which to maintain their cultural identities and to transmit them to the next generation. For this purpose, Sikhs in Yuba City as well as Helsinki have been active to create stable and fleeting sites, where they can gather as a community to celebrate their cultural and religious traditions and to create bonds with others across generations.

The role of these sites in the intergenerational transfer of traditions is of particular importance in the case of Finland, where the Sikh community is, due to its migration history, less visible than in the case of Yuba City, where the percentage of Sikhs in the city is significantly higher than in Finland. In Yuba City, the idea of a Sikh community is much more concrete and tangible, whereas in Helsinki it is largely imagined and only materialises itself at specific sites created for the purpose of coming together as a collective. Further, the findings in this chapter have shown that practices conducted at these cultural and religious sites may contribute to a process through which Sikhs negotiate their position in the broader society. They may do so by claiming public space or by engaging in specific activities that concretely aim at establishing bonds with the surrounding non-Sikh population. In the case of the former, they often have to deal with external constraints and reactions.

With reference to the latter, it appears that the efforts of Sikhs in Yuba City to establish bonds with the non-Sikh community seem to be much more conscious than in the case of Sikhs in Helsinki, who perhaps are still more concerned with establishing themselves as a community. In sum, the practices analyzed in this chapter highlight numerous instances that help us to better understand the ways in which Sikhs in Yuba City as well as in Helsinki negotiate their identities with reference to fellow Sikhs, across generations and with non-Sikhs. They reveal the struggles that inform the creation of a diasporic consciousness while at the same time indicating the efforts through which Sikhs seek to carve out a place for themselves in the wider societies in which they live.

## 6 Life-Cycle Rituals And (Transnational) Practices

In this ethnography I consider a ritual as a symbolic act through which those who are participating in it strengthen, communicate but also negotiate their sense of self. As a performance that follows a pre-defined script, rituals may help to perpetuate basic values that are integral to a group while strengthening its sense of community. At the same time, rituals can also be seen as symbolic practices that can challenge traditions and make room for the shaping of new identity positions (See also Köpping, Leistle and Rudolph 2006). Further, it has been pointed out that identities are often negotiated anew in the performance of life-cycle rituals that are carried out in relation to birth, marriage or death (See Gardner and Grillo 2002: 183). It is at the moments related to the birth of a child or the marriage of two individuals that people strive to construct and negotiate for themselves identities that reflect their senses of belonging.

This chapter seeks to explore how the surrounding cultural context, which has changed as a consequence of migration, influences the ways in which Sikhs seek to construct their identities at the time of important life-cycle events. In addition, I am eager to explore the ways in which 'tradition' may become a contested good in ritual celebrations. Thus, I want to investigate how far rituals not only reflect aspirations towards continuity but also towards cultural change on a communicative level (See Baumann 1992: 99). As this chapter highlights, peering through this particular analytical lens also allows us to take a closer look at the manner in which rituals function as dynamic promoters of practices that play a pivotal role in the creation and strengthening of transnational family networks.

### *Birth and Childcare*

Amal, who is in her mid-twenties, was married in India. Soon after her marriage, she followed her husband Sanjit to Helsinki, where he had accepted a job offer in a large Finnish company. The first winter that Amal spent in Finland was extremely cold, and for months the temperatures were well below minus fifteen degrees. However, it was not only the different weather which Amal found difficult to cope with. Her social environment and life style had

also changed. By boarding the plane in Delhi, Amal had left behind a family who had provided her with a sense of comfort. She had also abandoned a well-paid job that had given her a feeling of independence, as she explained to me. In addition, she had to leave her close friends behind. And although Amal soon became acquainted with Sikh women at the local gurdwara and found solace and support from a non-Sikh family she and her husband had befriended, the first year was emotionally difficult for her. She missed her old life, the ability to physically meet her family and friends, and the freedom she had enjoyed previously when working in a field that corresponded with her education. Being in daily contact with family and friends via phone or the Internet helped to ease her pain. By using media such as Facebook and Skype, immigrants enter a virtual space where they can meet up with families and friends who are living in another country. Engaging in forms of transnational communication with the help of social media enables familiar voices and faces to enter the domestic spaces of many Sikhs living in Finland. Yet, such transnational encounters in an online setting are often only able to compensate for a modicum of the actual experience immigrants might be seeking (see also Boccagni 2010).

Some time after settling down in Helsinki, Amal became pregnant. It was planned that Sanjit's parents should travel from India to Finland a couple of weeks before the due date in order to be of assistance. When the baby arrived prematurely, weeks before the grandparents' scheduled arrival, Amal and her husband felt lost, as they acknowledged when I visited them to meet their newborn a couple of months after birth. Like many other first-time parents, they initially felt overwhelmed by the complex task of caring for the infant and were relieved when Sanjit's parents finally arrived. The grandparents' suitcases were filled with souvenirs and contained an abundance of baby clothes bought in India, where they are much less expensive than in Finland. They also brought some cash from relatives and friends in India donated in order to bless Sanjit's and Amal's child. Resources and goods, as in this case money and clothes, thus do not only travel from emigrants to those who stay behind, but may also flow in the other direction (see also Vertovec 2009: 9).

From the moment Sanjit's mother arrived, she started to organise the household and offered the new parents instructions concerning Indian childcare practices, showing them, for example, how to give the baby a traditional oil massage.<sup>1</sup> In India, massaging the newborn is a significant cultural practice, and it is meant to 'straighten the body from the cramped postures of the womb' and to make it more flexible with the help of stretching movements (Maharaj 2007: 189ff.). Sanjit's mother also took care of preparing the daily meals, for which both Amal and Sanjit were grateful. For example, on the day of my visit, she prepared paranthas for breakfast, which were her speciality. Together with the plain yoghurt and the Indian pickles she made out of lemons bought in Finland and spices imported from India – a mix

1 I also learned this practice during my stay in Orissa, India, when the grandmother of the family I stayed with showed me how to give her granddaughter a massage with coconut oil.

Amal laughingly described as ‘Fintia’<sup>2</sup> – this experience of flavours took me, and perhaps also Amal and Sanjit, back to a time spent in India.

The practice in which parents, and in particular mothers, travel from India to Finland to help out in the initial period following the births of their grandchildren, appears to be common amongst Sikh families living in Finland, and serves the purpose of assisting in the management of the household as well as with childcare in the initial period following the birth of the child. At the same time, the visits can be also seen to play a crucial role in the process through which mothers pass on their knowledge concerning cultural practices and traditions related to childcare. When the children are older as well, grandparents journey from India to meet their loved ones and to help them out in their everyday lives in Finland.<sup>3</sup> The time they spend in Finland is usually around three months, as this is the maximum length they can stay on a tourist visa.

Also in Yuba City, albeit in a different manner than in Finland, I have seen many cases in which grandparents are significantly involved in what Kanwal Mand (2005: 422), in her study on transnational Sikh marriages, has called ‘invisible labour’. Whereas, in Finland, Sikh grandparents usually perform transnational childcare by undertaking short-term visits from India to Helsinki, grandparents in Yuba City are more permanently present in the extended families to which they belong. In Jaipreet’s case, for example, his parents live together with him and his wife and children, since he is the eldest son in the family. In the United States, citizens who are at least 21 years of age are allowed to petition for their parents to immigrate to the US. In Finland, however, Finnish immigration laws do not enable Finnish citizens to petition for the immigration of their parents who are foreign nationals. But even if the legislative situation were different, it remains in question whether Sikh parents from India would want to permanently move to Finland, in which winters are severe and pose a particular challenge for the health of older people. The mother of one of my informants, for example, stopped going out of the house in Finland after she had slipped on the icy ground outside. Moreover, the flight time between India and Finland is short and the costs are low when compared to the journey between California and India, making intermittent transnational childcare practices a reasonable strategy for Sikh families whose members are scattered between Finland and India.

According to Sikhs in Yuba City, the practice of living together with one’s parents has several advantages. First, it is advantageous for three generations to live together under one roof because families who pool their

2 As Amal pointed out to me, there is also a yahoo group consisting of Indians living in Finland with this name. It was founded in 2000 and had in April 2011 almost 1000 members ([groups.yahoo.com/group/fintia/#ans](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/fintia/#ans), accessed April 8, 2011.) The group also has its own page on Facebook.

3 Another option is to send children during school holidays to relatives in India, for example. In Finland, I heard of three of such cases during my fieldwork, in which parents had sent their daughters to stay with relatives for a couple of weeks. In Yuba City, one person told me that she had sent her daughter to live with her mother in India for about two years since she herself had to work and felt unable to take care of both – her child and her job (Field notes Laura Hirvi, December 5, 2008).

money together are able to buy bigger homes in which to live. Further, extended families provide an economic benefit since childcare expenses can be lower, provided that grandparents are able to take care of grandchildren while parents are working. In addition, Jaipreet's wife Meeta, who moved after marriage to Yuba City and who is now in her thirties, points out that this arrangement also has advantages for the kids, since 'they grow up in a more loving environment. [...] They get lots of attention and love from both parents – the parents and the grandparents.' The permanent presence of grandparents in California was said to be advantageous also for another reason, namely for offering a natural atmosphere in which older generations are able to transmit their knowledge concerning cultural, religious and linguistic traditions to younger generations.<sup>4</sup> In Finland, this task mainly falls to parents and the gurdwara.

### *Naming Ceremony*

In examining practices related to birth, it is worth also examining the naming ceremony that follows the birth of a child. This ceremony also has a transnational dimension, which I observed in Finland. Conventional Sikh first names,<sup>5</sup> which do not necessarily reveal gender, often bear a religious meaning, and to find a suitable name for their newborn, some Sikh parents decide to perform a naming ceremony at the gurdwara called *nam karan*. At this ceremony, parents are supposed to choose the name for their child based on the first letter of the received *hukam* (random opening of the Guru Granth Sahib, seen as the command of Vahiguru [= most frequent epithet for God]). But finding a name for one's child in this manner can be a tricky challenge for parents who have their own personal wishes or are eager to meet expectations arising from their cultural traditions. Balveer and his wife, who were both born and raised outside of India, realised this when they performed the *nam karan* ceremony for their first-born child. As Balveer, who is now in his forties, recollects,

I tell you, in all honesty, we did [the ceremony] with our first one, and what we did is we went through and picked a name for every letter in the alphabet, we said, we are going to go to the gurdwara. I was so excited. I called all of my friends, family, my parents' friends and families, the gurdwara was packed, we had like a langar, seva, everything, [...]. And here they open up the Granth Sahib, and they said it was a [G]<sup>6</sup>, and that was the only [letter], we did not have a name picked for! [...], and I was like, 'Oh great.' I looked at my wife, and she was upset, because in her mind, she had a name picked, she wanted to name him [...]. It was a [G]. Then I tried getting creative, I said, 'OK, his last name is [Singh] anyways, so could we just write his name backwards, and then transfer [...]' and my dad

4 See also Joseph T. O'Connell (2000: 206) for similar findings based on his research among Sikhs in Canada.

5 See the pseudonyms used throughout this book.

6 I changed the letter in order to better protect the anonymity of the informant.

[said], 'Do not try, don't, let us get serious here.' Well, then, I remember, my dad was, 'Name him [name starting with G]', and I was like, 'You got to think that these kids are going to school here, [...] you got to take the fear factor out for the kids, too. You do not want to get them teased all their lives, because of the name they were given.' Yeah, people accept us to a certain degree, but at the same time, they make fun and stuff like that. Let's say, nobody should with intention try to set up their kids. And so we actually did not pick [the name] that night, and you are supposed to pick it that night. [...] And I was like, 'Hey, we got a letter, thanks, sorry, send everybody home, give them their laddus and stuff, thank you, thank you' and oh, I remember my wife was so upset! And then [...] we picked a name, his name is [name starting with a G].

Laura            So in the end you picked a name starting with [G]?

Yeah, I did pick a [G]. I said, 'We went to the gurdwara, I picked it, and so we did it. So now we do it different. Now it is just, we pick the [name], it is different in its entirety with the transition from the hospital now, too. They do not release you without a name [for the newborn].

This account shows how Balveer struggled to find a compromise that would satisfy all of the people involved and their expectations concerning his behaviour. On the one hand, there were those like his father, who expected him to stick to tradition. On the other hand there was Balveer together with his wife, both of whom wished to give their child a name they liked and one that thought would not sound too exotic or religious to the 'mainstream' American ear, in order to prevent the child from being teased at school. The seriousness of this situation is highlighted by Balveer's decision to send the guests home although they had not chosen the name yet, a decision that could be seen to harm the family's *izzat* to a certain degree as it sent the message that Balveer and his wife were not willing to follow custom.

Balancing between the wishes of both sides, Balveer tried to creatively interpret the rules that underlie the *nam karan* ceremony while keeping the backdrop of tradition in mind. But the authority of his father did not allow for a violation of the norms, and hence Balveer and his wife finally chose to follow the traditional procedure of the naming ceremony by giving their child a name starting with the letter received via the *hukam*. In doing so, they submitted to the authority of their parents, thus avoiding any further harm to the family's reputation. However, this experience caused Balveer and his wife to make a strategic decision concerning their future children's names, as a consequence of which their children born later did not receive their names from a *nam karan* ceremony. The mention of modern hospital procedures can be seen to serve as means by which Balveer seeks to justify and rationalise his decision, because although it is true that Californian hospitals require newborns to be named before the baby leaves the building, the naming ceremony could theoretically also be performed in the absence of the child and its mother. As another of my Yuba City informants explained, 'Those people who wish to have a Gurmukhi letter randomly selected at the gurdwara from the Granth Sahib can certainly do so without the presence of the newborn. This is done quite often by the father and grandparents of

the newborn because the mother and newborn are usually in the hospital.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of Amal and Sanjit, for example, who at the time of their child's birth were both permanently living in Helsinki, it was Sanjit's mother who went to a gurdwara in Delhi to perform the nam karan ceremony to obtain the starting letter for her Finnish-born grandchild's name. Once she had received the letter via the hukam, she informed her son in Finland by calling him. After having received the phone call from the Indian subcontinent, Sanjit and Amal sat down in their home in Finland and chose a name starting with the letter that had been forwarded to them. What is interesting about this case, when seen in the context of the larger body of literature on life-cycle rituals as performed by immigrants, is that in this case the ritual was not performed entirely in the country of residence nor in the sending country, but in a truly transnational manner. Sanjit and Amal's case illustrates how people are flexible agents who modify rituals practices to their needs (see also Myrvold 2004: 156ff.). It further demonstrates that geographical proximity is not a necessary prerequisite for the joint performance of rituals.

To return to Balveer's argument, however, whereas it is clear that hospital requirements do not explain why he and his wife stopped performing the nam karan ceremony for their children, it can be assumed that Balveer's and his wife's motives were similar to those of Jaipreet, who explained that he and his wife did not perform the naming ceremony for their children because they 'wanted to be able to choose the names [themselves] without being restricted to simply one particular letter.' Examining Balveer's account more closely reveals how Sikh parents living in Yuba City still fear that their children run the risk of being teased or harassed by others because of a different-sounding name. In order to reduce this risk, Balveer and his wife made a strategic choice (see Gerhards and Hans 2009: 1106) by giving their children Sikh names that they believed would sound less exotic to non-Sikh ears. Having a different sounding name might have been especially difficult in times when the number of Sikh students in Yuba City's schools was much smaller than it is now. Livdeep's statement, in which he reflects on the period when he attended school in the late 1950s, suggests this:

I think for many years I was conscious, subconscious about my name, I use it proudly today, but what happened then is you were not made different, but you felt different. So, if you are feeling different, you try to be like other people; you dress very much like they do, and you wanted to have the same food, and you did not speak your language at all.

It is perhaps also for this reason – the desire to fit in more easily in the wider society – that some Sikhs in Yuba City prefer to anglicise their original Sikh names, a practice that was already observed by Leonard (1992: 196) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One option is to simply come up with a nickname of the original Sikh name. Applying this approach, Harminders would call themselves 'Harry', Satwinders 'Sat' or 'Sam' and so forth. But there are also those cases in which American non-Sikhs try to anglicise the name of Sikhs,

7 Jaipreet, email conversation (October 19, 2010).

most likely for reasons of simplicity concerning spelling and pronunciation. But as the following case outlined by Satwinder demonstrates, for some it may be very important to maintain their original names with which they identify:

When I came here, my supervisor was a lady and she said, 'What is your name?', and I said '[Satwinder] Singh' and she said, 'Oh, not in this lifetime can I pronounce it', and she says, 'What can I call you?', and [she] asked if she can call me 'Sam' or something like that, and I said, 'You know, I would prefer you to call me [Satwinder], and if you cannot call me by my first name, then you can call me [Sat] because that is what my parents, and brothers, and sisters, and uncles call me.'

On the whole, the accounts examined in this paragraph illustrate the important role that practices performed in relation to the choosing and giving of names play in the process through which people claim or are ascribed a position in the larger socio-cultural fields in which they are embedded. They also draw attention to how, as a consequence of immigration, the performance of ritualistic practices needs to be adjusted in order to accommodate the interest and needs of those who are performing them.

### *Weddings*

Although a few male Sikhs I know of have married non-Sikh Finns, Sikh immigrants living in Finland usually look for a spouse from India.<sup>8</sup> Sikhs living outside of the Punjab, including those in Helsinki and in Yuba City, often see this practice as an effective strategy to ensure the continuation of the intergenerational transfer of their linguistic, religious and cultural traditions (See Gibson 1988a: 170; Ballard 2008: 61). This is because those who have been growing up in India are assumed to have mastered these traditions better than those who have been raised outside of the original homeland. Further, in the case of Finland, the number of unmarried Sikhs of marriageable age of both sexes is rather small and thus local Sikhs looking for a 'suitable'<sup>9</sup> spouse candidate do not have much choice but to arrange their marriage in a transnational manner by searching outside of their country of residence. Kamalpreet is one of those Sikh men who immigrated as an unmarried man to Finland and who later on found his wife from India with the help of his family.

8 I only know of one case in which the spouse came from the UK.

9 There are several factors that determine whether persons are considered suitable candidates for marriage, such as educational background, physical appearance, caste affiliation, and the reputation of the family (See Mand 2005: 410). Harleen and her husband, who moved from India to Yuba City as a married couple in 1975 and who are now in their sixties, explained to me in the course of the interview that the person whom they would consider to be a suitable spouse for their children would be someone 'from the community with a nice social status, and well educated people.'

The day I met Kamalpreet in his restaurant for the first time, our Finnish-language interview was interrupted a couple of times by Kamalpreet's cell phone, whose ring tone is a serene Punjabi song.<sup>10</sup> The first time, it was Kamalpreet's fiancée Rasleen calling from India to congratulate him on his birthday, as he explained to me later. Kamalpreet had a brief conversation with her that was in places accompanied by happy smiles. These transnational conversations made via cell phone, which also include calls he makes on an almost daily basis to his parents in India, cost Kamalpreet monthly about 400 euros on average, as he explains. But for many of the Sikhs whom I met in Finland, these phone calls are an essential means of staying connected to loved ones living on the Indian subcontinent or elsewhere in the diaspora.

Ten minutes later, the phone is ringing again and it is Kamalpreet's brother, whom I know from the local gurdwara, who wants to talk to me. Since he does not know any English or Finnish, we converse through my basic Hindi skills. He invites me to join them for dinner that evening at his and his brother's home, and half an hour later I find myself sitting on the back of a brightly coloured racing motorcycle with food bags taken from the restaurant's kitchen placed between me and the driver Kamalpreet, who skilfully manoeuvres the bike through Helsinki's after-work traffic. Once we reach the one-bedroom apartment that he and his brother share, I take a seat on the white leather couch. On the shelf of the opposite wall I see a few photographs from Kamalpreet's family taken in front of their childhood home in India. I also spot a picture of the Taj Mahal as well as the Golden Temple in Amritsar hanging on the wall. These were all found in many other Sikh homes I visited, in both Finland and California, and they serve as visual reminders of the occupants' religious affiliation and cultural background.

Sipping on the mango juice I have been offered, I ask Kamalpreet if he can show me a picture of his future bride. In response, I receive a thick picture album to look at. The photographs collected in the album show Kamalpreet and Rasleen's exchange of rings<sup>11</sup> which they performed during Kamalpreet's visit to India a couple of months earlier. The photographs documenting the event not only function as a means of holding on to an important moment in their lives, but were also used to prove to Finnish immigration officials that their marriage is 'real', and not a marriage of convenience, as Kamalpreet explains. During Kamalpreet's stay in India, he and his fiancée also married in an Indian court. As one of my informants in Finland explained to me, in the past, people in India usually only held a religious ceremony when they married, but increasingly they also want have a civil ceremony.<sup>12</sup> Kamalpreet

10 Contemporary cell phones offer a wide array of symbolic means by which people can display their cultural backgrounds. Both in Yuba City and in Finland, I noticed that many of my informants had installed Bollywood or bhangra songs as ring tones on their phones, while some had chosen a spiritual ring tone. The general ring tone of one of my informants in Yuba City was a country version of the song 'I am proud to be an American', which she had chosen because it was her favourite song.

11 The ring ceremony is a practice that has been adopted in Punjab's cities under the influence of Western traditions (Myrvold 2004: 161).

12 Phone conversation with Sanjit (September 17, 2012).

and Rasleen got married in court in order to ease and speed up the process of applying for Rasleen's residence permit so that she could join her husband in Finland immediately after the performance of the religious wedding ceremony in India a couple of months later.

From a legal point of view, the civil marriage in India transformed Kamalpreet and Rasleen into husband and wife. Moreover the performance of the ring ceremony, which looks like a wedding reception to Finnish immigration officials, should visually help to verify this fact. But from the perspective of the actual participants, as Kamalpreet elaborates while I turn over the pages of his wedding album, the civil marriage is not seen to represent the 'proper' marriage ceremony. Rather, he himself considers both the ring ceremony and the civil marriage to be part of the engagement ceremony. Consequently, Rasleen did not follow the Indian tradition that expects a newly wed bride to move in with her husband and/or his family after marriage.<sup>13</sup> Instead, she continued to live with her own family until what they considered to be the 'proper' wedding ceremony, namely the religious marriage ceremony, which was performed at a gurdwara in India about a year later.<sup>14</sup>

Rasleen's and Kamalpreet's case can be seen to serve as an empirical example of how certain cultural traditions, in this case the preference of Sikhs to marry within the Sikh community, may actually foster transnational activities among individuals with a migration background.<sup>15</sup> While in Finland the majority of Sikhs marry Sikhs from India, the marriage practices observed amongst Sikhs in California are more diverse. This is especially true in the case of Sikhs who were born and raised in the United States. Although some of them still travel to India to find their spouses, there are others who marry either non-Sikh Americans or Sikhs who live in the United States or in other, preferably English-speaking, countries within the diaspora.

Balveer's case provides an interesting example for the latter and also highlights some of the dynamics that have shaped his marriage. Balveer, who is now in his forties, grew up in Yuba City, 'getting the best of both cultures' according to his own words. As a teenager, he was the typical American boy, played basketball and football and dated 'the hottest looking girl from high school' in his opinion, he adds with a smile. His parents let him live his own life as long as he was honest with them and informed them of his whereabouts. But then one of his siblings entered a marriage that brought disgrace to Balveer's family. The marriage was considered to be inappropriate

13 Since Rasleen was still waiting for official documents to legally enter Finland, she could not move in with Kamalpreet who was living in Finland, but she could have moved in with Kamalpreet's family in India.

14 La Brack (1988: 324) observed similar cases in his study of Sikhs in Yuba City.

15 Further, Rasleen's and Kamalpreet's case would seem to suggest that the prospect of migration influences the ways in which people in India perform practices related to marriage today. Instead of only performing the religious ceremony related to marriage, people are also eager to have a civil marriage through which they receive the papers that legally transform them into husband and wife in the legal system of other countries. But this would need to be studied in more detail.

according to the norms prevailing in Yuba City's Sikh community, since it involved a spouse who was not of the same religious background. As Opinderjit Kaur Takhar (2005: 186) points out, marriages with spouses of a different caste or religion are considered to damage the family's *izzat*. Balveer remembers well how this was an emotionally tough time for his family, and for his father in particular. To console him, Balveer told his father that he should not worry, and promised him that he would 'marry an Indian girl. I will make you proud!' Balveer's father did not believe his son and decided to test him, telling him to 'pick up the phone and tell the girl you are seeing that it is over.' And so Balveer picked up the phone and called his non-Sikh girlfriend whom he had been dating for some years and told her that their relationship was over. 'Whatever happened to me', he says, 'it did not matter to me', underscoring the importance he ascribed to his family's wellbeing.

Balveer eventually married a Sikh woman with an Indian background from another English speaking country. Taking a closer look at the manner in which he, and not his parents, found his wife is revealing, as it provides insights into his intentions to accommodate the expectations of both the cultural frameworks in which he grew up. The story of how Balveer found his wife began when he visited one of his female friends, where he happened to see a photograph of a young woman. 'Who is that?' he asked, and his friend told him the woman's name and that she lived in another country where a larger number of Sikhs have settled. As Balveer explained:

'Call her!' I said, and sure enough she calls her. I did not take into consideration the time difference, so it was in the middle of the night or morning over there, and I was like, 'Ask for her' and she asked for her and I try talking to her and she hangs up. I say, 'Call again' and I was trying to talk to her, make conversation, and she said that her brother is going to beat me up, and I was 'This is the type of girl I need!', you know, and she hung up! And I was, '[...] this one needs a rebound.' So I did it again, and I said 'Just hear me out, [...] my dad and my sister are coming to [the country you live in] for a wedding, can my sister just pop by to see you?'

Balveer evidently admired the young woman for her proper attitude, which he saw as evidence of her upbringing in a family that taught traditional Indian values, according to which 'decent' unmarried young women were supposed to demand respect from strange men and rely on their brothers for their protection (see Walton-Roberts 2010: 335). Nevertheless, the girl agreed to meet Balveer's sister, and soon after they had met, he began to plan his own trip. In the company of some relatives, including his mother, sister, uncle and cousin, he made the journey across the Atlantic in order to personally meet the woman whom until then he had only seen in a photograph and to whom he had only spoken to on the phone. Making this visit to a possible future bride's home in the company of family members demonstrates that Balveer was willing to follow, at least partly, the traditional Indian protocol for how to make matches between spouses. In doing so, it could be argued, he strategically compensated for his initial act of brazenness in independently establishing contact with the girl in question.

A few weeks before his departure, Balveer's family arranged in their

home an akhand path, in other words an uninterrupted reading of the Guru Granth Sahib, during which many visitors were present including his grandparents.<sup>16</sup> During this event, Balveer's grandmother took him into the backyard and gave him instructions for his upcoming journey abroad by providing him with a moral map of how to behave, saying: 'You are going to go there, you see this girl and you are going to get married. You are the one who called, and now you are not going to disrespect anybody in that family!' At that time, Balveer was worried that this was indeed what would happen during his visit. But the moment he met his future wife, he says, 'We fell in love, it was love at first sight.' They talked for the whole evening in her room, and when after midnight both of their parents were calling them to come down to eat something, Balveer swore to himself that he would not leave the girl's house before a member of her family offered him a traditional sweet that would symbolically seal their engagement.

Analyzing Balveer's actions regarding his own marriage, it appears that they were motivated by his desire to please his family, including his grandmother who had made him aware of his responsibility to do so. Most importantly, Balveer decided to marry a woman, who due to her Punjabi Sikh background, fulfilled at least some of the criteria that his family as well as other Sikhs living in Yuba City associate with an understanding of what constitutes a 'suitable' partner. Through this marriage, it can be assumed that Balveer helped to at least partially to cement the crack that his sibling's 'unsuitable' relationship had brought to the family's reputation. At the same time, however, it can be argued that Balveer's account reveals how he managed to successfully accommodate 'Western' ideas concerning marriage, including the assumption that a person has the right to freely choose his or her spouse (see Ballard 2008: 48) and that this choice should be motivated by love. In this vein, Balveer made his marital liaison not only acceptable in the eyes of the Sikh community and his family, but also in the eyes of his American non-Sikh friends and colleagues.

This case study demonstrates how young Sikhs growing up in California encounter situations in which they must choose to position themselves within one of the two cultural systems in which they have been raised. Especially when they start to think about marriage, young Sikhs who have been raised outside the Punjab may feel torn between cultural expectations concerning their behaviour and the question of what they themselves want from life. Thirty-year-old Jas, for instance, who like Balveer grew up in Yuba City, said that as a young woman she was the 'rebellious one' in her family, who kept pushing her family with questions such as 'How come my friends can do it, when I can't?' When I asked her whether the experience of being pulled in two cultural directions had turned her into a more self-reflexive person, Jas gave me the following reply in which she explains the reasons why she feels that this is the case:

16 When Balveer mentioned this in the interview I did not intervene to ask why they arranged it. But I assumed from the context, that in organising this religious event the family might have been motivated by their need to cope with the feeling of shame brought upon them by Balveer's sibling's relationship.

Yeah, I think so. Looking back, [...] for being where I am in my life now, I am kind of glad I was torn, [...] I did not let one culture affect me too much, [...] I did not allow them to push me in one direction or in the other, where it is like I have a stable ground now between east and west, it is because the things I went through, the things I experienced, the choices I made, I think that I am a better person, you got it?

Balveer's account also reminds us that transnational practices do not need to take place only between the sending and the receiving country, which in this case would be India and the United States, but can also include other countries in which migrants from the same country of origin and/or same religious affiliation have settled. In the case of Yuba City, many such transnational marriages within the global Sikh community take place between Sikhs living in California and Sikhs living in Canada or the UK. Thus in Yuba City, marriage practices have linked a great number of Sikh families across the national borders of several countries and have created family trees with a strong transnational character. According to Raveena, who was one of my informants in Yuba City, women who have been raised in the UK are valued for their more traditional Indian upbringing, which derives from assumptions regarding their more frequent visits to India, enabled by the relative proximity of India to the UK.

Transnational marriage arrangements not only increase Sikhs' involvement in social networks that reach across national borders, but can also be seen as a consequence of these networks. This becomes evident in such statements as that by Harmeet, who helped to arrange the marriage of her oldest daughter with a Sikh man from Canada. As Harmeet's husband explains, in the Sikh community it is often the women who take care of this task. Harmeet's description of how she approached the family of her daughter's future spouse supports the argument that marriage arrangements across national borders follow Sikhs' pre-existing transnational networks. Harmeet explained: 'This young man, I communicated with his folks, and said that I found out from a distant cousin that you have a son who is in a marriageable age [...].'

Harmeet's daughter eventually married the man from Canada and, as in the case of Balveer, her wedding took place at one of the gurdwaras in Yuba City. According to Harmeet, her daughter's wedding at the gurdwara was a huge event with about a thousand guests attending. Often, participants in transnational marriages decide to hold the wedding celebrations in both of the countries from which the spouses come. During the course of my fieldwork in Yuba City, I had the chance to attend a wedding reception party in which such a transnational matrimonial liaison was being celebrated. A photo slide show on display throughout the evening visually demonstrated that the couple, consisting of a Sikh man from Yuba City and a Sikh woman from India, had already performed their religious wedding ceremony at a gurdwara in India. The decision to celebrate a wedding in a transnational manner may be one means by which couples want to ensure that relatives from both sides are able to join at least one of the celebrations (see also Purkayastha 2005: 76ff.). Migrants and their family members are not always free to move across borders as freely as they would wish, but may have to

deal with travel restrictions. Such travel restrictions prevented, for example, the participation of the bride's mother in the aforesaid wedding reception, when American officials did not grant her the necessary visa. This incident highlights how in a globalised world, national laws still constrain the movements of many people and thus have an impact on the formation of transnational practices (Gardner and Grillo 2002: 182).

### *Retirement, the Question of Return and the Experience of 'Going Back'*

In Finland, there are not yet many Sikh immigrants who have reached the age of retirement. But the few persons whom I know have responded to the dilemma of whether or not to return to India for good in a way that resembles the decisions made by many European, including Finnish-born, pensioners who, when eager to escape unpleasant weather conditions in their home countries, migrate to regions with more pleasant weather, such as the southern parts of Spain. In a similar vein, retired Sikhs in Helsinki seem to prefer to avoid the harsh Finnish winter by moving like migratory birds for its duration to India, where they may stay with relatives or live in an apartment or house that they own. Relatively cheap fares and the possibility of direct flights from Finland to India increase the attractiveness of applying this back-and-forth movement through which they are able to return to India on a semi-permanent basis. In the following quote, Karamdeep, who is in his sixties, describes the phenomenon of Sikh retirees' seasonal migration in his own words:

Look, when the winter is too bad, old people cannot stand it in my opinion. Many Finnish people go to Spain and elsewhere, and Indians go to India in winter times and come back here to Finland in summer times. Most of the time he [the Sikh friend we are talking about] is here [in Finland], but for three to four months in winter he is there [in India]. Now [in January] he is in India but he will return after a couple of months. His family is here [...].

Similarly to Margaret Walton-Roberts' (2004: 92) findings in her study on Punjabi immigrants in Canada, Karamdeep's statement suggests that being close to one's children and grandchildren, who have settled down in the country to which their parents moved, is the most likely reason why some retired Sikhs avoid a final return to India and instead prefer to commute between the two countries in a seasonal rhythm. Another motive that might explain why Sikh immigrants avoid settling down for good in India, and instead prefer to follow a transnational lifestyle, is perhaps that they experience their home country today as a different place from the one they left behind. As scholars have pointed out, the idea of going home means for many a return to familiar things, yet 'one can not simply return home, because home also changes' (Johansson and Saarikangas 2009: 18). Formerly, familiar places and people undergo transformation during the migrants' absence, and the experience of this may render the return to the country of origin a complicated and sometimes painful experience. Jodh,

who migrated from India to Finland as a teenager and who is now in his thirties, experienced this during his holiday trips to Punjab:

Anyhow, it has changed quite a lot there from the time when we left and came here [to Finland]. People have changed, the friends, there are not the same friends anymore [...] they think we have changed, but in our opinion they have changed, because we do not get along the same way as before.

An elderly Sikh man with whom I spoke at the gurdwara responded to my question of whether he has intentions to return to India in the following manner: 'I am used to live here in Finland now. Also people in my village have changed, many whom I lived with back in the days have gone away, so living there would not be the same thing anymore.'<sup>17</sup> Not having witnessed this natural process of change on the ground and in real time can make it hard for those who have left to accept these transformations. In the eyes of those who have stayed behind, also those who left have changed in the course of their lifetimes spent abroad. The following conversation I had with Jodh and his friend at the pub they are working at highlights how those who remained in India can perceive migrants on their return visits. At the same time, the excerpt reveals how the Finnish customers, with whom Jodh is in daily contact due to his work behind the bar, identify him and his friend:

- Jodh                    [...] Here we are foreigners, and there we are foreigners, too! When ou go there, they always say that we are from 'there'.
- Laura                    'There', from Finland?
- Jodh                    Not necessarily from Finland, but from abroad. They are foreigners. So now we are nowhere, but in between.
- [...]
- Laura                    Is there some image in Punjab of the people who have left and went abroad? For example, that they earned a lot of money?
- Jodh                    Well, that is one, [...]. But they [in India] do not understand that if we work here [in Finland] for a year and then we go there for a month, of course we have to use the money then, because it is our holiday time. They do not understand this. They perhaps think that our life here [in Finland] is like how we live there.
- Friend:                They think that money is growing on the trees [here in Finland].
- [...]
- Jodh                    Yes, exactly. They do not know that here [in Finland there] is nothing else than work.
- Laura                    Yes, I can imagine that this is difficult.
- Jodh                    [Says something in Punjabi]
- Friend                [translates what Jodh says] He said that we are not Indian, not Punjabi, and not Finnish. It is like [we are living] in our own world. When we go there [to India], they think we are foreigners.

17 Field notes Laura Hirvi (March 23, 2008).

- Jodh            But they know, somehow they immediately understand [that we are from abroad]...
- Friend        They ask us: 'When do you go back?' And here [in Finland] they ask: 'What are you doing here?'

Thus immigrants returning to the places they have left behind might experience a feeling of alienation. These practices of exclusion which Jodh experiences not only in the receiving but also in the sending country contribute to the growth of a diaspora consciousness amongst Sikhs living outside of India that may reflect itself in a feeling of being 'here and there', or 'nowhere, but in between', as Jodh puts it himself. The cases discussed here suggest that feelings of alienation arise from being identified as someone who lives abroad and from the experience that former friends have turned into strangers.

Jodh's parents, too, went through such an experience when, after retiring in Finland, they decided to move to a house they had built in India for this purposes. After having lived for about a year in Punjab without getting along with the paternal family members living nearby, Jodh's parents decided to move back to Finland. This meant that they had to leave the country they loved, but in exchange, as Jodh explains, they were able to be close to the people whom they loved, namely their children and grandchildren living in Finland. In retrospect, Jodh regrets that he and his family had put so much money into the building of a house in India, and nowadays he discourages his friends from investing money into building homes in India, a practice that he now considers a mistake.

Building houses in the country of origin that are in many cases empty for most of the time, or making significant improvements to houses already built, are practices that have been documented in numerous studies focusing on migrant groups (see for e.g. Dalakoglou 2009). In his study on Mexicans living in New York, sociologist Robert C. Smith (2006:198) argues that these houses not only serve to provide immigrants and their descendants with a home during holidays in the country of origin, but also serve as tangible proof of immigrants' 'hard work and virtue'. Other scholars have interpreted that these homes can be seen to embody the message of immigrants' success abroad (Brettell 2003:64). In the case of Punjabis, such homes can be seen as a means of increasing the family's *izzat* (Mooney 2011:204). Following an interpretation offered by Laura Huttunen (2006:75), the urge and interest to impress people living in the former home country can be also seen as an indication that migrants still consider themselves to be part of the social system there.

In Finland, the continuous seasonal back and forth movement to and from India seems to be a feasible option for retired Sikhs. But for Yuba City's Sikh pensioners, the scenario of spatial arrangements appears to be different. The people I met and heard about in the course of my fieldwork prefer to stay put in California, and only travel occasionally to India to spend a couple of weeks there. One explanation for this different 'location strategy' (Coulun and Wolff 2010:3319) could be that unlike their Finnish counterparts, retired Sikhs in California have no harsh winter from which to flee. Further, not only

is the weather of Yuba City similar to that of the Punjab, but also the cultural landscape, with its gurdwaras and religious as well as cultural events, by now resembles very much the one they once left, thus perhaps reducing the need to travel to India in order to ease the feeling of homesickness. Another reason why elderly people shy away from regularly commuting between the two countries is that the journey from California to India is much longer and more expensive when compared to that from Finland. Not only retirees but also other Sikhs who collaborated in this study, mentioned this reason when explaining why they did not visit India on a more regular basis.

Kundan, who is in his forties and who at the time of our interview explained that he had visited the Punjab the last time more than ten years ago, assured me that he and his family ‘would love to go back, but that the trip for his whole family is expensive and in addition also quite long: ‘It is a 22-hour flight, and so it is just hard to, just say I’ll go for a vacation because it is a long haul and if you go there, you need to go for a good three to four weeks.’ But getting such an extended break from work is hard in the American work system, and also the only school holiday for children which is that long is in the summer time, when it is too hot to go to the Punjab, as Kundan explains. From October to March is considered by Sikh living outside of India to be the best time to travel to Punjab, as my findings in Helsinki and Yuba City reveal.

Satnam, who came to Yuba City when he was around thirteen years old, and is now in his late forties, is fond of the idea of maintaining a transnational lifestyle on a regular basis for reasons that he highlights below. In the following excerpt, he describes why he considers the regular visits to India to be important for him and his family, including his children:

- |        |  |
|--------|--|
| Laura  | Do you still go often to India? Do you still have family there?  |
| Satnam | First time I came here in 1973. I never went back until 1990. I was here seventeen years, and since then I’ve been going every five years, and the last five years I’ve been going every year.   |
| Laura  | And the reason for that?   |
| Satnam | Well, I always thought about doing it, if I can financially, if I can live here six, seven months, and then two, three months over there. That is my goal, [to combine] what is good over there and here. So I built me a house up there [in India], took my family [there for the] last three years. We teach the kids [...] what we got here [in California] and what we got over there [in India]. That is a good lesson for them.  |
| Laura  | What are the good sides about India?   |
| Satnam | I think here [in the US], you know, you get everything at the same time. Everybody wants more and more all the time. There is never a real satisfaction, you can have this nice car and then you want another one, It is a never ending story. Up there [in India] I think, for me, plus, it is my blood too, I was born there, I want to roam those streets [where I used to play] when I was a little kid, when I went to school. So it was always in my blood, so life is a lot slower over |

there, [...] so I am enjoying it. I want to have both sides, plus I can do it now, the last four to five years financially [...].

As becomes clear, Satnam still feels closely attached to the place where he used to live as a child and he wants his children to be aware of both cultural worlds that he sees as framing their lives. But like many other Sikhs in Yuba City and in Helsinki who reflect on their visits to the Punjab, Satnam expresses in the interview his irritation about the fact that in India he is not viewed as a local. Similar findings also emerge from a study on second-generation South Asian Americans conducted by sociologist Bandana Purkayastha (2005: 72). In the following excerpt, Satnam gives an example of a situation in which he tries to claim a certain identity position, but is denied the right to do so because of his external habitus:

- Laura            Do they recognise you? There is a word for Indians living outside of India.
- Satnam         No, I do not know what it is called. But you know, I think we give it away when we speak. We speak really good Punjabi, right, but with 'ok, yes, right' there.. He can tell the way you dress, that you are not, you know, one of the locals or from there. I was in the Taj Mahal, right, a couple of years ago, and we were staying in the line, and if you were a foreigner, you had to pay 700 Rupees, right, and if you are a local, you only have to pay twenty Rupees, which is only a few cents. And we are standing in line, and I am 'Hey, I am Indian'. So I was trying, so we bought the tickets twenty rupees each, and even though I tried to tell my brother and his friend to keep it down, because when they speak, they give it away, saying 'okay' or and saying some slang, [but the guards at the entrance] would not let us in, and I told them, 'This is me, and I live in this [Indian] state, and this is my home city,' and [the guard] said, 'If you live here, show us some kind of documents,' (*laughs*) and I did not have any documents [...] So it was an experience, and we had to buy the 700 rupee tickets in order to get in.

Discussing the issues of 'going back', it can be noted that based on the interviews I conducted in Yuba City, it appears that some of the Sikhs who came to California as immigrants initially still cherished the hope of returning to India for good one day. But the following excerpt taken from an interview with retiree Prem, who came to Yuba City as an adult together with his wife and who is now in his late sixties, illustrates how the thought of returning to India may in the course of time fade and finally vanish, making the option of a final return to India eventually unimaginable:

- Prem            [The] first two years, I wanted to make a little money and then go back. Four to five years over here, I said, 'Let me retire

- and then we go'. And then after seven eight years, after we established ourselves – India? Forget it. Because after living so much here now, we are more on this side than over there. [...] After spending thirty plus years [here in America], I have established myself so much. I have more friends in the local community; I also have Sikh friends, they are all my community. [...] I am more on this side now. [...]
- Laura            So you have become more American?
- Prem             Oh, yeah, we are American. And I am proud to be American. That is true.

To summarise, in the case of Sikh pensioners in Finland, and to some extent also in California, the question whether or not to return permanently to the country in which they were born has become obsolete. This is because their geographic location, paired with present-day modes of transportation, allow them to live lives in which they are able to realise both their desire to spend time in the country in which they grew up as well as their wish to be close to their descendants living in the country to which they migrated. Thus for some retired immigrants the opportunity of transnational mobility has eliminated the need to address the question of whether or not to finally return to the country of origin. In the case of retired Sikhs in the United States, however, the distance between India and California makes the option of a seasonal, two-sited 'here and there' lifestyle less feasible. In transnational practices, geographic location matters.

### *Bringing the Ashes Back*

I now take a closer look at the practices surrounding the natural end of the human life-cycle. Religious studies scholar Kristina Myrvold (2011: 76ff.; see also Myrvold 2006: 198ff.), for example, provides interesting insights into how the national legislative context has forced Sikhs in Sweden to modify ritualistic practices surrounding death. For example, instead of cremating a deceased Sikh in the open air, as would be the custom in India, security regulations in Sweden force Sikhs to place the deceased into a coffin and to perform the cremation in a crematorium (2011: 76). However, at the time I gathered my research material, I did not pay particular attention to this topic and it only occurred to me in the aftermath how interesting it would have been to find out more about what immigrants do or plan to do when death enters their lives. In my ethnographic data I nevertheless recorded fragments that suggest the transnational forms taken by practices related to death in the lives of Sikh immigrants.

Almost exactly two years after our first interview with Kamalpreet and his wife in Helsinki, I met them again at their restaurant. In talking about his life, Kamalpreet told me that his father had recently passed away. One day they had received a phone call from India in which his mother informed him that their father was not doing well. Kamalpreet was able to exchange a few words with his father before he passed away later on the same day. Kamalpreet

and his wife immediately took a flight to India to take part in the funeral rituals. Had they lived in earlier times, when communication via phone was more restricted and travel more expensive, the news of their father's death would have reached them much later and their chances of participating in Kamalpreet's father's death rituals would have been much slimmer.

But what happens when immigrants die outside the country they once left? As the cases that came to my attention in Finland and California suggest, one option seems to be cremation in the host country, after which a relative takes the ashes back to India. This is what Ratangeet's family in Yuba City did when her grandfather died. Ratangeet, who was born in Yuba City and who is now in her thirties, explained in the interview that she has only visited India once in her life:

- Laura           And you said you went to India?  
 Ratangeet       Just once, in 200[X], I went there in 200[X].  
 Laura           What was the reason for going?  
 Ratangeet       Originally we were going to go because my grandpa had passed away a few months prior and we wanted to take his ashes [to India]. But my dad ended up going a couple of weeks earlier [than us], and took them. Then we came a couple of weeks later for a wedding, one of my uncles got married there.

How common this strategy of 'bringing back' ashes to India is among Sikhs living in the diaspora has yet to be researched.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

The Punjab still plays a significant role in the lives of many Sikhs in Helsinki and Yuba City, and in shaping their sense of self. On the other hand, as a consequence of migration, cultural practices can change as a response to structural constraints and the surrounding cultural context and may take on a transnational character. Thus, the ethnographic findings presented and analysed in this chapter provide a case study for 'transnationalism from below', where ordinary people are the principal actors in the making and maintaining of relationships that link people across the borders of particular nation-states (Al-Ali & Koser 2002: 2). The impact of the surrounding cultural context becomes evident in the case of Sikhs who have grown up in the US or Finland and who at the time of important life-cycle rituals such as weddings often seek to mediate between the various, and at times also conflicting, cultural influences in their lives. As a result, some Sikhs who have grown up with both a Sikh and American cultural background seem to strive toward 'hybrid' cultural practices in which they combine elements taken from the different cultural strands in their life. Prem, whom I interviewed in Yuba City together with his wife, described this interweaving of cultural practices as the 'western Indian way' of doing things.

As the empirical findings concerning Sikhs living in Finland presented

in this chapter show, in some cases the practices carried out in conjunction with particular life-cycle events may also take on a transnational character due to immigrants' desires to maintain traditional cultural practices in their new country of residence. In this way, not only the performance of the nam karan ceremony but also the search for a suitable spouse may assume a transnational character. I would argue that not only may rituals performed by immigrants and their descendants lead to a transnational division of ritual space where practices related to marriage, for example, are first performed in the country of residence and then in the country of origin or vice versa (see Salih 2002), but that at times, practices performed in relation to life-cycle rituals become transnationalised. By this I mean that practices related to rituals are performed in a truly transnational manner, across borders, in order to secure their continuity. The act of carrying out cultural practices in such a transnational manner can also be seen to strengthen what Deborah Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela (2002: 3) describe as a 'feeling of collective [...] unity, namely 'familyhood', [...] across national borders' that is needed to create a sense of being part of a transnational family.

In addition, in the case of Sikh immigrants in Finland, cheaper and faster modes of travel and communication seem to render obsolete the question whether or not to finally return to the country of origin. Instead, those Sikhs who have reached the age of retirement in Finland engage in a seasonal back-and-forth commute between the country of origin and the country of settlement. In contrast, retired Sikhs in Yuba City do not engage to a similar degree in such seasonal transnational mobility. Factors that discourage such behaviour are the longer distances and higher expenses related to the journey from California to India as well as a warm climate and a cultural landscape that resemble that of the Punjab.

Cultural practices concerning marriage have incorporated Sikh families into a network that traverses national boundaries, and it seems that for many Sikhs living in California especially the UK and Canada constitute significant nodes in this network. But in Finland, too, family networks stretch across national borders, generating a body of transnational activities that become especially evident at the moment when people participate in the performance of important life-cycle events. However, whereas individual Sikhs in Finland mentioned having relatives in Canada, Germany, Italy, or the UK, it seems that India is still the country that plays the most significant role in shaping the transnational family trees of Sikhs in Helsinki.

## 7 Final Reflections: The Art of Negotiating Identities

In a general sense, this study adds to our understanding of how practices performed in everyday life contribute to the process through which people negotiate their identities. By applying the 'identities in practice' approach paired with an analytical and theoretical framework derived from discussions surrounding 'diaspora' and 'transnationalism', this study illustrates some of the ways in which people try to constitute themselves in relation to multiple others, here or there, real or imagined. In examining the ways in which people dress, talk, or go about celebrating important events related to the life-cycle, this ethnography uncovers some of the moments that reveal the shifting, situational, mobile and fluid character assigned to the postmodern understanding of identities. At the same time, this research offers empirical insights, which bring to the fore how cultures are not finished objects but are in the process of constantly being made.

One purpose of this trans-Atlantic ethnographic study has been to reach a better understanding of the ways in which Sikhs migrate and for what reasons. Concerning the latter, it can be stated that the most frequently given explanation for why Sikhs decided to leave their country of birth to settle in the US or in Finland has been their wish to improve their families' standard of living by moving to a place that offers them better opportunities to pursue this goal. In the long run, it is hoped that this will also result in positioning the family higher in the hierarchies of the societies to which they feel they belong. Based on the accounts of Sikhs in Helsinki it appears that not only the United States but also Finland may from an immigrant's perspectives constitute a 'land of opportunities' in which one can achieve some sort of a European version of the 'American Dream'. In comparison to India, where corruption is seen to impede the efforts of climbing the social ladder, Sikhs consider Finland to be a country that offers equal opportunities to progress in life to all those who are willing to work hard.

Looking at the migration histories of Sikhs in Helsinki and Yuba City that are discussed in Chapter Two, it becomes clear that the migration histories differ from each other in certain respects but also display some similarities that also seem to apply to the migration histories of Sikhs living elsewhere in the diaspora. While Sikhs in Yuba City arrived in California more than a century ago, Sikhs in Finland have been living in their newly adopted home

country for less than thirty years. What both migration histories have in common, though, is that in both cases male Sikhs arrived first in the new country of settlement and after the male pioneers had established themselves in financial terms, their wives and children joined them, provided that the legal context in the new country of residence allowed them to do so. Indeed, the legal context appears to have a strong impact on the lives of immigrants and their families, and also affect their migration strategies. In both settings family networks as well as transnational marriage practices seem to play a crucial role in enabling the migration of Sikhs to California and Finland. Today, Sikhs who have become American citizens and are at least 21 years of age are able to file a petition to bring their parents and siblings to live in the United States. In Finland, the laws concerning family reunification are different, and it is not possible to file a petition for siblings or parents on the grounds of wishing to reunite the family. Thus, in the case of Finland, one means of supporting the migration of relatives who belong to the extended family network is to help them find work. Sikh immigrants may offer their relatives and friends a job in the restaurant sector, in which most male Sikh immigrants and also some female Sikhs living in Helsinki currently work.

One strategy for achieving the 'American/ European Dream', which seems to have motivated many Sikhs to leave a familiar place in exchange for settling down in a country that initially appears to be very strange, is to gain quick access to the local labour market and to invest in the education of their children. Looking at the work histories of Sikh pioneers in Yuba City and Helsinki, it becomes clear that the trajectories of how they positioned themselves in the local labour markets differ from each other. Whereas Sikh pioneers in Yuba City initially found employment in jobs related to farming, Sikh immigrants in Helsinki usually enter the local labour market through accepting jobs in the restaurant sector. Both fields are attractive as they do not demand any formal education and require few language skills in the dominant local language. Further, both sectors offer an avenue to rise from the lower ranked position of an employee to the more prestigious position of an entrepreneur, who has the capability to employ others, Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike, provided that the business runs well. In this vein, both the agricultural and the restaurant sector provide ways to increase a family's status in the communities that they consider play a meaningful role in their lives. However, Sikhs working in the restaurant sector seem to have a harder time to justify the kind of work they are doing with regard to their religious teachings than Sikhs in Yuba City who work in the field of agriculture, although this depends on what understanding of 'honest work' as promoted in Sikhism is being applied.

The second formulated aim of this ethnographic study has been to assess how the experience of migration affects people's daily lives. In order to do so, I have examined the process through which Sikh immigrants and their children negotiate their identities and how this is reflected in practices carried out in everyday life. As became clear, the kind of work someone is doing has an impact on the ways in which identities are being constituted. But also the concrete setting of the work place constitutes in Sikhs' daily life a platform where questions of belonging are negotiated in dialogue with

customers of colleagues. Besides practices that are carried out in relation to the realm of work, clothing and dress-related practices appear to play a central role in the process through which people seek to position themselves in relation to others. Hence, I have concentrated my analysis on the Sikh turban worn by male Sikhs and have explored the various layers of meanings that are ascribed to it. As became clear, the Sikh turban is significantly involved in the dialogic process through which the identities of Sikhs are fashioned. The turban provides the material grounds on which Sikhs as well as non-Sikhs ascribe identities to those Sikhs who both wear and do not wear the turban. In the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, the turban led to several cases of 'mistaken identity' in which Sikhs wearing a turban, which resembled that of Osama bin Laden, were taken to be his followers. As this study suggests, however, Sikhs living in Yuba City experienced solidarity and support from non-Sikh residents during this time.

What the analysis of dress and dressing practices suggests on a more abstract level is that at the core of identity negotiations seems to be the question of insider versus outsider. Who belongs to and constitutes 'us' (the Americans/ Finns/ Indians/ Sikhs or 'real Sikhs') and who belongs to 'them', the ones who are positioned outside of these imaginary spheres? Although these are the larger dynamics that seem to inform the negotiations of identities, which are reflected in practices related to dress, it appears that at the grassroots level many of the Sikhs with whom I spoke were eager to escape these clear-cut dichotomies. The desire to break free from pre-defined categories was more clearly communicated by those male and female Sikhs who created bricolage outfits reflecting their membership in more than one culture. It could be argued that through such acts of bricolage, Sikhs challenge the prevailing definitions that wish to delineate insider from outsider.

In addition to illustrating the significant role that dress plays in the process through which Sikhs fashion their identities, this study also sheds light on the impact that structural constraints have on the ways in which people are able to constitute themselves in relation to multiple others. In the case of Sikhs in Finland, for instance, the current political atmosphere in Finland, which may in part be reflected in statements made by members of the *True Finns* party, influences the process through which Sikhs in Finland use performative speech acts to describe their work ethic and claim a certain identity position for themselves. Sikhs in Yuba City use similar means to carve out a place for themselves in their adopted homeland, namely by making statements that stress the compatibility of Sikh virtues with those that are cherished in the larger society in which they live. In both cases, Sikhs' eagerness to stress their hard work ethic can be interpreted as a strategic tool through which they seek to position themselves closer to the image of the 'good immigrant' and the 'good Finn/ American' as defined by Finnish and American public discourse. In doing so Sikhs do not give up the values that stem from their cultural and religious backgrounds but instead inscribe them with a new layer of meaning to bring them in line with those virtues that are emphasised in their respective countries of settlement. Through this act of

re-interpretation, as expressed in their performative speech acts, Sikhs claim an identity position for themselves that cherishes their cultural and religious traditions, while at the same time transforming them in a way that would allow them to incorporate themselves into the wider societies of their new home countries.

Such identity-work is also present in the religious and cultural sites that have been established by Sikh immigrants in Helsinki and in even greater number by Sikhs living in Yuba City. As this study points out, one of the core purposes of such institutions is to help preserve cultural, religious and linguistic traditions in immigrants' new home countries while also supporting a process that seeks to pass them on to later generations of Sikhs growing up in Finland and California. For Sikhs in Helsinki, who in contrast to Sikhs in Yuba City live geographically scattered over a vast area, such cultural and religious sites are of specific importance as they help to bring the Sikh community together thus making the abstract idea of its existence more concrete for Sikh immigrants and their descendants alike. Especially for the latter these social-cultural venues provide a unique chance to experience with all five senses the texture of their parents' and forefathers' culture. In addition, these sites also play a pivotal role in the process through which immigrants as well as their children negotiate the content and meaning of their cultural and religious traditions and related practices, thus bringing to the fore the important role human beings as agents play in the shaping of cultures and the related frameworks of meanings.

This study has argued that especially practices that are conducted in relation to cultural and religious sites in Yuba City reveal the aspirations of local Sikhs to carve out a respected place for themselves in the wider society in which they live. Such an agenda does not entail the need to give up the maintenance of a distinct identity; instead Sikhs in Yuba City actively re-negotiate the definition of who Sikhs in America are and what kind of practices they may carry out in their everyday life – thus also influencing the general notion of who Americans are. In this sense Sikhs in Yuba City may be seen as creating what Avtar Brah (1996) has called a 'diaspora space' in which mobile persons intermingle with the 'the mainstream' to produce a state of cultural fission and fusion that leads to a transformation of traditions and that challenges given subject positions such as the 'native' or 'the immigrant'.

According to Brah (1996: 208) cultural fissure and fusion are at the heart of shaping various forms of 'transcultural identities'. The blending and mixing of cultural forms is also at stake in practices that Sikhs perform in relation to important life-cycle events. For those Sikhs who have been growing up in Yuba City and Helsinki, it seems that especially marriage constitutes a culmination point in the process through which they try to position themselves in relation to others. Whom to marry, in what manner, and on what grounds they should enter a matrimonial liaison are some of the issues with which Sikhs grapple and which they try to solve by using the cultural repertoires at hand. As this ethnographic study suggests, some young persons are skilful in finding ways to engage in the delicate act of mediating between the expectations originating from the different cultural systems in which they participate. Hence, the findings presented in this ethnographic

study can be seen to support Peggy Levitt's (2009: 1226) argument that immigrants' children who have been growing up in transnational households become skilful actors who master several cultural repertoires that they may selectively apply in response to the needs and challenges of a particular situation. At times, such acts of navigation may also result in the creation of new practices that can be seen to inform the shaping of the larger cultural matrix and thus contribute to the sort of transcultural identities described by Brah (1996).

The analysis of Sikh immigrants' marriage practices is also revealing with regard to how the immigration policies of a particular country may impact the ways in which the celebration of important life-cycle events are arranged. In the United States, for example, the difficulties of obtaining a tourist visa for relatives from India makes the idea of dividing the wedding festivities between two countries a feasible option, leading to a situation in which the religious part of the wedding may be performed in India while the wedding reception takes place in California, or the other way around. One of the more significant findings to emerge from my analysis of Sikh practices, as carried out in relation to life-cycle events is that the desire to preserve cultural practices and to maintain a distinct identity informs courses of action that may result in the transnationalisation of cultural and ritualistic practices. This leads to the creation of a transnational cultural space in which meanings, and also identities, are negotiated anew. This point is illustrated by the transnational practices that Sikh parents in Finland carry out with regards to the 'naming ceremony' through which they seek to obtain the letter with which their newborn baby's name should start.

Transnational practices do not only feature prominently at the time of birth, but also at the stage of retirement, when Sikhs choose a transnational lifestyle by following a seasonally bi-local arrangement, as in the case of many retired Sikhs in Finland. The possibility of carrying out such a transnational lifestyle paired with the fact that many immigrants have, at the time of retirement, children and grandchildren living in the new country of settlement are some of the factors that seem to make the question of a final return to the original home country complicated, if not obsolete. For retired Sikhs living in Yuba City, the idea of maintaining a transnational lifestyle that would be based on an annual back-and-forth movement between California and the US seems to be less common than in the case of Finland. This is due to the greater geographic distances between the US and India that makes travelling much more expensive and difficult, and due to the fact that in contrast to Finland, California has no harsh winter that retired Sikhs would need to escape for health-related reasons. Viewing migration through the analytical lens of transnationalism is in line with ideas presented in Deborah Bryceson's and Ulla Vuorela's (2002) work on transnational families, in which they argue that to grasp the experiences of immigrants it is not sufficient to frame the lives of immigrants in terms of a nostalgic orientation towards the past, as often seems to be the case with diaspora-oriented studies. Rather, the researcher should also pay attention to the transnational dimension that is often present in the lives of immigrants. Focusing on transnationalism, Bryceson and Vuorela (2002: 6) point out, allows a researcher to highlight

‘individuals’ negotiations between movement and staying put, between different levels of loyalties and their orientation to past, present and future.’

What became especially clear in the analysis presented in Chapter Six is with what ease, as a matter of course, many Sikhs in Yuba City and in Helsinki incorporate in their everyday life transnational practices. Punjab, and for some others India more generally, functions for sure as a central node in this transnational network that seems to grow and ebb away with the people who are part of it. Due to different migration histories, which in many cases are related to transnational marriage arrangements, the imagined map of transnational Sikh families often also comprises a number of other countries that are meaningful nodes because relatives or friends are living there. Important life-cycle events constitute important moments that motivate people to travel across borders and to participate as bodily human beings in a process that brings the idea of a transnational family alive for a moment.

Future research on Sikh immigration could delve further into the formation of Sikh transnational identities in an online setting. In particular, such studies could focus on exploring what role the Internet and especially social media play in the shaping of the identities of young Sikhs for whom online activities form an important part of their everyday lives. Of particular interest would be to examine in more detail what role the Internet plays in the lives of young female Sikhs who, in contrast to their male peers, often have to deal in their offline lives with stricter expectations concerning their behaviour. My fieldwork suggests that for them social networking sites such as Facebook may provide a secret retreat that offers them a protected arena in which they can play with their identities, provided that they can protect this play from the gaze of relatives and the larger Sikh community.

In the context of Finland, further research is needed that would scrutinise more closely how the experiences of those Sikhs who come as highly skilled immigrants desired by the Finnish government differ from those of Sikhs who lack such an educational background. Such research would do well to ask: Who belongs to this group? Which parts of India do they come from? how long do they stay in Finland? With whom do they mingle in their everyday lives? How do they perceive their relationship to the country they are living in? In the context of Yuba City, future research could focus in more detail on exploring the experiences of elderly Sikhs. What do they think of everyday life in Yuba City today? What were their motives for migration? Looking back, what do they think about the changes in their lives caused by the decision to leave India in order to immigrate to the United States? Where do elderly Sikhs live and with whom? What role do they play in the household? What meanings do transnational activities have in their lives? Exploring these issues in more detail could help to enrich our understanding of the social and cultural worlds immigrants inhabit and how they are created, shaped and transformed as a consequence of human mobility.

What many of the accounts, as told by Sikhs in Helsinki as well as in Yuba City, seem to have in common is that they contain descriptions of selected moments in which people have skilfully manoeuvred through the cultural options available to them. Many of the Sikhs whom I interviewed for this

study often seemed eager to avoid making either-or choices and instead sought to figure out ways to accommodate both cultural worlds in an effort to avoid possible conflict. It appears that there are two types of strategies Sikhs apply with the intention of creating a harmonious solution that would unite the demands, expectations and wishes that stem from the multiple lifeworlds of which they are a part. One approach is to *add to the body of cultural values and traditions a new layer of meaning* that makes them appropriate in the new context of settlement and transforms them into useful tools, allowing people to craft positive identity positions for themselves. The other tactic, which especially Sikhs who have been growing up in California or Finland seem to apply, is to create a body of new, hybrid cultural practices in acts of bricolage and blending that pay tribute to Sikh traditions while at the same time acknowledging the cultural texture of the larger society in which they are living. So instead of merely reproducing the cultural practices of one specific cultural reference point, they *create new practices that interlace elements from their cultural traditions with those emerging from the new context of settlement*, thus signalling their belonging to multiple socio-cultural worlds. The performances of transnational practices in everyday life speak for similar intentions, which ultimately subvert dominant distinctions between here and there, old or new home country, native or immigrant.

This study highlights the dialectic of structure and practice, and enhances our understanding of how migration can function to accelerate cultural change, when immigrants and their descendants function as agents who participate in the shaping of the cultural worlds that surround and inform their everyday lives. Tavleen, who moved to Yuba City as an adult and who is now in her forties, expresses her consciousness of the power she sees related to human agency by saying: 'I think it is the people themselves who make all those rules. We can blame the culture, we can blame the atmosphere, whatever, but it is up to the people to change it [...]'. Migration produces conditions that promote simultaneously an interest in maintaining social and cultural practices as well as in transforming them. Both the maintenance and transformation of practices can be seen to stem from an urge toward intelligibility: to create identities that make sense both to the persons who are enacting them and to the others around them. Based on this study, I suggest that we consider the practice of negotiating identities to constitute an art in itself.

# Glossary

Punjabi words appearing often in the text are only written in italics when being mentioned for the first time and are not italicised thereafter.

<i>Akhand path</i>	Uninterrupted reading of the Guru Granth Sahib
<i>Amrit</i>	The 'nectar of immortality' used in the initiation of Sikhs
<i>Amrit sanskar</i>	Rite through which Sikhs are initiated into the Khalsa.
<i>Amritdhari</i>	Someone who has taken amrit and has thus been initiated into the Khalsa and wears the five Ks.
<i>Ardas</i>	Prayer said at the ending of congregational worship.
<i>Barfi</i>	Indian type of sweet
<i>Bhangra</i>	Popular Punjabi music and dance style
<i>Chai</i>	Black tea with milk and spices, typical drink in India
<i>Chunni</i>	Scarf
<i>Dal</i>	Lentils
<i>Dasam Granth</i>	Scripture attributed to Guru Gobind Singh's court
<i>Dastar</i>	Turban
<i>Desi</i>	Refers to something or someone who is from the Indian subcontinent.
<i>Dharam</i>	Duty
<i>Diwali</i>	Important Indian holiday at the end of October or beginning of November. Sikhs participate in Diwali to celebrate the release of their sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind, from prison.
<i>Five Ks</i>	Five items that all start with the letter k and that initiated Sikhs must wear.
<i>Ghi</i>	Clarified butter
<i>Giddah</i>	Punjabi dance style for women
<i>Gori</i>	Punjabi word for 'white'
<i>Gurdwara</i>	Sikh religious place of worship
<i>Gurmukhi</i>	Language in which the Guru Granth Sahib is written
<i>Guru</i>	Spiritual guide
<i>Guru Granth Sahib</i>	Holy scripture
<i>Hukam</i>	Random opening of the Guru Granth Sahib that

<i>Izzat</i>	is considered to be a divine order Honour
<i>Jura</i> <i>Jutti</i>	Knot in which long hair is tight on top of head. Shoe
<i>Kaccha</i>	Cotton undergarment, one of the five Ks
<i>Kangha</i>	Wooden comb, one of the five Ks
<i>Kara</i>	Bracelet, one of the five Ks
<i>Kathavachaks</i>	Professional preachers
<i>Kaur</i>	'Princess', Sikh last name for females.
<i>Kes</i>	'Hair', one of the five Ks
<i>Khalistan</i>	'Country of the Khalsa', proposed name for an independent Sikh state
<i>Khalsa</i>	Community of initiated Sikhs, established by Guru Gobind Singh
<i>Khanda</i>	Important symbol in Sikhism
<i>Khande di pahul</i>	Initiation ceremony through which Sikhs become Amritdharis.
<i>Khira</i>	Indian milk dessert
<i>Kirat karo</i>	Work!
<i>Kirpan</i>	Sword, one of the five Ks
<i>Kirtan</i>	Singing of hymns
<i>Kurta pajama</i>	Long shirt worn with a pair of loose trousers
<i>Laddu</i>	Indian type of sweet
<i>Langar</i>	Food served equally to all from common kitchen in the gurdwara
<i>Mata</i>	Mother
<i>Mattha tek</i>	Kneeling in front of the Guru Granth Sahib
<i>Mela</i>	Gathering
<i>Nagar kirtan</i>	Religious procession
<i>Nam karan</i>	Naming ceremony
<i>Nishan sahib</i>	Sikh flag on flagpole
<i>Panj</i>	Five
<i>Panj ab</i>	Five rivers
<i>Panj piare</i>	Literally 'Five beloved ones', refers to the five Sikhs who first volunteered when Guru Gobind Singh asked who would give his head on Vaisakhi in 1699. But instead of actually taking off their heads, Guru Gobind Singh declared them as the <i>panj piare</i> and initiated them into the Khalsa by letting them take the amrit. Today, five amritdhari volunteers who are meant to represent the five beloved ones

<i>Panth</i>	lead ceremonial events. Sikh community
<i>Pag</i>	Turban
<i>Parantha</i>	Indian type of bread
<i>Patka</i>	Head covering made out of thin cloth
<i>Rahit</i>	Sikh belief and practice
<i>Roti</i>	Indian type of bread
<i>Sabzi</i>	Vegetables
<i>Salwar kamiz</i>	Female dress consisting of long shirt and trousers
<i>Samosa</i>	Deep fried pastry stuffed with filling
<i>Samsara</i>	Cycle of birth after birth
<i>Sangrand</i>	First day of each month of Indian solar calendar
<i>Sanskar</i>	Life cycle rite
<i>Sat Sri Akal</i>	Common Sikh greeting, means 'Vahiguru is truth'
<i>Seva</i>	Voluntary service
<i>Shabad</i>	Hymn
<i>Shabad kirtan</i>	Devotional music
<i>Sikh</i>	'Disciple', follower of Sikhism
<i>Simran</i>	Remembrance of the divine
<i>Singh</i>	'Lion', second name [so often serving as surname] for Sikh males
<i>Sunyara</i>	Goldsmith
<i>Vaisakhi</i>	Spring festival that is now celebrated by Sikhs as the day on which Guru Gobind Singh founded the <i>Khalsa</i> at Anandapur Sahib in 1699.
<i>Vahiguru</i>	Epithet for 'God'
<i>Virsa</i>	Heritage

# Appendices

## *APPENDIX ONE: Interviews conducted in Metropolitan Area of Helsinki*

Name (Pseudonym)	Female (F) / Male (M)	Date of Interview	Age group
Amal*	F	Field notes 6.2.2011 & 7.7.2010	~ 25
Brahamjeet	F	2.2.2008	~ 40
Geet*	F	7.7.2009	~ 25
Gurmeet	F	2.2.2008	~ 20
Harleen	F	Field notes 7.7.2009	~ 40
Kavita	F	Field notes 7.7.2009	~ 20
Kiran	F	8.8.2008	~ 40
Komal	F	9.6.2009	~ 35
Kushpreet	F	8.1.2009	~ 60
Nalin	F	Field notes 8.6.2008	~ 35
Rasleen*	F	Field notes 6.7.2010 & 7.7.2010	~ 25
Ravneet	F	21.3.2008	~ 30
Satleen	F	8.8.2008	~ 20
Adeep*	M	10.10.2008	~ 25
Akaljot	M	9.6.2008	~ 20
Bhagat	M	21.3.2008	~ 35
Charan*	M	15.5.2008	~ 25
Deep	M	9.6.2009	~ 45
Gagandeep	M	Field notes 6.7.2010	~ 55
Gatnam*	M	7.7.2009	~ 25
Jal	M	8.2.2008	~ 20
Jodh	M	9.6.2008	~ 30
Kamalpreet	M	7.8.2008 & Field notes 7.7.2010	~ 30
Karamdeep	M	8.1.2008	~ 60
Mahaan	M	9.6.2009	~ 50

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Ramjeet	M	7.1.2009	~ 45
Sagar	M	Field notes 6.7.2009	~ 50
Sanjit*	M	Field notes 7.7.2010 & Emails	~ 30
Rana	M	9.7.2010	~ 20

\* Interview was conducted in English, all other interview were conducted in Finnish.

*APPENDIX TWO: Interviews conducted in Yuba City*

Name (Pseudonym)	Female (F) / Male (M)	Date of Interview	Age
Chitleen	F	4.12.2008	~ 60
Daya	F	5.12.2008	~ 35
Four High school girls (Amanpreet, Geet, Jasmeen, Kareen)	F	25.11.2008	~ 16
Geet	F	Field notes (numerous entries)	~ 35
Harmeet	F	13.11.2008	~ 65
Jas	F	18.12.2008	~ 30
Jasleen	F	23.11.2008	~ 35
Meeta	F	23.11.2008	~ 35
Noor	F	1.12.2008	~ 30
Priya	F	17.12.2008	~ 30
Ratangeet	F	15.10.2008	~ 30
Raveena	F	12.12.2008	~ 40
Satleen	F	23.11.2008	~ 60
Sunita	F	Field notes 17.11.2008 & email conversations	~ 20
Tavleen	F	20.11.2008	~ 40
Arjan	M	24.11.2008	~ 20
Baldev	M	8.12.2008	~ 70
Balveer	M	19.11.2008	~ 40
Bhagwan	M	7.12.2008	~ 70
Harbinder	M	19.12.2008	~ 90
Hardit	M	15.12.2008	~ 40
Harsimran	M	3.12.2008	~ 35
Harsukh	M	3.12.2008	~ 45
Jagroop	M	Field notes	~ 50
Jaipreet	M	17.11.2008	~ 40
Kundan	M	2.12.2008	~ 40
Livdeep	M	17.12.2008	~ 60
Mohan	M	8.12.2008	~ 75
Prem	M	13.12.2008	~ 65
Premjot	M	17.12.2008	~ 35
Ramjot	M	12.11.2008	~ 40
Sajan	M	26.11.2008	~ 20
Santokh	M	16.11.2008	~ 30

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Satnam	M	21.11.2008	~ 50
Satwinder	M	4.12.2008	~ 60
Suraj	M	17.12.2008	~ 70
Tajender	M	8.11.2008 & 30.10.2009	~ 45

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