

*PARDESAN KA KAM*: AN ESSAY ON PUNJABI-SIKH WOMEN CANNERY WORKERS  
IN NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

by

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## Abstract

This essay is an ethnographic account of the lives of Punjabi Sikh women cannery workers in northern British Columbia. Using the concept of difference as an analytical tool, I am extending the analysis beyond the intersections of the differences of race, class, and gender to include regional, ethnic, age and caste variations among the members of this community in order to illustrate the complexities of being a South Asian Canadian woman. By employing individual socio-histories and narratives based on work life, my descriptions revolve around the difficult and rewarding aspects of being an immigrant in the larger Canadian context. As well, I am describing the contradictions and tensions present in raising children in the West while continuing to be a member of an immigrant community which bases some of its norms and accepted behaviours on a displaced Punjabi context.

## Table of Contents

Abstract	.....ii
Table of Contents	.....iii
Acknowledgements	.....iv
 <b>Introduction</b>	 .....1
<b>An Interlude in the Cannery</b>	.....3
<b>On Ethnicity and Difference</b>	.....9
<b>Situating Knowledges</b>	.....13
<b>The Gift of Stories</b>	.....17
<b>Tirath Aunty-ji</b>	.....19
<b>Jagdish Aunty-ji</b>	.....30
<b>Discussion</b>	.....39
<b>Concluding Remarks</b>	.....44
 Glossary	 .....46
Bibliography	.....48

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## Introduction

*Displacement involves the invention of new forms of subjectivities, of pleasures, of intensities, of relationships, which also implies the continuous renewal of a critical work that looks carefully and intensively at the very system of values to which one refers in fabricating the tools of resistance [and existence] (Trinh 1991:19).*

This essay is a compilation of stories of Punjabi Sikh women who work in the fish canneries in northwestern British Columbia. These women migrate to work from their home communities for four or more months annually. The stories were told to me by Tirath Aunty-ji<sup>1</sup> and Jagdish Aunty-ji. The stories are their commentaries on cannery work, on work relations, and on being South Asian Canadian women. Fragments from conversations with twelve of the other ten dozen or so women that work in the canneries are interspersed throughout the essay. The story within these stories is of me: a South Asian Canadian woman anthropologist and the daughter of one of these women who is conducting research in my home community.

When examining the individuals and groups that make up the South Asian collectivity (Buchignani 1985, Chadney 1984), especially with respect to women (Nadoo 1984, 1980; Ghosh 1984, 1983), researchers generally have focused on the interface of cultural contact in terms of accommodation or assimilation models (Ames and Srivastava 1989, Dua 1992, Mathur 1990), which result in two dimensional portraits of multidimensional communities. By employing "difference" as an analytical category, I have attempted to extend my examination beyond the intersections of differences of race, gender and class, to include various differences transported in the migration process which still have currency in the Canadian context. These differences of ethnic, regional, age, caste, and class variations continue to shape our identities and our daily lives.

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<sup>1</sup> In Punjabi, Aunty follows the person's first name. Even when we speak in English, we follow this pattern. When addressing the person directly, we also depart from English and only use Aunty-ji as it is considered rude to address a senior by her/his first name.

In keeping with an emerging style of anthropological writing which rejects separation of story-rich ethnography and theoretical analysis, I chose to present the main protagonists of my research through narratives (Behar 1993, Tedlock 1992, Narayan 1989). These narratives are strategic textualizations. The stories serve a purpose and represent particular points of view: "they are thus incipiently analytical, enacting theory" (Narayan 1993:681).

I am attempting to demonstrate, by presenting individual socio-histories and narratives, the process whereby "difference" and differences are conceived, gain currency and are transmitted in a group of individuals comprising a minority community. Due to the limitation of space, I am only including the narratives of two individuals in an attempt to put faces on the monolith that is the South Asian collectivity. Narrative ethnography also provides me with the opportunity to reconstruct the "role" of "informants":

Narrative transforms "informants" whose chief role is to spew cultural data for the anthropologist into subjects with complex lives and a range of opinions (that may even subsume the anthropological enterprise). At a moment in which scholarship has a "multinational reception", it seems more urgent than ever that anthropologists acknowledge that it is people and not theoretical puppets who populate our texts, and that we allow these people to speak out from our writings. (Ibid:681)

This aspect of narrative ethnography is especially important to me with regard to my ongoing membership in the Punjabi-Sikh community. My insider status calls for the dismantling of objective distance.

### **An Interlude in the Cannery**

It is Sunday afternoon, and my parents and I are sitting around enjoying a cup of tea. The phone rings at 4:15 pm. My mother, I address her as Bibi, has been expecting a call from the cannery so she tells us she will pick up the phone. She picks up the receiver, listens for a few seconds, and hangs up. I ask who it was. As she is telling me that it was the cannery calling, she is busy dialling Narinder Aunty's house. She informs Aunty that the cannery just called and asks whether Raminder Aunty or Kashmir Aunty is driving. After confirming that Raminder Aunty is driving, Bibi hangs up. She then dials the cannery number and passes the receiver to me. She tells me to speak to the personnel woman and to ask her when they are to report to work and to ask, also, if number 105, Santokh Aunty's number, has been called. Also she wants to know how much work there is. I speak to the person on the other end, and she tells me Bibi is to report to work at 7:30 am, Monday. The woman on the line tells me that they have not called number 105 yet, and there is lots of work. The personnel woman informs me that because they have received such a large quantity of fish and are still expecting more, the plant is starting a night shift as well. After hanging up, I ask my mother why she did not take the call from the cannery in the first place. She tells me that it is cheaper for her to call back than it is to accept a collect call. Over time, the costs would add up if she took collect calls.

Later that same night, my mother and I pack our clothes, and I pack my research materials as well. We store the left-overs from dinner in plastic containers for lunch the next day.

My mother wakes me at 4:30 am the next morning, and we both get ready and have our tea. Papa-ji, my father, also gets up to sit with us while we wait for Raminder Aunty to arrive. My mom is always the last one to be picked up because our house is



furthest from town. Most of the women my mother works with live in the centre of town. Our ride arrives. All the women are dressed in sweat suits and have their heads covered with company-issued orange and green scarves. It is still dark outside as we all climb into the car and proceed to make our way to the highway for Prince Rupert. Kashmir Aunty tells us all that she had frozen the *dāls*<sup>2</sup> and *sabjīs* leftover from the *langār* at the last *sangrāndh* celebration of a week ago, so we do not have to worry about food for the week.

Most of the talk in the car revolves around Narinder Aunty's son's wedding. He married a *gorī* he met at school. Apparently, rumour has it, he had previously been involved with another white woman in town. She had become pregnant, and he had abandoned her and convinced her to have an abortion. I had overheard a few women at the *gurdwārā* discussing Narinder Aunty's son. Those women did not respect him for what he had done to this young woman. They believed that if you are going to take up with anyone - Punjabi or white - do the honourable thing and get married and be together. They felt that the young woman was the victim in all this, and that she, too, is someone's daughter.

Everyone is asking Narinder Aunty what her daughter-in-law is like. We all inquire about what they had bought for the *barī*, the menu they had planned for the reception, the gifts they had purchased for the girl's family. The topic then changes to discussion of one of the townswomen, and the arrival of her two newly born grandsons. Apparently, this woman is planning a party for everyone to celebrate the arrival of their grandsons. "Her health is much better. She looks like she has recovered from the cancer treatment," Raminder Aunty intervenes. The woman being discussed is her sister-in-law...

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<sup>2</sup> Punjabi words are italicized throughout the essay. Please refer to the glossary at the end of the essay for definitions.

The drive to Prince Rupert is magnificent. The highway follows the Skeena River to its meeting place with the ocean. We travel along with beautiful mountain peaks on both sides of us and the river on our right. It is a beautiful way to start the day.

I am dropped off at Gurminder's house where my mother and her friends rent a room together and share kitchen and bathroom facilities with the family. We make plans for me to meet them at the cannery at noon for the lunch break.

I walk to the cannery and weave my way through the giant, unpaved parking lot. I check with Personnel in the portable office to the left side of the plant and inform a staff person that I am there to visit with my mother. I make my way to the cannery.

The odours of fish and stagnant salt water permeate the air. The fish plant is a large two level, wood framed structure situated at the water's edge, to one side of the town. I am first bombarded by the strong smell of fish as I enter the plant and then deafened by the din of the machines - the harsh clanging of the trays of fish as they are stacked and unstacked and as the fish are unloaded onto collecting trays, the revving and braking of forklifts as they shuttle back and forth transporting trays to various locales inside the plant, the incessant swishing and grinding of the mazes of conveyor belts as they move fish and cans to their various destinations, the clinking and crunching of cleaning machines where the fish are decapitated, slit and gutted and then passed on to the women that stand on the lines to inspect and clean any residual blood and guts, the slamming of monstrous freezer doors as they are opened and closed, and the clinking and clanking of the cans as they jerkily move along in a continuous stream being filled with salmon and then inspected and sealed.

The environment is cold and wet from the constant cold running water washing away waste from cleaned fish and the lines. The water from the hoses is kept ready to wash the floors at regular intervals. The opening and closing of the freezers and the

melting ice as the fish are packed onto and unpacked from 4x4 foot aluminum trays contribute to the bleak atmosphere.

The perceptible smell of fish disappears after about 10-15 seconds as my olfactory nerve is overloaded and ceases to respond to the odour. As I gradually adjust to the clamour, the lunch hour horn goes off. The sudden cessation of noise is followed by a deafening silence. Everything comes to a standstill. Relief for the workers from the pandemonium is found in coffee breaks and lunch breaks when all the machinery and work comes to a timed halt. Workers make their way to the rest stops. One stream of workers moves out of the plant, some to smoke and others to get fresh air and to grab lunch from the concession truck. Another stream converges at the stairwell climbing up to the lunch rooms.

For the last ten years, there has been a non-smoking lunchroom located at the very back of the building. Out of convenience, and in order to maximize their break time, the Punjabi women, who are all non-smokers, continued to use the main lunchroom at the top of the stairs. Only in the last few years, when the smoke became a real irritant, have some of the women shifted to the back room.

The atmosphere in the lunchrooms and halls on the second level is boisterous and rowdy as workers make their way to coffee urns, microwaves and tables, chatting among themselves constantly, in some cases conversing across the room. A group of Punjabi women I recognize from Terrace, Kitimat and Prince Rupert make their way to a couple of tables in the middle of the cafeteria style sitting area in the main lunch room. A couple of the women wave to me, recognizing me as Mohinder's daughter. I do not go over because Jasi Aunty has spotted me coming up the stairs and comes over to take me to my mother and her friends. "No we do not reserve tables, but over time people know which tables are used by whom, and everyone continues to go back to those tables out of habit,"

Sarinder later responds to my inquiry of where people end up sitting in the lunchrooms.

I make my way to the non-smoking lunchroom accompanied by Jasi Aunty. She is an old friend of our family's. I cannot remember a time when we did not know her and her family. We have not seen each other in over eight years, and we spend our time discussing her kids as we make our way to the back of the building. She has three children and they are all grown up now, of course. However, it is difficult for me to picture them as other than the little kids that we used to play with. She is having problems with her daughter who just graduated from high school. "She does not listen to me, and comes and goes at all times of the day and night," Jasi Aunty tells me. I tell her I would like to visit her in Kitimat on the weekend, if they get time off, to interview her. She says that if I come I can also speak to her daughter and give her some guidance - maybe interest her in going on in school. I agree to speak to her daughter and thank her for being willing to participate in my research.

The hallway leading to the smokefree lunchroom is a maze with doors leading off in every direction. The smell of curried food and the sound of laughter and Punjabi conversation herald my entry into the room. The Punjabi women occupy three of the five tables in the room. When the season is in full swing, the number of Punjabi women is in excess of 120, with approximately forty women from each of the three towns. The number varies with the amount of fish the cannery receives. For a couple of weeks every summer, a night shift is added which brings in even more workers.

"The atmosphere is that of a *melā*. It is mostly *raunak-melā*. Lots of talk and laughter. Really, work is a time for all of us to get together and visit." This is Manjit Aunty's description of work. All of the women I spoke to placed the emphasis of work life on the breaks and free time after work that they have together. The clamour of the machinery makes it impossible to carry on a conversation while they are working, so they

really only visit during their breaks. "The talk is non-stop. We never run out of things to talk about," Jasi Auntie tells me. Everything is a topic for discussion, including their own lives, each other's lives, and the gossip that has accumulated in each of the towns since these women were last together.

It has been a long morning for these women. There was a fifteen minute coffee break at 10:00 am, and there will be another coffee break in the afternoon. They are expecting to work until 7:00 pm, at which time the clean up crew will come in to hose the machinery and floors down for the night shift. Since they are working until 7:00 pm, there will be another half-hour break at 5:00 pm.

I meet with everyone and tell them about how I have spent the last few years away from home. They ask me what I am studying, and this allows me to introduce my research topic and explain my presence at the cannery. They are all a bit leery of the kind of information I may want, but good-naturedly, some of them agree to speak to me. Most of the women say that they do not think they have anything valuable to say. Also, they tell me that since I had worked here before, for one season ten years ago, with these same women, why do I not write whatever needs to be written from the knowledge I already have? While we are all still talking, the horn goes off, marking the end of the break. They gather up their things, containers and remaining food, and drop them off at their lockers. I follow my mother through the locker room. She adjusts her smock and scarf and puts on her gloves as she goes, taking the short-cut this time. Workers make their way down to the plant floor. The commotion and racket of the machinery as we come down the stairs shatters what seems to have been only a momentary calm. Workers scatter to their stations, and I slowly make my way out of the plant.

## On Ethnicity and Difference

South Asian ethnic identities in the Canadian context differ in the negotiations and experiences of them because they are complicated by differences among members of the communities in addition to differences of race, gender and class. These additional differences include regional, ethnic, religious, caste, age, and class variations originating in South Asia. The concept of ethnic identities found in anthropological literature on South Asians does not adequately address the diversity within the collectivity at the level of these differences. The literature on South Asian Canadian women is problematic for the same reason.

Difference - *phark* - is as much a word in these South Asian Canadian women's vocabularies as it is in Third World feminist theory (Mohanty 1991, Spivak 1987, Trinh 1989), black feminist theory (Collins 1990, Davis 1981, hooks 1990), and cultural studies (Appadurai 1991, Clifford 1988). These women use the word *phark* to describe the distinctive treatment they receive in the workplace and to describe their situation in Canada. Jagdish's response to my question "how do non-Punjabi workers and staff treat you?" was "*sāde nāl phark kar dhey hai* (they make a distinction between us [and them])." These women use the word to distinguish between themselves and members of the dominant community, as well as members of other minority communities. "*Sāde vich phark hai* (there is a difference between us)," was Tirath's response to my question "are you a Canadian?"

In my discussion of the lives of the subjects of this research, I am extending the category of difference to include differences in race, gender, and class, as well as the various differences of regional, ethnic, caste, religion and age, in order to illuminate the multitudes of experiences reflected in this small group of women. Specifically, I am employing difference in this paper to illustrate the positioned perspective South Asian

Canadian women. I also attempt to demonstrate how difference is employed in practice by these South Asian Canadian women in negotiating their everyday lives.

Difference is a palpable phenomenon in the cannery environment. It finds expression in the concentration of South Asian women on the fish cleaning lines, rather than the canning lines, and of separate tables of South Asians, Euro-Canadians, and Native Canadians in the lunchroom. These women I worked with have created a well-defined space for themselves. They convey through every avenue open to them that they belong there as much as anyone else in that cannery. They are self-assured as they converse with each other in Punjabi, and as they greet their non-Punjabi co-workers with a casual "hi, how are you" in English. They walk with self-assurance in their company-issued green smocks and scarves and black rubber boots as they make their way down the hallway or to their tables in the lunch room. Difference is elaborated in the form of bringing Punjabi food for lunch and getting their noses pierced. Nose rings have become fashionable again after a lapse of twenty years or so in the Punjab. The trend has been transported to Canada as well. Consequently, a couple of women recently had their noses pierced. The company has a jewellery policy as part of their health and safety regulations, and it was forced to address the issue by formulating a clause concerning nose rings. Since the formulation of the clause, women who have nose rings either have to remove them while on the job site or cover the ring with a piece of medical tape.

The differences between these women and the non-Punjabi women are many. However, rather than seeing themselves as marginal in some way, they revel in who they are: Punjabi-Sikh Canadian women. This translates into various expressions such as buying a beautiful silk *salwār-kāmeez* or purchasing a new piece of jewellery in 22-23kt with some of their earnings. The aesthetic is Indian, Punjabi. The aesthetic is Canadian, too. For example, the new house Narinder Aunty is having built will have a formal living

and dining room, and Sarinder Auntie just bought a dough making machine for making *chāpāttīs*<sup>3</sup>.

Difference is also palpable amongst themselves as their lives are now on different trajectories. For example, the number of children each woman has varies; the ages and sexes<sup>4</sup> of the children vary; whether they married within the community or out of the community varies; and where the women are making their homes varies. Half a dozen women from Terrace now make their homes in Vancouver because their children have moved out of the Skeena Valley to marry and/or to find work.

Although similar in many respects, their lives are played out in different ways. Among similar caste members, these women discussed each other using negative stereotyped caste membership attributes. For instance, a Jat woman characterized Rajput community members as untrustworthy. Differences in regional origins in India and caste membership also surface in moments of conflicts and in marriage arrangements. Consequently, the "difference" of being South Asian in Canada must be envisioned as "differences," which are multiple and intersect with each other in complex ways.

The issues of gender can be broken down to illustrate how the economic situation of families facilitated a shift in thinking about women's place and women's work as well as the participation of husbands and children in the home. Further, it is important to note here that as members of Sikhism, we are taught that both sexes are equal, everyone

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the women told me about the difficult work they had to do in the village before coming to Canada. Now, when they go back to the Punjab to visit, they are amazed at all the appliances available there. In fact, what they missed most were the old, manual *madhānīs* for churning butter. Now, most homes in the smallest of villages have purchased electric *madhānīs*.

<sup>4</sup> Male children continue to provide their families with higher status by the sheer accident of their sex. Families with more boys than girls are considered luckier because Punjabis are patriarchal people and the family line is carried on by males. Also, girls are considered unlucky because of the added risk of ensuring "purity": girls can get pregnant and bring shame to their family if it occurs outside of marriage. There is also the expense of providing a dowry at one's daughter's wedding.



is responsible for her/his own well-being. In fact, this ethos is extended to the home. In *Jāpji Sāhib*, the Sikh morning prayer found in the holy book the *Guru Granth Sāhib*, there are direct references to washing your own clothes if they are dirty and working in order to feed and house yourself. As much as there is an emphasis on *sevā* in Sikhism, which loosely translates as "helping others," there is also emphasis on helping one self. This liberating ideology may help to explain why Punjabi women do not perceive themselves as submissive, like the stereotypical Indian women depicted in the academic literature and in mainstream media (Dubois 1993, Nadoo 1984), but rather as enabled and powerful.

The issues of class can be examined on a number of fronts. These women could be described as working-class, due to their work in the cannery. However, even though their spending habits may not reflect this status, in most instances, their families' combined incomes categorize them as middle-class. This economic position enables cross-class marriages. Parents are also able to support their children in completing university educations and consequently, in moving out of the labouring classes.

In seeking to convey the multiple realities of these Punjabi-Sikh South Asian Canadian working-class women living in northern British Columbia, I have sought to present stories that supersede the hyphenated identities that are thrust upon us as we have taken up residence in this land not of our birth (Thobani 1991, Jiwani 1992). In fact, these women have found ways to interact on their own terms with the dominant community. In some instances, the dominant society is only tangential to their world as they move through their lives. For example, when they go grocery shopping, they can go straight to the Indian section of the supermarket. They can purchase fruits and vegetables they are familiar with and have created a market for in the northwest. When watching television, their passion lies with the all day Saturday South Asian

programming on Vision Television, or with renting Hindi movies at the local Punjabi groceries. On the other hand, they also feel and act "at home" here in Canada. They mingle with their co-workers and their neighbours, whether Punjabi or non-Punjabi.

### **Situating Knowledges**

The experience of growing up in the Skeena Valley and travelling among the towns of Terrace, Kitimat, and Prince Rupert, was the foundation of my life as an "East Indian" (a misnomer as there is no East India and the term comes from the East India Company), a "Punjabi-Sikh," an "Indo-Canadian" (a term I never liked and avoided), and the latest catch-all descriptor, "South Asian." I have never been referred to as a Canadian except when I have been travelling outside of Canada, defending myself against racists, neo-Nazis, etc., or when casting a vote in an election.

Although there is a generation gap between me and the women I worked with, I do share a past with them. Like many of them, I came to this country twenty-two years ago with my family. My father had been in the country for two years already, and we followed him on a tourist visa two years later to the Skeena Valley. He had found employment as a mechanic in a sawmill. With a new house on the other side of the tracks, furniture and appliances requiring payments and four young mouths to feed, my mother soon went to work.

She found out about work in the canneries through a neighbour. And in the summer of 1974, she travelled to Prince Rupert during July and was hired to work the next day on the lines cleaning fish. We grew up with our mother going away for 3-4 months each year. She would come home on weekends when there was a break in the work. More than half of the women of the families close to our family did this same work.

Having a membership in this community as a daughter of one of the members of

the circle of women I interviewed and spent time with, and having lived in Terrace, allowed me access to intimate knowledge of their lives and histories. My relationship to them was that of a niece. They are all, in a sense, my Aunties, and I address each of them as Auntie-ji in everyday conversation, and do so in this essay out of respect for our relationship. *Jī* is the honorific term of respect used when addressing elders.

Membership also presented problems regarding access to information. Trust became an issue. My interviewees wanted to know who would see the information I was gathering, who was funding my research, and why I was approaching them in particular. A number of times they asked me to simply speak to the cannery management people or draw upon my experience in the cannery in order to acquire the information I wanted. I also had difficulty in convincing the women that what they had to say about their lives and work was important. They did not think their experiences were of any significance. Eventually, they spoke with me because I was known to them, and I told them that our conversations would help me write my thesis. I also conveyed to them that non-Punjabi researchers worked among us all the time, and I wanted to contribute as a Punjabi to some of that literature.

An outsider would have access to different information than an insider (Zavella 1991, 1987). In this instance, s/he may have been able to acquire more in-depth explanations on issues that are not openly discussed within the Punjabi community. Issues such as inter-racial marriages, marital tensions and problems with children's behaviour are frequently talked about in the larger community. In the Punjabi community, people rarely talk to each other about such issues because of the worry, "what will people think?" Also, there exists the consideration that a Euro-Canadian may be perceived as providing a more important audience than me.

On the other hand, I had access to information that an outsider would not have

access to simply because I am an insider. I also had the added privilege of knowing the Punjabi language. Paradoxically, because I occupy a privileged position of an insider, some of the information I was privy to has to remain "inside" because of my continued membership in this community.

Another consideration for me is the way South Asians are profiled in mainstream media. South Asian "traditions" are typically presented as "alien" customs - dowries, arranged marriages, sex-selection ( Dubois 1993, Thobani 1991). As Sikhs, with the rise of the Khalistan movement (Oberoi 1994) and the media attention given to the turban issue in the Armed Forces and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, we have found ourselves singled out for less than positive mosaic attributes.

We constantly grapple with the issues of race even though most of us hold Canadian citizenship. The issues of ethnic identities are elusive to all of us. One respondent replied thus to my question "do you consider yourself Canadian?"

Of course I am Canadian. I have a Canadian passport. I do not think I could go back to India even if I wanted to because I gave up my Indian passport. Also, I like it here. My life is here. All my children are married here. Two of sons' wives came over from India. I am as comfortable in pants as I am in salwar-kameezes. But I am also Punjabi, I am a Sikh. I married all my children in our caste. You cannot let those things go either. I do not think about what I am first...Punjabi, Canadian. I am all those things. We cannot give up our roots. And the only way they [Euro-Canadians] would accept us completely would be if we painted ourselves white, and we cannot do that. I do not know how all that works. I live my life the best I can.

All of this makes my role as a researcher a tenuous one. I necessarily have to be sensitive to the various audiences, knowing that readers will rarely be of South Asian origin. The South Asian collectivity is as important an audience to me as the academic one. What is therefore responsible reporting? How do I respectfully present these stories so that the information will be interpreted by the reader in a manner that is respectful? Because this thesis is a public document, all possible audiences must be taken into

account. The work I do cannot jeopardize the well-being of the individuals involved, nor the community I am a member of and which I respect. This community is engaged in an on-going struggle for economic, political and social status. To be too free with information would presuppose "an equal society where everyone has the right to make the kind of statement or image they want" (Jiwani 1992:12).

It presupposes that there are no structured preferences wherein one colour of skin is privileged over others. Difference in such an utopic landscape becomes just that difference. And society becomes a cacophony of voices and visions competing in a market-place, and accessible to all. The image is akin to the notion of this country as a mosaic wherein each part is valued as much as another. The reality as we know it is quite different. Unequal power relations are the norm. (Jiwani 1992:12).

I have to be careful what information I reveal in order not to insult my compatriots in a public arena which has demonstrated little sympathy for South Asians (Indra 1981, Thobani 1991, Dubois 1993). I have respected my respondents' wishes to remain anonymous. I have only lightly touched on topics of marital tension and marital status because these remain as sensitive topics for a couple of the women I interviewed, and they believed that pseudonyms were not enough. They felt that regardless of how I wrote about them, I would be unable to protect their identities. Consequently, I had to alter some details to protect their privacy.

I interviewed eight women in total. All of these women have been living in norther British Columbia since the early 1970s. Six were members of the group my mother has been with for the last sixteen years. These women have worked together, travelled together, and lived together during their annual migrations to Prince Rupert. I conducted in-depth group interviews with these six women. In order to dampen their fears that I was not on some reconnaissance mission from the government, I asked my mother to be present during the group interviews. My mother's presence and sharing of information way-laid their fears. I taped all of the interviews in order to use as many of

the womens' own words as possible. All of the quotes included in the essay are direct translations from the interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted in their homes while they were off work. I chose two of the respondents, Tirath Aunty and Jagdish Aunty, to describe in greater detail and thereby round out the picture of these Punjabi women cannery workers. I have used pseudonyms, however, because they requested anonymity.

I joined the women in Prince Rupert for a period of two weeks. I went to the cannery during their breaks to speak to them, to observe them, and listen in on their conversations. I joined two guided tours offered by the cannery to learn about the different operations of the plant. All this proved informative although it was still difficult to have the respondents speak freely about their personal lives because, in part, they were unconvinced they had anything valuable to say.

### **The Gift of Stories**

The following are stories told by Tirath and Jagdish Aunty-jis. The first story chronicles the life of Tirath Aunty-ji. She is a Punjabi-Sikh woman. She was born in a small village in Jullandar district to a poor Jat family, the youngest of five girls and two boys. Her father and brothers are all farmers. Her marriage was arranged by an aunt, and Tirath Aunty-ji was married at twenty-one to a man from Hoshiarpur district. She has three girls and one boy. She told me she is fifty-six, but she does not know her birthday because there were no records in the village. She knows though that she was born in the month of March. Aunty-ji completed a basic elementary education in her village school, but did not go on to further education because the nearest high school was 15 miles away and would have meant too much travel time. In fact, all of the women I worked with, who are from rural villages, had found themselves in similar situations.

Their families have been involved in agricultural work for centuries. These women could not have received more than an elementary education unless a high school existed in their village because their help was needed at home and in the fields. Also, young women would be discouraged from travelling any distance to school because their safety could not be ensured. Another factor in not sending daughters to school in order to receive higher education, was that parents could not foresee a paid work future for their daughters because the opportunities were minimal.

Today, even women in rural villages are able to travel to urban centres by bicycle or bus where high schools exist to complete a high school education at the very least. And English medium schools are now commonplace in most urban centres<sup>5</sup>. A few of the women I interviewed, whose families had lived in towns or had close relatives in urban centres, had received secondary and post-secondary education. Consequently, they had some fluency in English, which is part of the general curriculum after grade six. This was the case with Tirath Aunty. She now understands English after having lived in Canada so long, but she speaks it haltingly and tells me she does not have the fluency to carry on an in-depth conversation. However, she does speak and read English well enough to take messages on the the phone, speak to neighbours, and do all of her shopping.

### **Tirath Aunty-ji**

*My sister-in-law said to me, 'You have three daughters. What else can you do? You have to go [to Canada].' So I told my husband that we had to try this. We couldn't offer our children any kind of future there...so we borrowed, took all our savings...and I told him*

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<sup>5</sup> I spent two and half months in Punjab in the spring of 1994, residing in both villages and urban centres. My knowledge of the growing numbers of women receiving higher education stems from direct observation of the activities in my relatives' homes and conversations I had with women of various ages. Also, I became acquainted with young women during visits to schools in the Punjab.

*I would take care of my in-laws and the children...we had to make this work.*

Aunty-ji's father-in-law's parents had died during an epidemic while he and his brother were very young. They had been raised by their *Māsī*. As a young man, the father-in-law had migrated from Amritsar district to Hoshiarpur district to take a teaching post. He had made his home in a nearby village, purchasing a house and a small plot of land. His sons later added to the family's land holdings. It was not sufficient to provide a good standard of living, however. Furthermore, since Aunty-ji has three daughters, raising money to finance their future weddings and provide substantial dowries were looming problems: without sufficient dowries she would have been unable to arrange good marriage matches to well-educated and well-established men.

*I have lived without shoes so my kids would have shoes. We had a small plot of land far away from the village where I would go to get fodder. I know what poverty is...I lived it. My kids don't understand because we gave them everything, but I cannot forget those days. Even now when I go back to India, I find it difficult to spend rupees even with the exchange because I have lived with so little.*

Tirath, following her husband, came to Canada in 1972 as a visitor. She speaks with humour and pride of her first encounter with Canadians.

*The immigration people took me and the children aside and started to question me about what I was doing here. They brought an apni girl who worked for them because I did not speak English. She asked me over and over what my real intentions were since I only had a visitor's visa. I simply told her I was here to visit my husband. She insisted that she did not believe me. She thought it was impossible that I had come for a visit with four small children in tow. I made it clear to her that I had my elderly in-laws to care for back home and that I would be back at the airport to bid her *sāt srī ākaal*<sup>6</sup> when I*

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<sup>6</sup> '*Sāt srī ākaal*' translates to 'Truth shall reign' and serves as a salutation among Sikhs.



*returned to India...I wonder if she is still waiting.*

*I barely made the connecting flight to Terrace after all that interrogation. They found a Punjabi man going up to Terrace in the waiting area who knew my husband and asked him to help us if we needed anything since we did not speak English. My husband was waiting for us when we arrived. The two younger children did not recognize him after two years, of course, and they were quite frightened of him. Also, they had not comprehended how far we had come. In their minds we had simply gone to visit my natal village. Often, over the course of the first year, any time one of the two would get angry with your uncle, they would turn to me and say "let's go home."*

*Tirath's husband, Uncle-ji to me, had purchased a house in a new subdivision a month before his family's arrival. She quickly learned about payments and purchasing items on credit. He wanted us to have the best of everything - we had a new house. It was a wonderful home, a television, all new furniture.*

*The neighbourhood developed over the course of the year as the houses were completed and as more Punjabi families joined the men. It became a real mixed community. But at first there was only our house and the houses immediately around our house...for the first year...there were only gorā families which was good for the children...to have those kids around them because they learned English quickly...and we learned how the gorās lived. Tirath recalls that as the houses were completed a number of Punjabi families moved onto their street. There was also a Greek family and a Chinese family in their neighbourhood.*

*The gurdwara was built in 1977. It continues to function as a religious site and as a community centre. It is a place where people met each other and new immigrants. At first, we got to know the couple of men your uncle roomed with for the year he was in town before we had arrived, and then their families joined them. There were two Punjabi houses*

*in our area, and we became friends with them as well. The men [of those two families] worked in the mill also.*

*Tirath learned about cannery work through one of these families: ...it was through Sucha Singh's wife that I found out about the cannery...my husband drove me to Prince Rupert that summer in 1974, and I put in my application. I was hired that summer and got called to work two days after I put in the application.*

In 1974, when Tirath started working, her children were still quite young, and their well-being was a concern to both her and her husband. The idea of daycare or a babysitter was not a familiar one as the concept was non-existent in Indian life. In India, childcare would be provided by a family member. Daycare was not a feasible option financially since Aunty was away anywhere from five to 13 days at a stretch. All of the other Punjabi children were of similar ages to Aunty's so they had playmates and their mothers would keep an eye on them while the children played. Essentially, the two of them relied on Uncle-ji's proximity at work and his shift rotation to suffice for childcare.

*When I first started working my kids were very young, but my eldest I felt could look after the younger ones. My husband was on shiftwork at the mill - there were three shifts at the mill. In those days, I worried a lot in case there was a fire at the house, since the houses were wooden. Also there was the concern that the children would be harmed in some other way. Your uncle would come on lunch breaks to make sure the kids were all right. He would also call the kids from the mill. My oldest was ten when I started working. After the initial tension of leaving my kids, I enjoyed going to work once I knew they were able to care for themselves.*

The most difficult time for all families was during the herring season in March and April. At this time, the children were in school so they had to manage with school work and house work. The salmon season during July and August was easier as the children

were off on summer holidays. At the latest, the women may be called in for the first two weeks of September, but this was rare.

Initially, there were difficulties in organizing rides to and from Prince Rupert and to and from the cannery because the women were not acquainted with each other. Once rides were worked out, and they had established a niche for themselves among the non-Punjabi workers at the cannery, work provided the opportunity to meet and socialize with other women from all three towns. The opportunity to develop close friendships spilled over to non-work life and provided social ties for the entire family.

*There [in Prince Rupert] we face no hardship, there are five-six-seven of us living together - these are times of raunaq-melā, of fun and laughter. It is time to be with all these other women - there were women from all three towns working in the cannery. I got to know many of the women well. Of course then we did not have the close connections for rides and house-mates that developed after the first or second season. If I received a call from work, it did not matter if it was only four hours of work, I would even take the greyhound bus to get to work. Sometimes my husband would drive me if his shift allowed it. I couldn't refuse work because I had no seniority. And any money was good. But it was difficult going on the bus and making our way through the snow. It is a difficult treacherous highway in the winter...although they have improved the highway since then. The kids were still in school for the herring season, it was difficult leaving them to fend for themselves. Yes, it was difficult then.*

At first, it was a difficult adjustment period for the family as well. The husband's and children's response to a working mother has been analyzed in terms of family models. Depending on the family model each individual family member has internalized, it can be smooth transition or a situation fraught with tension and conflict (Zavella 1991; Lamphere 1987, 1985). Also, there is extensive literature on the double shift, describing

the dual burden of paid work and housework that most women in the paid labour force are left to deal with when husbands do not take on the shared responsibilities of homemaker (Hartman 1981, Hochschild 1989, Hoffman 1974). However, the research does not account for the effects of temporary migrations which characterize these women's work lives. In this case, women physically remove themselves from home and town. They may be away anywhere from one day when the season is just starting to 13-14 day stretches when large quantities of fish arrive. In this situation, it is impossible for the family to wait for the "wife and mother" to come home and fix dinner or clean house. From the start, the families were forced to fend for themselves.

In Tirath's case, her work role was necessitated by economic need, and the transition for her husband and children in taking up household duties was difficult because her children were so young. But the transition was made. There was also the additional factor that young Punjabi girls have always had to learn to carry household responsibilities at an early age. As such, Tirath Aunty's oldest daughter stepped in.

Conflict and tensions arose between husbands and wives when there were problems at home with the children...were they being raised in the proper way, not losing their respect for their elders, respect for their religion or culture? Arguments flared up among couples if the children were behaving badly. However, all of the women agreed that they came to Canada knowing that everyone worked and that it was expected of them. There was no question that they would go back every season to the canneries.

*My husband did not have problems with my working. We had no choice really. We needed to buy things, pay off the house, the appliances. If the kids started misbehaving, which was not often, that was when he would complain that it was a result of my working. He would say that I should quit my job and stay home in order to provide discipline for the children, but we both knew that I had to work. For the first year, I would sometimes*

*cook enough food, on the weekend when I was home, to last the children a couple of days. But my husband and children didn't enjoy eating leftovers, and my oldest daughter learned how to make rotis. Between my husband, who would make the dāl and sabji, and Aman, who would make the rotis for everyone, it worked out fine. They took over the house the best they could. And having girls means they have to learn to keep house and mine just learned to do it while they were still young.*

The work environment has become a friendlier place over the years, Aunty-ji tells me. And she does not give any importance to the work itself because, as all the women expressed, they saw work as a means to an end. The social aspect of work plays an important role for all the women. Although she is self-deprecating about her work, it has taken its toll on her physically over the years. She and her friends are plagued by health problems from the long hours on their feet, the poor ventilation, and allergic reactions to the organic matter in the air.

*The work I do is fast-paced, but it does not require strength. The floor ladies don't like us talking or are on our backs all the time: "work faster, faster!" they say. It is not difficult work, though, so in that we are fortunate. There is the noise and the smell of the cannery, but we do not notice anymore. When the call comes, the day before or that morning, we know ahead of time who is driving, and we all know each other's numbers [employee numbers] so we know who is going. There is a cluster of us with the most seniority, and we get called together. We verify with the driver that she is going and sometimes when the driver is not called or there are only a few hours of work for that day only, then it is not feasible for us to pay for the ride and rent and not make back what we spend...plus all the headache of getting organized. With my seniority, I now feel confident and say no if the timing or hours are not good.*

*This season, we went in one day and put in four hours of work and personnel could*

*not say when the next call-in would be so we came home. After that, I have turned the cannery down a couple of times because they could not guarantee more than that day's work. Because we are seasonal workers, my main concern is to get enough stamps (insurable weeks) to get U.I. (unemployment insurance), although I have enough seniority to be fairly sure of that every season. This herring season stretched for eleven weeks. It was long and I made most of my stamps there. And this salmon season, there is talk of a strike by the fishermen. The season has not really started and we are already into late July.*

*I would not do this work on a full time basis. It is too difficult to be on your feet all day, I get bronchial infections every season...I take antibiotics all season long. I do not enjoy the work itself, but I enjoy working because I can buy things for my home, my self, my family...go to India to visit...cover the cost of weddings. We came here to improve our situation, to work and provide a better future for our children. We have done the best we could, now we want to see our children do well...and be happy.*

Aunty-ji is proud of her membership in the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union (UFAWU) and has used the union when there have been problems at work. The problems Aunty has encountered have had to do with errors on Records of Employment which in turn created problems when she went to apply for Unemployment Insurance. She recounted the number of times she saw her picture in newspaper articles and on television news when they were out on the picket lines. South Asian women have a history of being active in political struggles in their places of work (Westwood 1984, Aggarwal 1987), and this history can be traced back to India (Guha 1989; Sanghera 1990a, 1990b).

*I have walked out when the union has called strikes in the past, but usually it has nothing to do with us in the cannery. Mostly the strikes have to do with grievances of the*

*fishermen, but we go out there on the picket lines when the union people tell us to. The union is good. We have good wages, and when there has been a problem we have gone to our shop steward. A couple of times our women, a couple of apniān, have been shop stewards. Now, whoever is shop steward, the company and the union always use an interpreter for us. But the company is good, too. All the people in Personnel know us by first name. We have been there for twenty years now, and they treat us well.*

Relations with other workers have always been good, she assured me. She is sometimes discouraged that her English is not sufficient to really converse with her non-Punjabi co-workers, especially the women she has worked with for the last two decades. The only discrimination she wanted to elaborate on was the treatment they received from the forewomen. She, along with the other women, mocked the forewomen's behaviour, and they laughed it off. They pointed out that they had learned to deal with the floor-ladies in their own way.

*Sometimes there have been problems on the floor...the floor-ladies [forewomen] harassing us when we took breaks to go to the bathroom. The floor-lady tells us we were in there for 7 minutes or 11 minutes. They always seem to watch the clock for us, but they [non-Indian] women take all the breaks they want and for as long as they want. A lot of these women smoke in the bathroom...so now we know we can take as long as we need to in the bathroom, and we ignore their harassment. What can they do? They only give us this kind of treatment. We have seniority...we work hard. We do not bother complaining to the union about this discrimination because what could they do?...nothing really.*

I asked the women I interviewed to elaborate on how they felt they were treated differently from the non-Punjabi workers. Although there was no one thing in their opinion, differential treatment showed up in the way things were done. They reiterated their mistreatment over length of washroom breaks, or how they were moved around to

various parts in the processing parts more often than other workers.

*For years we worked on the lines cleaning fish. They rarely took us over to the canning side where you make a little more money and the work is less strenuous, even as our seniority increased. If they needed us, they would take us over there. However, when they wanted to replace us [with non-Punjabi workers], they would tell us we are too slow. We are not too slow when they do not have one of their own available, or there is a lot of work.*

*Over the years, things have improved. I have been patching<sup>7</sup> for the last few years now. They also know we understand exactly what is going on even if we do not speak English. But they continue to discriminate against us, treat us differently, but that is the way it has always been.*

I asked Tirath Aunty if she knew about the racist graffiti defacing the walls of the women's bathroom. She told me that she had been informed about it by a young Punjabi woman before. *During summer holidays she told us there was written on the wall something about Hindus...not good things... she was quite angry and asked us did we not care? I cannot read it for one thing, and I work hard for 3-4 months of the year. At the end, I enjoy myself being with my family, raising my children, and looking after my home. If we were in India, I would not have the opportunity to work outside the home. Some of the women in the cannery, of course, are well educated and they may have been doing service<sup>8</sup>. We would not have had that opportunity, so I do not care what they write on the wall.*

I spoke to Tirath Aunty at length twice. She was also one of the women with

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<sup>7</sup> Patching refers to a duty on the canning lines where female employees trim pieces of fish steaks in the cans as they come along the conveyor belt. The job requires a "cleaning up" of the fish piece so it sits well in the can. The cans are then moved along to be sealed.

<sup>8</sup> In India, people refer to having a job as "doing service." These women used the word in the same context.



whom I arranged group interviews. A topic that repeatedly came up in conversations was the behaviour of children. I was aware that children's behaviour has always been a concern in our community. Thus, I purposely inquired about what impact they thought their work had had on their own children? I also asked them did they think their children were different from the children of those women they knew who were full-time homemakers or those women that worked in town? All of the women I interviewed were quick to respond that their children were "good": they had no complaints. I pointed out that the impact of having a working mother could be positive since that was how I viewed my own upbringing. In my opinion, we had learned to be self-sufficient, responsible, and independent because we were given responsibility when my mother was working. However, their responses reflected cannery free-time talk.

Much of this talk that circulated around the tables at lunch included gossip about other people's children or gossip about children in the community who were misbehaving. Sometimes, women made indirectly critical comments to women whose children were not deemed "good" by community standards - bad habits, dating without intent of marriage, "running around" in most instances. What came out of these comments and gossip sessions were the criteria of a "good" child. Parents who did not have "good" children found themselves on the fringes of the Punjabi community or were themselves embarrassed about their children's behaviour to the extent that they isolated themselves. Gossip contributed to tension and distrust among women. Women whose children were "good" enjoyed centre stage: they talked freely about their children's lives. These interchanges were really about maintaining a central position in the community and not becoming marginalized. Such centrality could be managed through maintaining Punjabi customs and ways that were held in high esteem by community members. The community norms dictated that in order to be considered a successful Punjabi Sikh

Canadian, you obtained a well-paying job, got married to a nice Punjabi man or woman, and had a nice house and well-behaved children. These elements constitute a model or a blueprint of behaviour used by the women to gauge their own behaviour and the behaviour of their children. It was only when deviations from prescribed behaviours were perceived by community members that individuals and families became marginalized.

*We spoke Punjabi at home so my children are still quite fluent. We gave them everything - good food, a home - what more is love? Our children were always good. My daughters brought no shame to our name. There were always stories circulating about other people's children, but never ours. If anyone ever brought anything up about my children, then we discussed it with our children. But they knew better than to be the target of gossip.*

Tirath Aunty-ji sent her children to university. At that time, she had seen it as a risk because other parents did not agree in giving children too much freedom.

*We trusted them to know the right things to do. My husband did not want to be like the other parents in town who married their daughters off right after high school. It was not my desire, but I did want them to be able to qualify for good jobs - work in a bank or a business. But I know they get a mind of their own when they stay single too long.*

*My daughters are married to boys from here [Canada] who are well settled, the older two. My son I worry about because he is not yet married and has no plans to get married, and my youngest is working. We have told them both that they should inform us if they meet some good person. My other daughters, they were introduced to a number of boys before they decided to marry the ones they did. My sister called from Toronto and said she knew a family who was looking for a girl for their son. My husband does not believe in dāj and the family did not want daaj. We are all very happy. Shammi is married to a boy from Vancouver and she has a boy and girl now. We found out about*

him through the Ajit newspaper [matrimonial section]. Now I am trying to convince the younger two to settle down. It is a constant worry to have single children. A lot of worry. Once they are married and settled, then the load is lifted off our heads.

I do not worry about inter-racial marriages because my children would not do that, although it is happening more and more. In Santokh Singh's basement there is an apnī girl living with some gorā. They do not even have the decency to get married. Her mother used to gossip about everyone else's kids, but this event with her daughter has shut her up. She is so ashamed that I do not see her around at all. These kids have no shame, no sense of respect for their families sometimes. And the girl is pregnant again. What kind of life will her kids have? You see how gorās live. He may leave her at any time, and they are not even married.

My husband and I have bought a house in Vancouver, and we will be moving down in a couple of years. Lots of people have moved down from Terrace so we can visit with them, and we can join our kids. My niece and nephew also live their with their families. Everyone always complains that they do not like Vancouver or city life, but I like it. I like the raunaq of the city. I like my life here, too. I know all my neighbours and their kids come over and play in my yard all the time. Everywhere we go people know me and my husband. They greet us by our names at Safeway. Yes, it is easy to get things done in a small town, for instance, to see the doctor and do your banking. Everything can be done in a shorter time than in Vancouver. But now I am ready to move. My husband does not want to move because he likes his life here, but we want to be close to our children, too. I look forward to retiring so I can enjoy that time with my grandchildren. I am not like these goras that want to work so much. I will retire as soon as I can and enjoy my life.

Now we are all getting old. Of course I would miss work, but I would retire as soon as I could. Even when we retire, we [cannery friends] still would spend time together. And

*if our kids choose to support us, then I would happily take that support and play with my grandchildren.*

### **Jagdish Aunty-ji**

Jagdish Aunty is fifteen years younger than Tirath Aunty. Both her parents were teachers and encouraged her and their other three children to pursue a college education. She attended a women's college and completed a Bachelor of Arts degree. She was well-versed in English before coming to Canada, and now after twenty-two years here, she is fluent. She is the mother of three children, two girls and a boy. She loves living in the Northwest. She enjoys an active lifestyle visiting and doing activities with Punjabi and non-Punjabi friends in her community. However, she will follow her children to the Lower Mainland in another ten or fifteen years, since that is when Uncle will be able to take early retirement. They have already purchased a house in Surrey to coincide with their future plans.

Aunty had heard about Canada through neighbours and friends while still living in India and had ambitions to come. When her family arranged for her to meet the family of a young man who had immigrated to Canada, she was pleased at the opportunity to come overseas.

*My husband's family went to India and met me there through an aunt. I had finished my B.A and had not yet started working. I had always wanted to go abroad because I had friends, classmates who were living in other countries. We wrote to each other and I found out about their lives here in Canada, too.*

*When the chance to come to Canada was there, I took it. I came in 1972 and had my wedding here. Your uncle had already been working here for two years and his sister was here. She had also married a man who was living in Canada, and after moving to*

*Canada, she had sponsored your uncle. Once we had established ourselves, I also sponsored my parents and brother to Canada. They live in the Fraser Valley.*

Paralleling Tirath Aunty's story, Jagdish Aunty also began to work in the cannery out of necessity. She did not pursue a position where she could use her education because no one would recognize her degree in Canada. Having their education accepted on par is a common problem among South Asian immigrants (Buchignani 1985).

*I started working in the cannery a year after my marriage. We wanted a car and there were mortgage payments. My sister-in-law was working there and I joined her. Seasonal work made it easy to take care of my children while they were pre-school age. And soon after my first child arrived, my husband sponsored his younger sister to come and she lived with us along with my in-laws.*

Because of her fluency in English, Jagdish Aunty has developed a wide network of Punjabi and non-Punjabi friends in Kitimat and at work in Prince Rupert. She also enjoys reading English and Punjabi magazines and books. She is hooked on "Days of Our Lives," a daytime soap opera. Most days, after watching the soap opera, she is off on her daily two hour walk.

*I would get bored if I did not work at the cannery. The season is slow this year, otherwise by now it would be in full swing. I have worked with the same group for twenty-two years. I mix with all of us who have the same seniority, Indian, Native Indian or gorian. It does not matter to me. I talk to everyone, and I like sitting for lunch with different women. I get bored with just the Punjabi women because they gossip so much. Someone always has some information about a family who is experiencing problems: who has left who, which mother-in-law is bothering her daughter-in-law. Also, I do not want the other women [non-Punjabis] to think that we do not like them or that we are discriminating. I have things to do at home, too, but I really enjoy going to work.*

Jagdish goes on to explain to me that most of the Punjabi women sit together because they do not speak English, and therefore, it is difficult for them to converse with the Native Indian women or Euro-Canadian women. They can eat their Punjabi food unself-consciously. *I think some of them are shy about what the others may think about their food or facing some other form of discrimination.*

*When we are laid off, I miss my work circle and the routine of work, especially now that my kids are not needing me as much. I get bored quite quickly. My outlook is broader since I have been working. I learn about new things and find out what is going on in the world, and sometimes this information is useful in getting things done and making choices in my life. I have learned about things to do and about school or job openings for my children.*

Compared to those friends who do not work, Jagdish Aunty believes that her and her husband's combined incomes enabled them to spend more money on their children. They signed their children up for games and teams, toured with their teams around B.C. for tournaments. Also, she knows her income helped her family get established and has provided a good life for her children.

*My family benefitted greatly from my work. Because I work we were able to buy and pay off this house. My husband alone would have had a difficult time supporting the whole family. My working meant that the whole family could have holidays in the year, and we could meet whatever needs my kids had.*

When I asked her if she felt that she was treated differently at work by non-Punjabi workers and staff, she unabashedly told me that difference is always present. *You cannot get away from that [difference]. But the 3-4 months that we work, it can be dealt with easily enough. What stops us from really speaking our minds about the discrimination we face and standing up for our rights at work is the language problem. If*

*we try, there is always the worry of misinterpretation. I worry that they [non-Punjabis] will read something else into the defense I put up and misconstrue my real meaning. Difference is a way of life. I know that we Indians contribute immensely to the Canadian economy. They cannot dispute that. They know it. We do not throw our money away like the gorās. We do not accumulate entertainment expenses. Rather, we save our money so we can have the things we want for our families.*

The family's combined income enabled it to help Aunty-ji's in-laws before they passed away in India. Her in-laws had lived with them in Canada but had decided to rejoin family in India: *My income helped them. I have always contributed money to the well-being of my husband's family. His sister stayed with us for years. We arranged her wedding and paid for it.*

Jagdish Aunty has held a number of positions in the cannery because she has had health problems. After the first season of working with herring roe, she developed a severe allergic reaction to it. She went on to work on the cleaning lines, and there too she developed an allergy to the fish. She approached her floor-lady with whom she had good relations and asked her to find another post for her in the cannery, away from the fish. Jagdish Aunty did janitorial work in the lunchrooms and did the laundry on the second floor of the cannery. She felt that her rapport with the supervisor and her English skills helped her in being able to find work suitable to her needs.

*I only worked on the lines, cleaning fish, for two years, but I developed such a severe allergy to the fish that I was moved to maintenance. I worked in the laundry and the lunchrooms. After seventeen years, for a change, I transferred to the warehouse and worked with canned fish. Now I am working upstairs sharpening knives.*

As her children got older, Jagdish Aunty's children wanted her to be around for summer holidays and not be away for such long stretches of time. They especially missed

her during the spring months. The children asked Aunty to find a job in town.

*My children, as they got older, would ask me to find different work because they did not want me working in the cannery, especially when we had 12-14 hour shifts. But the cannery work allows me to be at home most of the year and still have an income because I am on UI when I am not working. The work pays better than any other job I could find because it is unionized there. And now I have been there for so long and have so many friends there that I could never leave.*

A couple of the Punjabi women Aunty worked with became her close friends. One woman was from Terrace and the other was from Prince Rupert. She also had two families in town on her husband's side. She visited with her relatives frequently, as well as, with her friends. The friendships she had developed at work in the two neighbouring towns provided outings for the whole family.

*We would go to Terrace, and they would come to Kitimat to visit us and to spend the weekend. My children are younger than hers. My oldest is three years younger than her youngest, and that has worked out well. Her son is getting married this fall. He is good friends with my son. They are both in Vancouver and they get together themselves. Her son is a good role model for my son and all the kids are good examples for my kids. They look up to Manjit's children. Her girls are also living in Vancouver. They come up to see their parents, and we visit with them when they come. I like it that my girls talk to Manjit's girls. Her daughters are well-educated, and they have good jobs. They respect their parents and have done nothing to dishonour them. They are all still single, but their values and ideas are good. My girls look up to them and hopefully will follow in their footsteps and get an education. I still want them to be married by the time they are twenty-two. One of my daughters is fourteen, and the other one is seventeen right now. If Noni shows no ambition towards more schooling, then I plan to marry her right after high*



*school. I don't want to take any risks like some of the other women did, letting their daughters go to Vancouver or not being too strict with them. Although, you never know what children are going to do. I am lucky that my kids think about me, but most do not anymore.*

Aunty was quite worried about her children's future. She worried that they would lose respect for the Punjabi ways, marry out of the community, or marry someone she and her husband could not get along with. This worry had been exaggerated by the behaviour of her niece:

*My niece is living with a gorā. I think my sister-in-law should have allowed them to get married like they wanted. Instead, she told her daughter to break off with the boy. At least if they had been allowed to get married, it would not be such a shameful thing because so many kids are marrying gorās these days. Was not Narinder's son's wedding last week? He married a gori. And once they fall in love with someone, it is not good to force your children to marry someone of your own choosing because they can still bring shame to their house by taking up with their boyfriend or girlfriend after they are married. You hear about that all the time, or they run off with the boyfriend or girlfriend after marrying a perfectly nice person. They then destroy two families...their husband's or wife's and their own.*

*My brother-in-law does not talk to his daughter, and he wants nothing more to do with her, although my sister-in-law stills speak to her. As far as he is concerned, she might as well be dead. But the girl herself has disowned her family. She is now a Christian and denies being Indian. She has made all kinds of derogatory remarks about Indians to my daughters whenever they have spoken to her. They sometimes run into her in town. My nephew also took his sister's action hard. He does not speak to her either. He went to India and got married early this year, and his wife is arriving soon. It made up a*

*little for the sadness and shame my niece caused her family.*

Aunty repeatedly stated that she constantly worried over the future of her children, especially since her niece's decision to move out. Her recent acquaintance with a woman whose two daughters had taken similar action, added to her fears.

*Until my children are safely married and in their own homes, their marital status is a constant worry to me and your uncle, just as yours is to your parents. Both of Ratan's daughters have left with gorās. She has some semblance of peace with one who married and is settled with two kids, but the other one is no longer with the one she left home with. She is now living with a man her father's age. What can Ratan Kaur do? I see her quite a bit because her sister-in-law used to live in our basement suite. She has since bought a house a couple of houses away from us. I became good friends with all of them during that time, and we are still close. She is not the same person anymore. She has lost a lot of weight and is listless much of the time. I remember that she was a happy person, she always dressed well. She always took such an interest in fashion and dressing well. She does not talk about her daughters with me. What is there to say? She has lost her daughters to this culture. She cannot have the joy you feel in planning your grandchildren's arrival. She cannot visit with her daughters' new families. What would she say to them? We do not really have a lot in common with gorās. All she has left to enjoy is her son's family. His wife is from India and her own family has arrived in Canada so Ratan Kaur now has a circle of relatives around her.*

Jagdish Aunty was busy thinking of and planning for her son's wedding. She had sent word out to her friends and family to keep their eyes and ears open for a suitable girl. She already had a standing offer from a college friend now living in Toronto. However, Aunty felt that her friend's daughter was too short and small for her son. They did not make a good couple in Aunty's opinion, but she had written to her friend to bring

the children in the fall for a visit and suggested that her son and her friend's daughter could meet in person. She was open to the possibility that they may hit it off.

A number of times we talked about Aunty's educational background. Both her parents had been teachers, and she came from a well-educated and well-established family. She had told me that she had wanted to study nursing and that her parents thought that was a difficult career so instead she had majored in the humanities. Often, she spoke about her friends and cousins in India who were lecturers or scientists. I asked her if she ever regretted her decision to come to Canada since she may have had opportunities in India to work in her field.

*The work I do is hateful and atrocious by Indian standards. In the eyes of my friends in India, this is considered low quality work. My cousins and friends have good work. One friend is a lecturer at Ludhiana University, and a cousin is a scientist in Delhi working for the government. Those who do not work married into good families.*

*I may not have a high status job, but I am better off here than if I would have stayed in India. It was a dream of mine to be here. My children have all kinds of opportunities to do what they want. The real joy in life would be to live in India, of course. That is the society I know most intimately, and I miss hearing my own language everywhere. But, I have established ties here, and my children are here so my life is here.*

*I could have learned and improved my English because I had English from my studies in India. But when I first arrived, I lived in a joint family situation. These people, well you could say, were illiterate so I could not improve my English skills around them. I could not even watch television attentively because they would always talk since they did not understand the program. I find with watching television, I can really improve my English. And at the cannery, I used to sit with only other Punjabi women, and we would speak in our language which held me back as well.*

*Now, many of my friends are white women and we get together a lot. Some of them live in my neighbourhood so it is easy to see them. They also call me. And at work, I do not only spend time with apniān. I mingle with everyone.*

*I did start working out of necessity and difficulty because we had nothing. Now the reasons are still the same, but things have changed in that I do not have to work as much overtime. I am willing to book holidays in the season because we are better off. I worked a lot of overtime because we did not have a house or car. Now I have more choice, and I work through choice. I enjoy work. It provides an outlet for me instead of sitting in front of the television. That is no way to live. Unlike your uncle who wants to retire at fifty-five, I will work as long as my health allows me to.*

### Discussion

Upon first arriving in Terrace from India, these women moved in the social circles created by their husbands who had journeyed ahead of them. These circles were the result of men rooming together prior to family arrival or working together at the sawmills in town<sup>9</sup>. As their families joined the men, the Punjabi population grew and consequently so did their social networks. All the women I interviewed remembered finding out about cannery work through female relatives who were already employed there or through these developing social networks.

None of the women I spoke with had worked outside the home prior to immigrating to Canada. They, nevertheless, came fully prepared to do paid work because they had been told by their husbands that women in Canada worked. Although women

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<sup>9</sup> These bachelor communities or support systems were especially important to early South Asian settlers and are well detailed in Buchignani and Indra (1985). For later settlers they provided emotional and financial support while the men were establishing themselves. For more discussion on South Asians in Canada see Kanungo (1984).

do hold paid jobs in all sectors in India, the majority of the women who migrated to the Skeena Valley had been unable to do so because of their social and geographical location in the Punjab. As daughters of farmers in most instances, they lived in rural villages, helping their families with agricultural work. Nonetheless, now having worked for most of their lives in Canada, they enjoyed their employed status and the financial, social and psychological rewards it has brought.

Cannery work entails a unique migratory procedure. This special feature does not apply to women and men living in Prince Rupert who work in the cannery. However, individuals living in the neighbouring towns and employed by the canneries migrate to and take up temporary residence in Prince Rupert twice a year for up to 4 months in total: in the spring for one and one half to two months during the herring season when herring roe is harvested, and in the summer for two or more months during the salmon season when fresh fish is harvested and canning is done. A group of 5-7 women rent a room in a Punjabi home, sharing kitchen and washroom facilities with the family. They travel home during their time off. During high season, they may work for 13-14 day stretches without any days off.

Cannery work, consequently, provides the Punjabi women with the opportunity to be with each other without the responsibility of children, husbands, and homes. It also affords them some financial independence. The work atmosphere is conducive to solidarity and generosity among the women because they are all away from their homes. If a worker was hired on the spot, Manjit told me that they would do what ever they could to help her:

We will supply new women with boots in case they are called right 'way. Here at work we help each other out, everyone does...share your food...In town, that is not necessarily so, but there the atmosphere is warm, everyone is in good spirits.

In the Punjabi community, the cannery workers are referred to as

*macchīānvālanān* - the fishwomen. At first, this term was used in jest among community members, but now it has taken hold as a convenient name tag. I had heard the term often in everyday conversations among the group and in my home. However, Manjit was quite offended when a Punjabi woman not involved in cannery work said to her, when we were at the Gurdwara for a wedding, "you *mucchīānvālanān* will be too busy to help with the camp" [a Sikh studies summer camp for children held annually in Terrace]. Without offering a direct response, we walked away and took a seat in the *langār* hall. When I asked her why she was angry, her response reflected a cognisance of her social position in Canadian society as an immigrant South Asian women. "The job she does [dishwasher in a restaurant] is done by *chirs* [in the Indian caste system, a sub-caste of *dālits* or *hārījans*]. When they call us *mucchīānvālanān* they are also referring to us by a low caste" [fisherfolk are classified as a subcaste of the *sūdra* caste which is the lowest registered caste].

When I asked Tirath and Jagdish Aunties about their discussions of their lives and their work in Canada with their relatives in India, they drew parallels between themselves and the poor of Bihar, fully cognisant of their perceived sojourner and marginal status in Canadian society. "We are the *bheī-e*<sup>10</sup> of Canada," Manjit stated. She also added, "we work hard so that our children can get ahead." These women found themselves performing work in Canada that they could not have imagined doing in India - janitorial work, restaurant work, and fish processing work. In fact in India, much of this work is caste-designated and consequently as Jats and Rajputs [two subcastes of the high status *Ksatria* caste], these women would be socially constrained to avoid such "low" occupations because such tasks would be considered beneath them.

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<sup>10</sup> *Bheī-e* is plural of *bhai-a*, a term used by Punjabis to refer to poor migrant workers from Bihar. These individuals travel to the Punjab for two years at a time to find work on farms, in cities doing housekeeping and other work Punjabis would not do.

Regardless of the self-labelling, these women on the whole enjoyed their lives in Canada and identified with Canada as their home because of the ties they have established and the opportunities they have:

- Harbans: We like our situation here.  
 Santokh: I like it here. You cannot starve here.  
 Harbans: You can work and you can feed yourself.  
 Narinder: Women do mostly housework there. There are too many customs to worry about in our own country - what colour *dupattā* she is wearing [with regard to widowhood, strict custom dictates that women wear white *dupattās* or light coloured *dupattās* unless they remarry to maintain respectful position in the community]. Is it white? So many things to concern yourself with there in your own country. Here, no one really pays too much attention to that. In my case, my husband died, and I came here and worked and raised my children. At the time of your uncle's death, Shinda (the youngest) was four. In India, I could not have raised my children. In fact I do not know where I would be right now if I was still there. Now they are all married and well-settled in their own homes [Aunty's daughters]. And because I work, I can help my son out with his tuition, pay for his wedding, and support myself if my son does not in the future.

During the two weeks I spent in Prince Rupert, among my mother's group and the dozen Punjabi women I met at the cannery, I began to notice the intensity of alliance-building and conflict among these women. The same tensions and contradictions surfaced during group and individual interviews. For instance, in one group interview I asked how their relationships among themselves were in terms of compatibility and comraderie. Speaking animatedly, all three women assured me that they were like sisters. "We have been together for eighteen years. We live together and work together like sisters," Sarinder replied. "After all, how could all of us still be together twenty plus years later if we did not share this sisterly relationship?" Manjit added. Alone, respondents expressed more cynicism about their relationships and each other's behaviour. One participant emphasized,

We came to this country to make a better life for ourselves and our children.  
 We do not have much family here, but even family you cannot trust to be

loyal and supportive. My own family has spread rumours about my children. And we know not to expect loyalty or trustworthiness from co-workers. Everyone is in this to make a living. We put up with poor quality clothes, inconveniences, poor health, racism because in the end, we have earned so much money. No one wants to see anyone person get ahead. All *Hindustānī* are like that.

While, together, on the other hand, all women echoed Sarinder's sentiments,

We all come from different places, different *brādherī*, but here we do not differentiate among ourselves. Even in India, working people do not differentiate between *brādherī*, whether one is a Sikh or Hindu. With us there is no difference...also things are changing everywhere in India...customs...before, to marry you had to skip four family names...your father's, mother's, paternal grandmother's and maternal grandmother's surnames. With illiterate people, they would get into this rigamarole about names, *jaats*...but times are changing everywhere.

Work-related associations through room-sharing and ride sharing have developed into friendships for some women. Three of the women I interviewed had developed life-long friendships with their landladies and their co-workers in Prince Rupert. These friendships were shared by all family members. Similar to any relationship, including looser relationships where women spent time together on the phone or in-person off-season, friendships had obligations or conditions attached to them. The expectations outside of work ranged from maintaining confidences to doing work at cultural and religious functions such as weddings and *ākhand pāths*<sup>11</sup>, respectively.

In the off-season, families planned weddings and religious celebrations. All of the food and *matheāt* was prepared by friends and members of the family. Any special help a family might need, including aid in performing marriage related rituals, would be met by friends.

At work, expectations revolved around carrying one's own weight after work in

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<sup>11</sup> The ceremony of a *ākhand pāth* is a complete, continuous reading of the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs, over a forty-eight hour period. During the reading langar is prepared in the Gurdwara by volunteers and the family members who are having the *ākhand pāth* in honour of a special event (a wedding, a birth or death, or to express piety).



completing chores at the rented premises, such as shopping, cooking, and supplying groceries. Failure to carry one's own weight could result in being ousted from the group as demonstrated by this one conversation among three women regarding a fellow member who they felt was not fulfilling her obligations:

- Manjit: We have to move because it is just too far to walk from Gurminder house...it will be at least a forty-five minute walk each way and my knee is already bothering me. I will ask Kirin if she has room at her house.
- Santokh: I don't think she has room. Is not that group from Kitimat staying there?
- Manjit: Not right now. I will ask.
- Narinder: Yes, ask because it is too far for me to walk as well.
- Manjit: Should we ask Surjit if she wants to move as well.
- Santokh: No!
- Manjit: Personally, I don't care what happens to her.
- Narinder: What is the matter with her anyways? since she moved to Vancouver, she treats us shabbily.
- Manjit: And how she acted during the herring season...she did not do any work. She ate everyone else's food.
- Santokh: *Kī, nānakiān dhey ghar aī sī?*<sup>12</sup>

I also witnessed some embarrassing displays of anger and contempt among members of one close-knit group. This group of women had been together for eighteen years. However, rifts developed between two of the members, of this group of six, this last season when one woman reneged on her offer of aid at the other's *ākhand pāth*. Angry exchanges between the two women during my fieldwork resulted in group members being left stranded behind during call-ins in Terrace while the rest of the group made its way to Prince Rupert. This incident was repeated twice with an innocent member getting caught in the middle the second time. The two women left behind on separate occasions both lost a day's wages because of communication breakdowns among group members. Although all six of the women were back on "friendly" terms when I left, the underlying

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<sup>12</sup> "*Kī, nānakiān dhey ghar aī sī?*" translates to "What, was she visiting her maternal grand-parents?" It is understood among Punjabis in India that when one visit one's maternal grandparents one will be spoiled with love, attention, and food. No one expects one to work when visiting them. Santokh was suggesting that Surjit was acting as if they were her maternal grandparents.

conflict had not been resolved because they refused to discuss the cause of the initial problem.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The literature on South Asians has rarely dealt with the diversity that exists within the collectivity. By providing individual narratives of two women living in the small Punjabi communities in the Skeena Valley and illustrating the differences and similarities between them in negotiating their situations, I hope to have demonstrated the importance of taking into account the differences among us in order to understand what sets us apart from the dominant community. These differences also illuminate what sets us apart from each other. I have argued for the extension of the notion of difference beyond gender, race and class to include regional, ethnic, age, caste, and class variation among South Asian Canadian women in order to illuminate, as much as possible, our experiences as South Asians and as South Asian Canadians.

### Glossary

<i>ākhand pāth</i>	the event of the continuous, complete reading of the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs, over a 48 hour period. An individual or group or institution can arrange for khandpad to be performed for any occasion, usually for weddings, births and deaths.
<i>apnā, -ī, -e, -iān</i>	one's own. In everyday usage in Punjabi, one's own means belonging to one's own community, caste; in the Canadian context, a Punjabi-Sikh person.
<i>barī</i>	the part of a bride's dowry received from the grooms family. Usually takes the form of jewellery and clothes.
<i>brādherī</i>	brotherhood, community, belonging to same caste, clan, or tribe.
<i>dāj</i>	dowry, the bride's portion of the dowry.
<i>dāl</i>	split grain of legumes, curried soup of split grains.
<i>dupattā</i>	a piece of fabric of 2 1/4- 2 1/2 metres matching the salwar-kameez, used to cover head.
<i>gorā</i>	fair-skinned or complexioned, as a noun, means Whitemen, Europeans.
<i>gurdwārā</i>	Sikh Temple
<i>Hindustānī</i>	Indian
<i>jaat</i>	caste, clan.
<i>jī</i>	life, heart, soul; as a term of respect, i.e., Papa-ji.
<i>langār</i>	public kitchen; free meals served in Gurdwaras.
<i>matheāī</i>	Indian sweets or desserts.
<i>māsī</i>	mother's sister, aunt.
<i>melā</i>	a fair, a gathering.
<i>phark</i>	difference, distinction
<i>raunak</i>	mirth, boisterous atmosphere. Together raunaq-mela connote the lively atmosphere of a fair - full of joy and laughter and fun.
<i>sabjī</i>	vegetable, curried vegetables.

<i>salwār-kāmeez</i>	a Punjabi woman's outfit consisting of a long tunic and loose fitting trousers.
<i>sangrāndh</i>	the first day of the Punjabi calendar, marked by a Sikh ceremony at gurdwaras.
<i>sewā</i>	service, attendance, duty, worship; to attend, to wait upon.

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