Ocean and Island Studies

Women and the Sikh Diaspora in California

Singing the Seven Seas

Nicole Ranganath

ROUTLEDGE

"*Women and the Sikh Diaspora in California* is a compelling study of the South Asian diaspora through the lives and imaginaries of 20th century women neglected by history. Music and mobility from the origins of their Sikh religion in the Punjab resonate with the rivers of California in their songs—revolutionary, sacred, folk, and autobiographical. Distinguished by a wealth of research, this evocative volume on Sikh women's sonic textures is a landmark contribution to audiences worldwide."

Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, *Professor of Religious Studies, Colby College, USA*

"In this wonderful book Nicole Ranganath painstakingly weaves together the story of women, water and music to focus on how the diasporic Punjabi Sikh women came to make the Californian space their own. Whether traveling over worldly oceans or spiritual *bhavsāgars*, traversing Punjab's *daryās* or California's rivers, Ranganath asks how did these women who mostly migrated after the Luce–Celler Act of 1946, come to find their cultural moorings, voices and subjectivities even as they faced dystopic displacements. Delving into their humane resilience and natal creativity, Ranganath journeys with them through their manifold musical odysseys—devotional, revolutionary, folk, autobiographical—to show the power of music, poetry, song and friendship in making these Sikh women the embodiment of joy and empathy. Ranganath's refreshing work underscores the importance of looking at the extraordinary achievements of ordinary, everyday lives—a must read for students of South Asia, Diaspora, and Punjab and Sikh Studies."

Anshu Malhotra, *Professor & Kapany Chair for Sikh & Punjab Studies, University of California Santa Barbara, United States*

"Based on years of fieldwork with Sikh women in the Sacramento valley but also on wide ranging reading in Sikhi and diasporic history, Ranganath relates Sikh women's music and mobility to their enhanced creativity and self-expression. Importantly and hopefully, she proposes a transoceanic imaginary among Sikhs emphasizing global belonging and unity rather than disruption. This is a pioneering and thoroughly original contribution."

Karen Leonard, *Professor Emeritus, University of California, Irvine, United States*

"*Women and the Sikh Diaspora* offers a unique insight into the "river of songs" that nourished the lives of the earliest Sikh women migrants to the United States. By reconstructing an aural and sonic history of these women and foregrounding their relationship to the ecology, Ranganath fills an important gap in the disciplines of history, diaspora studies, and ethnomusicology."

Radha Kapuria, *Assistant Professor of South Asian History, Durham University, United Kingdom*

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Women and the Sikh Diaspora in California

This book charts the transoceanic history of South Asian women in California through their speech and songs across the twentieth century.

Nicole Ranganath reimagines the history of the South Asian diaspora through an examination of gender and the dynamic interplay of water and land in the cultural history of Sikhs, a faith and cultural community that emerged in the Punjab region of north South Asia over 550 years ago. It shows how the history and music of transoceanic communities, in this case Sikhs, spilled beyond the boundaries of regions, empires and nation-states. It emphasizes the heterogeneity of the South Asia diaspora by uncovering the distinct history of women's migration experiences, as well as an alternative oceanic imaginary among Sikhs that envisions unity in the cosmos. It foregrounds the pivotal role that women played in transforming Sikh communities in California through songs and female affinities. Based on six years of fieldwork in rural northern California, it explores song as a window into the interior lives of Sikh women through their performance of diverse genres: anti-colonial protest songs, folk music, hymns, and autobiographical songs. This sonic history of South Asian women in the diaspora dislodges dominant paradigms in diaspora studies and oceanic humanities that depict men as mobile and women as stationary.

Women and the Sikh Diaspora in California will interest scholars of migration, South Asia and South Asian American studies, oceanic humanities, Sikh studies, music, and women's studies. It is also essential reading for anyone who is curious about global music and migration, as well as Sikh history.

Nicole Ranganath is Assistant Professor of Middle East/South Asia Studies at the University of California, Davis. She is the author of articles, book chapters, and a digital archive about the history of the Punjabi and Sikh diaspora, especially in California and Fiji.

Ocean and Island Studies

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Nicole Ranganath

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To My Family

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Author's Note on Identity Terms, Names, and Transliteration

I use the term "Sikh" to refer to people who endeavor to live by the teachings in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and who identify with the shared faith, history, and culture that emerged in the fifteenth century in the Punjab region of South Asia. The term "Punjabi" describes people who speak the Punjabi language *and/or* share heritage and cultural ties to the Punjab region. This broader identity term encompasses diverse faith communities, namely Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists. The majority of Punjabi migrants who settled in California before the mid-twentieth century belonged to the dominant land-owning farming caste in Punjab known as "Jats."

Sikh names reflect the community's history and values. Sikh women are named *Kaur* (princess), and men are named *Singh* (lion). When Guru Gobind Singh created a casteless society in Punjab in 1699, Sikhs adopted these names to reflect their solidarity, as well as their commitment to the values of equality and strength.

For greater readability, I have limited the diacritical marks to the *Guru Granth Sahib* and song lyrics and to Punjabi words the first time they appear in the text. I followed the US Library of Congress transliteration system for the Punjabi language in a slightly simplified form.

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Introduction

"I heard the river and then I saw water rushing towards our farm," eighty-eight-year-old Pritam Kaur Heir recalled, pointing toward the Yuba River levee that failed in 1986.[1] Pritam and her family were fortunate to escape, but their home and walnut orchards were destroyed in the deluge. In a nearby farm where Pritam's husband's family lived, the Sikh scripture was hoisted onto the rafters of the second floor to ensure its survival. The Sikh scripture, or *Gurū Granth Sāhib* (henceforth the *Guru Granth Sahib* or *GGS*), is the core of the Sikh faith that emerged in the Punjab region of North South Asia in the fifteenth century. The Heirs had brought one of the first Sikh scriptures to the area. The scriptures were the anchors around which local Sikh communities in northern California coalesced, as women and men gathered to sing hymns and socialize in small, informal meetings in the 1960s. The *GGS* is a repository of the philosophy, faith, history, and culture of the Sikh people; it continues to play a central role in the lives of millions of Sikhs around the world.

Pritam Kaur Heir and her peers traversed multiple oceans after leaving Punjab for California between the late 1940s and the 1960s. She was part of the first generational cohort of South Asian women who settled in California, specifically in the Yuba City area located 40 miles north of Sacramento. They arrived at a critical historical juncture after immigration from Asia reopened in 1946 and South Asian Americans regained US citizenship and the right to own land on a limited basis. These women helped build their family farm businesses on land recently purchased by their husbands, from whom they had been separated by over 7400 miles for years, even decades. This book narrates the transoceanic lives of the first generation of South Asian American women *from their perspectives* through their speech and songs.

Women and the Sikh Diaspora in California examines the relationship between water and land in the sonic cultural history of women living in river watershed regions, as well as how these areas remained deeply connected to the ocean culturally, materially, and environmentally. Placing water in the center of the analytic frame shows how the histories of transoceanic communities, in this case Sikhs, spilled beyond the boundaries of regions and nation-states. The Indus River watershed flows across four countries: India, Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan. Rather than understanding culture as

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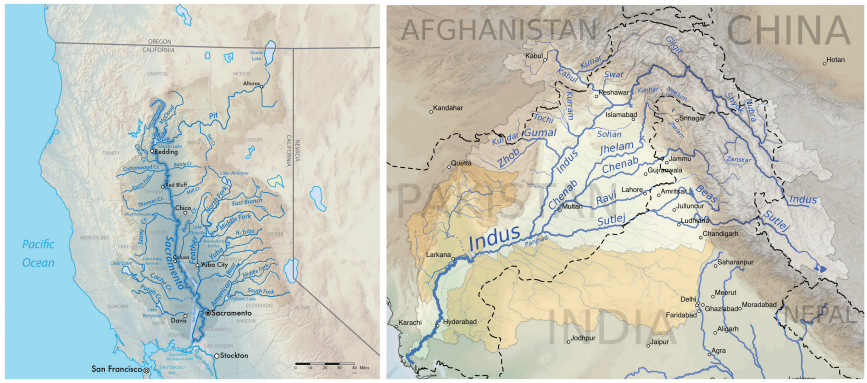

Figure 0.1 The Sacramento River (left) and the Indus River (right) watersheds with outflows into the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Credit: Creative Commons.

originating in and bound by (home)lands, this book theorizes migration as more akin to flowing water. This is especially true for the hypermobile Sikh community in which *routes* are as important as *roots* in shaping their history (Friedman 1998; DeLoughrey 2007). Sikh farmers who settled in the Sacramento Valley emphasized the similarities in the topography and climate of the Indus and Sacramento river basin regions despite the vast distances between them (see Figure 0.1).

Punjab: The Song of Five Rivers

In California, across vast oceans from his native Punjab, the poet Charan Singh composed a hymn about his ancestral home: "Under the arch of the Himalayas, nestling in the arms of its five rivers, lies the North Indian province of the Punjab, recently partitioned between India and Pakistan" (Charan Singh 1949, 42).[2] The year was 1949, and India's cataclysmically violent Partition of 1947 was still a fresh wound. Singh's "Song of the Five Rivers" is infused with his shock, fury, and despair over the devastation wrought by Britain's abrupt departure from South Asia. This watershed event was one of the great humanitarian crises of the twentieth century, especially in the hardest-hit regions of Punjab and Bengal. Partition sparked the largest mass migration in human history in which over 12 million people became refugees and 1 million were murdered in the ethnic cleansing between the Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu communities[3] (Figure 0.2).

Singh conjures up a pre-colonial sense of place as defined by nature, in defiance of the British Raj's logic of Partition in which ancient landscapes and waters were carved into modern nation-states.[4] Punjab is named after its five mighty rivers (*panj* = five and *āb* = water). Situated in the Indus River

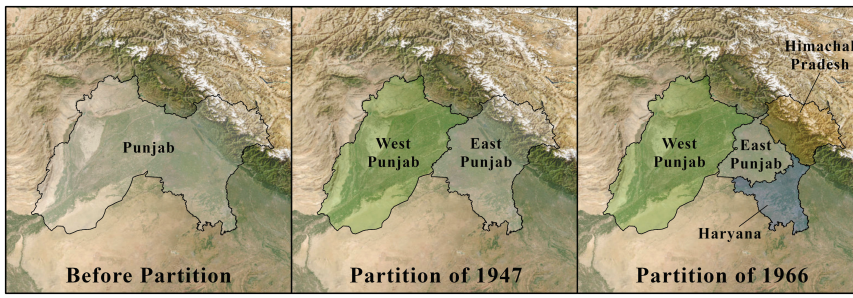

Figure 0.2 Multiple partitions of the Punjab region. The Partition of 1947 divided the region into West Punjab (Pakistan) and East Punjab (India). East Punjab was further partitioned along linguistic lines.

basin, the region is defined by two main climatic features: aridity and highly variable seasonal rainfall. As a result, water has remained the critical force as the giver and taker of life, shaping Punjab's 6000 years of history. *Panjābī* (hereafter Punjabi) culture is "river-centric," overflowing with references to the five rivers—Satluj, Beās, Rāvi, Chenāb, and Jhelam.[5] In Singh's diasporic imaginary of Punjab, the "Neptune-bound Couriers of the Himalayas" are connectors between the "infinity of the oceans" and the world's highest mountains (Charan Singh 1949, 45). In the monsoon cycle, winds carry moist air from the sea upward until the rain freezes into snow caps on the Himalayas. In the spring, the snowmelt then makes its descent along the five rivers where the water joins the Indus River and, finally, merges with the Indian Ocean. The fluidity of water makes it a powerful metaphor for the indivisible, unifying essence of the *Panjābīat* (hereafter the Punjabiyat): the undivided region, language, and culture of Punjab.[6] Singh exhorts the "inseparable five … to heal the wounds of Partition and forever bind together/One Bharat,[7] stretching from the Himalayas to the Ocean" (Charan Singh 1949, 51).

At the heart of the "Song of the Five Rivers" lies deep cultural associations between music, water, and women. Music and nature, especially water, are imbued with a feminine essence in Punjabi culture.[8] In Singh's hydropoetics, the five rivers have carried Punjabi history and culture forward. Romantic folk legends, songs, and historical memories of diverse peoples abound about these waters since the Indus Valley civilization began c. 4000 BCE.[9] The popular love legends of Hīr-Ranjhā and Sohnī-Mahiwāl coalesce around the rivers central to these tales of desire, transgression, and peril. The distinctive regional cultures and dialects of Punjab are delineated by riverine borders; the interfluvial lands between rivers are called *doābs* in Punjabi (literally, "two waters"). Each river possesses its own mood, personality, and folklore. Singh defines Punjab by invoking a sensorium of sights, emotions, histories, memories, and sounds. He extols women's vital role in carrying memory through song, as well as their resilience in the face of natural and anthropogenic forces of destruction.

In Singh's poem "Homesick," women bind together the globally dispersed peoples of Punjab through music:

> *All your heartbreaks shall be healed*
> *And the scars of separation erased,*
> *When thundering clouds race overhead,*
> *When roaring streams roll below,*
> *And the artless maidens of the Punjab*
> *Strike familiar tunes.*
>
> (Charan Singh 1949, 32)

The continuity of Punjabi culture that extends both temporally and geographically is exemplified in this poem by water and the resounding of women's voices, both of which ease the poet's pain of separation from his homeland. The fluidity of water and women's songs allowed the poet to imagine the essence of Punjabi culture as embodied within him despite the great geographical distance between California and Punjab.

Climate change is yet another example of the ways that modern histories of regions and peoples flow beyond the frames of national narratives. The Indus River watershed has been battered by monsoon rains over the last decade. During a devastating flood in the summer of 2022, Pakistan's prime minister visited the worst flood-hit area, exclaiming incredulously: "[there is] water everywhere as far as you [can] see. It is just like a sea."[10] The 2022 monsoon rains inundated a third of the country, displacing millions of people, killing almost 2000 people, and causing $40 billion in economic losses. As a result, Pakistan has led the charge in calling for countries in the Global North to pay climate reparations to nations with small carbon footprints that are most vulnerable to extreme weather events.[11]

California's Sacramento Valley: The Other Land of Five Rivers

California's Central Valley is a giant flood plain that has historically filled with water every two centuries. During wet winters, the Pacific Ocean carries vast amounts of moisture to the Sierra and Cascade mountains before descending into the valley's river systems. In the Sacramento Valley (the northern third of the Central Valley), the Nisenan Maidu people adapted their lifestyle to the frequent ebb and flow of water. Their extensive use of tule (bulrush), a plant that grows abundantly in riverine environments, reflects the dominance of water in their daily lives. The community constructed rafts, sleeping mats, and dwellings with tule plants, which they designed to move easily when flooding occurred. For these people, the Yuba River formed the center of their culture and way of life; in fact, Yuba means water in the Maiduan language. For 10,000 years, the Nisenan Maidu lived along the western banks of the Feather and Yuba Rivers, relying on plentiful salmon and acorns, as well as 200 other species of plants, fish, and game.[12]

After the Gold Rush of 1848, water remained critical to the region's development. When miners arrived from around the world to seek their fortunes, they often traveled by steamboat from the San Francisco Bay in a northeasterly direction up the Sacramento River to the Yuba City area where they headed for the Sierra foothills. As in Punjab, the rivers were well-known for both creating rich farmlands and causing destructive floods. The miners radically altered the environment by clearing riverine forests and introducing hydraulic mining that filled rivers with debris, both of which exacerbated flooding. California's Central Valley has continued to experience severe flooding periodically, often worsened by the very construction of levees intended to protect communities by channeling floodwaters into ferocious flows.[13] In *Battling the Inland Sea*, Robert Kelley calls the Sacramento Valley "one of the nation's most flood-ravaged valleys" (Kelley 1989, 12) (Figure 0.3).

When the first Punjabi immigrants arrived in Northern California's Sacramento Valley circa 1907, they felt an affinity with the landscape, climate, and rich soil reminiscent of Punjab, similarities that extended down to the valley's five rivers. "On arriving in the Sacramento Valley," early Punjabi immigrant Puna Singh recalled, "one could not help but be reminded of Punjab. Fertile fields stretched across the flat valley to the foothills lying far in the distance" (Puna Singh 1972, 109–10). The Feather, Yuba, Bear, American, and Sacramento Rivers flow from the Sierra mountains and Mount Shasta through the Sacramento Valley on their journey to the San Francisco Bay, where they join the Pacific Ocean. In a playful short story, Hari Singh Everest, a writer and educator who settled in California from India in 1955, draws an extended analogy between the geography, people, and culture of Punjab and Yuba City—a small town in the Sacramento Valley known for its large Punjabi Sikh community.[14] Everest's story, "the Land of Five Rivers," refers not to Punjab but to the Sacramento Valley: "The water, like the water in the Punjab, had the same urge to run downward. The distant hills have the same charm" (Hari Singh Everest, 1972, UC Davis *Punjabi and Sikh Diaspora Digital Archive* https://punjabidiaspora.ucdavis.edu/).[15]

Since the 1980s, Yuba City has loomed large in the global Punjabi imaginary. The Punjabi worldview is largely envisioned as a network of villages (*piṇḍs*); thus, it is a *piṇḍu* global imaginary (Mooney 2011). Yuba City figures prominently in the global Punjabi culture, rivaling New York City, London, and other metropolises. Yuba City represents an arcadia in which Sikh farmers have achieved an affluent lifestyle in farming, political influence, and the freedom to publicly practice their faith and celebrate their cultural heritage. The global Punjabi imaginary celebrates the prosperity of caste-dominant *Jaṭ* farmers, disavowing the hybrid Punjabi Mexican American community,[16] as well as the growing presence of Punjabi immigrants from the lower castes.[17] There is a tension in the Punjabi diaspora between the tendency for cultural and social hybridity and mixture with other communities versus a countervailing force that Anjali Gera Roy identifies as the return of tribal forms of

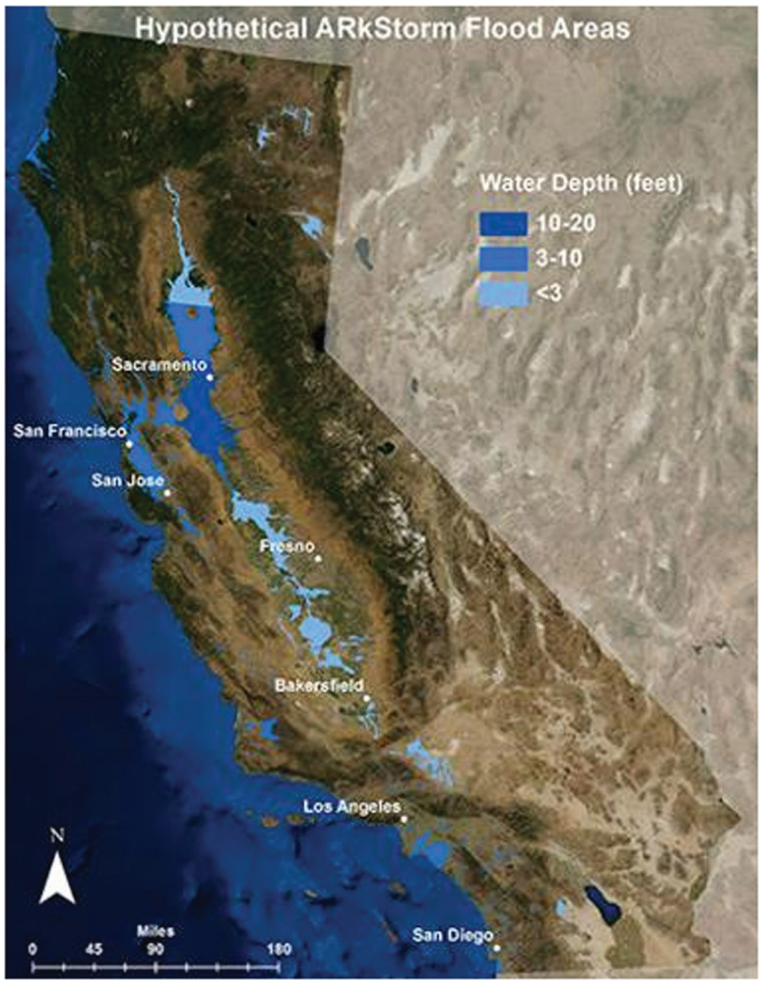

Figure 0.3 Diagram of California's Great Flood of 1861–62 highlighting the same areas that are predicted to flood again in a massive storm.

US Geological Survey.

identity along narrow caste, sectarian, and regional lines (Roy 2011) (Figure 0.4).

The Modern South Asian Diaspora

The growing presence of South Asians around the world is a significant yet understudied feature of modern global history. India's diaspora is the largest in the world with over 32 million people of Indian origin living overseas.

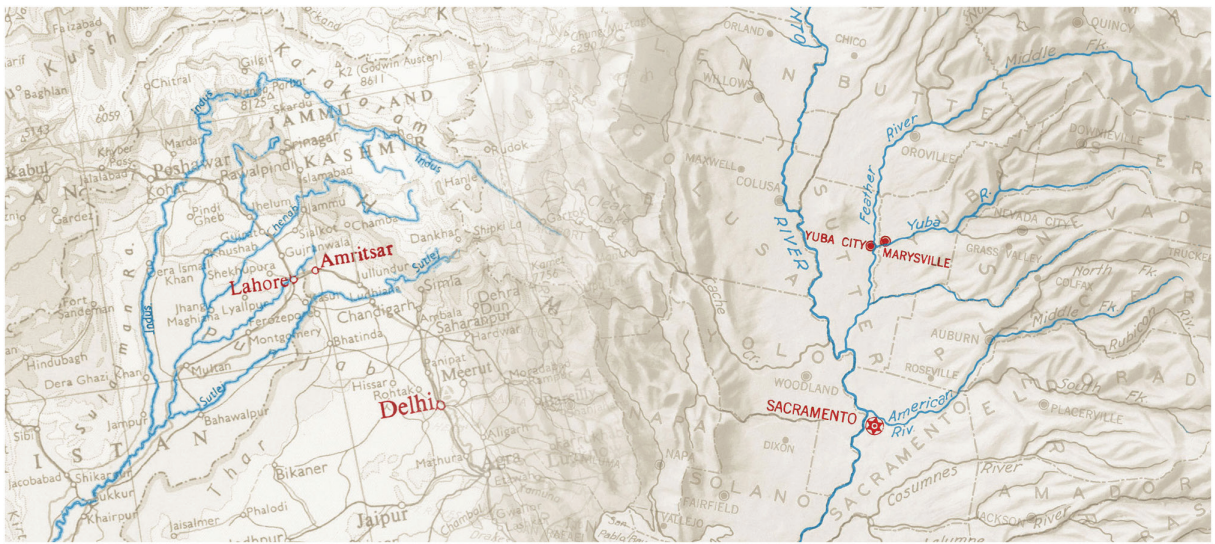

Figure 0.4 The lands of the five rivers in the Punjabi imaginary: Punjab (left) and California's Sacramento Valley (right).

There were 4.4 million people of Indian origin in the United States in 2020, as well as sizable populations from other South Asian countries, namely Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.[18] This book traces the history of Punjabi Sikhs who formed over 85% of the South Asian Americans in the early twentieth century.[19] Few Hindus were present in the United States in the early 1900s, partly due to the prohibition among Hindus against leaving India's shores. By contrast, there was never a taboo among Sikhs prohibiting overseas migration.

The advent of British colonial rule in Punjab in 1849 radically transformed Sikhs' relationship with their environment and forced Sikhs to travel the world in new ways. British construction of the canal colonies brought the arid land of western Punjab under cultivation. The canals were key to the agricultural colonization of Punjab after the British military conquest in the Anglo-Sikh Wars of 1845–46 and 1848–49.[20] The Indus River basin became the largest integrated, state-controlled irrigation system in the world (Gilmartin 2015; Ali 1988).

By the late nineteenth century, British colonial policies created greater economic hardship for farmers in the congested areas of central Punjab, encouraging many to migrate overseas for economic opportunity. Sikh men first traveled the world as soldiers and police officers throughout the British Empire to Asia, Africa, the Americas, Europe, and the South Pacific.[21] The Sikh diaspora resembles a complex network of ports, outposts, and communities spread across the British Empire and beyond, eventually extending to nearly every corner of the world.[22]

At the turn of the twentieth century, Sikh men serving in the British Army and police forces in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Singapore heard about the greater opportunities in North America, prompting many to venture onward by ship to Vancouver and San Francisco. Over the next twenty years, over 10,000 Sikhs settled along the West Coast of North America between the 1890s and 1914, with approximately 6000–7000 in the United States.[23] They faced a rising tide of racial antipathy and laws barring their immigration, citizenship, and other civil liberties in the 1910s and 1920s. Feared as cheap competitors for jobs, Punjabi laborers were driven from the railroad and lumber industries by white workers. In Bellingham, Washington, in 1907, hundreds of Punjabi workers were attacked and driven out of town. In the next few years, they were also driven from other cities in Washington, as well as Oregon and California, including Marysville in 1908.[24] Racial violence continued to occur periodically in the Yuba City area through World War II, especially during Fourth of July celebrations.[25] Despite the hostile environment, Punjabi men found work in farming. They brought their knowledge of irrigation and farming from Punjab to the Sacramento Valley where they grew peaches, plums, rice, walnuts, almonds, and other crops.[26] They earned a reputation as hard workers, and some managed to purchase land (Takaki 1989; Leonard 1992).

US immigration regimes profoundly shaped the history of South Asian Americans. Laws targeting Asian Americans began with the Chinese

Exclusion Act of 1882, and, in 1917, US immigration from most of Asia (including India) was barred. The 1923 *United States v Thind* Supreme Court decision legally categorized South Asian immigrants as Asians who were "aliens ineligible to citizenship" (Takaki 1989; Leonard 1992). Ian Haney Lopez' *White by Law* documents how "the federal government began a campaign to strip naturalized Asian Indians of their citizenship, denaturalizing at least sixty-five people between 1923 and 1927."[27] District attorneys in California and other western states vigorously enforced its so-called Alien Land Laws targeting Asian immigrants from owning land. The Punjabi migrants who had owned land previously were forced to sell their property, often to white farmers in informal handshake agreements, or put their property in the names of their wives from Mexico and their children who were US citizens (Leonard 1985).

For the next three decades, Punjabi men lived precariously in racially segregated farm labor camps. Unable to bring their wives to join them in the United States, theirs was a community of men living in dilapidated bunkhouses. Their rights to immigration, citizenship, and land ownership were reinstated on a limited basis by the US Congress Luce–Celler Act in 1946.[28] The watershed 1965 Immigration Act, passed during the era of the Cold War and the Civil Rights movement, gave preference to highly educated professionals and skilled workers from around the world and finally eliminated race as a basis for immigration and citizenship. It also reunited Punjabi families that had been separated for decades.

Before 1965, however, Punjabi men faced formidable legal, economic, and social obstacles to establishing families in the United States, challenges that would profoundly shape the lives of the women who are the subject of this book. South Asian migrants had the lowest proportion of women among all Asian American groups in the United States. There were just 100 Indian women for 1572 men in 1930 (Leonard 1992, 23). Many of the early male migrants had already married before they left Punjab. Initially, the men planned to return to their families in their ancestral villages in Punjab to purchase land with their savings; however, approximately half of the early settlers remained in North America. Very few were able to bring their wives to the United States before the late 1940s when US immigration policy finally allowed them to do so legally.

The early Punjabi male settlers, unable to bring their wives, either married local women or remained bachelors. California law prohibited people of different races from marrying each other until 1948. County clerks routinely denied licenses for marriage between Punjabi men and white women. However, few objected to marriages between Punjabi men and Mexican women. A hybrid Punjabi Mexican American community developed in the western US between 1916 and the 1940s due to a unique set of circumstances, including the propinquity of Punjabi men and Mexican women working in the fields together, the women's need for financial security, and a shared cultural resonance.[29]

Although largely absent from South Asian American history, there was a small number of Punjabi Sikh women who settled in the United States in the early 1900s. Rattan Kaur Dhillon was the first recorded Punjabi Sikh woman to settle in this country when she arrived in 1910 (Figure 0.5).

Her daughters, Karm and Kartar, were likely the first Punjabi Sikh girls born in the United States in 1914 and 1915, respectively (Das 1923; Dhillon 1989).[30] For decades, there were only a few Punjabi families in the western United States. The first significant cohort of Punjabi women arrived in the United States in the late 1940s—years, even decades, after their husbands. After immigration from South Asia was reinstated in 1946, Punjabi Sikh men began to sponsor their sons, wives, and other kin. Upon their arrival, Punjabi Sikh women encountered a small community of men living like bachelors in ramshackle farms. *Women and the Sikh Diaspora in California* narrates the story of the first generation of Punjabi Sikh women who settled in California's Central Valley *after* World War II and *before* the large influx of South Asians arrived in the wake of the 1965 Immigration Act. It highlights

Figure 0.5 The Dhillon family in Astoria, Oregon, c. 1916. Rattan Kaur (middle) sits beside her husband, Bakhshish Singh Dhillon (right). Their daughter, Kartar (Kar) Dhillon, is seated on her father's lap.

*Courtesy of Erika Surat Andersen (https://*www.erikasurat.com). (Also included in the photograph are Kartar's eldest brother (Kapur), older sister (Karm), and brother, Budh (left to right). The other three men are friends of the family. The Dhillon family would eventually grow to eight children, all of whom were born in the United States after the couple arrived in 1910. Information provided by Kartar Kaur Dhillon's granddaughter, Erika Surat Andersen, correspondence, September 13, 2023.)

the aberrant historical circumstances that women negotiated as individuals and as a collective generational cohort in Punjab and in California. They survived India's Partition of 1947 and then transformed the South Asian American community in the 1950s and 1960s, domesticating a male bachelor society and forging faith and cultural institutions in rural California.

The Centrality of Music in the Sikh Diaspora

This book approaches this story through song. Music and mobility have figured prominently in Sikh history since its inception. Sikhi is a monotheistic faith that emerged in North South Asia in the fifteenth century.[31] Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, was one of the most traveled people of his time, engaging with peoples of diverse faiths, languages, and cultures throughout his known world. Guru Nanak's older sister, Bebe Nanaki, may have helped place music at the heart of Sikhī (hereafter, Sikhi). According to Sikh legend, she purchased a rabāb (a lute instrument) for Bhai Mardana, Guru Nanak's childhood companion who accompanied him on his world travels. Thus, Guru Nanak's sister may have ensured that Guru Nanak's poetry was wed to melody (Figure 0.6).

Guru Nanak spent twenty-four years of his life on the move, engaging in philosophical discussions with sages, scholars, and peoples in all four

Figure 0.6 Bebe Nanaki, Devender Singh, 2011.
Credit: Kapany Collection—The Sikh Foundation.

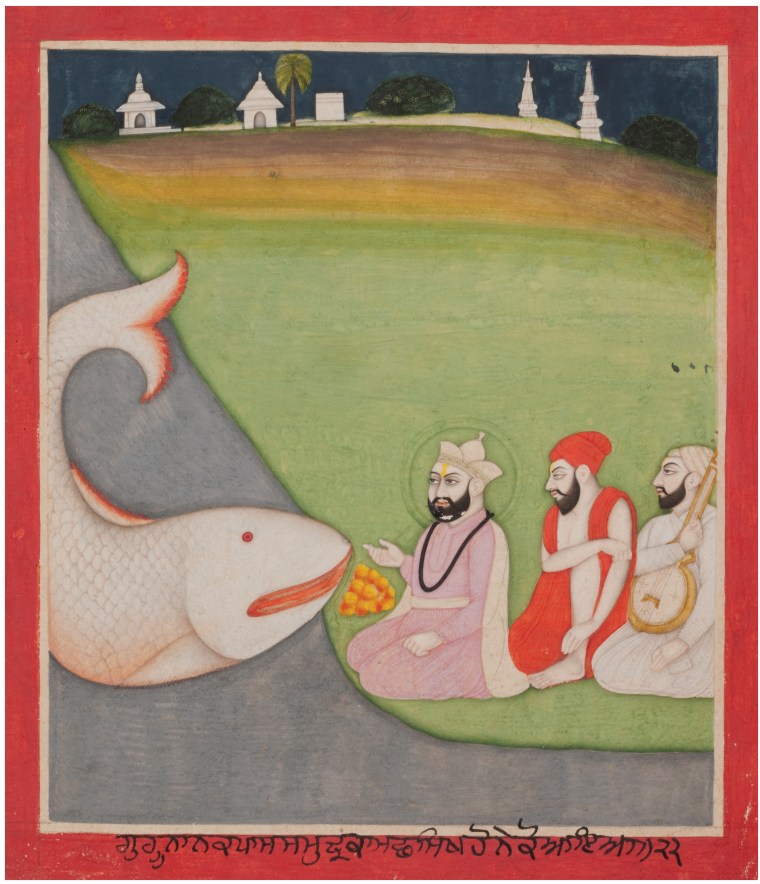

Figure 0.7 Guru Nanak encounters a monster fish before crossing the ocean. Note: Bhai Mardana with his *rabāb*.

Credit: Kapany Collection, Asian Art Museum, c. 1755–1770.

directions, as far as Assam and Bengal (east), Sri Lanka (south), Mount Kailash in the Himalayas (north), and Mecca and Baghdad (west). The first Guru's travels suggest a boundless geography of Sikh sacred space (Figure 0.7).

Music remains at the core of Sikh devotional practice today. For Sikhs, devotional music is the highest form of devotional expression and the most powerful way for the soul to merge with the divine essence. Guru Nanak captures the bliss of performing hymns: "Music is a jewel born of the divine family; the essence of the nectar of immortality rises from it." ("rāg ratan parīā parvār ‖ tis vich upjai amrit sār" ‖ Guru Nanak, *GGS*: 351).

The Sikh vision of the divine is invoked in musical poetics as the transcendent Infinite One: formless and unfathomable. Guru Nanak's famous

discourse with the Siddhas (ascetic sages) articulates core aspects of the Sikh worldview, such as deep cultural understanding of home and belonging in the world, that is evidenced by his reply to their query: "How do we cross the world-ocean to obtain enlightenment?"

Freely, a lotus floats in water,
a duck paddles in a pond;
when consciousness swims in the sacred word,
Nanak: we cross the world-ocean,
saying the name.
Set apart, alone, focused on the One,
living amid desires without desire,
When such a person sees the One,
unfathomable, imperceptible,
and shows others,
Nanak is their slave.

Jaise jal meh kamal nirālam murgāī nai sāṇe ॥
Surat sabad bhav sāgar tarīai nānak nām vakhaṇe ॥
Raheh ikāṇt eko man vasiā āsā māh nirāso ॥
Agam agochar dekh dikhāe nānak tā kā dāso ॥

(Guru Nanak, *GGS*: 938 as translated by Singh 2022, 160-61).

The first Sikh articulates the portability of Sikhi, emphasizing that its followers should not retreat from the world like yogis in search of enlightenment. Rather, Sikhs are encouraged to fully engage with diverse peoples wherever they live in the world while also remaining tethered to the core values of their faith and culture.[32] In Sikhi, home is not tied to geography; rather, it is created wherever Sikhs perform sacred music. The ocean, and water more generally, is a core metaphor for the essential fluidity of Sikh metaphysics, especially concerning the soul's journey toward transcendence. Sikh ontology deeply informs the history of the global Sikh diaspora: encouraging Sikhs to travel, settle around the world, and engage with the societies in which they live while also maintaining a global community.

Sikh Women Singing the Seven Seas

Within the broader subject of music in the Sikh diaspora, this book pursues a more modest aim of examining the history of the affective, interior worldviews of Sikh women as they crossed multiple oceans through an examination of song lyrics, oral narratives, and sonic embodied practices. In the Sikh imaginary, the vastness of the world is broadly conceived as the "seven seas" and the "world-ocean" (*sāgar*). As a historian, I carefully examine women's song lyrics, performative contexts, and sonic practices

as vital source materials that changed throughout the twentieth century. This book does *not* address the structural and technical aspects of Sikh musical elements (harmony, melody, tempo, and so forth) as they resound beyond South Asia. Rather, I closely examine the song lyrics listened to and/or performed by the women featured in this study, while also eliciting women's interpretations of these songs. The core sonic practices performed by women in this study are the acts of listening, singing, playing musical instruments, and, rarely, composing autobiographical songs.

California's Sacramento Valley is the main site of this book, which charts the shifts in Sikh women's songs and voices in the diaspora in the twentieth century. Punjab also figures prominently in this history, albeit mainly indirectly, through ongoing ties to diasporic communities through material connections, family networks, musical flows, and the echoes of memory. This book examines how women navigated new cultural geographies and the politics of race, gender, class, and caste through acts of singing in the other land of five rivers. I theorize this as an engagement with oceans that connect humanity across distant lands. The women at the center of this study bear special historical significance as they formed the first generation of women from the South Asian subcontinent who settled in the United States. Whereas the first male migrants from Punjab envisioned self-confident mastery of their new home—just as when Puna Singh looked out on a vista of fertile fields fed by the confluence of five rivers—I explore how women's performance of song created new female affinities and played a critical role in forming social and faith communities in California, all the while remaining connected to a global Sikh imaginary.

The history of early South Asian Americans has relied primarily on the memories and writings of and by men. Given the dearth of public records about women's lives, this study necessitated the creation of an alternative archive in collaboration with the Punjabi community of the Yuba City area. This book also builds on the excellent scholarship about women's songs in South Asia.[33] Collected over six years of fieldwork, *Women and the Sikh Diaspora* involved creating an alternative archive of oral histories, writings, photographs, archival films, and songs of and by Punjabi Sikh American women. These source materials enabled me to address these questions: What meanings did the act of singing have for Punjabi Sikh American women's sense of self, lives and communities in the diaspora, especially in California? How were South Asian American communities shaped by women's sonic performances? Finally, what insights can be gleaned from women's song cultures, performances, and oral narratives about historical shifts in the Sikh transoceanic imaginary?

This book places diaspora, decolonial, and feminist scholarship in sustained dialogue with the field of critical ocean studies. Ocean as Method has been taken up by scholars in fields including global migration and diaspora studies, Asian American studies, ethnomusicology, feminism, and human ecology. I converse with scholars in oceanic humanities throughout

while proposing three main contributions to scholars across disciplines. First, I offer a fine-grained history of the first generational cohort of South Asian American women in which I foreground female voices from their perspectives as expressed through their songs and speech, and as informed by their ongoing oceanic engagements and imaginaries. As noted in Sykes and Byl's *Sounding the Indian Ocean*, music is an especially generative focal point for nuanced "articulation[s] of contestations about history, memory, locality, and belonging" (Sykes and Byl 2023, 11). There is considerable scholarship about Punjabi music and dance forms performed by men in South Asia and the diaspora (Roy 2010; Kalra 2015; Schreffler 2021), yet, there is comparatively little scholarship about women's creativity as a cultural force shaping the South Asian diaspora—the subject of this book.[34]

Second, I employ new insights from oceanic humanities to destabilize territorially based understandings of migration and the primacy of the nation-state. I focus on a cultural and material history of water, especially the interplay of water and land in river watershed regions, that flows locally and globally, within and across nation-states. Third, I challenge the dominance of the metaphor of the *kālā pānī* (hereafter, *kala pani* or black waters, i.e., the ocean) as a symbol of the rupture of leaving India's shores among overseas South Asians. Instead, this book highlights the heterogeneity of the South Asian diaspora(s) by tracing an alternative oceanic imaginary among Sikhs in which the oceanic signifies the underlying unity in Sikh cosmology and worldview.

Women have participated in nearly all migration flows beyond the Indian subcontinent, yet they remain omitted or marginalized from the theoretical and empirical frameworks in South Asian diaspora studies. I concur with Ambe Pande's assertion that every aspect of migration and settlement has been unique for women: "the conditions propelling the migration of women, their experiences during the process of migration and the subsequent efforts at adaptation and settlement have always been different" (Ambe Pande 2018, 1). This book takes part in filling that absence.

This study theorizes an important gap in the historiography of South Asian Americans in the immediate postcolonial/post-war era, which I argue is a vital period for understanding women's experiences and contributions. It is also a crucial, though neglected, turning point in the history of South Asians in the United States. Currently, this history is divided into two main historical phrases—the first wave in the early twentieth century and the second wave ushered in by the Immigration Act of 1965. The literature on early South Asians in the United States foregrounds debates about the relationship between race and Orientalism, migration and imperialism, and the radical politics of Punjabi laborers in the early twentieth century.[35] Scholarship about post-1965 South Asian Americans offers a critique of the racialized discourse of the "model minority" in which the success stories of the highly educated South Asian immigrant professionals were presented as the "solution" to the "problem" of black America (Prashad 2000; Visweswaran 1997). Recent studies focus

on the cleavages among South Asian Americans (Das Gupta 2006; Matthew 2005). The post-9/11 racialization of Muslims from Pakistan highlights the surveillance and stigmatization of South Asian Muslims, as well as the emergence of new alliances with other communities (Rana 2011). Sangay Mishra's *Desis Divided* offers an excellent study of the types of political mobilizations of South Asian Americans that are possible, given the large and growing internal divisions. This book illustrates that when women are placed at the center of history, the 1940s become a watershed decade involving both the Partition of 1947 and South Asian women's arrival in the United States amidst the resumption of immigration from the Indian subcontinent after 1946.

Recently, feminist scholars have emphasized that gender relations change in complex and uneven ways in the South Asian diaspora. The diversity and complexity of the historical and structural circumstances of the many migrations of South Asians abroad during the colonial and contemporary periods preclude sweeping generalizations about how gender relations change in the diasporic context. South Asian women migrated within patriarchal contexts in which they were expected to preserve their cultural traditions abroad and pass them on to their children. Migrating to societies with complex racial hierarchies, South Asian women encountered cultural adaptation as an especially fraught process. This was particularly true in circumstances and families in which there was a fear about losing control over female kin in a foreign society that was viewed as too liberal; in such circumstances, gender hierarchies grew more rigid and oppressive abroad. However, migration also encouraged new freedoms, challenges to patriarchal norms, and opportunities for self-expression. This book traces the specific trajectories of change in self, agency, and power dynamics in the lives of individual women and their collective cohort experience using a biographical historical approach.

This case history of the first generational cohort of Sikh women in California's Sacramento Valley highlights the importance of micro-histories to capture the subtleties in women's life circumstances as they moved across distant places, as well as their self-fashioning, creativity, and agency. Of the many women from South Asia who have migrated to the United States, these Sikh women in rural California were among the most circumscribed by a hostile racial environment and patriarchy—more so than well-educated or professional South Asian women migrants, and more so than their own daughters. The women in this study were born in the 1930s and 1940s and received little or no formal education. However, by focusing on their performance and composition of songs, I found that profound yet subtle changes did arise in women's lives: as they grew older, and as spaces opened up for their self-expression in the diaspora, their voices grew louder. Harbhajan Kaur Takher, one of the women in this study, succinctly put it: "We didn't speak in India. *We learned to talk here*."[36]

Historian Anshu Malhotra writes of the paucity of female voices in Punjabi history: "The famed fertile land of Punjab had proven to be singularly barren in fructifying its women's expressions in written and published forms, and I

had to strain to read a few discordant notes" (Malhotra 2017, xvii). Within this context, feminist Sikh scholar Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh finds inspiration in the male poet Bhai Vir Singh's beautiful sonic image of female vocality and agency. This poem is generative in my own search for conveying the subtleties of women's voices in the Sikh diaspora. The poet adopts a feminine voice in personifying the devotee's relationship to the Beloved (divine):

My songs
My Beloved!
Songs sung for you …
The waves rise like wind from the ocean;
My silent voice has now burst forth like the nightingale singing;
Like from a child's throat
May the tremors reach forth.
To your presence,
O, my Beloved!

Mere geet
mere sāīāṇ!
tusāṇ laī gāe gae geet …
uṭṭhan taraṇgāṇ sāgaroṇ āe paun vāṇgūṇ,
chhiṛ paea merā cup galā, boldī bulbul vāṇgūṇ,
hān bāl-gale dīāṇ thibakdīaṇ thibakdīaṇ
tusāṇ—mere sāiāṇ jīo—dī
hazūrī vic![37]

Singh explains, "The woman's silent voice (*cup galā*) now rings like a nightingale's song. The vibrations gushing forth from her heart have been compared to the gusty wind from the ocean on the one hand, and to the tiny tremors in a baby's throat on the other" (Singh 1993, 157). This poem captures the intense countervailing forces acting upon and emanating from the young woman, who is likened to the ocean and a singing bird. These two metaphors of the feminine and women's agency—water and the nightingale—recur in Punjabi women's folk songs. The ocean figures as a space of wild and infinite power, whereas the singing bird in women's folk music captures a young woman's powerlessness, her feelings of being trapped yet yearning to fly away. The core pursuit of this book is to examine the confluence of influences in Sikh women's lives in California between the 1940s and the 2000s that triggered their voices bursting forth, as well as a close listening to the content of their speech and song. I am indebted to Mrinialini Sinha's critique of the feminist notion of uncovering the "voice of the 'Indian woman' as naturally there, just waiting to be expressed" (Weidman 2003, 195; Sinha 1996). Instead, it examines the complicated relationship between women's voices and agency, and the ways that women "come into voice" and assume particular voices within specific historical circumstances (Weidman 2003, 195).

This book is indebted to the pioneering work of feminist scholars in India,[38] especially Anshu Malhotra's work on the intersectionality of gender and other forms of social hierarchy in Punjab (Malhotra 2002). Doris Jakobsh's extensive work on gender in Sikhi (Jakobsh 2003, 2010) is also central to this book, as are the studies of women in the Punjabi and Sikh diasporas (Jakobsh 2014; Bhachu 1985) and transnational Sikh feminism (Hundle 2019). Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh's extensive body of poetic insights into the feminine concept in Sikhi is a continual source of inspiration. At its core, this project extends Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley's work from the South Asian context to the diaspora in examining the historical, social, and cultural conditions in which a woman's sense of self is shaped and articulated (Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley 2015). In short, I seek to deeply understand the specific conditions enabling women's subjectivity and creative vocal expressions as they move beyond the Indian subcontinent across multiple oceans. I explore the unique and shifting global circumstances that enabled Punjabi women's songs and speech as windows into the rich cultural history of the modern South Asian diaspora from a gendered perspective. This book also responds to anthropologist Anneeth Kaur Hundle's provocation to "continue to create space for ongoing conversations about the intersections of feminism and Sikhism in our current historical moment and political crossroads" (Hundle 2017, 237).

Women and the Sikh Diaspora in California redirects the theoretical and empirical study of oceans away from ships, ports, and littorals to the human ecology of integrated river basins, where fresh and saltwaters meet and drain into interfluvial land. River watershed regions are also crucial sites of inquiry as they house a significant portion of the world's population. Through a series of new water-based ways of thinking about migration, this book builds on scholarship in critical ocean studies (Basu 2008; Ho 2006; Menon et al. 2022). Those engaged in this work have challenged the terracentric bias in social and cultural theory and the figuring of the ocean as an empty space devoid of history and scholarly analysis. Instead, these scholars conceptualize cultural flows and material histories as mutually informed by the dynamic relationship between land and sea, influenced by what Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls tidalectics (DeLoughrey 2007). This term invokes the "continual movement and rhythm of the ocean" as a framework "for exploring the complex and shifting entanglement between sea and land, diaspora and indigeneity, and routes and roots."[39]

My approach is influenced by Renisa Mawani's *Across Oceans of Law*, a brilliant study of the *Komagata Maru* event in 1914, when 376 South Asian migrants who directly challenged Canada's racial exclusion policy were denied entry and forced to return to India. Viewing history from the ship and the sea, Mawani theorizes that history in motion was central to British colonialism and South Asian migration (Mawani 2018). Using Oceans as Method, Mawani disrupts linear narratives of departure, arrival, and settlement in the study of global migration, as well as the dominant paradigm of

defining migrations by the boundaries and imperatives of nation-states. She uses oceans, currents, and crosscurrents as her methodological tools to focus on how "the seas join the nations they divide" (Mawani 2018, 20). Like Mawani, I trace temporal and spatial journeys—the political, material, and cultural flows within and across national boundaries—in the South Asian diaspora.

I offer a series of new metaphors for diaspora studies that encourage us to consider the influence of the oceanic. Territory-based metaphors are deeply rooted in diaspora discourse: homeland, hostland, roots, and landscapes. Transplantation is the dominant metaphor for the cultural adaptation of an individual or community to a new geography. Even the concept of transnationalism, which is employed to counter the primacy of the nation-state in diaspora and migration studies, is grounded in national territories and borders. By contrast, I suggest that the concept of *anchoring* is a particularly apt metaphor for the hypermobile Sikh community, with a persistent tradition of crossing oceans from its inception. It is also productive to conceptualize the global presence of the Sikh people as *islands of sovereignty*. These islands have existed in tension between imperial and national seats of power in Sikh history, including the Mughal Empire, British Empire, Indian government, and national governments around the world where Sikhs reside.[40] The emphasis on fluidity, currents, and crosscurrents better captures the uneven trajectories in the historical processes by which the Sikh women in this study adapted to the racial and cultural hierarchies.

The Sikh diaspora is productively envisioned, I propose, as *pearls of the seven seas* to convey the global networks of overseas Sikhs who maintain ties across multiple oceans. The modern Sikh diaspora consists of active, multidirectional political, religious, cultural, and economic ties connecting Sikhs around the world—quite different from the binary relationship of homeland and hostland that is the dominant conceptual framework in diaspora studies. Moreover, I extend this metaphor to capture the role of women's songs in shaping the modern Sikh diaspora.

My third contribution rethinks the oceanic in the South Asian diaspora through the Sikh worldview. Elizabeth DeLoughrey proposes that the kala pani is a dominant motif in the literature of South Asians overseas, particularly for indentured laborers and their descendants. Historically, this metaphor has referred to the prohibition of high-caste Hindus from leaving India's shores. Leaving India that delineates the boundaries of sacred geography presented issues of ritual impurity and is a subject of caste taboo. In this context, the motif of the black waters envisions the ocean journey as a radical break, involving the traumatic dissolution of identity for the male diasporic subject in leaving the homeland (DeLoughrey 2011). Feminist and postcolonial scholars posit that the kala pani created a new space for female liberation from patriarchy and racism (Mehta 2009; Bhardwaj and Misrahi-Barak 2022). Later on, in the early twentieth century, the kala pani also referenced the political exile of freedom

fighters by British authorities in the cellular jail on the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal.

Women and the Sikh Diaspora in California uncovers an alternative transoceanic imaginary among Sikhs emphasizing global belonging, connection, and unity rather than rupture. Absent are the caste concerns about ritual impurity beyond India. The Sikh worldview emphasizes the underlying Oneness of reality and continuity across time and space. Although the concept of an individual's crossing bodies of water toward salvation appears in other Indic faiths, the difference is the prevailing belief in India that the soul is imperiled by leaving the motherland in contrast to the Sikh worldview that envisions the triumph of music over geography—every place is sacred where devotional music is performed. I find this line from the *GGS* to be a core metaphor for the Sikh diaspora: "The Guru is the ocean filled with pearls." ("gur sāgar ratni bharpure") (Guru Nanak, *GGS*, 685). The oceanic figures heavily in the *GGS*, representing the underlying unity in the universe in which Sikhs are dispersed like pearls throughout the world.

In Sikhi, the best way to commune with the divine is through singing and listening to the recitation of the *GGS* ("gāvīai sunīai man rakhīai bhāu," Guru Nanak, *GGS*: 2). "Every Sikh can and must engage in *kirtan* (devotional music)—no matter the level of their musical training or capacity," music scholar Gurminder Kaur Bhogal observes (Bhogal 2022, 22). Devotional music is experienced as the most powerful medium for uniting the individual with *Gurbānī*, the sacred word of the gurus. The Sikh worldview of the transcendent Ultimate Reality has profound implications for Sikhs' understanding of their place in the world. If the divine can be found within, then Sikhs are more likely to settle anywhere in the world. Until recently, Hindus envisioned a sharp rupture between *des* (homeland) and *pardes* (foreign land). By contrast, Sikh philosophy views all human beings as *pardesi* (foreigners) until they merge with the divine. In Sikhi, *pardes* is not a physical place but an internal state of spiritual alienation. The unity in the cosmos that connects all of humanity lies in the reverberations of the Word (*sabad*) and even the potentiality of sound (*anhadnād sabad*). Music, and the reverberations of sound itself, signify the underlying unity of reality in the universe.

A Sonic Archive of South Asian Women in the Diaspora

Every historical monograph is profoundly shaped by its source materials. This history required years of fieldwork before I discovered source materials that offered access to the interior lives of the women in this study. I had been doing oral history and archival research for four years when Harbans Kaur Panu, one of the women I'd interviewed several times, spontaneously sang a beautiful autobiographical song about her anguish after losing her teenage son in an accident. Harbans spurred me to concentrate on the various forms of singing in this generation of women's lives: hymns that they'd written

in prayer books, folk songs they loved and performed at family and work occasions, and even the autobiographical songs that two women composed. I interviewed women about the meanings that these songs carried over the course of their lives. The songs were performed and discussed in both Punjabi and English.

Oral histories and songs offered windows into the affective and creative lives of these women. The women at the heart of this book were born and came of age in villages in Punjab in the 1930s and 1940s with little or no formal education. Their cultural expression involved extensive oral literacy in listening and performing the *Guru Granth Sahib* and folk songs. Inspired by Kirin Narayan's exploration of women's songs in the Himalayan foothills, I interpreted songs as "windows into the larger landscape of women's changing lives" (Narayan 2016, 35).

The women in this study were ordinary people who lacked access to formal musical training. They did not identify themselves as singers. What I found inspiring was the determination of women who possessed little encouragement or knowledge of Sikhi to connect with their faith. Some women learned the Gurmukhi script to recite the Sikh scripture. They sang simple hymns from the Sikh scripture to further their knowledge. One woman created prayer books in which she wrote down the hymns for her women's prayer group to perform. "I celebrate this kind of everyday creativity," Narayan asserts, "that may not carry value through institutions, commoditization, or acclaim, and yet remains a form of well-being and even happiness for individuals and their immediate community" (Narayan 2016, xvi).

I felt passionately that this everyday creativity of women who had been denied an education deserved to be the focus of a scholarly study. I was told countless times directly and indirectly that these women's lives were not important or worthy of historical analysis, including by the women in this study. Hopefully this book will serve as a counterweight to this deeply held belief: these women survived and contributed to momentous historical events and changes in South Asia and the United States. Their stories deserve to be narrated and heard; they are worthy of incorporation into the modern global history of migration and music.

Women and the Sikh Diaspora in California offers a rich history of women's representations of the sea and their natural environment that helps to dislodge the male bias in the scholarship and historical memory of overseas South Asians. This work amplifies the reverberation of women's voices to tune into and understand the divergent historical experiences that comprise the many South Asian diasporas in relation to the sea and water more broadly.

Outline of the Book

This book is organized chronologically as well as by the different genres of music that women performed and/or composed. I propose that a unique

genre of Sikh women's song cultures reflects each historical era, phase of life, and their relationship to each place in which they lived, as well as their emotions, self-fashioning, and creativity. The genres of music in chapter order are anti-colonial songs, wedding songs, hymns, and autobiographical songs.

First, however, I reflect on the challenges of writing a sonic history of Sikh women's lives in the diaspora in which I search for new methods to investigate women's agency and imaginaries in relation to global and local scales of analysis, a broad oceanic framework and intimate locales and relationships. The book's first chapter, "Methods for Hearing Women's Transoceanic Voices," articulates my riverine journey of developing methodological strategies for capturing the capaciousness of these women's extraordinary lives, namely, the need for in-depth historical and biographical analyses of women's voices and cultural expressions.

Chapter 2, "A River of Nationalist Zeal Flows into the Sea: Women's Performance of Gadar Revolutionary Songs, 1913–1948," inserts women into the iconic early history of South Asians in North America. Women were fervent participants in the gadar revolutionary movement that aimed to overthrow British rule in India in the early twentieth century. Whereas most gadar scholarship focuses on the writings and activities of the male intellectuals and leaders during the 1910s, this chapter examines the living resonance of the *gadar dī gūnj* (protest songs, literally "echoes of revolution") in women's lives. It explores the predominance of the water motif in the gadar lyrical poetry favored by women, elucidating the alternative fluid identities and water ontologies of diasporic Sikh women, and delving into the rivers of collective memory that they created in performing and teaching the songs to their children.

The third chapter explores the spatial and temporal journeys of Sikh women who came of age in villages in undivided British Punjab, where they survived the Partition of 1947, before settling in California's Sacramento Valley after World War II. This chapter, "Double Passage: Marriage and Oceanic Journeys in Folk Music, 1930s–1960s," explores a fundamental difference in the Punjabi global migration experiences of men and women—the women in this study had already migrated as young brides from their birth homes to their in-laws' houses before they made their transoceanic journeys to the United States. The women had been culturally groomed and trained for the first transition from birth whereas the second journey was unexpected and unimaginable. The chapter interweaves a close interpretation of the bridal songs of departure together with women's oral narratives to render their life journeys audible.

Chapter 4, "'Crossing the Terrifying World-Ocean': Creating Communities in California Through Sacred Music, Late 1940s–1990s," charts women's interior journeys via hymns amidst their new geography in California. Using Ocean as Method, this chapter analyzes women's performance of hymns and their critical role in creating sacred spaces in monthly prayer gatherings

beginning in the 1960s; *gurdwārās* (Sikh houses of worship) and the Sikh initiation ceremonies in the 1970s; and finally, the public performance of the Sikh faith and identity in Yuba City's *Nagar Kīrtan* (a traveling court of poetry) in 1980. The ocean, and water in numerous forms, figured prominently in the sacred songs performed by women. I also explore the altered soundscapes in the diaspora in which the traditional knowledge-carriers of many forms of Punjabi music, the low-caste *mirasi* community, were absent. Without this critical knowledge, early attempts to revitalize Sikh *kirtan* involved a degree of improvisation and women's greater involvement in an informal, egalitarian sonic atmosphere.

Chapter 5, "'Rivers of Desire, Oceans of Separation': Women's Autobiographical Songs, 1990s–2000s," examines the transformation of women's representations of water in the decades after their transoceanic journeys. Based on the rare autobiographical songs composed by two Sikh women who settled in the Sacramento Valley in the 1950s, this chapter theorizes that their riverine imaginaries were partially transposed onto new oceanic ones after they migrated overseas, gathering new meanings as a result of their life experience and mobility. In contrast to the Sikh hymns of the previous chapter, the autobiographical songs are influenced by an eclectic range of folk songs and popular culture, especially love legends inspired by the tragic love story of Hīr-Ranjhā, the Punjabi version of Romeo and Juliet. These songs capture emotions of longing, loss, and nostalgia through representations of oceanic and riverine imagery.

The book concludes with reflections about the echoes and resonances of women's voices into the present. I explore the specific historical and biographical circumstances that encouraged Punjabi Sikh women to voice their concerns through protests and songs, as well as the conditions that enabled their voices to be heard. Amidst the farmers' protests against India's farm bills in 2020–21, Punjabi women's voices called out forcefully as they joined the chorus of public protests in North India that reverberated around the world through digital media. I employ this example to illustrate the need to attend to the specific historical and biographical circumstances in women's lives that enabled their greater agency and vocality rather than ascribing an excessive degree of explanatory power to national cultures in shaping women's transoceanic lives. I conclude with a lovely poem by Amardeep Kaur in which she narrates the centrality of the oceanic in the global history of Sikhs from an embodied female perspective.

Notes

1 Pritam Kaur Heir interview by Nicole Ranganath and Arijit Sen, October 6, 2022, Marysville, CA.
2 I wish to thank Dr Jasbir Singh Kang for bringing Charan Singh's, *Song of the Five Rivers and Stray Petals: The Poems of Charan Singh* (New York: Exposition Press, 1949), to my attention, and for providing me with a rare hard copy. Note: Charan Singh's poetry was published in English.

3 Estimates of the number of people who lost their lives during Partition vary from 500,000 to two million, but there is a general scholarly consensus that approximately one million people perished. For an excellent history of Partition, see Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

4 This book is deeply indebted to these histories showing the importance of rivers, monsoon rains, and oceans in the history of South Asia and Asia: Sudipta Sen, *Ganges: The Many Pasts of an Indian River* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); and, Sunil Amrith, *Unruly Waters: How Rains, Rivers, Coasts, and Seas Have Shaped Asia's History* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).

5 For an excellent analysis of the omnipresence of rivers in Punjabi culture, see Radha Kapuria and Naresh Kumar, "Singing the River in Punjab: Poetry, Performance and Folklore," *South Asia: Journal of South Asia Studies* 45, no. 6 (2022): 1072–94.

6 The complex relationship between Punjabi and national identity is evident in Singh's poem. For Singh, rivers represent both Punjabi regional identity and a pre-colonial historical understanding of India. My working definition of the Punjabiyat draws from thoughtful scholarly work concerning the idea of Punjab as unstable and contested historical and cultural processes enacted in daily life. See Anshu Malhotra and Farina Mir, *Punjab Reconsidered: History, Culture, and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Surinder S. Jodhka, "Changing Manifestations of Caste in the Sikh Panth," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, eds. Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 583–93.

7 Bhārat is the official name for India in the Hindi language in the Indian Constitution; this geographical name is derived from Sanskrit and appears in ancient Indic texts.

8 See also the local study delineating the history of water and womanhood in western India, Kapuria and Kumar, "Singing the River in Punjab"; Anne Feldhaus, *Water & Womanhood: Religious Meanings of Rivers in Maharashtra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

9 See Radha Kapuria's broader definition of hydropoetics as a tool for engaging with the centrality of Punjabi rivers in "performed music and poetry," in Kapuria, "Singing the River," 1074. See also John Charles Ryan, "Hydropoetics: The Rewor(l)ding of Rivers," *Special Issues: Voicing Rivers, River Research and Applications* 38, no. 3 (2021): 486–93.

10 "Pakistan looks 'like a sea' after floods: PM," *Al-Arabiya News*, September 7, 2023, https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2022/09/07/Pakistan-looks-like-a-sea-after-floods-PM.

11 "Pakistan PM decries climate carnage 'Did not contribute to this'," *Al Jazeera,* September 24, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/24/pakistan-pm-decries-climate-carnage-did-not-contribute-to-this.

12 David M. Rubiales, *First People* (Yuba County: Saddleback Ranch and Spieker Family, 2014), 1.

13 Robert Kelley, *Battling the Inland Sea: Floods, Public Policy, and the Sacramento Valley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

14 For two local histories of the Punjabi Sikh community in Yuba City, see Bruce La Brack, *The Sikhs of Northern California, 1904-1975* (New York: AMS Press, 1988); and Lea Terhune, *California's Pioneering Punjabis: An American Story* (Charleston: The History Press, 2023).

15 See the UC Davis *Punjabi and Sikh Digital Archive*, https://punjabidiaspora.ucdavis.edu/; and, Karen Leonard, "Finding One's Own Place: Asian Landscapes Re-visioned in Rural California," in *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, eds. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 118–36.

16 Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).
17 Dalits who have settled in the diaspora have asserted the continuing problem of caste discrimination in the United States and elsewhere. See Sangay K. Mishra, *Desis Divided: The Political Lives of South Asian Americans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Monisha Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); and Vivek Kumar, "Understanding Dalit Diaspora," *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 1 (2004): 114–16. For two important studies on caste in Punjab, see Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Social Vision of Untouchables* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1988); and Surinder S. Jodhka, *Caste in Contemporary India* (London: Routledge Press, 2015).
18 Brittany Rico, Joyce Key Hahn, and Cody Spence, "Asian Indian was the Largest Asian Alone Population Group in 2020." https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/09/2020-census-dhc-a-asian-population.html. Created September 21, 2023. Accessed January 4, 2024.
19 There was also a significant minority of Muslim immigrants from Punjab and Bengal totaling approximately 10 to 12 percent among the early South Asian Americans. Karen Isaksen Leonard, *The South Asian Americans* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 43.
20 Gilmartin offers a prominent early example of the political instrumentality of the British canal colonies regarding the Sikhs. The first major government canal project after annexation in 1849, the Bari Doab canal, was designed to pacify returning Sikh soldiers. He quotes an Irrigation Department report that states: "After annexation, the work pressed on, because the immediate construction of the canal was regarded as almost a matter of political necessity to provide employment for the disbanded Sikh soldiers … who would have had little encouragement to turn to agriculture." See David Gilmartin, *Blood and Water: The Indus River Basin Modern History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 69–70.
21 For histories of the Sikh diaspora, see Michael Hawley, ed., *Sikh Diaspora: Theory, Agency, and Experience* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); and N. Gerald Barrier and Verne A. Dusenbery, eds., *The Sikh Diaspora: Migration and the Experience Beyond Punjab* (Columbia: South Asia Publications, 1989).
22 For histories of global Sikh migration within the context of the British Empire, see Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); and Tony Ballantyne, *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). For studies of the South Asian diaspora during the rise of US global power, see Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Judith M. Brown, *Global South Asians: Introducing the Modern Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Vivek Bald et al., *The Sun Never Sets: South Asian Migrants in the Age of U.S. Power* (New York: New York University Press, 2013). Recent studies envision the Sikh diaspora as a complex network model, such as: Knut A. Jacobsen and Kristina Myrvold, eds., *Sikhs Across Borders: Transnational Practices of European Sikhs* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012); Verne A. Dusenbery, *Sikhs at Large: Religion, Culture and Politics in Global Perspective* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008); Opinderjit Kaur Takhar and Doris R. Jakobsh, eds., *Global Sikhs: Histories, Practices, and Identities* (London: Routledge, 2023); and Pashaura Singh and Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, eds., *The Sikh World* (London: Routledge, 2023).
23 For estimates on the numbers of South Asians in North America before 1914, see Joan Jensen, *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988); and Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How*

the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 17. Leonard estimates that 6000-7000 South Asians entered the western United States between 1899 and 1914, Leonard, *The South Asian Americans*, 42.

24 Nayan Shah offers an insightful history of the transient homosocial bonds between Punjabi men and male laborers of diverse backgrounds in western North America in the early 1900s. Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

25 "Hindus Driven Out," *New York Times*, January 27, 1908; and Tuly Singh Johl interview by Joan M. Jensen, May 28, 1975, Yuba City, CA, Joan Jensen Asian Indian Immigrant Research Materials, 1975-88, Library Special Collections, University of California, San Diego.

26 For two excellent histories of early Punjabi Sikh farmworkers in California's diverse agricultural economy, see Richard Steven Street, *Beasts of the Field: A Narrative History of California Farmworkers, 1769-1913* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); David Vaught, *Cultivating California: Growers, Specialty Crops, and Labor, 1875-1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

27 For an insightful discussion of the *United States v Thind* decision, see Ian Haney Lopez, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 56–77.

28 Gould provides an in-depth history of the intense lobbying efforts of diverse South Asian immigrants, such as JJ Singh, that led to the reinstatement of immigration and naturalization rights in 1946. Harold A. Gould, *Sikhs, Swamis, Students, and Spies: The India Lobby in the United States, 1900-1946* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006).

29 Leonard documents 378 marriages between South Asian male migrants and women of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, mainly from Mexico, between 1916 and 1949 in the western United States. See Leonard 1992.

30 The Dhillon family's arrival in the United States is well documented. A 1923 study notes the arrival of Bakhshish Singh Dhillon as the first Indian known to enter the United States in 1899: "He has been back and forth several times and finally returned to this country in 1910 with his family" (Das 1923, 10). See also Kartar Kaur Dhillon's autobiographical account of her family, "The Parrot's Beak" on the South Asian American Digital Archive (https://www.saada.org).

31 I use the term "Sikhi" to refer to the Sikh faith (that is commonly translated as Sikhism), as well as the shared history, culture, and identity of the millions who identify as Sikhs around the world. For a thoughtful discussion of the complex relationship between Sikhi and Punjabi identity, see Pritam Singh and Meena Dhanda, "Sikh Culture and Punjābiyat," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies,* eds. Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 482–92.

32 Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The First Sikh: The Life and Legacy of Guru Nanak* (Haryana: Penguin Random House, 2019).

33 There are a number of excellent studies highlighting South Asian women's songs, including: Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold, *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); M. Whitney Kelting, *Singing to the Jinas: Jain Laywomen, Mandal Singing, and the Negotiations of Jain Devotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Barbara C. Johnson, "'Till the Women Finish Singing': An Historical Overview of Cochin Jewish Women's Malayalam Songs," *The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 4 (2001): 7–22; Smita Tewari Jassal, *Unearthing Gender: Folksongs of North India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); and Kirin Narayan, *Everyday Creativity: Singing Goddesses in the Himalayan Foothills*

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). For an excellent recent study of female dalit tamasha song/dance performances, see Shailaja Paik, *The Vulgarity of Caste: Dalits, Sexuality, and Humanity in Modern India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).

34 There is an emerging field of inquiry into transnational South Asian women's dance, especially in Africa, England, and the United States. African studies include Shobana Shankar, "Singing and Sensing the Unknown: An Embodied History of Hindu Practice in Ghana," *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* 6, no. 2 (2021): 89–103; Ellen E. Hebden, "Swahili Covers, Sufi Prayers, and Liberation Hymns: Women's Mobilities in Competitive Tufo Dance Associations in Northern Mozambique," in *Sounding the Indian Ocean: Musical Circulations in the Afro-Asiatic Seascape*, eds. Jim Sykes and Julia Byl (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023), 77–98; and Inderjit N. Kaur, "Making Pilgrimage, Making Home: Sikh Sacred Soundings in Kenya," in *Sounding the Indian Ocean: Musical Circulations in the Afro-Asiatic Seascape,* eds. Jim Sykes and Julia Byl (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023), 181–98. The emphasis on ongoing oceanic ties, and the symbolism of the *kala pani*, is prevalent in the literature on women's music and dance in the Caribbean. See Tejaswini Niranjana, *Mobilizing India: Women, Music, and Migration Between India and Trinidad* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). For studies in England on South Asian women's music and dance, see Jasmine Hornabrook, "Gender, New Creativity and Carnatic Music in London," *South Asian Diaspora* 11, no. 2 (2019): 193–208), and Anusha Kedhar, *Flexibility and its Bodily Limits: British South Asian Dancers in An Age of Neoliberalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020). In the United States, see Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012); Kaley Mason and Ameera Nimjee, "Sound Unions: The Work of Music Specialists in Chicago's South Asian Wedding Scene," in *Music in the American Diasporic Wedding*, ed. Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 208–30; and Rumya Putcha, *The Dancer's Voice: Performance and Womanhood in Transnational South Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

35 The literature on early South Asians in the United States foregrounds debates about the relationship between race and Orientalism, migration and imperialism, and the radical politics of male Punjabi laborers and farmworkers in the early twentieth century. For pioneering works on the history of early South Asian Americans, see Jensen, *Passage to India*; Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1989); and Leonard, *The South Asian Americans*. There is a voluminous scholarship on the anti-colonial radicalism of Punjabi laborers along the west coast of North America, including, Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*. Nayan Shah examines the role of transiency among the early Punjabi laborers in North America who formed precarious intimate relations of sociality with other men in the early twentieth century, Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*. For an excellent review of the core theoretical and political debates among South Asian American scholars and their interventions in Asian American Studies, see Sunaina Maira, "South Asian America: Histories, Cultures, Politics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American History*, eds. David K. Yoo and Eiichiro Azuma (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). The most extensive history of South Asian Americans at the mid-century is the outstanding monograph of the hybrid communities of Muslim Bengalis on the East Coast, Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

36 Harbhajan Kaur Takher interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA.

37 *Bhai Vir Singh Rachnāvalī* (Collection of Poetry) (Patiala: Punjab Bhāshā Vibhāg, 1972), 191 as translated by Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 156–57.
38 Among the many publications by feminist scholars of India who have shaped my thinking are Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Saraswati Raju, ed., *Gendered Geographies: Space and Place in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011); and, Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).
39 For DeLoughrey's adaptation of Kamau Brathwaite's theory of tidalectics, see Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'I Press, 2007), 2.
40 Axel contends that the idea of the Sikh homeland was created in the diaspora through the global circulation of images of male Sikh tortured bodies during the violence in Punjab in the 1980s and 1990s. Keith Brian Axel, *The Nation's Tortured Body: Violence, Representation, and the Formation of a Sikh 'Diaspora'* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). See also Darshan Singh Tatla, *The Sikh Diaspora: The Search for Statehood* (London: University of London Press, 1999).

1 Methods for Hearing Women's Transoceanic Voices

Driving north toward Yuba City from Davis along country roads stirred a feeling of nostalgia in me for the people and places I had grown attached to over the course of six years of research. After countless times I had completed this 47-mile drive, I could anticipate the curves along the sinuous path, and I observed the seasonal rhythms of the crops and communities. The waters of the rice paddy fields along the Sacramento bypass rose and fell across the annual cycle of planting, growing, harvesting, and dormancy. This area reminded me most of Punjab in the Spring. The season offered vistas of yellow mustard flowers, the snowy peaks of the Sierra Mountains, and river waters flowing into the twin communities of Yuba City and Marysville. Turning left onto George Washington Boulevard from Road 102, I passed the homes of individuals and families who I had interviewed. Over the years, we had lived through a severe drought, the COVID-19 pandemic, political upheavals in the United States and South Asia, and many personal and family milestones. Most dramatically, in February 2017, I witnessed their evacuation from the Yuba City area when the Oroville Dam threatened to breach in February 2017, triggering traumatic memories of the massive floods in 1955, 1986, and 1997.

On this bright spring morning on April 17, 2021, I drove to Rajinder Tumber's home, a good friend who played an invaluable role in connecting me with the "old-timers," Sikh Americans who had settled in the area before the large influx of South Asian immigrants began in the 1970s. Raji enjoyed deep relationships and shared pasts with the "pioneer families" (as they are known locally), as well as a passion for the community's history. On this day, we drove along a driveway leading to the Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara family farm in Live Oak, just north of Yuba City. The family farming business was founded by Mohinderjit's husband's uncle, Munsha Singh Thiara, one of the first Punjabi Sikh migrants to settle in the area in the 1910s. Today, the Thiara peach and walnut orchards spread across an expansive stretch of land beside a capacious house.

We came to interview Mohinderjit, who is known in the community as "Mama Thiara." Rajinder's family and hers were part of the same social circle; the families shared a deep bond having "come up together" in this country. Mama Thiara stood on the porch waving to greet us. She warmly embraced

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Rajinder who she considered family. Showing her generosity of spirit, she also gathered me, a stranger, into her arms after I stepped onto her porch. Mama Thiara stood out among her peers in Yuba City for her outspoken and gregarious personality and her lack of concern for propriety. Even at formal occasions at the gurdwara, Mama Thiara demanded to be heard.

Dressed in a wheat-colored tunic and floral-patterned pants, with her long, gray hair pulled back in a ponytail, Mama Thiara exuded the effervescence of youth belying her age of eighty-four years. In conversation, her remarkable eyes—with rings of cerulean blue encircling chocolate brown irises—twinkled with mischievous humor, frequently accompanied by laughter and the joy of speaking boldly. She is a firecracker. Yet, in rare moments of repose, her eyes evinced a child's sadness and vulnerability. Despite her small frame, her life force filled the space of the sparsely furnished living room.

During our visit, Mama Thiara broke into song multiple times, performing the music she had composed about her life. Sometimes she sang spontaneously amidst conversation; at other times, she did so after prompting. Sitting on the couch, with her notebook of autobiographical songs she had composed in Gurmukhi and English on her lap, she closed her eyes as she held her right hand out in front of her as if holding a small globe. At other times, she thrust her arm overhead. The act of singing transported her to a space where she channeled intense affective states cascading forth in a torrent of song. She sang of her life journey across vast ocean distances, from her birth in Burma to her youth in Iran, her life as a young bride in Punjab, and her decades spent in America (Figure 1.1).

Mama Thiara sings her own version of a modern Punjabi *qissa* (oral stories) employing the classic romantic motif of the exquisitely bittersweet pleasure/pain of separation from her beloved. For two years after her marriage in her youth, oceans separated her from her husband. Mohinderjit (not yet Mama Thiara) waited as a teenage bride at her in-laws' home in a Punjabi village before her husband returned and brought her to America with him. She experienced this brief period in a state of acutely painful separation, as if time slowed down, stretching forward interminably.

Mohinderjit's songs were born from her crucible of grief after her husband passed away. They are saturated with powerful emotions, of loneliness, sorrow, joy, and excitement. Her songs defy easy categorization by genre. They often lack a clear structure, liberally borrowing themes and tropes from diverse sources. One of her favorite themes is the tragic love story of Hīr-Rānjha, for instance, composed by the Punjabi Sufi poet Waris Shah in the eighteenth century. This love story is ubiquitous in folk music and modern Punjabi culture, including over a dozen films from Bollywood, Punjab, and Pakistan from the 1930s up until the present. Mohinderjit draws from the broader popular culture conventions of romantic love rather than the classic genre of romantic ballads. Perhaps her songs can best be characterized as her own mash-up of popular and folk influences incorporating eclectic influences from Punjab, India, the Indian Ocean region, the United States, and beyond.

Figure 1.1 Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara, April 17, 2021, Live Oak, CA.
Photo by Nicole Ranganath.

Her songs exemplify the irrepressible spirit and voices of Sikh women in the diaspora—cultural forms and identities that are in a state of flux and refuse to be contained within the divides of colonial and racial binaries, such as "traditional/modern," "Punjabi/American," or "historical actor/victim."

After I began hearing the life stories and songs of the first generation of Punjabi women who migrated to California's Sacramento Valley, I have reflected on how to best capture the expansiveness of these women's lives traversing great oceanic distances, as well as the nuanced shifts in their subjective worlds resulting from their local and transoceanic mobilities. This chapter traces my research journey over six years in developing a methodological approach that renders the submerged voices of the first generation of Sikh women who settled in the United States visible and audible. I found new research from oceanic humanities—combined with diaspora and migration studies, feminist history, and ethnomusicology—to be vital in discovering the relationality across distant geographies and temporalities through women's crossings. Thinking with ocean spaces highlights how communities spread across vast distances remain connected. Moreover, given the deep associations between women, water, and music in Punjabi culture, it is productive to explore notions of fluidity and flux in the recent history of women in the Sikh diaspora as it appears with water in various forms: oceans and rivers, as well as tears and *Amrit* (ambrosial nectar).

Documenting the history of women in the South Asian diaspora presented numerous challenges. Historians rarely capture the lives and predicaments of individual women, especially those who did not keep journals or other texts. Given the paucity of public records about women's mobilities, it was necessary to create an archive through oral history research and a careful analysis of their musicality. Additionally, the task of rendering the complexity and consciousness of women in the Sikh diaspora demanded a new methodology—beyond the dominant land-based transnational frameworks and metaphors in diaspora studies in which the experiences of male migrants are presented as representing a unitary history of the South Asian diaspora.

This chapter delineates my research methods in disentangling the complex historical relationships between Sikh women's understandings of themselves and their worlds through their speech and songs. I suggest that oceanic metaphors best capture the modern Sikh diaspora, especially women's agency and vocality. This historical biographical methodology allows me to capture the personal and the intimate together with the collective history of the first generation of South Asian women who arrived in California after World War II.

In this chapter, I seek to demonstrate how an Ocean as Method approach offers fresh insights and vantage points on the mobilities and consciousness of Sikh women in the diaspora—beginning with the first encounters with women in California's Punjabi community that set me on my way to an oceanic humanities-informed approach to their songs and life stories. I share my research journey for scholars interested in pursuing community-engaged research to access marginal voices and lives through song.

The Tea Party: A Filming Steeped in Female Affinities

Shortly after the launch of the UC Davis *Punjabi and Sikh Diaspora Digital Archive* (https://punjabidiaspora.ucdavis.edu/) in September 2016, Sharon Singh asked to meet for coffee. The daughter of early Punjabi Sikh migrants in California, Sharon felt passionately about documenting the lives of elderly Punjabi women who she profoundly respected. She expressed her frustration about their absence in history, and she offered to help me document their lives. This meeting was the first step to forming a work group to document women's lives in the Sikh diaspora that led to organizing a tea party, a filming of Sikh women's oral histories that started my journey with the women analyzed in this book. It is no accident that these women, the navigators for my research journey, chose to embed our interviews within a tea party—the center of Sikh female sociality. The tea party also provided a ritual context for the daughters to honor their mothers and other *bībīāṇ* (respected female elders) in the community.

In December 2016, I formed a workgroup to launch a project about women's history in California's Punjabi community together with three daughters of Sikh farmers who had immigrated to Yuba City in the 1950s and

1960s—Sharon Singh, Rajinder K. Tumber (hereafter Raji), and Davinder Deol. Over the course of a year, the four of us met in Raji's Yuba City office to plan how we would gather the life histories of elderly Sikh women who arrived in Yuba City before 1970. All three women had access to the elderly Punjabi women who were part of the first cohort to settle in the area. These women were the most inaccessible members of the local Punjabi community not just to outsiders such as me, but even beyond their family circles. Most stayed at home, exclusively spoke Punjabi, and enjoyed little contact with the world outside the Punjabi community.

Over the course of our meetings, Sharon, Raji, and Davinder tried to invite every Punjabi woman in the Yuba City area who had migrated prior to the watershed 1965 Immigration Act. We agreed that the migration experiences of the first generation of Sikh women in the United States between World War II and 1965 were unique in many respects. These three women shared deep insights into the female networks and relationships binding together their mothers' generation in Yuba City that were far beyond my understanding. With the support of a California Humanities grant, Sikhlens and other community organizations, we created a documentary that ultimately aired on PBS called "Jutti Kasoori (Walking into the Unknown)," the first film about women's history in California's Punjabi community.[1]

Our planning culminated in the filmed group interview and tea party that Davinder, Sharon, Raji and I organized in honor of the elderly women in the Sikh community on December 17, 2017. In the 1950s and 1960s, whenever a new Punjabi woman arrived in the United States, the other Punjabi women would host a tea party to welcome her (Figure 1.2). The women would give her bedding, cookware, and other necessities to start a household. The tea party was a female space where women socialized and gave each other support.

The tea party that we organized involved filming group and individual interviews with the elderly Sikh women who settled in the 1950s and 1960s in Yuba City who were still with us and who agreed to participate. The elderly women were organized into two interview groups—a vital contribution made by the three daughters, who saw that the women's life and migration experiences differed in significant ways by their age, affinities, and time of arrival in Yuba City.[2] The two group interviews were followed by a tea party hosted by Davinder Deol, Rajinder K Tumber, Sharon Singh, and myself, as well as the female student researchers from UC Davis.

An enormous amount of energy was required to counter the widespread sentiment in society (including in the Punjabi community) that elderly women's lives were not worthy of study. Through existing female networks, Davinder, Sharon, and Raji worked hard to convince the elderly women's families of the historical significance of gathering and sharing their mothers' lives. The daughters and other family members encouraged the elderly women to publicly speak about their life experiences. Most of the elderly women demurred at first, saying incredulously: "Why would you want to talk to me? What could I possibly say that is important?"

Figure 1.2 Tea party gathering, 1967, Yuba City, CA. (Left to right) Front row: Sant Kaur Grewal and Gita Kaur Grewal. Back row: Bakhso Kaur Takhar, Swarn Kaur Johl, Harbhajan Kaur Takher, Gurmit Kaur Takhar, and Swarn Kaur Takhar.

Photograph by Dr Manohar Singh Grewal.

It was only through a great deal of persistence, and deep bonds of trust and love, that the women participated in documenting their own history at the tea party that day in December. The visibility of the female networks was highlighted by the daughters who dropped off and picked up their mothers at the home of Davinder, who hosted the event. Davinder and her female kin cooked an elaborate lunch with tea. A group of female UC Davis students whom I mentored joined the gathering, enthusiastic about helping and listening to their elders' experiences.

What the group interviews revealed to me were the deep intimacy and bonds among women. In individual interviews, women talked about the love and kinship in the community in the early days. These female bonds were their lifelines in the early days after migration that offered practical help and support, as well as ongoing emotional nurturance throughout their lives. Interviewing the women as a group was an effective approach. After one of the women named Harbhajan Kaur Takher spoke up, she emboldened the other women to publicly share their experiences as well.

During the interviews, the women powerfully expressed their emotions about the hardships they had faced in life and their pride in how they had

overcome them together. The women surprised me with their boldness in sharing their life experiences in open and unsentimental language. They appeared to be unconcerned with the optics of how they represented the community. They also exhibited the fearlessness that comes with advanced age in which they were no longer as concerned with propriety. They rarely ask themselves: "*lok kī kahenge?*" ("what will people say?").

Both the content and style of the elderly women's narratives contrasted with those of the educated male community leaders who served as ambassadors for the broader American society, explaining in media interviews: Who are the Sikhs? What are their values? Why are they "here"? This continues to be an urgent, fraught conversation due to the ignorance and racism in American society. There is little awareness that the Sikh community arrived in the 1890s in the United States and have contributed in significant ways, especially in politics, agriculture, transportation, and more recently, the professions. Punjabi Sikh immigrants have disproportionately been the targets of hate crimes, and racial and religious discrimination up to the present. Sikh American Balbir Singh Sodhi was the first person murdered in a hate crime several days after 9/11. The Sikh Coalition documented over 300 cases of violence and discrimination against Sikh Americans in the month after 9/11 (https://www.sikhcoalition.org). In the most horrific hate crime, a white supremacist murdered seven people attending prayer services in a gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin on August 5, 2012.

Our approach offered a window into the interior affective experience of the first generation of Sikh women who migrated to the United States in the mid-century. It also highlighted the resilience and vibrancy of female networks throughout women's lives. Our tea party was also timely. Most of the elderly women in our group interviews either passed away shortly after or could no longer participate for health reasons.

The group interview approach, as well as the specific women identified by Sharon, Davinder, and Raji, highlighted the bonds of female affinity that remained powerful for over a half-century throughout the women's lives. I did not realize the limitations to this approach until later, however. We followed the female networks that Sharon and Davinder were connected with that mainly involved women from the Jalandhar region of Punjab, many of whom shared ties to their ancestral village of Shankar. Many women from the Hoshiarpur district appeared to opt out of the filming because they were not part of the Shankar village networks. It was not until Raji and I continued this work, interviewing many more community members over several years, that I connected with other key early women who settled in the area, particularly from other regions of Punjab, especially Hoshiarpur.

A wonderful surprise arrived one day at Raji's house on January 22, 2019. That afternoon I engaged in a more informal interview with Harbans Panu, a graceful woman whom I had formally interviewed twice. Harbans, Raji, and I were having a relaxed conversation in Raji's living room when Harbans spontaneously performed a song she had composed about surviving her

intense grief after the untimely death of her son in a motorcycle accident as a young man. It was the first time I heard a Sikh woman in this cohort who had composed autobiographical songs.

Months later, Raji and I met with Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara at her home. There I learned about the dozens of autobiographical songs she had composed over the course of her life. In listening to their songs, I realized that the richest source material about women's experience of migration was the various genres of song they performed—participating in vibrant traditions of oral literacy and music—and even composed. The autobiographical songs were especially important in the absence of texts created by this cohort of women who had received little or no formal education.

Harbans Panu and Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara composed simple yet powerful songs about their lives.[3] The songs triggered my own journey in search of new methods. I followed a riverine flow through creative source materials, and then a long process of inquiry into an understanding of music informed by the oceanic turn in the social sciences and humanities. Byl and Sykes, for instance, assert the importance of placing the study of musical forms "not just in their national and land-centric area studies frameworks," but also in relation to their ongoing oceanic connections (Byl and Sykes 2020, 398). Two key features of my fieldwork were collaboration with the Punjabi community and a dedication to years of dialogue and interviews. This book would not have been possible without my long-term commitment and the community's passion for their history.

Oral History Research: Notes on Design and Ethics

The heart of this study are the interviews with the 30 elderly Sikh women who settled in California's Sacramento Valley between the late 1940s and 1969. These oral histories, together with their body of songs, allowed me to write this book from the inside out. The hidden perceptions, affects, and identities of the first generation of South Asian women in the United States formed the nucleus of this book. I chose to focus exclusively on Sikh women due to their predominance in early South Asian female migration to the United States, as well as the important ways that Sikhi and Sikh culture informed their lives and mobilities.

The women featured in this book shared many historical and personal circumstances. They were born between the late 1920s and early 1940s into relatively affluent Sikh families in the dominant jat land-owning caste. The geographical spread of female migrants follows the overall pattern in the Punjabi diaspora in which relatively well-off farmers left the central districts in Punjab, Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur, for greater economic opportunity. There was also a woman who was born in Delhi; her views and experiences differed considerably from the other women due to her urbanity and high educational attainment. Nearly every woman experienced extreme trauma during India's Partition in 1947. They began to arrive in California after

World War II as soon as the first Punjabi male settlers regained their eligibility for US citizenship in 1946 and could sponsor their family members from Punjab to enter the United States legally.

The women's arrival transformed the tiny South Asian immigrant community in California, which had dwindled due to discriminatory immigration laws. The newly arrived women and children provided essential labor that helped grow the rural Sikh community's family farm businesses. As the South Asian immigrant community has grown in California, it has become more diverse in terms of caste and class diversity. More research is needed to understand the complex interactions between gender, racial, caste, and class hierarchies among women in caste-oppressed communities in California.

It is important to note that this book represents the mobilities and imaginaries of a specific demographic of South Asian society described above, at an aberrant time of trauma and violence in the Indian subcontinent and of a specific moment in US history after World War II. It does not represent the experiences of South Asians from multiple faiths or those at the top or the bottom of the social and economic hierarchies. It gives a glimpse into the experiential nature of migration for Sikh women who grew up in the most unusual circumstances and then relocated to California just as the Punjabi community regained their civil rights and were able to own land on which they built family farm businesses.

A key complicating factor in drawing conclusions about the changes in women's agency in California was their phase of life. Punjabi Sikh women generally gain greater agency and authority as they age, especially after giving birth to sons. I suggest that it is crucial to account for the complex set of circumstances in the lives of individual women as well as the collective generational cohort. There is a tendency to assign too much explanatory power to national cultures in shaping women's agency and sense of self. The national cultural context is an important factor, but it is also important to examine a myriad of personal and family circumstances, local and global influences, as well as women's actions and choices, to offer nuanced understandings of their lives and subjectivities.

Specific historical conditions informed the experiences of this cohort of Sikh women. The first generation of Sikh women who relocated to North America generally did so within strict patriarchal family contexts and codes that traveled with them overseas. The fundamental features of the lives of the elderly Sikh women in this study were determined by the decisions of male relatives, husbands, and in-laws. These women grew up in sequestered interior spaces in Punjab and therefore had little idea of the vast transoceanic spaces they would traverse in joining their husbands in California. However, it is also important to avoid interpreting women's lives through the lens of victimhood. Even under the most rigid patriarchal frameworks, women asserted themselves and wielded authority in meaningful ways.

The women featured in this study wished to have their life stories publicly acknowledged. Historical accounts of the lives of the early South Asian

Americans are reduced to statistics and bits and pieces gleaned from official records. The humanity of these individuals is often lost as this information was not captured in the historical record. Therefore, I felt it was vital to include the formal names of the women featured in this book.[4] With this decision I also believed it was ethical to honor women's choices about whether or not to share information about their lives in print. The elderly women of this generation rarely shared the greatest difficulties they faced in life with me directly. Instead, it was their daughters who divulged the deeper sources of pain—for example, sharing the sadness or in some cases suicidal ideation that their mothers suffered when they did not give birth to sons, because of the enormous pressure from their in-laws to produce male heirs. The preference for male heirs was brought over from Punjab. The stigma surrounding issues such as domestic and sexual violence, substance abuse, and infidelity was so great that only a few women raised them with me directly and they did so confidentially. I respected their confidentiality and circled back to individual women to make sure they approved of sharing the difficulties they expressed about their lives.

Interpreting Sikh Women's Mobilities Using Ocean as Method

Listening to the elderly Sikh women in California, it took me years to devise methodological and analytical strategies for explaining the capacious geography of their ocean-crossing lives. The emerging field of oceanic humanities offers new interpretive perspectives for thinking about the vast geography, complexity, and deep temporality of the Sikh diaspora. The prevailing analytical framework of migration is built on unilinear trajectories of cultural change bound within landscapes, fractured by borders, and shaped by modern conceptions of time, but Sikh mobilities resist such frameworks. Oceanic humanities brings an emphasis on fluidity, connections across vast distances, and mobility over stasis. And, because I focus in-depth on women's changing individual lives and collective experiences, my book adds much-needed biographical and historical specificity to counter the male bias in migration studies and oceanic humanities alike. This new oceanic humanities framework encouraged me to listen to the subaltern voices of women in the diaspora, generally submerged by universal theories of migration based on men's experiences.

Drawing on the oceanic humanities framework, I examine these core research questions about women's mobilities: What kinds of places and subjectivities emerged in women's transoceanic migrations? How did women see themselves across the various journeys they completed in life (material, imaginative, metaphysical)? How were Punjabi Sikh women transformed by the places they inhabited across vast distances in the diaspora, and how did they transform these sites? The women in this book experienced a confluence of historical traumas—relocating to the unknown of their in-laws' village as young brides, the terror and violence of India's Partition of 1947, and the

transoceanic journeys from villages in Punjab to rural California on the other side of the world. Thinking with the ocean, and focusing on the biographical narratives of women, highlights the variation and unevenness of migration experiences. The journeys, let alone the imaginaries, of the Sikh women in this study quickly exceeded the confines of a smooth, unilinear trajectory from homeland to hostland—or even a single ocean.

Now more than ever, scholars are reorienting toward the ocean as a unified object to move away from territorial and nation-centered histories. The urgency of climate change encourages us to reexamine the dynamic relationship between land and sea, as well as accepted paradigms in scholarship (Menon et al. 2022). There is an emerging scholarly consensus in the age of the Anthropocene that "our planetary future is becoming more oceanic" (DeLoughrey 2019, 136). As ocean levels rise and climate refugees increase, it is likely that the migrant will become a more central figure in our politics. The peril facing the planet, as Amitav Ghosh suggests, creates a profound intimacy for humanity (Ghosh 2021). This sense of unity of the Anthropocene overrides the previous emphasis on land borders and fragmented oceans. Thinking with the ocean in the study of migration histories helps us write histories of "continuous oceans rather than divided continents" (Menon et al. 2022, 11). As Renisa Mawani asserts, "The seas join the nations they divide" (Mawani 2018, 20).

Oceanic humanities helped dislodge the primacy of the nation-state and the essentialist understanding of places of origin embedded in diaspora studies. As Keith Brian Axel notes:

> Place has primarily been developed to identify a diasporic people's "place of origin." This very common analytic posits that a homeland is originary and constitutive of a diaspora, and very often it supports an essentialization of origins and a fetishization of what is supposed to be found at the origin (e.g., tradition, religion, language, race).
>
> (Axel 2002, 411)

A growing body of scholarship challenges the framework of national and ethnic identities by envisioning the ocean as a crucial site of analysis linking distant sites. Historians such as Sugata Bose, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and Engseng Ho have focused on the historical movements of trade, people, and ideas across ocean arenas (Bose 2006; Subrahmanyam 2012; Ho 2006), rather than with a territorial imagination bounded by nation-states that has shaped historiography.[5]

Women and the Sikh Diaspora in California proposes three main methodological contributions to diaspora studies using insights from an oceanic perspective. The first involves disrupting dominant understandings of culture and place when women's perspectives and voices are placed in the center of the analytical frame. Diasporic frameworks have been useful for dislodging

colonial and national narratives, yet they have inadequately accounted for the ways that gender has informed mobilities (DeLoughrey 1998, 206).

This book inverts the dominant paradigm in which men travel across oceans while women remain stationary in the homeland. By contrast, in the Punjabi kinship system, women are viewed as mobile and liminal; they are socialized from childhood that they are movable property that will be transferred from their birth families to their affinal relations after marriage. In Punjabi folk songs, women are associated with mobility and fluidity (water and air), whereas men are rooted in ancestral land. From women's perspectives, the displacement from their birth families and villages to their in-laws' represented as much significance and trauma as their subsequent transoceanic journeys from South Asia to North America. The mobilities of the Sikh women in this study were fundamentally different than men's, including their cognitive and emotional mapping of their relationship to society and place.

Focusing on women's history uncovers different narrative themes about global belonging and cultural change. Punjabi narratives tend to be male-centric, focusing on the themes of sovereignty, martyrdom, and honor. The women's narratives in this study gravitate toward their female affinities, their liminal insider/outsider positions never fully belonging in their birth or marital families, the joys of seasonal festivals, and their emotional resilience in the face of the quotidian difficulties they faced. Another popular theme in Punjabi storytelling focuses on rivers as sites of desire and peril. They are cautionary tales about women who met tragic fates after transgressing cultural and gender thresholds by crossing rivers where they meet illicit lovers beyond the opposite banks. In the diaspora, the ocean is foregrounded as a new site of cultural expression and contestation where longing and lust, transformation and transgression, and differing class, caste, gender, and cultural codes clash and compete.

Women and the Sikh Diaspora in California also illuminates the importance of multiscalar analyses. The emphasis on large scales, of the global and the planetary, in oceanic humanities often precludes the intricacies of the personal and the intimate. Through an analysis of women's transoceanic songs and oral narratives anchored in a biographical historical approach to the specific experiences of individual women and their generational cohort who settled in California's Sacramento Valley, my approach enables an analysis of the relationships between the small and the vast—the intimate and the global, the interior and the universal, and the individual and the societal. This second contribution is informed by architectural historian Chattopadhyay's theorization of "small spaces" in which she examines how scale is culturally specific and gendered, with women often inhabiting small and fragmented private spaces (Chattopadhyay 2022). Such a perspective dislodges the primacy of bigness and the great man view of history in order to "notice subjects and effects that remain invisible at the big scale of analysis" (Chattopadhyay 2023, 6). This book also employs DeLoughrey's

concept of tidalectics to theorize the "disjunctive spatial relations between the enormity of the planet and the experience of a local place" in a dialectic rhythm of the ocean tides to see how they mutually inform each other (DeLoughrey 2019, 4–5 and 2). Tidalectics represents a methodological innovation in connecting land and sea anchored in specific histories. The focus on women's creativity and resilience through song offers exciting new insights into the ways that sonic expression creates a sense of place; it also provides a window into the interior affective worldviews of women as they moved locally and globally.

The third contribution, an anchor of my approach, is to extend an oceanic methodology to river watershed regions beyond ships, ports, and littorals—the primary sites of analysis in ocean studies. River basins connect mountains and farming communities to the ocean in integrated water systems. Thinking through dynamic sites like rivers, tidelands, and archipelagos, oceanic humanities scholars offer vital new ways to understand the relationships between non-contiguous places rather than assuming that geographies near each other are more closely related (Menon, 16). It is vital to theorize the importance of the oceanic, and the interplay between water and land, in river watershed areas in which millions of people engage in agriculture and livelihoods that are increasingly vulnerable to climate change. Rather than envisioning culture as grounded in a place of origin (Punjab) and transplanted to a new land (California), I explore the ways that Sikh farming families adapted their knowledge from one river basin region to another—places that they viewed as similar; they emphasized the common environmental features of Punjab and California over their geographical separation.

This book explores the material and imaginary history of Sikhs as they moved from the Indus River to the Sacramento River basin that were imaginatively connected as similar farmlands irrigated by five rivers. The expertise that Sikh migrants brought with them overseas in irrigation that preceded British colonization, their involvement in the massive canal construction under the British, as well as their strong identification with farming, gave them a distinct relationship to watersheds characterized by the highly variable seasonal rainfall that brought the risk of large-scale environmental disaster.

Theory and Methods in Writing About Women's Mobilities

Women's performances of the self through speech and song offered windows into their self-perceptions and self-fashioning, and the complicated ways in which gender and kinship identities are constructed, represented, and contested in everyday life—and took me beyond the official records that barely reflected these women's existence.

The scholarship of early South Asian migration to North America relies heavily on official records that were used to surveil, govern, and exclude laborers from Asia (e.g., court records, land deeds, marriage licenses, newspapers, and census statistics). The individual journeys, life trajectories and

affective lives of the first South Asian migrants are largely omitted from public sources Moreover, these sources were often created by white government officials, lawyers and journalists who were hostile to South Asians.

For all the problems with these written sources, the challenges of finding women in them were far greater. For this generation of Sikh women who settled in California in mid-century, public sources, newspapers, and official records were sparse. The absence of women in the historical record about the early South Asian migration to North America required new methods to document women's history. And it highlights the limitations of the privileging of texts in the discipline of history. It would not be possible to write a history of early Punjabi Sikh women, much less of their experiential and affective lives, without venturing beyond official records.

This book is influenced by the foundational theoretical work by transnational feminist scholars that employs a feminist lens in conceptualizing women's subjectivity and agency. My theoretical framework and methods draw from their strategies to illuminate the multiple, overlapping power hierarchies that women negotiate in their daily lives in the Global South, as well as the places women have relocated to around the world.[6]

Thinking with the ocean helps advance the conceptualization of women's experiences in migration. It offers a fluid framework for perceiving the currents of overlapping and ongoing forms of power that shaped their lives, as well as the counter-currents of their efforts to resist these forces and create ripples of agency.[7]

Tracing the submerged experiences and emotions of women who had traversed vast distances and left virtually no written trace required new methodological strategies. Pamila Gupta's research on Goan migrants in Mozambique advanced my thinking and methods. For Gupta, offering life histories of the tremendously variable experiences of diasporic Goans offered more nuanced portraits of the experience of migration in the absence of other source materials (Gupta 2009, 24). In researching the diverse and nuanced stories of Sikh women, I faced a problem much like the one raised by performance studies scholar Diana Taylor: How do scholars recover the pasts of indigenous peoples that are perceived today as erased by colonial histories of conquest? Her thoughtful methods seek to recover this history through the critical lens of performative cultural transmission:

> we learn and transmit knowledge through embodied
> action, through cultural agency, and by making choices.
> Performance … functions as an episteme, a way of
> knowing, not simply an object of analysis."
>
> (Taylor, xvi)

Taylor distinguishes between the archive and the repertoire. The archive is comprised of enduring materials (e.g., texts, documents, buildings, bones) that are viewed as authoritative remnants of the past. The scholarly primacy

of the archive based on historical documents and literature is also due to its perceived status as unbiased, enduring, incorruptible (Taylor 2003). By contrast, the repertoire "enacts embodied memory" through daily behaviors, gestures, and movement—"in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non reproducible knowledge" (Taylor 2003, 20).

Paying attention to the performative nature of oral history research renders the scholar's presence, and their acts of mediation and interpretation, visible. My position as a woman helped me fit within an intimate space of female sociality in a community in which men and women of their generation socialized in gender-segregated spaces. My status as an outsider and a *gorī*, a white woman, profoundly influenced the interviews as well as the content of this book in visible and imperceptible ways as well. Thinking about this work in terms of my role as an interlocuter with female performers of a repertoire helped me to identify and counteract the biases, ethics, and power dynamics raised by my positionality rather than approaching this research as an objective interpreter of an official archive.

This methodological approach to the study of women's performances opened rich worlds of emotion and life experience. Through the exploration of women's telling of their life histories, and embodied expressive sonic culture, I could access the experiential aspects of their lives. It also led me to a reliance on their creative expressions as vital acts of survival and catharsis. This focus made the individual women's experiences audible as well as visible.

Sonic Amplitudes: The Soundwaves of Diaspora

Sound offers insights into the experiential, expressive, and affective processes by which people know and connect to places through sound. Steven Feld's "Waterfalls of Song" explores the ways that "place is sensed" and "senses are placed" in a process he calls acoustemology, referring to the "acoustic sensation, knowledge, and imagination embodied in the culturally particular sense of place resounding in Bosavi" in Papua New Guinea (Feld 1996, 91). In this environment, for the Kaluli people, emplacement involves perceiving the sound of coursing water as analogous to the voice into and flowing through the human body: they "sing with water, imagine song as water flowing like an embodied voice. Here the poetics of place merge with the sensuousness of place as a soundscape and with the sensuality of the singing voice" (Feld 1996, 134).

In the diaspora, focusing on sonicity reveals embodied practices and forms of expression by which people on the move become familiar and emotionally attached to new places. Song is also a powerful medium for connectivity across time and space. Kirstie Dorr's *On Site, In Sound* explores the political dimensions of researching the sonic, which she conceptualizes as "a critical realm of social conflict and a productive site for imagining and activating alternative social possibilities" in Latin America (Dorr 2018, 14). She

employs listening as a research method to de-stabilize power hierarchies and counteract "spatial arrangements of power" that silence marginal individuals and groups (Dorr 2018, 15). Listening carries the potential to be a potent research method for writing about the marginal using feminist and decolonial strategies.

Feminist scholarship also helped me develop strategies for interpreting South Asian women's songs to uncover the complex daily negotiations of power, kin, and patriarchy (Raheja and Gold, 1994). R. K. Narayan paid careful attention to women's songs for their alternative meanings, arguing that even the same song, when performed by women, conveyed different values and perspectives. I was inspired by Kirin Narayan's *Everyday Creativity* to interpret "songs as windows into the larger landscape of women's changing lives" (Narayan 2016, 35). Although rarely utilized by historians, songs form rich source materials in accessing women's affects and worldview. The act of singing intensified women's lives, Narayan observes, allowing them a flowing channel of self-expression and catharsis, representing quotidian acts of creativity in fashioning and refashioning the universe in a deeply personal yet collective art form. Although most of the women in her study could not read or write, nor did they compose their own songs, they shared varying degrees of expertise and mastery of vast oral literacy traditions carried forward by women to women in rivers of collective memory.

The attention to singing highlights the overlaps and divergences in articulations of identity and global belonging in the Sikh diaspora and the broader Punjabi diaspora.[8] Punjabi music enjoys tremendous global popularity and influence on youth cultures. Duggal and Kapuria's *Punjab Sounds* is a rich volume showcasing how the idea of the Punjabiyat (global Punjabi identity) is constituted through the acts of musical performances and soundings that spill "across boundaries and national borders" (Duggal and Kapuria forthcoming, 3). Gibb Schreffler offers an excellent ethnography of the ḍhol drum, which serves as a global symbol of the region (Schreffler 2021). There is voluminous research on Bhangra music and dance in the diaspora, as well as the influence of this art form in rap with Punjabi lyrics (Maira 2002; Ballantyne 2007; Roy 2010; Kalra 2015; Schreffler 2013). Radha Kapuria's *Music in Colonial Punjab* provides an important corrective to the stereotype of the Punjabi soundscape as rustic by tracing the history of classical art music in the region (Kapuria 2023).

By contrast, there is little scholarly attention paid to Sikh devotional music, despite its significance in the diaspora. As Gurminder Kaur Bhogal states, "If there is a place we can go to hear traces of female voices and bodies otherwise missing from Punjab history—that place is in Sikh *kirtan*" (Bhogal 2017, 48). For the elderly Sikh women in this study, listening to sacred music and reciting the *Guru Granth Sahib* remained central to their lives, supporting their well-being, emotional catharsis, and sociality. This book about Sikh women's song lyrics and sonic practices in the diaspora emphasizes the meanings

that individual women created while listening to and participating in Sikh sacred music, building on the ethnographic work of Inderjit N. Kaur about the contemporary sonic worship of Sikhs in California (Kaur 2018, 2019 and 2021) and Kenya (Kaur 2023). This book adds a historical dimension by interpreting performance and interpretation of Sikh sacred music among the first cohort of Sikh women in the United States. I also trace this generation of Sikh women's uneven participation in diverse types of musical performances, finding that they were most actively involved in singing in informal settings in private spaces where formal musical training was not required.

My emphasis on sonic texts and practices highlights the unique Sikh worldview in which music triumphs over geography. In the *Guru Granth Sahib*, water is a core metaphor for the underlying unity in the cosmos and the immanent presence of the divine. Anywhere and everywhere is home where sacred music is performed. I now turn to my articulation of the core oceanic metaphors in the South Asian diaspora and the smaller Sikh diaspora. These metaphors reveal the unique understandings of identity, belonging, and place in relation to the broader global movement of South Asian peoples.

The Black Waters and the Universal Ocean: Alternative Oceanic Metaphors for the South Asian Diaspora

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the black waters (kala pani) as "a term used by Indians, esp. Hindus, for the sea." For upper-caste Hindus, crossing the black waters was taboo. Leaving the shores of India signified the loss of one's caste status, meaning that the migrant would return as an outcast(e), a pariah in Indian society. Nevertheless, there were famous examples of Indians crossing the seas during the colonial period who did not lose their caste status, including Mohandas K. Gandhi and India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

For the South Asian diaspora, the black waters trope symbolizes the material and existential condition of Indians who crossed the forbidden sea. The perception that crossing the seas was an act of transgression, Mishra suggests, "was reinforced by the fact that the ocean as kala pani, in a literal sense, also carried the connotation of death since kālā ('black') invokes kālā or death itself." (Mishra 2022, 20).

The origins of the kala pani taboo, as well as the extent of its influence, in Indian history remains unclear. Archeological evidence demonstrates trade between India, Africa, and the Middle East dating back over 5000 years to the Indus Valley Civilization. Suparna Sengupta suggests that the black waters trope was largely a British colonial construct that aided in governing Indian subjects (Sengupta 2022).

The kala pani metaphor is strongly associated with the history of indentured labor in which 1.25 million Indians were transported to British colonies in Mauritius, the Caribbean, and Fiji between 1834 and 1916 to replace

enslaved African laborers. Leaving the Indian subcontinent was experienced as a radical break by indentured laborers in which their sense of self and their social relationships were permanently altered. As mentioned in the previous chapter, feminist scholars employ this trope to show how the rupture in the diaspora partly allowed female laborers and their female descendants to experience greater independence overseas (Mehta 2009; Bhardwaj and Misrahi-Barak 2022). Later on, the kala pani reference also referred to the imprisonment of freedom fighters and other dissidents in the cellular jail on the Andaman islands in the Indian Ocean in the early twentieth century by British colonial officials.

This book traces a strikingly different oceanic imaginary among Sikhs. There was never a taboo prohibiting seafaring in the Sikh diaspora. From Sikhi's inception in the fifteenth century, the Sikhs have traveled widely beyond India's shores. Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, traveled his known world in the early sixteenth century. The mobility of the Sikh people is reflected in the cosmopolitan, multilingual nature of Sikh scripture that includes poetry from Muslim and Hindu saints as well as Sikhs. With the British conquest of Punjab in 1849, Sikh men traveled the empire as soldiers, police officers and migrants in search of greater economic opportunities overseas.

Central to the Sikh worldview is the perception of a universal ocean. The *Guru Granth Sahib* is filled with oceanic imagery, a metaphor for the infinite, all-pervasive presence of the divine: "You are the deepest, most unfathomable ocean" ("tum har saravar at agāh" || Guru Ram Das, *GGS*, 668). The purpose of life is understood as crossing the terrifying world-ocean in merging with the Divine One. It is support of the divine teachings that enables the soul to be liberated: "The Guru is the Boat, and the Guru is the Boatman. Without the Guru, no one can cross over" ("guru jahāj khevaṭ gurū gur bin tariā na koi" || Bhatt Gayand, *GGS*, 1401).

Ocean as Method opens vast horizons for approaching the worldviews of global migrants—making it a vital element in my search for a theoretical language adequate to the consciousness and imaginaries of these women. In my study of the history of Sikhs in Fiji, I proposed the concept of "anchoring" to capture the place-making strategies of this hypermobile community (Ranganath 2020). This language emerged from my dissatisfaction with the plant metaphors that abound in US immigration history and migration studies (think "transplantation"), which I trace to thinking centered on land, empire, and nation. It is still common in migration studies to use a unilear trajectory of cultural change from a homeland to a hostland in which the foreigner adopts and assimilates into the new country's culture and society.

The anchor, in contrast, refers to the efforts to settle and belong in a place while also maintaining a distinct faith and values conceptualized as mobile, global, planetary. Sikhs belong wherever they recite the scriptures in the presence of the *Guru Granth Sahib* and the *sādh sangat* (dedicated Sikh congregation). Thinking of "anchoring" rather than, say, transplantation helps us

stay with the worldview of a people who have been persecuted by authorities for centuries. This has created a mindset ever ready for relocation, repeatedly raising their anchors and lowering them in the unrelenting search of home. The historical lessons for Sikhs who have repeatedly experienced persecution have reinforced the need for anchorage over permanent settlement—from their early history of persecution by Mughal authorities in the Indian subcontinent, to expulsion from East Africa in 1972, to the violent aftermath of the coup in Fiji in 1987.

Racial violence and discrimination has met Sikhs wherever they have put down anchor. But equally, Sikhs have established islands of sovereignty wherever they settled in the form of gurdwaras. The Sikh flag (*nishān sāhib*) that towers above every gurdwara acts as a beacon visible for Sikhs in the vicinity in need of shelter or refuge. This idea of islands of Sikh sovereignty highlights the global nature of the Sikh imaginary, ideas of belonging, and networks that transcend narratives of empire and nation.

Reflections

This book proposes the image of the "pearls from the seven seas" as the core metaphor for Sikh women's transoceanic mobilities and music in the diaspora and the Sikh diaspora as a whole. This metaphor is a recurring oceanic motif in Sikh scripture, poetry, and music, carrying numerous meanings and valences of affect. Pearls from the seven seas is an apt metaphor for the Sikh diaspora, capturing identity and belonging within a global context. Like pearls, the Sikh people are highly mobile, ready to relocate frequently around the world in response to dynamic conditions. It captures how Sikhs were dispersed around the world beginning in the late nineteenth century, but who came together in different formations due to military service in the British Army, common cause fighting against British rule in India during the gadar movement, and in forming communities coalescing around a global network of gurdwaras. It also invokes the importance of the individual in relation to the collective global Sikh community.

For the women featured in this book, the pearl metaphor captures their resilience, agency, and creativity through their musical expressions. Just as oysters create pearls around the grains of sand and debris that could cause them harm, women transformed the hardships they faced in life into beautiful melodies that represent their ongoing acts of survival and artistry across countless generations. Envision the women's songs as pearls within the unified universe often referred to in the Sikh scripture as the seven seas. The women inhabited intensely local worlds—isolated on farms in villages, strung together across vast distances. Women's consciousness was also deeply informed by the view of the underlying unity in the universe in Sikhi. They were transformed by their migrations from village to village in Punjab and to the other side of the world, and yet they were tethered to a view of universal Sikh sovereignty. Yet distinct from Sikh men in diaspora who shared these

views of Sikhi, women's worldview was both more intensely local and also more imaginatively untethered to US cultural norms, due to their isolation and limited interactions with English speakers.

Throughout this book, I trace the history of gender and mobility in the Sikh diaspora across the twentieth century. The diaspora lends itself to a multiscalar investigation of the interplay between the intimate and the global, the personal and the universal, as well as land and water. I tell the story of women's lives in transit and displacement within and beyond the nation-state, gleaned from their oral narratives and musical expressions. In the next chapter, I explore how the oceanic figures in the anti-colonial songs performed by women in the Sikh families of workers and farmers in the United States in the early twentieth century. In contrast to the exclusive attention to male migrants in this anti-colonial movement, the next chapter explores the importance of this movement in the lives of the first Sikh women in the United States through their performance of revolutionary songs as well as their alternative interpretations of their significance.

Notes

1 Jutti Kasoori, *(Walking into the Unknown)*, directed by Nicole Ranganath (Sikhlens, 2018).
2 The first group of elderly Sikh women whom I interviewed included Surjit Kaur Bhatti, Bakshish Kaur Maan, Preetam Kaur Purewal, Gurmit Kaur Takhar, and Harbhajan Kaur Takher. The second group: Harpal Kaur, Manjit Kaur Janda, Harbans Kaur Panu, and Veena Singh. The interviews were conducted by the author and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
3 To my knowledge, Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara and Harbans Kaur Panu were the only two who composed autobiographical songs of the elderly Sikh women I interviewed who settled in the Yuba City area from Punjab between the late 1940s and 1969.
4 The 30 women include Amar Kaur Bains of Live Oak, Amar Kaur Bains of Yuba City, Gian Kaur Bains, Surjit Kaur Bhatti, Joginder Kaur Dhaliwal, Surjit Kaur Dhami, Amar Kaur Everest, Sant Kaur Grewal, Pritam Kaur Heir, Manjit Kaur Janda, Darshan Kaur Johl, Jaswant Kaur Johl, Satnam Kaur Johl, Sham Kaur Johl, Verinder Kaur Kajla, Harpal Kaur Dulai, Bakshish Kaur Mann, Harbans Kaur Panu, Harbhajan Kaur Purewal, Preetam Kaur Purewal, Rasham K. Sandhu, Veena Singh, Gurmit Kaur Takhar, Harbhajan Kaur Takhar, Baldev Kaur Thiara, Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara, Satinder Kaur Thiara, Sukhwant Kaur Thiara, Rajinder Kaur Toor, and Surjit Kaur Tumber.
5 For example, Metcalf's, *Imperial Connections* offers a "webs of empire" framework to envision the vertical and horizontal connections across the Indian Ocean during the British Empire in order to study the historical relationships among far-flung British colonies (Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*).
6 Foundational work includes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 66–111; and Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). I build on Grewal and Kaplan's observations about "the uneven ways in which power and resistance unfold" and the "scattered hegemo-

nies" that need disentangling in order to understand women's lives across cultural divides (Grewal and Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies*). More recently, Hundle offers additional insights about transnational feminist methodology in studying the "intersectional or interlacing forms of oppression for women (race, class, caste, religion, citizenship and migration status), Anneeth Kaur Hundle, "Postcolonial Patriarchal Nativism, Domestic Violence and Transnational Feminist Research in Contemporary Uganda," *Feminist Review* 121 (2019): 38. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, for instance, urges scholars to carefully attend to the historically specific ways that women are constituted as women through multiple power regimes (kinship, legal, political, etc.) rather than assume that the construct of so-called third world women form a homogenous group, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

7 I build on a growing literature about women's agency in the Indian diaspora (Brinda Mehta, Mariam Pirbhai, Gabrielle Hosein, Lisa Outar, Patricia Mohammed, and Gaiutra Bahadur). This work is also inspired by dynamic recent work about women's subjectivity and performance in autobiography and folk music in South Asia (Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance and Autobiography in South Asia* (Duke: Duke University Press, 2015); Narayan, *Everyday Creativity* and in the South Asian diaspora in Trinidad and Ghana (Niranjana, *Mobilizing India*); and Shankar, "Singing and Sensing the Unknown."

8 There are approximately 130 million native speakers of the Punjabi language in Pakistan, India, and throughout the world. Punjabi speakers follow a diversity of faiths, such as Islam, Sikhi, Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism. The global Sikh community includes approximately 30 million people, most of whom are native Punjabi speakers.

2 A River of Nationalist Zeal Flows into the Sea

Women's Performance of Gadar Revolutionary Songs, 1913–1948

"Come on, lions, rise up and fight! Don't miss your golden opportunity!" Nand Kaur, one of the first Sikh women to settle in California, sang a rousing revolutionary song exhorting her menfolk to join the uprising to throw off the foreign rulers of India, adding, with impatience: "The revolution has started. What are you waiting for!"[1] Protest songs in the gadar movement created a fiery passion among the Punjabi Sikh laborers around the world to liberate India from British rule. Nand Kaur's performance of gadar songs shows the music's enduring resonance in diasporic Sikh women's lives 70 years after the revolt collapsed in the 1910s.

Nand Kaur's voice is one of the few surviving accounts by a woman active in the first global movement calling for India's complete independence from colonial rule. Nand Kaur was among a handful of women who relocated from Punjab to the United States before the Luce-Celler Act of 1946 reopened immigration from South Asia. Traveling by ship in 1923 at the age of 17 with her older husband, Nand Kaur experienced intense isolation in her first years overseas. What connected her to the global Sikh diaspora, and helped ease her isolation, were the few days she spent each year at the gurdwara (Sikh house of worship) in Stockton, CA. On these rare occasions, she recalled feeling joy in the company of women, listening to sacred music, preparing and enjoying communal meals, and swapping stories and news.

What deeply transformed and inspired Nand Kaur were the Sikh laborers' revolutionary songs about liberating her home country from the shackles of British rule. Seventy years later, she joyfully sang these anti-colonial songs from memory. Singing was an empowering act for Nand Kaur and other Sikh women in the diaspora, and they performed these songs in their homes, farms, and at the Stockton Gurdwara. The memory of the gadar movement in California was carried forward by women who taught these songs to their children, along with Sikh sacred music and Punjabi folk songs. Nand Kaur's interpretation of these songs conveys the emotions of a woman who fiercely supports the cause, and yet feels impatient, even exasperated, with her male countrymen whom she urges to act swiftly and decisively in fulfilling their duty. Her analysis combines her political acumen with her gift of telling a good story with warmth and humor (Figure 2.1).

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Figure 2.1 Nand Kaur with her husband, Puna Singh and eldest son Karpal, 1923, Bingham City, Utah.

Courtesy of the Puna Singh and Nand Kaur Family.

This chapter's title refers to one of Nand Kaur's favorite verses in a gadar song, but it also gestures to my interpretation of women's participation in this global revolutionary movement. The metaphor of a "river of nationalist zeal" flowing into the world-ocean conveys the complex relationship

between nationalism and diasporic consciousness in this movement. It also captures the fluidity of belonging and identity in the Sikh worldview. Finally, the metaphor refers to the sonic and affective resonance of the gadar movement as embodied through the performance of music throughout the lives of the small number of Sikh women who lived in California. In other words, the aqueous metaphor aptly suggests the long afterlife of the movement and its music in the community, especially as remembered and performed by women across generations.

Toward the end of her life, Nand Kaur was still reflecting on the transformative influence of the gadar speeches and songs on her consciousness as a young woman, awakening her to the plight of India under colonial rule and inspiring her to join this global movement. She participated not by returning to India with arms, but through simple everyday acts in her home in Yuba City, CA, and at the Stockton Gurdwara, such as giving financial support, attending meetings, and listening to speeches and music. Perhaps most important to her, she taught the gadar songs to her children and sang them with her family in the evenings. Hearing and singing the revolutionary songs called gadar di gunj emotionally sustained her during the early lonely decades in a new country and connected her to a global Sikh imaginary of shared faith, history, and culture.

The collective memory of women's gadar activism was passed down through matrilines. It was the daughters of the *gadarī bībīāṇ* (respected female anti-colonial activists) who documented their mothers' participation, commentaries, and performance of gadar songs for posterity. Without this intervention, women's contributions to this movement would have disappeared from history. Nand Kaur's daughter, Dr Jane Singh (a gadar scholar at UC Berkeley), recorded her mother's recollections in 1972. Nand Kaur recalled the electrifying experience of hearing the revolutionary speeches and songs for the first time in the Stockton Gurdwara in 1924. From there, she brought the songs into her home:

> To me, the [Gadar] poetry was wonderful … I learned many of the verses and taught them to my children … We used to sing the Gadar songs every day. After supper, we would sit down and start to sing … The gadar di gunj became a part of my household.[2]

This left an indelible impression on Nand Kaur's daughter, who dedicated her scholarship to the gadar movement. The river also denotes the genealogies of memory in which female relatives create sound bridges that kept the movement alive through music.

This chapter offers two contributions to our scholarly understanding of the gadar movement in the lives and imaginaries of diasporic South Asians in North America in the early 1900s.[3] First, in contrast to the bulk of the scholarship focusing on the ideology and organization of the male gadar party

leadership in the 1910s, this work examines the afterlife, the *living resonance* of the gadar movement in the lives of diasporic Sikh women, and analyzes the gadar lyrical poetry from a gendered perspective. It shows how women actively supported the cause in many ways, perhaps most enduringly, by singing the gadar songs in their homes and teaching the songs to their children, and in so doing, creating a river of collective memory. Gadar literature was composed and performed from the movement's inception in 1913 until 1948, shortly after India's Independence. The Punjabi Sikh community's support for the movement continues to the present day in numerous memorial statues of the gadar heroes in Punjabi villages, commemorative conferences, and the construction of memorial halls and libraries in San Francisco, the Stockton Gurdwara, and Jalandhar, Punjab.

Second, this chapter examines the global oceanic imaginary expressed in the gadar music. In contrast to the dominant motif of the black waters in the South Asia diaspora, I explore the alternative transoceanic imaginary that predominated among the Punjabi Sikh diasporic workers who formed the backbone of the movement. The distinct Sikh transoceanic imaginary emphasizes the underlying Oneness of reality and continuity across time and space. The motif of the world-ocean is a recurring theme in Sikh metaphysics representing the individual's journey to fulfill the purpose of life: liberation from the cycle of rebirth by merging with the Divine One. The ship represents the immanent divinity embodied in both Gurbani (divine teachings of the Sikh Gurus that are recited and sung) and the world community of Sikhs that provide the spiritual support for the soul to safely travel across the turbulent world-ocean.

One of the central debates about the ideology and worldview of gadar followers concerns the role of religion. Until recently, there was a consensus in the Western academy about the secular nature of this populist movement. After all, Sohan Singh Bhakna (the founding president of the gadar party) famously asserted, "We were Hindustanees. Our religion was patriotism."[4] Mark Juergensmeyer, for instance, asserts that "the movement's ideology was always political, untainted with the language of faith."[5] It is true that gadar revolutionaries in the 1910s openly rejected sectarianism which they saw as a threat to their solidarity in defeating the British. For this reason, religion and other divisive issues were not discussed at gadar meetings. A few of the most prominent gadar intellectuals eschewed religion. There was also a widely shared hostility among gadar activists toward religious leaders whom they believed had colluded with the British. Harjot Oberoi convincingly argues that the gadar movement was cosmopolitan and pluralistic in its disavowal of parochialism and eclectic in its ideology, drawing from diverse intellectual and cultural currents.[6] After World War I, the gadar party splintered into factions, one of which was aligned with the communist party.

In recent years, scholars have critiqued the earlier consensus about the secular ideology among the gadar activists to uncover the complex role of faith in the movement.[7] Seema Sohi has provided a detailed history of the

global network of gurdwaras (particularly in Stockton, Vancouver, and Shanghai) that formed the critical centers of financial, political, organizational, and leadership for anti-colonial agitation.[8] Moreover, as Harish Puri observed, secularism was unknown to the Sikh farmers who formed the core of the movement. My research confirms that the gadar songs composed by Punjabi Sikh workers was anchored in the Sikh faith and worldview steeped in the sacrifices of the Gurus and Sikh heroes, as well as historical figures from other cultural and faith traditions. The songs are filled with references to Sikh heroes who sacrificed their lives for the faith and the community and its values, such as Banda Singh Bahadur and Baba Deep Singh.

The lack of attention to faith in the gadar movement is partly due to the scholarly focus on the elite intellectuals and their polemic writings in the *Gadar* newspaper without careful attention to the lyrical poetry composed by the laborers in the vernaculars, particularly in Punjabi. A careful analysis of the lyrical poetry is necessary to provide a nuanced understanding of the relationship between politics, faith, and culture in the gadar movement—which this chapter aims to provide.

The influence of Sikhi is infused throughout the gadar literature in Punjabi. The masthead of the inaugural issue of the *Gadar* newspaper in Urdu was *Angrezī Rāj Kā Dusman* (Enemy of English Rule). By contrast, a well-known verse from the Sikh scripture composed by Guru Nanak appears at the top of the first Punjabi issue: "If you desire to play this game of love with Me / Then step onto My Path with your head in hand" ("jau tau prem khelaṇ kā chāu || sir dhar talī galī merī āo" || Guru Nanak, GGS: 1412). This passage is part of a popular hymn that captures the spirit of the Sikh workers who pledged their total commitment to the gadar cause. Many interpreted their activism within the context of Sikhi as a divine mission for which they were willing to sacrifice their lives. Based on this analysis of gadar songs in Gurmukhi and individual accounts with female gadar activists, I have found that women's views and activism were deeply informed by Sikhi. It is also critical to consider the deeper meaning of the phrase gadar di gunj, referring to the gadar movement's lyrical poetry. Gūnj does not translate to music (*sangīt*), song (*gīt*), or the act of singing (*gāūṇā*). In Punjabi and Urdu, gūnj refers to an echo or reverberation, the awakening of a latent vibrating energy force or sound current (*nād*) that resonates within the soul and throughout the universe. In Gurbani, this echo conveys the unique power of music to connect humanity with the divine.

Gadar scholars have primarily interpreted the call for revolution within the framework of Indian nationalism,[9] and more recently, Sikh nationalism.[10] By contrast, my analysis of diasporic Sikh women's interpretations and performance of gadar music suggests their striving for a global equality and unity that flows within, across and beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. I propose that the motif of water in gadar lyrical poetry is a productive heuristic tool for uncovering alternative meanings that women created while listening to and singing gadar songs.

This examination uncovers new source materials, such as the memoirs and oral narratives of Sikh women in northern California who joined the gadar cause, as well as close readings of the gadar lyrical poetry. The music, and first-hand accounts in the many vernacular languages used by the men and women active in the movement, remain underutilized sources in gadar scholarship.

This chapter is organized into three parts. The first outlines a brief history of the gadar movement, especially its music, within the context of the South Asian migration to North America in the early twentieth century. The second narrates the history of the gadar movement from a female perspective based on rare autobiographical writings and interviews with Kartar Kaur Dhillon, a woman who dedicated much of her early life to the cause. The final section investigates Nand Kaur's favorite gadar song "the Last Message of the Gūnj." In this remarkable song, the spirit of the gadar movement appears in the form of the personified female voice of the gūnj—the underlying feminine energy force, or vibration, in life that animates the revolution.

A Brief History of the Gadar Songs

Shortly after the British annexation of Punjab in 1849, Sikhs brought their music with them as they traveled the world. Sikh men were employed as soldiers and police officers to defend an empire at the apex of its power. Sacred music gave Sikhs the courage to risk their lives on the front lines of the most brutal battles waged by the British Army. Music also expressed their discontent as colonial subjects. Their songs of revolution ascribed the root cause of the racial discrimination they faced in North America to their subjugation by the British in India. Music is the most enduring echo of the shared feeling and collective imaginary of the Sikh laborers, farmers, and soldiers abroad, the vast majority of whom were men. The revolutionary songs circulated among Sikhs across the British Empire and beyond, from San Francisco to Vancouver, London, Moscow, Nairobi, Manila, and Shanghai, and to Amritsar and Lahore in Punjab.

Gadar music reflects the concerns and worldview of the first South Asian migrants in North America in the early twentieth century. By the start of World War I, there were about 10,000 South Asians—primarily men, but also a small number of women and children—along the west coast of Canada and the United States.[11] About half were veterans of the British Indian Army who expected to be rewarded by the British Crown for their bravery after their tours of duty. They believed they should be able to exercise their full rights as British subjects. Instead, the former soldiers and police officers faced racial discrimination, violence, and exclusion in Canada and the United States. The South Asian migrant laborers, mainly Sikh men, placed the blame for their daily humiliations overseas on their status as slaves to the British at home:

What have we earned in coming to America?
After leaving our country for years.

Everywhere they treat us contemptuously,
calling us coolie, coolie,
How can we tolerate this treatment, brothers?"

Kī kuchh khaṭiā je mirakaṇ vich āke, desh chhaḍiāṇ nūṇ kaī sāl ho gae।
Kulī kulī kaih ke dunīāṇ nak chāhaṛe, vīro asīṇ besharam kamāl ho gae?[12]

We are called coolies in countries abroad,
why is there no flag of our own anywhere? ...
A handful of people have taken control of our land;
why is there no caretaker of Hindustan?

Kulī kulī pukardā jag sānūṇ, saḍā jhūldā kite nishān kiun nahīṇ।
ḍhāī ṭoṭarū khā gae khet sāḍā Hindustan dā koī kisān kiuṇ nahīṇ।

Brothers, let's go back with our gadar party and
dedicate ourselves to liberating Hindustan from slavery.

Chalo pārṭī de nāl milo nāl āke, siṭo lah gulāmī dā jāl vīro।[13]

The humiliation the Punjabi Sikh migrants felt by their treatment as so-called "coolies" (a derogatory term for unskilled Asian laborers) by whites reveals a great deal about their change in status from India to the diaspora. In the nineteenth century, British colonial officials widely used the term coolie as a derogatory racial slur referring to all Asians. For the early Punjabi Sikh migrants, most of whom came from the dominant farming caste, this erasure of their caste privilege in the diaspora created an added layer of insult. White Americans also referred to the early migrants as "Hindus" even though they predominantly belonged to the Sikh and Muslim faiths. The Sikh migrants' desire to hoist a flag of their own reflected their status as a religious minority in India after the Sikh Empire was annexed by the British in 1849.

In North America, then, the religious, caste, political, and cultural identities that were the pride of the early Punjabi migrants were replaced by the racist epithets "coolie," "raghead," and "dirty Hindu." Raised in elite families in Punjab, and many having defended the British Raj in battle, the men were shocked to find themselves occupying the bottom rung of American society. Blaming the British tyrants, they fiercely desired to restore their honor in the world.

The daily humiliations of racial discrimination in North America in the early twentieth century awakened the political consciousness of South Asian migrants as colonial subjects and as racialized workers. Working in logging camps in Oregon and Washington, and as farm workers in the Central Valley of California, Sikh laborers were also exposed to the ideas of radical union organizations, such as the Industrial Workers of the World and revolutionary ideologies from Ireland, Russia, Germany, Turkey, and elsewhere. A

new diasporic consciousness emerged that transcended religious, class, and regional differences. Shared experiences of racial discrimination and violence created a fertile ground for anti-colonial and union activity.

Seizing the opportunity offered by the start of World War I, overseas Indian intellectuals published "A Call to Arms" in *Gadar*, a weekly newspaper in San Francisco aimed at mobilizing Indians around the world to return to India to liberate their homeland from British rule.

> *Arise, brave ones! Quickly … We want all brave and self-sacrificing warriors who can raise revolt …*
> *Salary: death*
> *Reward: martyrdom*
> *Pension: freedom*
> *Field of battle: India.*[14]

The gadar call for revolt resounded among Sikhs living around the globe like "the roar of the bomb."[15] South Asian students and workers in the United States recalled the electric effect of reading the gadar newspapers, listening to passionate speeches, and singing protest songs. One Punjabi migrant who joined a large meeting in Sacramento in 1914, Prithvi Singh Azad, likened the highly charged atmosphere to "a crusading fire" of revolutionary passion surging through the crowd of Punjabi Sikh laborers.[16] About 8000 Indians from around the world answered the call, half of them from North America.[17] They returned to India ready to give their lives to incite Indian soldiers in the British Indian Army to rise up against the British Raj.

Critical to the attempted revolt was the change in the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of the overseas Punjabi migrants compared to their counterparts who remained in India.[18] In 1914, when the majority of people in Punjab expressed their loyalty to the British war effort, the returning migrants spoke scathingly of the British as foreign tyrants. Gadar activists condemned Punjabi religious and political leaders for collaborating with the "white monkeys" (*farangī bāndar*).

The gadar literature achieved extensive global circulation. In 1914–15, British intelligence intercepted gadar publications in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Fiji, Thailand, Nairobi, South Africa, Europe, Mexico, Panama, Brazil, and in "every place where Indians were known to be residing, and was often reposted from these places to India."[19] The British government took great pains to censor the gadar literature and punish those who circulated it, recognizing the serious threat it posed in subverting the loyalty of British subjects.[20] Ultimately, the uprising failed due to the lack of mass support in India and the success of British intelligence in foiling their plans.

The most powerful and enduring legacy of the gadar movement, however, is its lyrical poetry, which resounded for years after the 1914–15 revolt. The gadar songs were included in the *Gadar*, a weekly newspaper printed in San Francisco. Due to their popularity, the songs were compiled and published

in separate songbooks on seven occasions from 1914 until 1931. The print orders for the first songbooks exceeded 10,000. In total, there were approximately 350 songs printed in gadar publications from 1913 to 1947.[21] Amidst a recent revival of interest in this movement, new collections of the gadar poetry continue to appear.[22]

Unlike the editorials and essays written by students and intellectuals in the *Gadar*, the Punjabi Sikh laborers composed the bulk of the gadar songs. Most of the poems/songs remain anonymous; this music expressed the collective discontent of colonial subjects. The songbooks were mainly published in Punjabi, although they were published in other South Asian languages as well. Scholar Ved Prakash Vatuk placed the gadar songs within the broader tradition of popular protest songs in rural Punjab.[23]

The gadar songs were composed in direct, simple language similar to other protest songs in rural India in the pre-Independence era. According to men and women who participated in the gadar movement, these songs were performed in public gatherings at gurdwaras and at gadar meetings.[24] The Sikh migrant farm laborers who lived together as bachelors sang them in the fields in the evening. The few wives married to laborers overseas joined in these musical gatherings of bucolic protest. Finally, as Nand Kaur mentioned, the few Punjabi Sikh families in North America sang these songs together at home.

A typical public performance was a community-oriented one. Punjabi laborers would come to the front of a gathering to perform, and the audience would join in to sing the lines that they knew. Many gadar songs were composed in a meter called *baint* common in North Indian folk music. In this meter, the final word(s) of every line is the same. This poetic structure encourages group participation in which everyone sings the refrain as a chorus. The act of singing simple songs with repetitive verses was a highly effective medium for creating a shared community of affect among the laborers who participated in oral literacy in rural Punjab but who could not read or write. Music was an important catalyst for uniting and mobilizing gadar revolutionaries.

The gadar movement both reflected and transformed the consciousness of overseas Punjabi laborers, as Harish Puri's authoritative study of the gadar movement emphasizes. The gadar di gunj resonated deeply with Punjabi Sikh workers, channeling their anger into political consciousness, as it "became a major source not only of fervent emotional appeal but also of development of a new framework of consciousness."[25] This music ignited the political awakening against colonialism that mobilized thousands of Indians in the diaspora. And a small number of women living overseas also joined the global chorus of protest.

The oceanic, and the symbol of the ship, were central to understanding the worldview of gadar activists. The experience of traveling overseas, and enduring the racial humiliation abroad, radicalized these laborers. But it was the tense stalemate surrounding the *Komagata Maru* ship in Canadian waters

during the summer of 1914 that was the proximate cause of the revolt. Gurdit Singh chartered a Japanese ship with 376 Indians (mostly Punjabi Sikhs) aboard from British India to Vancouver via Hong Kong as a direct challenge to British imperialism and Canada's new exclusionary policy targeting Indians. Singh hoped the voyage would lead to the triumph of the Sikh people and faith, according to Renisa Mawani's excellent study. "The flag of Guru Nanak shall fly (on our ship)," Singh proclaimed in his memoir: "and all the world shall see it, and we shall be reckoned among nations."[26] For months, the fate of the ship captured the imagination of Indians worldwide as Canadian authorities refused to allow the passengers to land in Vancouver and supplies ran low. The crisis provided a highly effective tool for recruitment and fundraising among Punjabi laborers for the gadar cause. According to one Punjabi passenger: "The ship belongs to the whole of India … this is a symbol of the honour of India and if this was detained, there would be mutiny in the armies."[27] The sight of the *Komagata Maru's* departure from Vancouver harbor symbolized the defeat and humiliation of Indians under British rule and their racial exclusion in western societies (Figure 2.2).

Punjabi laborers and farmworkers, eager to restore their honor after the failed voyage, eagerly boarded ships in 1914–15 bound for India to incite a mutiny and hopefully oust the British from the subcontinent. The imperiled ship is a frequent motif in the gadar music reflecting both this incident as well as the symbolism of the boat and the oceanic in Sikhi.

Women and the Gadar Movement: Kartar Kaur Dhillon's Memoirs

In contrast to the voluminous narratives by and about the male leadership of the gadar movement, including memoirs, biographies, novels, and films, very little is recorded about women.[28] This is partly due to the small number of women in North America before the mid-century. The richest account of Sikh women's lives in the United States emerges from Kartar Kaur Dhillon's autobiographical writings, which point us toward a better understanding of women's participation in the gadar cause.[29] Born in California in 1915, Kartar and her sister, Karm, were likely the first Sikh women born in the United States. Her father, Bakhshish Singh Dhillon, was the earliest recorded Sikh migrant to enter the United States when he did so in the late 1890s. Her mother, Rattan Kaur, was likely the first Sikh woman to settle in the United States when she arrived in 1910.

Kartar's family was deeply involved in both the gadar movement and in organizing workers to join the Industrial Workers of the World. Bakhshish was an important leader advocating for the political and economic rights of the Punjabi community at Hammond Lumber Mill in Astoria, Oregon. His service in the British Army in China and his extensive travels in the diaspora had politicized him. As one of the few workers who was fluent in Punjabi and in English, he played a vital role in informing fellow Punjabi workers about the American labor and gadar activities, recruiting them to both causes.

Figure 2.2 Komagata Maru leaving Vancouver harbor, 1914. Photograph by Leonard Frank.

Courtesy of the Vancouver Public Library, 16639.

> [My father] met with workers after the evening meal …, and read for them the news from India in Punjabi papers, and news of the world in English papers. It was a nightly event wherever he worked, in a lumber mill in Astoria, or a farm workers' camp in California. He had been deeply moved by the statement of one of his friends who said to him: "I have eyes, but I am blind; I cannot read." He became the eyes for his Punjabi comrades.[30]

In Kartar's view, the root cause of the gadar movement was the "terrible cruelty" of white Americans toward South Asians in the United States: "When our men were confronted by the vicious racism," she explained, "they realized that their first priority was to kick the British out of their own country."[31] Kartar and her family shared the pain of other Punjabi Sikh migrants who faced violent attacks in the early 1900s. She also emphasized the cruelty of the US immigration policies that separated Punjabi families across vast distances from 1917 until the late 1940s.

As a girl growing up in Oregon and California during the 1910s and 1920s, Kartar recalls, "in the school the girls considered themselves superior because they were whites and I was not."[32] Meanwhile, her brothers' situation was growing intolerable. The boys often came home after being called "ragheads" for the turbans they wore as a sign of the Sikh faith. White children also knocked their turbans from their heads. The taunting and physical beatings grew so intense that their parents made the painful decision to cut their sons' hair and remove their turbans.

US immigration policies also intensified Rattan Kaur's isolation and workload, leaving her resentful and bitter—feelings she took out on her daughter, Kartar. Late in life, Kartar felt empathy for her mother:

> I marvel at [my mother's] survival as the family trekked around California and Oregon, living as they could wherever my father found work. He had the company of other men, friends, and workers on the job. My mother had no one, no other Indian women to keep her company, no sisters or relatives to give her a hand with the housework. She had to do it all – all, that is, until her daughters grew old enough to help.[33]

The demands of childrearing and housework overwhelmed her mother. Kartar exclaimed in an interview: "Imagine eight children in 16 years of married life! … The very last child was born about two months after my father had died … So, my mother was always overburdened with work."[34] Her mother wrote letters to her family in India (Bakhshish had taught his wife to read and write in Punjabi). Kartar described her mother's life in America with great empathy:

> She felt that she was living in a very immoral place. She talked about India all of the time, and about her home; she was waiting for the day when we would return to India … She never did see her family again after she left for America and she died of cancer at a young age.[35]

Kartar understood the gadar movement as a progressive, non-sectarian, egalitarian struggle fueled by the support and fervor of the diasporic Sikh farm workers:

> The thing about the Gadar party was it was absolutely non-sectarian. They didn't care who was a Sikh, who was a Muslim, who was a Hindu. There was one objective that we had in our mind and that was to get the British rule out of India.[36]

In the early 2000s, Kartar was interviewed on several occasions about her family's history in the US and their participation in the gadar movement. Interviewers cast her in the role of an observer rather than as a participant, which is evident in the article title: "Witness to the Gadar Era." However, Kartar emphatically asserted, "*Every member* of my family was a part of it. *We* lived for the Gadar party." [italics added] "We felt we had a very distinct mission in our lives to free India," Kartar recalls, even though she and her siblings had never set foot in India.[37]

The family's involvement in the gadar movement increased after they moved from Oregon to California in 1922. Kartar recalled how the family would drive 200 miles from Los Angeles north to the Stockton Gurdwara for special Sikh holidays. At this gurdwara, South Asians from across the western United States would gather for religious festivals, such as the birth anniversaries of the Sikh gurus. The gatherings were also political meetings for the gadar cause, in which community members gave rousing speeches and sang gadar songs. These were the rare occasions where Sikh women met each other. Women anxiously looked forward to these joyful reunions. "There was such a wonderful democratic approach to the whole thing that we are all brothers and sisters and [that] 'we are going to be together in every bit of our effort,'" Kartar remembers.

Kartar narrates the extraordinary journey of her brother, Bud, who volunteered when he was just 12 years old to join a mission to fight for India's freedom. Her brother's actions were inspired by his parents. Their mother, Rattan Kaur, descended from Sikhs in the Kuka community who led a rebellion against British rule in Punjab in the mid-nineteenth century. Her mother's fervent anti-imperialist beliefs came from her lineage in Punjab. "She had immense pride in her ancestors. In her home, she displayed a picture of the Kuka Sikhs lashed to the mouths of cannons by smartly uniformed British soldiers. They were blown to bits for their rebellion," Kartar recalled. Their mother also read Punjabi newspapers, informing the family about events in India, such as the British massacre of Sikhs at the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar in 1919. As for her father, his ancestors had fought in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army. Her father showed courage in leaving his home village in Punjab as a teenager to join the British Army in China before settling in the United States.

According to Kartar, her parents' faith gave them forbearance and courage: "They were devout Sikhs who kept the *Guru Granth Sahib* in an honored space in whatever abode they lived in."[38] When their mother cried hearing her son's decision, Bakhshish reminded his wife: Hadn't Guru Gobind Singh sacrificed his four sons for the Sikh faith and people?

Kartar gives an example of her mother's dedication to the gadar cause when she cooked for 30 farm workers in a Sikh labor camp in California:

> The foreman insisted on paying her full wages. She took this money and turned the entire amount over to the Gadar Party and to the Gurudwara to send to the committee in Punjab that provided for the families of martyrs. [My parents] never hesitated to contribute in spite of the needs of their large family. It was the big-hearted spirit of Punjabi workers who felt that their contribution for India's freedom was never great enough.[39]

The $500 donation was an enormous sum for a laborer with a large family who likely worked 10 to 12 hours per day to earn $1.50 to $1.75 in daily wages.

All of the family's activities, even the children's education, were understood as integral to the struggle for workers' rights and for India's freedom: "My parents wanted us to get [an] education so that we became good fighters against the injustice of the foreign occupiers." It was "everyone's understanding" in the Sikh community in the United States that "we would eventually return to India … our real home."[40] Every member of the Dhillon family fervently believed that they were contributing to the struggle for India's freedom, a home country to which they would return one day.

A rare photograph of Sikh American women inside the Stockton Gurdwara in the 1920s suggests that they may have viewed themselves as defending India's freedom and/or the Sikh faith. The women and children are dressed for battle carrying large swords in Sikh military fashion (Figure 2.3).

Kartar's married life was also interwoven with the gadar movement. Just before her mother passed away, Rattan Kaur informed her daughter that she had saved her from an arranged marriage: "Your father wanted to arrange marriages for you and your sisters before he died, but I absolutely refused. I told him, 'We came to this country to give our children an education. What good will it do them if they have to marry men they do not know and perhaps might not like?'"[41] Her mother told Kartar to marry whomever she pleased. Still, she also advised her daughter to remain subservient to the men in her family, especially her future husband.

At a gadar party meeting at the Stockton Gurdwara in 1926, Kartar met her future husband. Suraj S. Gill was a gadar activist who gave up a career as a medical doctor for the cause. As a student at UC Berkeley, he regularly took the ferry to San Francisco to edit and write articles for the *Gadar* newspaper. He also spoke frequently at gadar meetings. "I idolized this man," she recalled, "I had been impressed by his fiery speeches."[42] Kartar primarily married Gill for the prospect of freedom: he promised to let her pursue higher education and political activism, possibly returning to India for the freedom struggle. Marrying Gill also offered her an opportunity to escape her brother's control.

Figure 2.3 Sikh women with Kartar Kaur Dhillon (right of the wreath) and her mother, Rattan Kaur (second from the left), Stockton Gurdwara, 1927, Stockton, CA.

*Courtesy of Erika Surat Andersen (https://*www.erikasurat.com).

Planning to become an artist and work for India's freedom from British rule, Kartar hated the idea of marriage, but she did it anyway. Kartar analyzes her decision to marry as follows: "I really didn't want to get married. I did it because it was a situation of being between the devil and the deep blue sea. I made a choice to plunge into the unknown sea."[43]

Gill, however, reneged on his promise to let Kartar pursue higher education and political activism. She left her husband the same day she realized that he did not support her growth: "I decided not to be married anymore … I decided at that moment that I was not going to be a servant any longer—and an unpaid one at that."[44] In 1945, Kartar left her husband, bringing their three children with her. Despite the daunting challenges of raising three children as a single mother with no job skills, she experienced freedom for the first time in her life, according to her memoir. Of paramount importance to her was raising her two daughters and a son with gender equality. When she learned that she had given birth to a girl, she felt overjoyed: "I wanted to prove to the world that she could be the equal of any boy ever born."[45]

Kartar raised her children in San Francisco where she participated in many struggles against class, gender, and racial oppression. She protested against the Ku Klux Klan and helped the Black Panthers activist Kathleen Cleaver

with her own political writings.[46] Although she did not know the Punjabi language well enough to sing gadar songs, Kartar performed American union songs with her children and grandchildren. Erika Surat Andersen, Kartar's granddaughter, collaborated with her grandmother on a narrative film about the Dhillon family's struggle to maintain their Sikh identity and faith when confronted with the intense racism in Astoria, Oregon in the 1910s.

Throughout Kartar's long life, the gadar movement signified much more than anti-colonialism. The movement represented the potential for full social, economic, and political justice for all people and for the self-actualization of every person regardless of gender, race, or class. Kartar believed that India's Independence was only a token freedom and that a fully democratic society had yet to emerge in India or the US. Kartar's writings offer a window into women's perceptions of the lives of early South Asian American families and their involvement in a wide range of progressive causes. The gadar movement provided the foundational experience that inspired women's ongoing activism and self-expression.

Nand Kaur and "The Last Message of the Gunj"

Nand Kaur offers another rare account by a contemporary Sikh American woman active in the gadar cause. Through her reflections about gadar lyrical poetry, I seek to understand more deeply the historical circumstances of women listening to and performing the gadar songs. This chapter also reveals the role that women played in creating a river of collective memory about the gadar movement.

In 1923, Nand Kaur Singh left her village in Punjab in British India for America as a 17-year-old bride with her husband who was twice her age and whom she had recently wed through an arranged marriage. They traveled from Punjab to Calcutta by train and then made the arduous journey by ship from Calcutta to Hong Kong and then onward to Vancouver, Canada. After crossing the US border, they finally arrived at her husband's sugar beet farm in Utah. "When we reached our home, which was situated on a small apple orchard, it seemed a very lonely place," she remembered. "I asked my husband, 'Are we there?' I started crying. I cried a lot that day." She wondered, *What's so wrong with India that we have to live here?* [emphasis added]"[47]

When she and her husband relocated to California in 1924, Nand Kaur was the first Sikh woman to settle in Yuba City. The transition to her new life in America was extremely difficult. The year she arrived in the USA was the apex of racism against Indian immigrants. In 1923, the *US v Bhagat Thind* Supreme Court ruling denied US citizenship to South Asian immigrants on the basis of race. But the greatest challenge that Nand Kaur faced in her new life was the isolation: "I was anxious to talk to women. I didn't care whether it was an Indian or an American. I told my husband, 'time no pass for me.'"[48] She would be in her forties before another Indian woman settled in Yuba City in the late 1940s.

During the early lonely decades, Nand Kaur's greatest pleasures were the drives she and her family would take to the Sikh gurdwara in Stockton, where she socialized with other Indian women.[49] The Sikh community across the western United States gathered a few times each year at Stockton to celebrate major holidays, such as the birth of the gurus. In 1924, Nand Kaur attended her first gadar party meeting at the Stockton Gurdwara. She and her husband became active supporters of the gadar movement, providing financial and moral support. Nand Kaur was particularly drawn to the songs in which workers expressed their feelings about the freedom struggle.[50] "The songs were very touching," she remembers, as were the speakers. At one meeting in 1925, a party functionary loudly declared that Indians could accomplish anything if they were united. In response, "the whole hall thundered with applause."[51]

One occasion stands out vividly in Nand Kaur's memory: Sarojini Naidu's visit to the Stockton Gurdwara in 1929. Naidu was an important figure in India's anti-colonial struggle, a prominent advocate of women's emancipation who was also well-known for her poetry. Nand Kaur admired Naidu's poetry which she had already read in Punjabi magazines. Mohandas Gandhi sent Sarojini Naidu to California to raise support for India's freedom struggle. Her speech at the Stockton Gurdwara was a recognition of the political significance of the Punjabi settlers in the United States in India's anti-colonial struggle.

After her speech, Sarojini approached Nand Kaur asking if she could hold her baby. Nand Kaur deduced that the famous leader must have missed her own daughter whom she had to leave behind in India. This rare account by a woman active in the gadar movement in California in the 1920s shows how women at different levels of prominence in the anti-colonial movement connected as women and their shared experience as mothers.

Nand Kaur was particularly fond of "The Last Message of the Gūnj" (1931), a song composed two decades after the gadar movement ceased to be an active political force. This remarkable song, composed in simple, direct language full of the pulse of life, is composed in the personified feminine voice of the Gunj, the reverberating essence of the gadar movement who resembles a goddess who animates the movement and life itself. Strikingly, all the symbols of life and creation are associated with women. Nand Kaur's interpretation of this song offers a rare window into the meanings that Sikh women created listening to and performing gadar songs.

Nand Kaur favored the lovely first stanza:

The path to the heart is through the heart,
I come from the heart to you.
The Gadar workers have strung together choice flowers,
I am a beautiful, fragrant garland.
From the collective breath of the compassionate ones,
I am a flowing river of nationalist zeal.

Selecting pearls from the seven seas,
I have created a precious necklace [of verse].[52]

Rāhīn dilān dī dilān nūn rāh hundī,
nikal dilān chon dilān nūn āī hān main।
Chuṇven phul paroke gadarīān ne,
sohaṇā maihakadā hār baṇāī hān main।
Kaṭhṭhī bhāp karke dildī dar daradīān ne,
kaumī josh dī naihar vagāī hān main।
Moti chhāṭke sattān hī sāgarān de,
navān lakhān dā hār sajāī hān main।

The lyrics of "The Last Message of the Gūnj" go on to share many core themes with the broader corpus of gadar poetry. In all gadar songs, the main imperative is the violent disposal of the rapacious rulers of India who looted the country and robbed ordinary people. The representation of India is also familiar: the formerly glorious nation has declined and its people are blind to the injustices caused by their rulers who keep them in slavery. The saviors are the lions, the true patriots, who will take the sword in hand, restoring the country's honor.

This song offers a different heroine than the one depicted in the bulk of gadar music, one that may have resonated more with woman active in the movement. Unlike most gadar lyrical poems, this one is composed in the voice of the Gunj, who is personified as a female goddess. In contrast to the dominant symbol of Mother India that appears frequently in gadar literature who exhorts her sons overseas to restore her honor, here the figure of the woman as Gunj is the primary actor. The feminine protagonist in this song speaks in the intimate first-person voice, whereas Mother India is generally depicted as a feminine object in the gadar literature. The feminine voice in the "Last Message of the Gunj" is the savior; the Mother India figure in the gadar literature exhorts her sons to save her.

The figure of the woman is also the creative force animating life and the movement: "Bringing the dead nation back to life / I can restore life by applying the healing herb of 'revolution.'" She is the goddess who slays the wicked and restores justice for the poor: "For the wealthy rulers and leaders who looted, / I am a sharp sword hanging over their heads." And: "I will start a new chapter in history / where I place the kingdom in the workers' hands."

The Gunj is not explicitly tied to any faith: she resembles the terrifying retributive justice of the Hindu goddess Shakti, as well as the righteous women warriors in Sikh history such as Mai Bhago. The Gunj is an all-pervading presence connecting gadar activists across the seven seas to the homeland and to each other through embodied metaphors of a collective breath of compassion and shared emotions of the heart.

Most significant, there is an agential shift in the feminine voice from the Mother India figure in gadar literature compared to the Gunj in Nand Kaur's

favorite poem. In the bulk of the gadar songs, Mother India beseeches her sons: "Save me! Defeat the foreign tyrants in my name, restore my honor, and liberate your Motherland and your people." By contrast, the Gunj declares, "I'll save you! I'll slay all enemies who rob my children of their honor." She asserts in this song: "I am the Creator and the Destroyer of life itself and the righteous Sword Slayer of greed and tyranny, and of evil doers." The Gunj also implicitly warns her sons: "Wake up! Do your duty or else you will be destroyed as well!" In "The Last Message of the Gunj," the voice of the gadar movement is the feminine active force whose potentiality is ever-present to inspire her true followers to fight to restore *dharm* (morality or righteousness).

The motif of water is salient in this poem, reflecting alternate scales of time and place. The early gadar literature mobilized Indians for an urgent call for action. But in this later poem the timescale is eternal, the space vast. The voice of the Gunj transcends both time and space as an immanent presence who can be awakened in her true followers anywhere, any time. She is "a flowing river of nationalist zeal"—fluid, moving, and forceful.

A torrent of water metaphors dominates this poem, including the river of anti-colonial zeal and the pearl from the seven seas. The Gunj is feminine, mobile, universal: "Selecting pearls from the seven seas, / I have created a precious necklace [of verse.]" The Gunj animates, and is animated by, the life force of dedicated Indians across the globe who are filled with compassion for the exploited and rage against the tyrants. The ocean figures not as a place of the annihilation of the self and identity as it does in the black waters motif. Instead, the ocean represents the world, as well as the source of salvation for the Indian nation and the individual soul. The feminine is not immobilized as representative of a land territory as it is in the symbol of Mother India; instead, she is a wild, ungovernable river. She asserts, "I am a flowing river of nationalist zeal." The imagined community here is not explicitly national; it spills beyond borders along boundless planes of time and space.

Another prominent water motif in this poem is *Amrit*, or ambrosial nectar. Amrit carries a unique meaning in the Sikh tradition due to its association with the tenth Guru Gobind Singh's creation of the Amrit ceremony in the birth of the *Khālsā* (Order of the Pure) on April 13, 1699. From that day onward, a fully initiated Sikh participates in a ceremony in which s/he drinks Amrit. By taking Amrit, the individual assumes greater responsibility for prayer and fighting for the core Sikh values of justice, equality, and *sevā* (community service).

In this poem, there are two references to Amrit that appear to be informed by Sikhi: "Whoever understands me and realizes my importance, / they have taken Amrit," and "the open vessel [of gadar] gives Amrit, / after drinking Amrit your disease will disappear." It is important to note that the reference to Amrit is not explicitly tied to the Sikh Amrit initiation ceremony, but it would be interpreted by most Sikh listeners/readers within that tradition. Here, the life-giving properties of water are emphasized. By drinking Amrit,

the individual is awakened to her/his heightened responsibility to restore justice in India and for humanity as a whole. Once again, the sensorial qualities of water are emphasized by which a person anywhere in the world can merge with the divine—and with the global community united by a shared dedication to the gadar cause—through the transformative act of drinking Amrit.

Water as a motif is thus a productive heuristic tool for uncovering alternative meanings that women created while listening to and performing the gadar music. The water motif is a rich metaphor for Punjabi Sikh women's worldview, emphasizing connectedness, unity, and fluidity, as well as women's role in creating a river of collective memory.

Reflections

In this chapter, I have explored an alternate transoceanic imaginary in the South Asian diaspora prevalent among global Sikhs. It contends that the gadar lyrical poetry expressed a distinct worldview, a unique type of global belonging that can be traced to a genealogy in Sikh history, faith, and culture. This chapter does not argue that Sikh history is unitary, however. Rather, it explores how a distinct Sikh worldview was refracted through the prism of divergent identities and life circumstances—especially among women who contributed to the movement, maintained its living resonance, and found different meanings in the cause and its poetry than their male counterparts. I have sought to expand the scholarly understanding of gadar activism, rendering women's participation audible and meaningful.

For Kartar Kaur Dhillon, the lifelong activist raised in a family dedicated to the gadar cause, and Nand Kaur, the early Sikh migrant who treasured gadar songs, the anti-colonial music continued to resonate with these women and their families throughout their lives. In a 2001 interview, Kartar Kaur Dhillon articulated her vision of an ideal society in which all working people in the world joined together in one international union outside the bounds of nation-states. For her, the abiding sources of inspiration and strength of character came from her early lessons in social justice from her parents. Even though she disavowed organized religion later in life, she felt that Sikhi taught her and her family "to put the good of all ahead of our selfish game."[53] She felt the progressive morality and core values in Sikhi and the gadar movement were essentially the same—equality, sacrifice, and service.

Later in life, Kartar's relationship with India grew more complex. Upon arriving in her mother's village during her first trip to India in 1972, Kartar recalled:"I felt as if I had come home." She had heard her mother describe her natal village so frequently and in such detail that this foreign place felt eerily familiar. But she ultimately decided, "I couldn't live in that contained society again because I would be in the same restrictions my mother had imposed upon me."[54] As a child, she had grown up hearing the gadar songs composed and sung by Punjabi Sikh workers and family members; Sikhi and

gadar gave her the strength to fight against injustice, as well as many of her core values. In her later life, as she discovered her own voice as a single mother, writer, and activist in progressive causes. Kartar harmonized with new voices who spoke out in solidarity with workers, women and people of color. As an adult, she sang union and civil rights songs at rallies and in her home, and she taught them to her children and grandchildren.

Gadar music also continued to resonate throughout Nand Kaur's long life. By the 1940s, Nand Kaur had become a leader within Yuba City's burgeoning Sikh community. Over the course of her life, Nand Kaur's connection to the Sikh faith and community was revitalized. Nand Kaur recalls how she and many Sikhs felt betrayed by the Indian state after the 1947 Independence. She expressed her disappointment with the oppression in Punjab that she likened to British rule. "We feel cheated," she recalls, "as though our work went to waste. We thought we had helped India, our India, gain freedom. And now the government is oppressing the public again."[55] Despite Nand Kaur's complex relationship to the post-colonial Indian government, she still felt proud of the movement's contributions to India's freedom.

This chapter has sought to follow the reverberation of the gadar movement forward within the lives of individual Sikh women. I find a strong similarity in the deeper meaning of the concept of the Gunj with the metaphysical idea of the unstruck sound current of the divine in Sikhi (*anhadnād*). As in Nand Kaur's favorite gadar poem, the immanent presence of the divine resounds everywhere, including in the human heart. In the lives of both Kartar Kaur Dhillon and Nand Kaur, the gadar movement, and especially its protest songs, gave them a feeling of optimism, resilience, and solidarity with others who shared their values. In Kartar's case, her life circumstances led her to activism in a plurality of spaces with diverse peoples. Nand Kaur passed on her strength of character and Sikh values to her progeny, to the local Sikh community, and to her friends of diverse backgrounds in Yuba City.

In the next chapter, I return to the Indian subcontinent to trace the early lives of the main cohort of women featured in this study. I explore the complex relationship between their two main passages in life—as young brides in Punjab and later across multiple oceans to join their husbands in California. I compare the women's folk songs and narratives about their displacements from their birth families after marriage to their secondary passages to the other side of the world to California.

Notes

1 *Sweet Jail: The Sikhs of Yuba City,* directed and published by Beheroze Shroff (1984).

2 Nand Kaur Singh interview by her daughter, Jane Singh, May 21, 1972, Yuba City, CA. Jane Singh, Miriam Cooke and Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, eds., *Blood into Ink: South Asian and Middle Eastern Women Write War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 175–78.

3 For histories of the gadar movement, see the authoritative Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement: Ideology, Organisation, and Strategy* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1983); and Sohan Singh Josh, *Hindustani Gadar Party: A Short History* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1977–1978).
4 Harish Puri's interview with Sohan Singh Bhakna cited in Puri, *Ghadar Movement*, 76.
5 Mark Juergensmeyer, "The Ghadar Syndrome: Nationalism in an Immigrant Community," *Punjab Journal of Politics* 1, no. 1 (October 1977): 11.
6 Harjot Oberoi, "Ghadar Movement and Its Anarchist Genealogy," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 50 (December 12–18, 2009): 40–46.
7 For a detailed challenge of the scholarly consensus about the secular ideology of the gadar movement, see Parmbir Singh Gill, "A Different Kind of Dissidence: The Ghadar Party, Sikh History and the Politics of Anticolonial Mobilization," *Sikh Formations* 10, no. 1 (2014): 23–41. For a discussion of the influence of Sikhi in the gadar poetry, see Darshan Tatla, "A Sikh Manifesto? A Reading of Ghadar Literature," *Panjab Past and Present* 44, no. 1 (April 2013): 61–81.
8 See Seema Sohi, "Sites of Sedition, Sites of Liberation: Gurdwaras, the Ghadar Party, and Anticolonial Mobilization," *Sikh Formations* 10, no. 1 (2014): 5–22; and, Seema Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism in North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
9 For studies of the gadar movement as a unique example of Indian nationalism in the diaspora, see Gurdev Singh Deol, *The Role of the Gadar Party in the National Movement* (New Delhi: S. Chand, 1970); Juergensmeyer, "The Ghadar Syndrome,"; and, Khushwant Singh and Satindra Singh, *Ghadar 1915: India's First Armed Revolution* (Delhi: R & K Publishing House, 1966). By contrast, Maia Ramnath explores the transnational networks and cross-pollination of international radical ideologies among gadar leaders. See Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*.
10 See Ajmer Singh, *Who Were the Gadar Revolutionaries? (Gadarī Babe Kaun San?)* (Amritsar: Sandhu Brothers, 2013).
11 Jensen, *Passage from India,* 170–71. There is a rich literature about the Punjabi migrants on the west coast of North America in the early twentieth century. See Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*; and LaBrack, *The Sikhs of Northern California*.
12 *Gadar dī Gūnj*, June 23, 1914. Translations from the gadar songs republished in Tatla, "A Sikh Manifesto?" 5.
13 *Gadar di Gūnj*, March 28, 1915. Translations from the gadar songs republished in Tatla, "A Sikh Manifesto?" 6.
14 *Gadar di Gūnj*, November 1, 1913.
15 Rohit Chopra, "'The Roar of the Bomb:' Violence as Universal Communication in Gadar Party Writings," *Global and Media Communication* 8, no. 2 (2012): 157–70.
16 Puri, *Ghadar Movement*, 176.
17 Ibid., 97.
18 Ibid., 85.
19 Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia,* 44; F. C. Isemonger and James Slattery, *An Account of the Ghadar Conspiracy, 1913-1915* (Lahore: Superintendent Government Printing, 1918), 20; and Puri, *Ghadar Movement*, 85.
20 For an analysis of British and American racial surveillance of Punjabi migrants in North America, see Hugh Johnston, "The Surveillance of Indian Nationalists in North America, 1908-1918," *B.C. Studies* 78 (Summer 1988): 3–27; and Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny*; and, Sohi, "Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism." Also see British intelligence reports in India compiled by Isemonger and Slattery, *An Account of the Ghadar Conspiracy*.
21 Tatla, "A Sikh Manifesto?", 2013.

22 Kesar Singh Kesar, ed., *Ghadar Lehar di Kavita (The Poetry of the Gadar Movement)* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1995); and Amolak Singh, ed., *Gadar dī Gūnj* (Echo of Revolution) (Jalandhar: Desh Bhagat Yadgar Hall, 2013).
23 Ved Prakash Vatuk, "Protest Songs of East Indians on the West Coast, USA," in *Thieves in My House: Four Studies in Indian Folklore of Protest and Change* (Varanasi: Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan, 1969), 63–80.

Vatuk derived this information from interviews with Nand Kaur and her husband, Puna Singh, as well as Charan Singh, K. S. Mota, and Kesar Singh Dillon. Vatuk, "Protest Songs," 78.
24 Puri, *Ghadar Movement*, 135.
25 Renisa Mawani, *Across Oceans of Law: The Komagata Maru and Jurisdiction in the Time of Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 2.
26 Puri, *Ghadar Movement,* 90.
27 About Sohan Singh Bhakna, see his memoir, *Jiwan Sangram* (Jalandhar: Yuvak Kendar Prakashan, 1967) and the biography, Sohan Singh Josh, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Life of the Founder of the Ghadar Party* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1970). There are numerous biographies and novels about the gadar leaders, such as Lala Har Dayal and Kartar Singh Sarabha.
28 This biographical sketch of Kartar Kaur Dhillon is based on her rich autobiographical writings, including her memoir, "A Parrot's Beak," in *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and About Asian American Women,* ed. Diane Yen-Mei Wong (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); and, Kartar Kaur Dhillon, "Astoria Revisited and Autobiographical Notes," https://sikhpioneers.net.
29 Kartar Dhillon, "Bud Dhillon," South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), August 20, 2013, https://www.saada.org/tides/article/bud-dillon.
30 Dr Jasbir Singh Kang, "Interview with the Iron Lady: Kartar Kaur Dhillon," SikhNet, 2008, https://www.sikhnet.com/people/interview-with-iron-lady; and, Kartar Dhillon, "Witness to the Gadar Era," in *The Ghadarite* (Berkeley: Gadar Heritage Foundation. Visit), accessed June 6, 2023, https://sikhpioneers.net/witness-gadar-era/ Created in 2001.
31 Dhillon, "Witness to the Gadar Era."
32 Dhillon, "A Parrot's Beak."
33 Dhillon, "Witness to the Gadar Era."
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Dhillon, "Bud Dillon."
38 Ibid.
39 Dhillon, "Witness to the Gadar Era."
40 Dhillon, "A Parrot's Beak."
41 Ibid.
42 Dhillon, "Witness to the Gadar Era."
43 Dhillon, "A Parrot's Beak."
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 *Turbans,* directed by Erika Surat Andersen (1999).
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Singh, *Blood Into Ink*, 176.
50 Ibid, 177.
51 "Last Message of the Gūnj."
52 Dhillon, "Witness to the Gadar Era."
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Singh, *Blood into Ink*, 177.

3 Double Passage

Marriage and Oceanic Journeys in Folk Music, 1930s–1960s

In the summer of 2022, eighty-nine-year-old Surjit Kaur Tumber vividly recalled her wedding day, especially her *ḍolī* ceremony. This wedding ritual marks a bride's departure from her family and integration into her marriage home in a nearby village in Punjab. The doli is a palanquin, a wooden carriage in which the bride is carried by her male kin largely concealed from public view. Surjit's doli was painted bright red. She was just fourteen years old on June 22, 1947, the day she was married to Mehar Singh Tumber. Thirteen years younger than her husband, a man who had served in the British Army in Kenya, Surjit had barely ventured beyond her village. Seventy-five years later, she relived that day with emotional intensity and specificity:

> We traveled a short distance [in the doli.] Four men carried me in the front and four in the back. My parents and husband walked behind. My brother and another man helped me climb inside the doli. I was crying so hard, feeling sad to leave home. I kept thinking, 'I'm too young to get married!'[1]

After a short distance, the wedding party boarded a bus for the remaining journey to Rampur, her husband's village. As was customary, Surjit's brother and another woman from the village accompanied her as chaperones. Her face remained covered during her visit, except when she was in the company of women. Two days later, Surjit returned to her birth home where she remained for two years until the two families agreed that she was physically mature enough to begin married life (Figure 3.1).

Shortly after she moved to her in-laws' house, in 1949, her husband Mehar left for America. Two years later, after becoming financially settled, Mehar sent for his wife to join him in California. Surjit traveled by plane with a married couple from Punjab. Both women were disoriented, afraid, and nauseous, yet they wore their finest clothes. Her new friend, Verinder Kaur, helped Surjit make a good impression on her husband upon arrival at the San Francisco airport.

Surjit's story is characteristic of the two main journeys experienced by the first generation of women that settled in California after World War II. This chapter compares the two major passages of Punjabi Sikh women:

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Figure 3.1 Mehar Singh and Surjit Kaur Tumber, 1951, Marysville, CA.
Courtesy of Surjit Kaur Tumber.

their departure from home as young brides in Punjab and their transoceanic journeys to California. Specifically, I explore women's experiential and affective expressions about their journeys through their voices (oral narratives) and music. This analysis of women's journeys highlights the vital role that music played in psychologically preparing women for mobility, rupture, and displacement after marriage. A careful analysis of the extensive body of songs about a girl's departure from home as a young bride, a genre called vidāī, reveals the crucial role that singing played in healing the painful transition for the bride and her family after marriage. By contrast, the absence of songs dedicated to the sudden, unexpected nature of women's transoceanic journeys reflected the lack of mental preparation among Punjabi female migrants who had only recently started settling overseas.

In this comparative study of their two major life journeys, I seek to deeply understand women's psychological and emotional experiences of mobility. Where was "home" for women raised in patrilocal extended families in Punjab where they were viewed as property to be given away to another

family after marriage—literally called "another's wealth" (*parāīā dhan*)? Why were women associated with mobility and fluidity (water and air) over the fixity of place (inherited land) in Punjabi kinship and culture? What was the relationship between these two crossings in women's lives—one expected and the other unforeseen? What toll did these dislocations take on their psyches, and how did they cope with these changes? And finally, how did their understandings of these passages change over the course of their lives as they replayed memories through listening to and performing music and dance?

This chapter places women's journeys at the heart of the modern South Asian diaspora. It concurs with recent studies showing that South Asian women's global migrations have differed in almost every respect from their male counterparts', from the conditions that propelled them to migrate, to the narratives they created of their journeys, and the subsequent transitions to life in the United States (Pande 2018, 1).

There is a celebratory tone in diaspora and oceanic humanities about mobility, cultural hybridity, and cosmopolitanism in oceanic worlds. By contrast, this chapter suggests that mobility and confinement were inextricably bound together in women's journeys and transoceanic imaginaries. In fact, mobility often triggered greater efforts to circumscribe women's movements. It also explores the symbolism in Punjabi society that associates women with fluidity (water and air) and men with fixity (land). I examine how these gendered associations between water (flux) and land (rootedness) shift within the context of overseas migration.

I developed three strategies to make women's worldviews audible and to foster empathy for women's lives, emotions, and concerns. My analysis of women's speech and singing involves a "deep listening" to women's agency within the context of specific historical circumstances (Becker 2004). First, I emphasize the contingency of women's lives within specific historical and geographical contexts. They grew up in extraordinary circumstances in Punjab in the twilight of British rule, a time of unprecedented economic, social, and political transformation. They came of age in the cataclysmic turmoil of the 1947 Partition, which involved the largest mass human migration in history and murderous communal violence. Second, I utilize a biographical historical approach to listen to the worldviews of both individual women and the collective who share experiences as a generational cohort. I focus on the worldviews articulated in their oral narratives and music. Attending to the interplay between individual and collective experience yields a nuanced portrait of women's worldviews, choices, and experiences. Moreover, it is only through a close listening to women's music that the interior emotional states of this generation of women can be accessed. Music is the tool that renders the otherwise inaccessible accessible.

Third, I draw from Veena Das' insightful essay on Punjabi kinship as a dialectic between "the rules deriving from nature and the rules deriving from culture" (Das 1976, 1). The highly valued ideal of honor in Punjabi society

is achieved by "transcending natural forces rather than succumbing to them" (Das 1976, 2). One of the most difficult transitions in Punjabi kinship is the daughter's departure from the home, which is the primary act of sublimating natural blood ties to the social obligations of marriage in Punjabi society. The genre of vidai forms the sound bridge in which women cross over the threshold from blood relations to affinal relations that are socially constructed. Psychologically, these songs condition the bride (and her family) for this traumatic loss, from which they never fully heal. How, then, did the women cope with unexpected and sudden events, such as Partition and global migration, for which there was no precedent or cultural and psychological preparation?

This chapter is based on my extensive oral history fieldwork with thirty Sikh Jat women from rural Punjab who settled in Yuba City between the late 1940s and 1969. I approach their lives in four phases: youth, marriage journey, Partition, and transoceanic passage. My close analysis of women's voices offers insights into their experiential and expressive histories through oral narratives and music.

Preparation: Growing Up as a Girl in Rural Punjab in the 1930s and 1940s

On January 22, 2019, a bright winter day in Yuba City, Harbans Kaur Panu, Rajinder K. Tumber, and I were sitting on the floor of Raji's living room engaged in a relaxed conversation. In a delightful moment, Harbans spontaneously began to sing the songs she had composed about her life, including her joyful song, "Today we are going to dance!" This autobiographical song within the Punjabi folk song genre expressed her powerful feelings of happiness and excitement as she celebrated her brother's wedding in Punjab as a girl.

It's my brother's wedding.
I'm so excited! ...
Today I'm going to dance
and dig up the earth dancing!

Mere vīr dā viāh
Te maiṇū chaṛiā e chā …
Ajj main nachchṇā ā
Nachch-nachch dhartī nūṇ puttṇā ā![2]

Harbans communicates her peers' nostalgic recollections about their youth, particularly the unbridled fun they experienced at women's festivals and their brothers' weddings. Harbans recalls the power she felt as a girl whose exuberance was expressed so freely that she felt like she could kick up the earth beneath her feet while dancing. It is important to note that she composed this

song decades later in the days leading up to her own son's marriage in Yuba City. The joy of her son's wedding triggered her earlier memories of her and her family's happiness during her brother's wedding.

The emotions that coalesced around family events from the women's youth became foundational. Later in life, loss and hardship were refracted through painful memories from their youth in the same way that a son's wedding invoked her earlier positive emotions experienced on similar occasions. This chapter explores the world that the Punjabi Sikh women in this study inhabited in their youth before marriage in Punjab. Through women's music and oral narratives, I examine the relationship between gender, space, and mobility as mediated through sonic performative memory.

For Sikh women growing up in rural Punjab in the 1930s and 1940s, during the tumultuous years leading up to Partition in 1947, the inner courtyard of their home was the center of their universe. The lives of women in relatively prosperous land-owning Jat families were largely circumscribed by the courtyard, in action and in worldview. The inner courtyard (*vehṛā*) was the site of the intimate quotidian sociality of a patrilocal family. Although this space was used by the whole family, the vehṛā is especially associated with women, often referred to as the women's courtyard. The rest of the home was built in relation to it, enveloping the courtyard. In the frontier region of Punjab, where violence was a frequent occurrence, the solidness of the home was of utmost importance. A large home (*hāveli*) of wealthy landowners in Punjab was built like a fort, with a formidable iron door surrounded by high walls decorated by photographs of gurus, saints, martyrs, and ancestors.

The family's honor was predicated on protecting its property, and most importantly, female kin. The primacy of this need to maintain the purity of female kin led to a myriad of pernicious effects on women's lives, especially as they reached puberty. Savitri Randhawa, one of the elderly Punjabi women interviewed, explained the widespread belief in Punjab that women are property, which led to many gender inequities, such as the preference for sons:

> People thought it was important to have a boy in the family because girls were not highly educated, and girls didn't have the right to property. That is why mainly people thought it was important to have a boy in the family.[3]

When recalling their youth in rural Punjab, women emphasized how their movements were highly restricted in contrast to their brothers' freedom. The inner courtyard was the space for girls to play before the exigencies of housework and marriage set upon them. Social activities were restricted to visiting close kin who lived nearby. With few exceptions, young women were not permitted to venture beyond their village before marriage. And yet, in hindsight, and after living through Partition and the responsibilities of married life, women remembered their early childhood fondly: "We didn't have a care in the world."[4]

Women's education in rural Punjab at the time was very limited. Of the women featured in this book, many did not receive a formal education; others completed a few years of informal learning in local gurdwaras; and only a handful enjoyed the opportunity to finish high school. Women's ability to finish school depended on the quality of girls' education in their birth village. They were not allowed to pursue education outside their village due to her family's fear that their daughters' chastity would be compromised. News of a woman's sexual activity outside of the confines of marriage would bring tremendous shame to her family and spoil her marriage prospects. For this reason, families permitted their daughters to be educated only within the home village.

The elderly Sikh women interviewed for this book deeply regretted the fact that their families had denied them an education. With few exceptions, the woman interviewed expressed resentment and sadness about their lack of education. In the documentary "Jutti Kasoori," Charan Kaur Kang expressed how she could never fully accept the fact that she had been denied an education:

> I often dreamed of getting an education. I still do now. When my kids tell me how to do something, I think to myself, "Had I been educated, I would have been able to do this." This thought keeps welling up from my heart … Only God knows to which heights He would have taken me![5]

Time and again, women expressed how they wish they could have realized their potential through education.

I first met Harbhajan Kaur Takher for an interview for the creation of a documentary of women's lives in California's Punjabi community.[6] Aunty Bhajani, as she is known in the community, sat across from me in our interview—she was a striking, statuesque figure dressed in simple Punjabi clothes with her head covered by a plain white scarf. Harbhajan possessed a powerful presence: calm, authoritative, stoic. She spoke in the simple Punjabi typical of an elderly woman raised in a village in the Jalandhar *doābā*, the interfluvial land between the Sutlej and Beas rivers. Her language was sparse and unsentimental. As an elderly woman who wanted to be publicly heard for the first time, she spoke forthrightly without concern about how people might react.

When asked the year of her birth, Harbhajan replied: "1928 is the year written, so that is my birth year."[7] Harbhajan spoke proudly of her lineage. Her family lived comfortably in a large home, a wealthy land-owning family from the Jat caste, with one of her brothers serving as a captain in the British Army and another as a *lambardār* (village headman). Harbhajan remembers being cherished as a child: "I had three brothers. I was the only sister, so I was kept with a lot of love."

Harbhajan's childhood was abruptly cut short by her arranged marriage. She did not form many memories from her childhood, explaining: "I was

already engaged when I was five years old … I was married off young." She only attended four years of school. "I liked school. I wanted to study further, but the culture and traditions at that time didn't support it. They weren't happy letting us learn more," she recounted.

Much like the other women in this study, Harbhajan's world revolved around the family's inner courtyard where the girls played simple games like jump rope:

> We did not play with the boys. The girls could play at home, but not outside. Either at home or at school. That's it. We could play all we wanted in those places. The girls would get together at our house because our courtyard was big. The girls who lived in the same lane would come to our courtyard.

Outside of the home, she was permitted to visit her paternal relatives who lived in the same neighborhood. Further beyond this patrilocal cluster lay the outside world, which was forbidden to Harbhajan (Figure 3.2).

As Harbhajan approached puberty, the rhythms of each day were increasingly set by the exigencies of work. As a sign of her family's prosperity, Harbhajan's home was one of the first in the village in which water pumps were installed. Her daily task was to pump water and then distribute it to

Figure 3.2 Harbhajan Kaur (standing in the middle of the back row) with her family, Sumrama village, Jalandhar district, c 1940, Punjab, India.

Credit: Harbhajan Kaur Takher Family.

everyone in the house before going to school. After completing four years of school, Harbhajan spent her days performing a myriad of chores: pumping water, cooking, cleaning, and sewing. "My mom made sure that I did all of the different types of household chores," Harbhajan explained, so that she was prepared to survive on her own as a young bride in her in-laws' home.

The act of singing folk songs provides a space for women like Harbhajan to express their individual hardships as a collective. The following song, performed by Punjabi Sikh American women in Fresno, captures the lengthy process by which girls are socialized to emotionally prepare themselves for marriage. The girl sings about her impending separation from her family and her home, the only community and place she has known in her short life:

With a small needle and thread,
I sit and stitch designs on fabric.
Passers-by stop and ask me:
"why are you crying?"
"My beloved father has gotten me married,
I am slowly becoming an outsider in my own home;
My mother created a kingdom in my house;
I am slowly becoming an outsider in my own home."

Nikṛī sūī vaṭvāṇ dhāgā, baiṭh kasīdā kaḍḍ rahī āṇ.
Āuṃde jāṃde rāhī puchhde, tūṇ kiuṇ bībā ro rahī āṇ?
Babul mere kāj rachāiā, maiṇ pardesan ho rahī āṇ.
Mātā merī rāj baṇāiā, maiṇ pardesan ho rahī āṇ.[8]

Women's songs often focus on the chores they must do as they are growing up to build the survival skills they will need in their in-laws' homes. A common theme focuses specifically on fetching water from wells, which is perceived as the responsibility of girls like Harbhajan. Once again, water, fluidity, and mobility are associated with women.

First Passage: Bridal Journeys, "Kuṛī dī Vidāī" (A Girl's Departure)

Songs form an essential part of Punjabi rites of passage (birth, marriage, death) and seasonal festivals, and are often accompanied by dancing at joyful occasions (Brara 2014, 245).[9] Punjabi weddings in particular are well known for their extravagance and exuberance. At these weddings, dozens of songs accompany the numerous rituals that take place over the course of one week. The bride and groom are passing through the most important transition in their lives from their childhood into married life, marked by an elaborate succession of rituals, ceremonies, and customs, all of which were accompanied by singing and dancing. Wedding folk songs express the powerful emotions that surround each custom in the transition to married life, from the engagement until the consummation of the marriage. This passage is experienced

and celebrated at multiple levels, including the individual bride and groom, the two sides of the extended family, and as a societal collective.

The songs carry different meanings for men and women, young and old, and a myriad of relatives on both sides of the extended family lineage (*khāndān*). Wedding songs performed by the groom's relatives are festive in tone and are called *ghoṛīān*, referring to his arrival on a horse (*ghoṛī*). Through singing and dancing, the groom's family and village express their excitement about bringing a new bride home. In his well-known history of Punjab, Prakash Tandon captures the carnival spirit of the wedding season in the Punjabi countryside in the early twentieth century:

> The time had come for weddings, and the country echoes to the beating of drums. Gaily dressed women and children, packed in bullock carts, with the men riding or walking in procession, happy, shouting, bantering, and raising much dust on the village roads was a common sight everywhere. The guests arrived at the wedding house with voracious appetites
>
> (Tandon 1961, 60).

On the bride's side, the marriage songs are called *suhāg,* referring to a woman's blessed state of a wife whose husband is still alive (*suhāgan*). Although it is also considered auspicious, a girl's wedding is imbued with immense sadness for her and her family. The wedding ceremony marks the daughter's departure, a rupture after which she will become an outsider in her birth family and integrate into her husband's family. Tandon captures the contrasting mood of the bride as she travels by ḍoli, the wedding palanquin:

> Swathed in red, the bride, a mere girl of fourteen or so, sobbed and cried as she left for a strange house. Consoling words from friends and parents were forgotten in the loneliness that gripped her as she sat huddled in the rocking palanquin which passed fields and villages she did not recognize
>
> (Tandon 1961, 61).

After marriage, the young bride enters a new joint family with complex dynamics and power relations that she must navigate as an outsider with the lowest status. A young wife is subject to the authority of her father-in-law, the head of the family, and to the husband's elder brother(s). However, in daily life, this involves subordination to her mother-in-law and her husband's elder sister(s). Building a relationship with her husband is a challenging and often slow process given the powerful bond between mother and son. It will be years before the woman carves out space for herself within this context. A woman's authority in the family accrues slowly with the birth of sons, which brings elevated status. Gradually, she can exert more control in the household as mother-in-law and as a respected female elder.

In the mournful wedding songs about the daughter's departure, the bride feels that her family is throwing her out of her home against her will. The bride is not consulted about the marriage and often does not meet her husband until her wedding day. Although she only relocates a short distance to a nearby village in Punjab, she is thrust into an unknown world filled with strangers. By performing wedding songs, women inscribe and reinscribe gender roles within kin networks in a sonic bridge connecting past and present.[10] Through the act of singing, the bride's female relatives or friends express intense emotions on behalf of the bride, as well as her parents, brothers, and other relatives who also mourn the loss of their daughter and sister. The emotional ties of a staggering array of kin relationships are explored, including the bride's affectionate relationship with her parents and her husband's younger brother(s), as well as her fraught relations with her brothers' sisters and mother-in-law. Women choose songs to perform from a large repertoire of folk songs specific to each of the numerous wedding rituals.

Through singing wedding songs, women create a palpable affective atmosphere, expressing nuanced emotions associated with each occasion from a staggering array of perspectives of the various kin on both sides of the family. Although the formal functions of the wedding are entrusted to men, including the official religious ceremony, it is the voices of women that form the soundscape. Songs signify "women's perceptions of what matters in human lives," Brara observes, and in singing songs, women make them their own (Brara 2014, 245). Women steward the family through the collective emotional and psychological journey of the marriage event, the loss of the daughter for the bride's family and the incorporation of the bride into the groom's family. The songs also help prepare the couple, especially the bride, for the difficult adjustment to married life and new kin relations.

Veena Das' insights about Punjabi kinship illuminate why this music is so important, for it upholds gender relations that are held to be natural. The morality of kinship in Punjab, Das argues, is measured in the degree to which the individual and/or the collective rises above their natural tendencies through acts of sacrifice. The more difficult the sacrifice, the greater the honor that is bestowed on the person or group. Actions that flout or break patriarchal norms bring shame to the whole family's reputation. So-called natural tendencies are linked to biological relations that are understood as powerful, instinctive, and natural, such as the relationships by blood (*khūn kā rishta*) on the father's side and relationships of milk (*dhūd kā rishta*) to the mother, and by extension, the matriline. All Punjabi kin relationships are gendered and differentiated by the two sides of the family. Marriage relations contrast with these natural bonds and are seen as socially constructed. It is the work of culture, especially music, to foster affinal bonds and override the powerful natural ones, which could erupt to disrupt the Punjabi kinship system. A complex relationship exists between the two types of kinship, natural (blood relations) and worldly (affinal ties).

The husband-wife relationship presents unique challenges within the multi-generational, patriarchal Punjabi family. Considerable tension arises in the joint family regarding the husband's loyalty to his mother and to his wife. The sexual tension between the newlyweds is viewed as threatening to the harmony in the household, specifically the mother/son bond. The mother garners respect in Punjabi culture for embodying sacrifice on behalf of her children, whereas the wife is generally perceived as replaceable.

The daughter's attachments to her family are supposed to cease after marriage, and yet, these strong bonds persist. A woman whom Brara interviewed shared: "We give away our daughters and bring home the daughters of others. This is how the world is constructed [duniya inj hi bani hui hai]; it is not natural [kudrati]" (Brara 2014, 241). A brother's duty to protect his sister becomes complicated after she marries. If relations between the affinal relatives and his sister deteriorate to an unacceptable degree, then he and his brothers may intervene with their sister's husband and in-laws, even though it is taboo for a girl's family to interfere with their affinal family relations.

It is important to add that the public mask of the idealized patriarchal joint family, with its assumptions about how kin *should* feel and behave, co-exists with an undertow of suppressed feelings and relationships. For instance, everyone knows that a newly married daughter feels terribly homesick and longs for her family, yet she will be criticized for expressing these feelings. In another example, the highest praise for a mother-in-law is that she treats her daughters-in-law(s) the same as her own daughters (thus she is viewed as overcoming her natural proclivities). In yet another example, the husband and wife avoid showing affection to each other and can only do so very discretely at night after the wife's chores and duties as a daughter-in-law are completed.

Behind the mask of idealized family relationships, the powerful emotions that run counter to these norms are widely felt, but rarely acknowledged, except in certain ritual contexts. The reason that the adage about a daughter being *parāīā dhan* (someone else's property) in her own home is frequently invoked is to psychologically prepare the daughter and her family to override their deep emotional bonds on the day when she will leave home after marriage.

My study focuses on the critical role that singing plays in the difficult process of sublimating powerful yet socially unacceptable emotions (especially women's) for the greater good of the patriarchal joint family. The wedding songs function to celebrate the values and norms of Punjabi kinship, such as the high status of the groom and the patriline. Sumera Saleem interprets a genre of Punjabi wedding songs called *siṭhṇīāṇ*—socially sanctioned songs of abuse performed by the bride's family in a joking manner about the groom and his family—as a form of "sonic-lyrical resistance" against patriarchal authority, especially for women (Saleem, forthcoming). These songs lampooning the groom and his family represent a cultural practice that balances the status of

the two sides of the family. The status of the girl's family is lowered by the act of giving away the bride. The singing of sithnian offers a socially sanctioned space for her family to flout social norms by abusing the groom and his family through teasing, and thus, ritually lower the groom and his family's status.

Rather than viewing the bride as powerless, the wedding songs also reveal the daughter's pivotal role in the family and her latent power. "The daughter has a special place in Punjabi families, being seen as a repository of family honour," Das observes. That also means that she has the power to cause irreparable harm to the family if she acts in a transgressive way. The practice of child marriage developed in order to prevent these perceived catastrophes for the patriarchal family, the ruination of their property (i.e., the women in the family). Elaborate surveillance and containment of daughters in rural Punjab actively prevent acts that would harm the family's reputation. The murder of a daughter by her male kin (known as honor killings) is not uncommon in Punjab if a daughter (and sometimes a son) brings shame on the family by marrying someone from another caste or religion or engages in a sexual relationship outside of marriage.

Beneath the celebration of patriarchal kinship at weddings also lurk anxieties about the daughter-in-law's incorporation into the patrilineal family. The mother-in-law worries about losing her son's affection and loyalty to his new wife. There is also a general effort to prevent a daughter-in-law from gaining the upper hand in the family power dynamics, to avoid her "sitting on our heads," a common Punjabi expression. As Anshu Malhotra observes, "A daughter-in-law was especially feared, for if she succeeded in splintering the common hearth, she could dissolve the economic base" (Malhotra 2002, 133).

The women in this study did not directly challenge patriarchal kinship norms, but, as I emphasize in my analysis of wedding songs, they articulated distinctive forms of creative expression. Their speech and songs contrasted sharply with the ideology of the Punjabi kinship system and with how its members are expected to feel and behave according to their roles. Women's speech and songs are filled with flesh-and-blood women rather than the feminine virtues of modesty, devotion, and sacrifice extolled in Punjabi society and popular music (Malhotra 2002, 5).[11] Stripped of sentimentality, women's wedding songs are filled with raw emotions, such as joy, anger, betrayal, lust, and sorrow.

The music and oral histories of the elderly women in this study, in particular, lingered on the lasting emotional turmoil they experienced leaving their families as young women. There was an undercurrent of anger, betrayal, and bitterness about their families marrying them off as girls when they felt unprepared. It was they who made the largest sacrifices in being deprived of an education, for instance, to maintain family honor. As Brara points out,

> the lynchpin of Punjabi kinship-and-gender organization lay in regarding daughters as movable from their natal homes upon marriage, along

> with the movable goods that accompanied them, while sons in a traditionally agrarian milieu had fixity of residence, like the immobility of agricultural land itself.
>
> (Brara 2014, 241)

The vidai song genre is derived from the word *vidā*, meaning departure. *Vidā karnā* means to see off or to bid farewell, specifically to say goodbye to a daughter or sister after the marriage ceremony. Vidai is the purest and most intense expression of the simultaneous experience of separation (*vijog*) and union (*sanjog*) in Punjabi culture. For this reason, the metaphor of the bride's state of utter isolation and aloneness at the moment of her departure is central to Sikh metaphysics as the purest representation of the soul's alienation before merging with the divine. Union involves the bride's incorporation into her husband's family, as well as the merging of the two extended families.

Singing wedding songs is the duty of female kin in Punjab. Their music offers a window into the predicament of women in a patriarchal society. Women will sing late into the evenings during the wedding expressing their condition in society, their frustrations, desires, and longings. As in the example of Manjit Kaur Janda, the bride is a girl who feels overwhelmed by intensely conflicting emotions of shyness, excitement, and sadness. The power of the wedding songs is that they alone give voice to the bride's feelings. Often it is her friends and sisters who express the bride's feelings as she cannot express her emotions at her own wedding. Instead, the music represents women's collective voice that spans generations, centuries, perhaps millennia. This music taps into a wellspring of pain for the guests at a Punjabi wedding about their own separation from beloved female kin after marriage. Of course, it is especially emotional for the bride (and her family) who are in the process of separating.

Song 1: "Sāḍā chiṛīāṇ dā chaṃbā ve!" ("Ours is a flock of sparrows")

Poetic metaphors associating women with flight abound in Punjabi culture and music. There is a common rhyme in Punjabi that likens girls and sparrows (kuṛīāṇ chiṛīāṇ). Both are perceived as migratory and delicate beings, whose songs fill the natural soundscape of Punjab. The metaphor of the sparrow also highlights the multivocality of the folk songs in which the voice of the bride is expressed both as an individual (bride/bird) and as a collective (brides/flock). These songs give voice to the unresolved separation that is experienced individually and collectively. This popular vidai song depicts a dialogue between a daughter and her father in which she implores him to let her stay home by delaying her marriage.

> *Daughter: Beloved Father, we are like a flock of sparrows who will fly away,*
> *Our flight is long! Which country are we going to, Beloved Father?*

My dolls are in the almirah … Beloved Father, who will play with them? (x2)

Father: My granddaughters will play with [your dolls]
Daughter, just go to your own home! (x2)

Sāḍā chiṛīāṇ dā chaṃbā ve! Bābal asīṇ ūḍḍ jāṇā,
Sāḍī laṃī ūḍārī ve! Bābal kihaṛe desh jāṇā?

Merīān āle guḍīān ve! Bābal huṇ kauṇ khelhū? (x2) (Kaur 1999, 294)

This particularly popular folk song gives voice to the collective consciousness of Punjabi families as they part with their daughters after marriage. Although the daughter pleads with her beloved father to let her stay home, everyone must yield to the imperatives of the patrilocal kinship system.

Despite the short distance between the two villages, this transition is described in the song as a final goodbye. The song reflects the agony of the daughter and her father in making this transition that is dictated by tradition. In the vidai songs, the daughter remains loosely tethered to home, like a bird. The daughter is raised by her birth family as *parāīā dhan*, someone else's property who will be gifted at marriage, whose birth home is not really her home. Despite the powerful emotional bond, the father must implore himself and his daughter to now view her marriage home as "her own home," to sever her familial attachments. The daughter, having only known her birth home and village, imagines the new home as in a distant land (*pardes*). Due to the practice of child marriage in rural Punjab, the daughter is a girl typically between the ages of ten and eighteen at the time of the transition. Her emotional immaturity is emphasized by her primary concern about who will play with her dolls. In her marriage home, the daughter-in-law is also treated as an outsider and at the bottom of the family hierarchy. Her liminal status between both families and places, as movable, follows her throughout her life and even after death, when her birth family is supposed to bear her funeral expenses.

After asking her father who will perform the chores that she was responsible for, the daughter in the song makes a series of futile excuses to delay her inevitable departure, concluding with this exchange:

Daughter: Beloved father, I don't know how far I'll have to go on the roads.
It'll be so hot and thirsty, who will give me water?
Father: I will dig a well for you, just go to your own home!
Teriāṇ rāhāṇ de vichch vichch ve! Bābal mainūṇ piās lagge, (x2)
Rāhīṇ khūhā puṭā diāṇ nī, dhiān nī, dhīe ghar jāh āpṇe. (x2)
(Kaur 1999, 295)

In another popular song in the vidai genre, the daughter pleads with every member of her family to let her stay home just one more night (Kaur 1999,

296–97). The father's anguished reply is, "How can I let you stay? I invited the wedding party myself!" (Kaur 1999, 296). She then pleads with her brother, grandfather, and grandmother, and receives the same reply. Her mother hides inside, crying. It captures the pain of separation for both the daughter and the parents. Still, the father is praised for giving away his daughter, which is seen as a father's greatest sacrifice for the good of society. The father offers the most precious gift, his daughter, in the fulfillment of his social obligations.

Song 2: "Ajj dī dihāṛī ḍolī rakhkh lai nī mā" ("Just for today, keep my doli here,
Oh Mother")

The doli is the perfect metaphor for the simultaneity of women's mobility and confinement within a patriarchal kinship system. In this song focused on the doli, the bride pleads for her mother to delay her departure:

Just for today, keep my doli here, oh mother
I will be your servant if you let me stay.
My doli you hid from me, oh mother,
You and father are kicking me out of the house
with your own hands.
Take a good, long look at my doli, oh mother
As I'm leaving for an unknown land.
My doli is studded with diamonds, oh mother
As my brothers send me away.
My doli is decorated, oh mother
As my paternal uncles send me away.
My doli is covered with fine muslin,
As my maternal uncles send me away.
My doli is decorated with stars,
As everyone sends me away.

Ajj dī dihāṛī ḍolī rakhkh lai nī mā, ravhāṇ baṇ ke golī nī mā
Merī ḍolī nūṇ tor chhipā ke nī,
dhīāṇ kaḍhaṇ gharoṇ haththīṇ māpe nī mā
Merī ḍolī nūn rajj ke vekh nī mā,
maiṇ chaḷlī bigānṛe des nī mā.
Merī ḍolī nūṇ rattṛe hīre nī mā,
mainūṇ vidā karan sake vīre nī mā
Merī ḍolī nūṇ laggṛe lāche nī mā,
mainūṇ vidā karan sake chāche nī mā
Merī ḍolī nūṇ chukkde kāme nī mā,
mainūṇ vidā karan sake māme nī mā
Merī ḍolī nūṇ laggṛe chchāpe nī mā,
mainūṇ vidā kareṃde sake māpe nī mā.[12]

This song conveys a powerful bittersweet emotion as the girl departs for her doli ceremony. What first hits the listener is the palpable feeling of sadness and betrayal that the bride who feels abandoned by her family members, everyone in her emotional world. Beneath this sadness is also a girl's excitement about feeling special as shown by how much love and care has been put into the decorations on her marriage carriage—fulfilling a young girl's fantasy of dressing up like a doll and/or a princess driving off in a lavish carriage.

Today, there is a tremendous diversity in living arrangements for Punjabi families all over the world, with the patriarchal joint family becoming less common. In contemporary cities in Punjab and in the diaspora, there is a nostalgia for the doli that allows a modern family to reconnect with their heritage, but without the emotional hardship of a woman's transition to living in her in-laws' home in an "unknown land."

Song 3: "Jutti Kasoori" ("Walking into the Unknown")

This iconic song is on the playlist of the soundtrack of Punjabi women's lives. When I created a documentary about the history of women in California's Punjabi community called "Jutti Kasoori," women would invariably spontaneously start singing the lyrics after hearing the title. They erupted in nostalgia and joy listening to this song, which captureswomen's complex emotions about the transition to married life. As soon as women heard this musical cue, a flood of memories and emotions washed over them. They would be transported to their own weddings, their feelings when their daughters had departed after marriage, and the many weddings they had attended over the course of their lives. Surinder Kaur, the nightingale of Punjab, recorded a wildly popular version of this song that filled the soundscape wherever Punjabi women lived in the world.

The joy and nostalgia that Punjabi women continue to feel listening to "Jutti Kasoori" are not captured in its doleful lyrics:

My shoes don't fit.
Oh God! We had to walk.
The paths that are unknown to me
I had to return on these same paths.

The way to my in-laws' village was so far from my parents.
There wasn't even a cart [to take me.]

My beloved is taking me to my in-laws' home
Wearing my veil, I couldn't say anything.
I felt so shy and embarrassed!
I felt so shy and embarrassed.
My shoes don't fit.
Oh God! We had to walk …

Juttī kasūrī pairī nā pūrī
Hāe Rabbā ve sānū turnā piā (x2)

Jinā rāhāṇ dī maiṇ sār nā jāṇā
Onī rāhāṇ ve mainūṇ muṛṇā piā. (x2)

Sahure piṇḍ diāṇ laṃīāṇ vāṭāṇ baṛā pavāṛā pai giā
Yakā te bhārā koī nā kītā.

Lai merā muklāvā ḍolā saṛke saṛke jāṇvadā (x 2)
Kaḍhḍhiā ghuṇḍ kujh keh nā sakī
*Dil merā sharam*āṇ*vad*ā *hai*
*Dil merā sharam*āṇ*vad*ā *hai*
Juttī kasūrī pairī nā pūrī
Hāe Rabbā ve sānūṇ turnā piā(x 6)[13]

The popularity of this song is partly due to its ability to capture the collective voice of Punjabi women as they traverse this difficult passage to married life. Unlike the previous song about traveling by doli, the bride here is left to walk this long journey feeling completely helpless and alone. Without the concealment of a doli, the woman in this song uses the veil as a device to show how she's still hidden from public view. She is voiceless (*chup galā*), unable to articulate the intense emotions roiling inside her.

It is important to note that women in large cities, especially wealthy, educated women, generally did not directly experience the bridal migrations from their birth village to the in-laws' village. Instead, brides transition to a highly diverse domestic arrangement after marriage, some live with in-laws but many women in cities establish their own households. In this modern setting, and through the popular versions of "Jutti Kasoori" and other vidai, women identify symbolically with the perceived archetypal experience of a rural Punjabi woman after marriage, which often was experienced by their mothers, grandmothers, and other elderly women in their families.

"Jutti Kasoori" continues to capture the collective experience of Punjabi women as they embark on this all-important transition from girlhood to married life. This song captures the embodied and affective experience by which women are "broken into" the lifestyle and hierarchy within their in-laws' family, just as women try to force their feet to conform to the fit of new leather shoes. The soft flesh of their feet painfully yields to the rigid, sharp leather.

The song also plays an important in creating a space for the Punjabiyat that is rooted in bucolic settings and is defined by women's collective voices and experiences. The scholarship of the Punjabi diaspora still focuses almost exclusively on music and dance performed by men, from the globalization of Bhangra to the circulation of violent images of torture in the global movement for Khalistan, a separate Sikh homeland (Axel 2001). But women's music, such as "Jutti Kasoori," demonstrates the ongoing significance that women's cultural expressions play in creating and recreating the modern Punjabiyat across the diaspora.

Voices: Women Speaking about Marriage and Mobility

The oral histories of elderly Sikh women, who grew up in rural Punjab in the decades leading up to India's Partition, enrich the analysis of women's folk music. I employ a biographical approach to discern the individual personal and historical circumstances shaping women's lives, as well as their interpretations, thoughts, and emotions.

The elderly Sikh women in this study emphasized their fear and dread before marriage, mixed with some excitement. The emotions of anticipation and fear are evident in this group interview:

Bakshish Kaur Mann: They would say, "You're going to a foreign home. You should know how to do all the work."

Surjit Kaur Bhatti, *[laughing]*: Is it easy to live with a stranger? I couldn't sleep for three to four days [before the wedding.] It was very hard … My mom and I both couldn't sleep … I didn't know what kind of temperament he would have, how it would be living there.[14]

In my interview with Manjit Kaur Janda, she articulated the feelings that most of the women in this study experienced as young girls on their wedding day: fear, shock, and a powerful sense of feeling overwhelmed. She vividly recalled her wedding day in 1961 when she was just sixteen years old. Looking back fifty years later, she observed, "I was too young to appreciate my wedding day." Reliving that day, Manjit saw herself as a character in a play as she witnessed herself in the third person in her recollections of her own wedding ceremony:

> It seemed as if I was playing a role in a play, as if someone kept giving me directions and I was just following along …
>
> I remember that my mom and aunts woke me up at 4 am, bathed me and adorned me with nice clothing. This is what I remember from my wedding day. They were telling me what to do and how to do it. I couldn't understand what was happening to me.[15]

Meanwhile, like many women interviewed in this project, Harbhajan Kaur Takher did not meet her husband before marriage and she was not consulted about the decision. She was merely fifteen years old at marriage. Harbhajan narrates the core features of this transition: she wore a veil covering her face during the Sikh marriage ceremony as she left her birth home and walked with "the boy" (in her words) in a ceremonial procession toward her marriage home. The women in her family sang the sorrowful songs of a daughter's departure. Upon reaching her in-laws' house, her mother-in-law performed the water ceremony, a ceremony of welcoming the young bride as

she crosses the threshold into the marriage home and into her new life. When I inquired how she felt at this moment, Harbhajan deployed a spatial metaphor illustrating the emotional distance between herself and her husband as they crossed the threshold of their new life: "He went outside, and I went inside … There were feelings of sadness. It doesn't feel good."

Shortly after this ceremony, Harbhajan returned to her birth home, where she waited for one year until the families agreed that she was ready for married life. At the age of sixteen, she moved in with her in-laws; she gave birth to a son a year later. The hardest transition in her life was those first few years in her in-laws' home. Harbhajan narrates this transition with a raw honesty, stripped of sentimentality:

NTR: How did your life change after marriage?
HKT: You don't like it in the beginning. There isn't love. You have to learn to love everybody there. You don't like anything at first. With time the love is built.
NTR: How did you adjust to your new life?
HKT: There is a difference in families. That family was different from my family. Their lifestyle was different. Our family had a lot of love between us but their family didn't have that much.

I knew that I would have to live there from then on … Where else could I go? So slowly the love started coming on its own. They mixed with me and I mixed with them.

NTR: What was your source of strength at that time?
HKT: I made myself feel better by telling myself, "Where else would I go?" I had to stay there … God gave me strength. I would say [to myself,] "Waheguru Ji."[16]

For a devout Sikh such as Harbhajan, the trial of transitioning to her married life taught her lessons about the true nature of reality and strengthened her faith. She began to accept the will of the Divine One by surrendering to the principle: "Jo tu karnā ṭhīk hi karnā" ("Everything you do will be okay").[17]

Harbhajan's narrative captures how the girl is stripped of everything she knows and cherishes: family, home, comfort, safety. However, this difficult experience taught her two positive core teachings in Sikhi. The first is the realization that every individual is subject to the divine will (*hukam*) and must accept this fate with equanimity. The second is that we are all alone in the world except for the support provided by the Divine One (*Waheguru Ji*). Within the Sikh worldview, the bride signifies the individual's journey toward merging with the divine. Traveling through this most difficult experience taught Harbhajan to rely on her inner resources and Sikhi for the rest of her life. In essence, this passage brought her closer to the divine and served as a source of strength that served her throughout the rest of her life.

Upheaval: The Home/World Partition Collapses Amidst South Asia's Partition of 1947

The Partition of 1947 was the defining historical event in the lives of the women in this book. The magnitude and brutality of India's Partition continue to shape the course of the political, economic, and social life of South Asia into the present. The force of trauma was so great that it remains a taboo topic among survivors over seventy-five years later. Unlike the trauma that young girls experienced in Punjab leaving their families after marriage, the suddenness and brutality of communal violence during Partition was unforeseen.

Within just a few months, over twelve million people became refugees in the months surrounding India's Partition between India and the newly created nation of Pakistan in August 1947—Muslims fled to Pakistan from India, and Sikhs and Hindus fled to India. The ferocity and scale of violence came as a great shock. Over one million people were murdered in the communal violence between Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus.[18] According to Yasmin Khan, the necessary conditions were in place in Punjab for ethnic cleansing in 1947: "a feeble and polarized police force, the steady withdrawal of British troops and their substitution with the limited and undermanned Punjab Boundary Force, and a petrified, well-armed population" (Khan 2007, 128). An estimated 75,000 women were raped, and official figures estimate that another 83,000 women were abducted on both sides of the border and kept as "permanent hostages, captives, or forced wives" (Khan 2007, 135). Nearly a third of the abducted women were girls under the age of twelve (Khan 2007, 134). Rape was a weapon wielded to humiliate and shame opposing communities in an escalating cycle of revenge. Families (including several in this study) created plans for killing their own female kin as a last resort to protect them from defilement and religious conversion in a widespread effort to preserve their family's honor.

Gyanendra Pandey notes how the narrative accounts of Partition survivors construct "domains of 'inside' and 'outside'" in their perceptions of violence as "always 'out there,' and 'never in us'" (Pandey 1997, 2037). In the logic of ethnic cleansing between religious communities, violence always occurs elsewhere by the Other—outside the home, the village, the community. Violent acts performed by members of one's own family and community were construed as sacrifice, martyrdom, or otherwise justified by upholding a higher cause, such as protecting one's religion and women's honor. The most celebrated acts of violence as sacrifice were those performed by women who killed themselves in defending their purity and faith. The most famous example is the suicide of ninety Sikh women in a well in Thoa Khalsa, in the Rawalpindi district of West Punjab (now in Pakistan). We seldom bear witness to the everyday acts of violence in which ordinary people were both the victims and perpetrators of violence unleashed by Partition or to the cyclical nature of escalating bloodshed in revenge and in restoring the community's honor.

In my interviews with the women in this study, I drew insights from Urvashi Butalia's pathbreaking oral history research on women and children during Partition. It was not until deep into her research that Butalia realized the degree to which she would need to alter her research methodology to create a safe space for women's voices:

> I had to begin to pose different questions … and to be prepared to do that most important of things, to listen: to their speech, their silences, the half-said things, the nuances. The men seldom spoke about women. Women almost never spoke about themselves, indeed they denied they had anything "worthwhile" to say, a stance that was often corroborated by their men. Or, quite often, they simply weren't there to speak to. And what right did I, a stranger, an outsider, now have to go around digging into their lives, forcing them to look back to a time that was perhaps better forgotten? Especially when I knew that the histories I wanted to know about were histories of violence, rape, and murder.
>
> (Butalia 2000, 100)

This passage deeply resonates with my conversations with Sikh women in the diaspora about their recollections of their lives, especially related to Partition. Due to the many silences in the history of the Partition of 1947, it is impossible to gauge the deep imprint it left on these women's psyches and worldviews. Below, I outline how Partition figures in their life narratives, with an understanding that so much is left unvoiced.

It is important to note that the women whom I interviewed were born and raised in East Punjab which remained in India after independence and therefore did not experience the trauma of becoming refugees after Partition. However, they did experience the encroaching terror of Partition from within their homes. They only heard or viewed glimpses of the violence. Eventually, however, as the violence escalated, intense fear crept into the inner recesses of their homes and profoundly shaped the emotional lives of these women. Despite the fact that these women were largely kept inside the home during this dangerous time, the violence eventually eroded the carefully constructed partition between the home/world in which young women in relatively prosperous farming families lived. Surjit Kaur Bhatti recalled, "There was fighting. The school would let the girls leave early anytime there was trouble. Some would say, 'They are here to kill you, run home!'" She added, "We kept rocks and bricks on our rooftop so that if any Muslims came, we could hit them on their heads." "The girls were told, "the Muslim men will kidnap you!" explained Bakshish Kaur Mann. She added, "The Muslims used to kill us. They would bring guns. We wouldn't open the doors. The Muslims used to live behind us. The girls were told not to leave the house: 'They will kill you.'"[19]

Preetam Kaur Purewal described her terrifying ordeal. During a particularly murderous attack on her village, she recalls that the Sikh families locked all of their women inside for safety. Some of the men in their families stood with guns on the rooftops of their homes while the women stayed downstairs behind locked doors. Other male kin met a gruesome fate.

> Many people in our village were killed by the Muslims. The Muslims would drag the men down the alleys and cut their right hands. Their *kaṛas* (sacred steel bracelets) would fall off. Then the Muslims would pour gasoline on them and burn them alive.[20]

When the police officers came to their house the next day asking for more men to protect the village, the women showed them a handful of steel bracelets, exclaiming: "This is all that is left of our family." When Preetam Kaur Purewal was asked if she had directly witnessed violence, she replied: "How could I see it? The girls were locked inside." The women interviewed described the terror during those weeks and months, when they had no idea whether they would survive or not.

Harbhajan Kaur Takher's Partition account differs in two important respects. First, her family sheltered Muslim families from the violence outside. "A lot of Muslim people stayed in our home," Harbhajan remembers, "because we had a big house with a lot of love." Eventually the Muslim families went to a refugee camp before settling in Pakistan. Harbhajan also witnessed violence first-hand. Perhaps because her brother was a police officer and her family enjoyed more protection, Harbhajan traveled with her relatives to another village to visit her cousin during this dangerous time. En route, she watched in horror as Sikhs stopped a train and slaughtered the Muslims inside:

> I saw this myself. They would kill our people over there [in Pakistan] and over here [the Sikhs] would kill the Muslims. I saw from afar how they [Sikhs] would stop the train, and take all of the nice things from the [Muslim] people on the train. They would take these things home after killing them with *kirpans* [Sikh swords].[21]

There were a few Sikh women in this study who did flee from western Punjab to Punjab, India. They recounted horrific stories of violence, losing loved ones, and the overwhelming obstacles to rebuilding their lives in India after Partition. Women in these families described the most desperate situations in which their male relatives made plans to take the lives of their female kin as a last resort to protect their honor and their religion. Other women described their readiness to fight themselves, even their willingness to sacrifice their own lives.

The thirty women in this study described the mounting terror of 1947 that encroached upon the safety of their worlds in the inner courtyards of their homes. Few discussed the fervent nationalist debates or political battles that

took place in the distance, remote from their lives. Even the women who were too young to remember Partition grew up hearing stories, and pronounced silences, about that time.

Second Passage: Transoceanic Journeys

In Punjab, rivers and mountains delineate cultural boundaries. Regional differences and dialects were defined by the interfluvial land between rivers. A Punjabi proverb warns, "Don't give your daughter beyond the Ravi River, oh no. How will she ever come and go?" (*Dhee diti Ravi, na koi aavi, na koi jaavi?*) (Brara 2014, 242). The Sikh women described in this chapter were among the first generational cohort to cross not simply rivers, but multiple oceans from Punjab to join their husbands in America. Bridal journeys were part of the cultural landscape of Punjab, the source of countless rituals, ceremonies, and songs to try to process the pain of a daughter's separation from her family—in the vidai songs analyzed above, as in proverbs and sayings about the difficulty of giving away a daughter to a faraway home. Due to the unprecedented nature of women's transoceanic voyages to California, and the recent nature of this phenomenon, to my knowledge there are no folk songs about these recent oceanic crossings.

The first cohort of Sikh women who made these transoceanic journeys spent their childhoods contained within sheltered, highly circumscribed boundaries within their villages, especially those who grew up amidst the raging violence of Partition. Most had never left their home villages prior to moving to their in-laws' house in a neighboring village. There was no repertoire of songs to prepare them mentally for a journey of this magnitude. So how did these women experience their journeys? How did their earlier relocations as young brides shape their subsequent transoceanic journeys to the United States? And where did their journeys even begin, as they lived in villages whose social fabric was profoundly altered by the departure of thousands of young men, where the absence of their new husbands was a central experience in their lives?

In 2017, I first interviewed Harbans Kaur Panu—a graceful woman who presented herself with simple elegance.[22] That day she wore a lavender Punjabi suit. She spoke in a calm, direct manner. Her experience coming to America was similar to many other women of her generation whom I had interviewed. According to Harbans, she only left her village in Punjab once before leaving India to settle in the United States. She felt intense fear as she traveled for the first time by plane to the United States at the age of twenty in 1961 shortly after marriage. Scared and missing her family, she fell ill during the journey. A Punjabi American woman showed her kindness and admitted Harbans into a hospital where she recovered.

In the spring of 1967, Amar Kaur Everest was preparing to leave her home and join her husband, having lived apart for thirteen years until he felt sufficiently financially settled to sponsor his wife and two children. Amar Kaur's brothers showed her great love before she left. Dr Paramjit Everest,

Amar Kaur's son, was a child at the time. He recalls a remarkable gesture: "I remember that one day before leaving India, my uncle washed my mother's feet and drank the water in deep respect for my mom."[23] In South Asia, this act of love is the highest form of reverence usually reserved for saints. It is not commonly performed in daily life. This act is extolled in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, "Wash the feet of the holy and drink the water" ("charan sādh ke dhoi dhoi pīo," *GGS*, 283).

Paramjit vividly remembers the scene of their departure from Palam airport (now Indira Gandhi airport) in Delhi. Amar Kaur and her two children ascended the outdoor stairs to the metal landing before boarding their Pan Am flight to Tokyo. As they turned back around, looking over their shoulders at the crowd standing on the tarmac below, they saw a busload of family members, friends, and neighbors wish them farewell.

The journey to America was arduous with frequent stops for refueling in Tokyo and Honolulu before finally landing in San Francisco. Paramjit recalls feeling intensely hungry throughout their long journey. They had packed nothing to eat and they did not feel comfortable eating the meals served during their flights. At their stop in Honolulu to clear immigration, they felt reluctant to leave the plane, eventually venturing out to drink pineapple juice. They arrived at the airport in San Francisco on May 5, welcomed to America by Amar Kaur's husband, Hari Singh Everest, and his friend, Ajmer Singh Bains. Paramjit remembers eating the home-cooked dinner at Ajmer Singh and Amar Kaur Bains' home, after the two-hour drive to Yuba City, with great enthusiasm, recalling the curry (*dal*), vegetables (*sabji*), and more than a few rotis.

Shortly after marriage, Harbhajan Kaur Purewal left her family in Punjab to join her husband in America.[24] This was the first time she had boarded a plane, which was a frightening experience. During a routine overnight layover in Hawaii, Harbhajan felt stranded and helpless. She could not speak English, and this was the first time she had traveled alone. She stepped off the plane in Honolulu expecting to find her husband at the airport. He was not there. Seeing Harbhajan distressed, an airline employee brought over a kind elderly man from India who helped her. This stranger brought her home where his American wife hosted her overnight, comforted her, and served her mangoes, dates, and almonds. The couple advised her about what to expect in America. Harbhajan always remembered the compassion that this stranger had given her on the journey to America.

Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara remembers little about her long journey by plane from Punjab to the United States compared to her detailed recollections of the year she spent in India waiting for her visa to arrive. Time slowed during the year Mohinderjit lived with in-laws, waiting for her husband to return to bring her abroad. Her husband, Harsev Thiara, traveled all the way to Punjab to accompany her to the United States. A local newspaper documented their entire journey by plane, which included nine flights between Delhi, India,

and Marysville, California, with stops to refuel in Calcutta, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Manila, Guam, Wake Island, Honolulu, and San Francisco.[25] Of the thirty women interviewed in this study, Mohinderjit is the only one who lived a comfortable life in America from the beginning. A maid even cooked and cleaned the house for the family. In her words, her presence in California was auspicious for the family, bringing good fortune.[26] Her narration of her arrival in the United States differed in tone from her peers': she spoke about the ease of her transition, arriving together with her husband, and experiencing greater financial security. She grew up primarily in Iran; therefore, she likely found it easier to adjust to a different cultural context.

This chapter has explored women's "double passages" as a foundational difference between the mobilities of South Asian women and men. Women had already migrated as young brides before they settled overseas. The widespread overseas migration of men was of recent historical origin, beginning soon after Britain's annexation of Punjab in 1849 and recruitment of Sikhs into the army. To my knowledge, this fundamental gendered difference in the South Asian diaspora has not been studied despite its great implications. Based on women's oral histories and music, I found a complex relationship between these two passages for women. The trauma of rupture from their birth homes was far greater than what they experienced in relocating over 7400 miles from Punjab to the United States. In fact, this careful listening to women's life narratives and music reveals that there was an inverse relationship between geographical distance traversed and the emotional trauma women experienced in these two passages.

Harbhajan Kaur Takher captures the enormity of the trauma of marriage experienced by a young girl in rural Punjab in the 1940s. In her stark words, from the perspective of a fifteen-year-old girl adapting to her affinal home and village: "there is no love at first." The bonds of love between the bride and her new family members must be built from scratch. Realizing that she was now alone in the world, Harbhajan experienced an epiphany: the Divine One was her sole source of support in the adjustment period after marriage. She would repeat the divine name "Waheguru Ji" to herself to lean on the only reliable pillar of strength that she felt was available to her in her world. There is a sense that every source of support, and Harbhajan's very self, was stripped bare after marriage, and then slowly grew within the marriage home, especially with the birth of children.

Folk songs offer a glimpse into the survival mechanisms that women created in order to adapt to foreign environments, whether to the new lifestyle in their in-laws' homes/villages in Punjab or abroad in rural America. In the next chapter, I turn to women's adjustments to their new lives in California. Although women experienced homesickness and isolation in settling far from Punjab, they had already developed coping mechanisms and inner strength to form female affinities that would carry them across the oceans of change they traversed.

Reflections

In contrast to the male Punjabi settlers who arrived in California and who have been the focus of most scholarship on mobility in the South Asian diaspora, women had been groomed from birth as future migrants who would leave their homes after marriage. They were connected culturally with water, sometimes with air (like "birds"), and their husbands with land. My use of an oceanic humanities framework attunes me to the interplay between water and land and the fluidity of cultural change, both spatially and temporally. This perspective highlights women's liminality and fluidity in Punjab as movable property gifted from one patriline to another after marriage.

From the perspective of the women in this study, the emotional trauma of mobility is inversely related to geographical distance. The primal trauma that women returned to throughout their lives was their departure from their childhood home and family. This trauma that never fully heals is performed and re-experienced repeatedly in life through the singing of mournful songs about the daughter's departure. Singing acts as a collective process of healing for women and their relatives about a female relatives' departure after marriage. This is a primal moment of pain in the collective consciousness of the Punjabi people that is expressed and experienced collectively through music. Of course, as women become matriarchs later in life, they also revel in reliving their joy at their sons' weddings and reconnecting to their cultural heritage through the performance of wedding folk songs. This chapter highlights the critical role that music plays in psychologically preparing women for this difficult displacement.

After surviving unforeseen and unspeakable fear and traumas during India's Partition, these women made transoceanic journeys to America with no idea where they were headed. They felt completely unprepared for the journeys and the lives ahead of them. They did not speak English and they knew little of what their new environments expected of them. The early Punjabi women who settled in rural California also experienced loneliness and confinement—a combination of mobility with confinement that recalls the experience of moving to their husbands' families' homes as young brides. Nand Kaur, the first Sikh woman who settled in Yuba City, liked to tell the children: "America is a miṭhī (sweet) jail. Living in America is like a bird being kept in a golden cage."[27]

The next chapter charts this cohort of Sikh women as they built new lives in California's Sacramento Valley beginning in the late 1940s. It explores the oceanic imaginary in the Sikh worldview, analyzing the performance of sacred music and its centrality in this generation's adjustment and settlement in California. It also traces the contributions that women made to the tremendous growth of Sikh religious institutions in California during the second half of the twentieth century. The ocean was a central metaphor in the sacred music performed at informal devotional gatherings. This period also involved the growth of gurdwaras and other Sikh institutions, Amrit

ceremonies that profoundly altered the Sikh community, as well as the first major public performance of Sikh devotional, cultural, and religious identity at the inaugural Yuba City Nagar Kirtan in 1980.

Notes

1 Surjit Kaur Tumber interview by Nicole Ranganath and Rajinder K Tumber, September 15, 2022, Yuba City, CA.
2 Harbans Kaur Panu interview by Nicole Ranganath, January 22, 2019, Yuba City, CA.
3 Savitri Randhawa interview by Nicole Ranganath, December 19, 2017, Davis, CA. Among the elderly Punjabi women I interviewed, Savitri was the only woman who immigrated to the United States for education as a single woman. In the United States, she married Narinder Singh Randhawa, a prominent agricultural scientist at the University of California, Davis. She and her family later returned to India where she obtained a professorship.
4 Sikh American women interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA. Pritam Kaur Purewal made this comment.
5 Charan Kaur Kang interview by Nicole Ranganath and Dr Jasbir Singh Kang, December 18, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
6 Ranganath, *Jutti Kasoori*.
7 Harbhajan Kaur Takher interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA. Note Harbhajan's uncertainty about her birth year. The elderly women in this study who grew up in rural India experienced temporality in terms of the shifting seasons rather than referring to the Western Gregorian calendar. The quotes from Harbhajan Kaur Takher in this chapter were taken from this interview unless indicated otherwise.
8 Punjabi women's folk song performed by Sikh American women, Sharanjit Kaur Ranu's home, December 9, 2019, Fresno, CA.
9 Two rich sources for the oral traditions and daily life in rural Punjab are Giani Surjit Singh, *Mera Pinḍ* (Chandigarh: Sahit Parkashan, 1961); and, Surjeet Singh, *Oral Traditions and Cultural Heritage of Punjab* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2016).
10 Faiza Hussain and Sarwet Rasul, "Sarcasm, Humour, and Exaggeration in Pakistani Punjabi Wedding Songs: Implicit Gendered Identities," *Pakistani Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan* 23, no. 2 (2016): 21–44.
11 See Anshu Malhotra's discussion of the new importance given to the wifely ideal of *pativrata* by nineteenth-century social reformers in India, including Punjab, emphasizing wifely devotion and purity. Given the wife's central role as a carrier of culture, a great deal of attention was paid in reform literature to inculcating ideal feminine virtues among middle-class wives and mothers. The antithesis of this feminine ideal was the figure of the *kupatti*, a rebellious, sexually aggressive and uncouth woman who was perceived as perpetuating outdated superstitions and cultural practices that thwarted the modernization of colonial elites in Indian society. Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities: Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.
12 Gurdit Singh, *Mera Pind*, 390.
13 For the "Jutti Kasoori" lyrics, see https://bharatlyrics.com/pdf/jutti-kasuri-title-lyrics.pdf. Accessed on September 15, 2023.
14 Sikh American women, first group, interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
15 Ibid.

16 *Waheguru* is the most common term for the divine in modern Sikhi, meaning Wondrous Enlightener. Harbhajan Kaur Takher interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
17 Harbhajan Kaur Takher interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
18 See Khan, *The Great Partition*. For excellent histories focusing on women and children during Partition, see Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); and Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998). For recent studies about memory and Partition, see Churnjeet Mahn and Anne Murphy, eds., *Partition and the Practice of Memory* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); and Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
19 Sikh American women, first group, interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
20 Ibid.
21 Harbhajan Kaur Takher interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
22 Harbans Kaur Panu interview by Nicole Ranganath, December 18, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
23 Dr Paramjit Singh Everest interview by Nicole Ranganath, July 29, 2022, Yuba City, CA.
24 Details about Harbhajan Kaur Purewal's transoceanic passage were derived from family correspondence submitted by her daughter, Sharon Singh, September 6, 2018.
25 "Visits Native Land, Returns with Bride," *Acorn* (1954): 1 and 6.
26 Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara interview by Nicole Ranganath, August 12, 2019, Live Oak, CA.
27 Balbir Singh Johl, son of Nand Kaur's best friend, Sham Kaur, correspondence, September 10, 2022.

4 "Crossing the Terrifying World-Ocean"

Creating Communities in California Through Sacred Music, Late 1940s–1990s

I begin this chapter with a rare photograph of the dedication ceremony of Yuba City's first gurdwara. The local Sikh community formally launched construction in 1969, the 500th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak. In Figure 4.1, the community gathers, absorbed in prayer as they consecrate the site on a chilly autumn day. In the foreground, Ranjit Singh Grewal holds a rendering of the gurdwara and recites the *Ardās*, a Sikh prayer performed before any important endeavor. Beside him, Harbhajan Singh Johl grasps the portrait of Guru Nanak. A Sikh flag undulates overhead, a symbol of the universal sovereignty of the Sikh faith and people (Figure 4.1).

Looking carefully at the left edge of the frame, a woman's light-colored Punjabi suit and sandals are barely visible. Her clothing forms a sliver of light emanating behind a semi-circle of men standing shoulder to shoulder. The woman is Swarn Kaur, a devout Sikh and the daughter of Ranjit Singh Grewal. She had sewn the flag flying above. The cropped photograph printed in the local newspaper focuses on the men performing the ceremony, especially the man raising the flag.[1] Swarn Kaur's presence, her contribution in making the flag, and her role in building this community are excised from history.

Swarn Kaur Johl (1929–2015) was likely the first woman who was fully initiated into the Sikh faith to settle in the Yuba City area. Four years after marrying at the age of sixteen, she joined her husband in the United States in 1951. In her Indian passport photo, she is dressed in the simple attire of a devout Sikh (Figure 4.2). Highly intelligent and dedicated to Sikhi, she was one of the women who played instrumental roles in the revival of the Sikh faith in the local community between the 1950s and 1990s. It was due to her influence that her husband rededicated himself to Sikhi. And it was at her request that her father brought one of the first Sikh holy books to Yuba City in 1962. In the years before the local gurdwara opened, the prayer room in her home served as a hub for devotional gatherings. She possessed a gift for teaching Sikh concepts in simple language that was easy for her female family members and friends to grasp. She also led a prayer group in Yuba City's first Gurdwara.

Following the story of the Sikh women who grew up in Punjab between the 1930s and 1960s from the previous chapter, I now trace their lives after

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Figure 4.1 Dedication ceremony for Yuba City's first gurdwara, November 29, 1969, Yuba City, CA.

Credit: Appeal Democrat.

they crossed multiple oceans to settle in Yuba City between the late 1940s and 1969. The scholarship about South Asian Americans either focuses on the male laborers who arrived in the early 1900s, or the affluent, well-educated urban immigrants who settled here after the watershed 1965 Immigration Act. By contrast, I place the first generation of women who arrived during the critical historical decades after World War II in the center of the historical frame.

Although a handful of women like Nand Kaur arrived earlier, the first generational cohort of women in the United States formed after the Luce–Celler Act of 1946 restored US citizenship and immigration for South Asians on a limited basis. For the first time, beginning in the late 1940s, South Asian American families were reunited after being separated by oceans for years, even decades. I narrate the arrival and adjustment of this unique cohort of South Asian women to California from their perspective, drawing from oral histories and devotional songs. In this chapter, I focus on women's community-building efforts, brought together by sacred music, that helped contribute to the opening of the first local gurdwara. When it was opened in 1970, Yuba City's gurdwara was the third in the United States (Stockton's gurdwara was established in 1912 and El Centro's in 1948).

Through a careful analysis of women's devotional music and oral narratives, I explore the numerous crossings that the first generation of Sikh

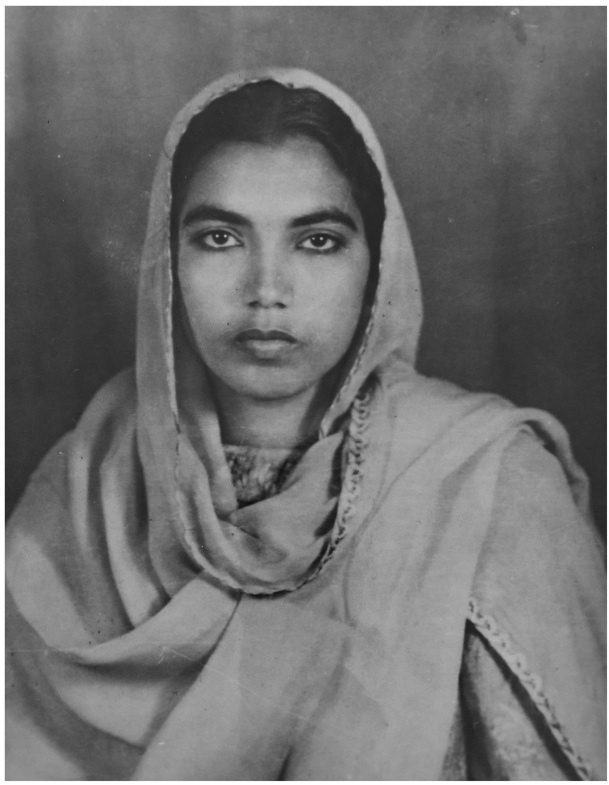

Figure 4.2 Swarn Kaur Johl passport photo, 1950, India.
Courtesy of Manohar Singh Grewal.

women made after leaving Punjab for rural California—their geographical journeys across multiple oceans, temporal passages, emotional turbulences, cultural transformations, and their reconfigurations of self and identity. For the women in this study, these diverse forms of mobility and transformation were experienced and understood within a unified Sikh worldview that envisions the individual's spiritual quest in life with reference to the metaphor of "crossing the terrifying world-ocean." I anchor my interpretations in Sikh concepts that predate, flow in parallel with, and transcend Western understandings of faith, identity, and culture within a modern global framework.

I invoke the metaphor of the pearls from the seven seas to capture the global network of Sikhs around the world who created islands of sovereignty through their institutions, communities, and music. Given the hypermobility of the Sikh people, as well as their oceanic worldview, the analogy of setting down an anchor is an apt one. An anchor conveys the frequency with which the Sikh people have moored, lifted, and then moored themselves yet again

across the world. From the inception of Sikh history, Sikhs have been relentlessly on the move. Guru Nanak famously spent twenty-four years traveling his known world. The space of the gurdwara represents a place of sovereignty to a universal authority that is unbound by geography. The first scribe of the Sikh scripture, Bhai Gurdas, wrote, "The Sikhs of the Guru are like pearls. They are threaded into a necklace when they get together in religious assemblies" (Gurdas 2002, 267. Quoted in Gurminder Kaur Bhogal 2017, 65).

Yet, women are rarely acknowledged for threading together this necklace. This is despite the fact that Guru Nanak created a spiritual world that was radically egalitarian. In the Sikh scripture, the Gurus imaginatively adopted the feminine voice with empathy and respect. Today, however, despite their elevated status in Gurbani, women are excluded from the leadership of Sikh institutions in Punjab and around the world. Additionally, as music scholar Gurminder Kaur Bhogal notes, women are not given the support and training to fully develop their devotional expression in the sacred soundscapes of the Sikh world (Bhogal, 2022).

This chapter examines a particular era and place in the history of the Sikh diaspora in which women did play a large role in community building to answer a core question: Why were Sikh women able to publicly exercise a greater degree of agency in their faith in rural California during the second half of the twentieth century? Women's greater participation in Sikh public life in the Yuba City area in the midcentury was due to a confluence of circumstances: their entry into agricultural work on their family farms and in seasonal work in the canneries, as well as the absence of extended kin in the United States, and additionally, by the initial shortage of professional musicians in the local gurdwara after it opened in 1970. All of these factors, and the newly-formed bonds among female newcomers, afforded women greater space and support to assert and express themselves in new ways in local Sikh public life. More intangibly, I also wonder about how women's listening to the story of the blessed bride's journey in uniting with the divine in monthly devotional gatherings influenced their self-conceptions.

In the early 1960s, an intimate circle of families began to gather monthly on *Sangrānd* (the first day of the Punjabi month) to hear and perform sacred songs—central among them was one called *Bārah Māh* ("Song of the Twelve Months"). Every month, these women and their families heard the story of a blessed bride's journey across the shifting seasons as she yearned to unite with her Divine Groom. My analysis of Barah Mah is deeply influenced by scholars who recovered the female voice in Sikh devotional music, emphasizing the meanings women created in hearing and performing sacred music. This helps us see how, facing numerous hardships, the women found sources of support and forged a new devotional community of tight-knit families.

I pay careful attention to women's performance and understandings of Sikh devotional music known as *sabad kīrtan*. There is little research about the central importance of sacred music in the lives of elderly women in the diaspora. Sabad kirtan, as Inderjit N. Kaur asserts, remains relatively

understudied (Kaur 2011). Inderjit N. Kaur's in-depth interviews are invaluable in understanding how listening to sabad kirtan structures the emotional worlds of individuals and the collective global Sikh community in the contemporary period (Kaur 2016, 2018). My approach contributes to the scholarly understanding of Sikh sacred music by offering a a rare window into the historical meanings that the first generation of Sikh American women created while listening to and performing sabad kirtans.

Interweaving my analysis of Sikh devotional music with the ways that this group of women themselves interpreted the music, I became fascinated by the meanings that this cohort of women created in listening to Sikh devotional music, as well as how women's performance of sacred music contributed to shifts in their sense of self and changes in their communities. This research suggests the value of deep listening to hear women's unique relationship to sacred music.

The historical arc of this chapter charts the interior transformations in women's affective and spiritual lives, as well as their conceptions of self, in the decades after they settled in the Yuba City area. It begins in the late 1940s when the first generational cohort of women from South Asia arrived in the United States. After experiencing intense isolation in the early years in California, these women gradually began to assert themselves in the public sphere through their work, faith and female affinities. From their embodied practices and the meanings they articulated about devotional music, a picture emerges of their creative devotional expressions. The chapter concludes with women gaining greater agency within the Sikh community by becoming fully initiated Sikhs in the 1970s and publicly walking beside the *GGS* in Yuba City's first Nagar Kirtan (popularly known as the Sikh Parade) in 1980.

Crossing the Terrifying World-Ocean

The Centrality of the Oceanic in the Sikh Worldview

> *The world-ocean is treacherous and impassable;*
> *How can one cross over?*
>
> *Dunīā sāgar dutar kahīai kio kar pāīai pāro ||*
>
> *(Guru Nanak, GGS, 938)*

The ocean is a core metaphor for the identity and belonging of Sikhs, envisioned as pearls (individuals) dispersed across a vast unified space (the ocean):

> *The Guru is the ocean filled with pearls.*
> *The saints gather in the sacred nectar;*
> *They do not go far away from there.*
> *Tasting the subtle essence of the divine,*

They are loved by the divine.
Within this pool, the swans find the divine.

Gur sāgar ratnī bharpūre ||
Amrit sant chugah nahī dūre ||
Hari ras chog chugeh prabh bhāvai ||
Saravar meh haṃs prānpati pāvai ||

(Guru Nanak, GGS, 685).

For Guru Nanak, the ocean is the metaphor for the daunting, perilous, and frightening journey of the soul in reuniting with the divine. The temptations of worldly pleasures cause many to drown. Only the Divine One provides the necessary support to reach the far shore:

The terrifying world-ocean is difficult and dreadful;
There is no shore on this side or the one beyond.
There is no boat, no raft, no oars and no boatman.
The True Guru is the only boat on this terrifying ocean;
The glance of divine grace carries us across.

Bhavjal bikham ḍarāvaṇo nā kaṇdhī nā pār ||
Nā beṛī nā tulhaṛā nā tis vaṇjh malār ||
Satigur bhai kā bohithā nadarī pār utār ||

(Guru Nanak, GGS: 59)

For Sikhs, the teachings of the Gurus and the company of the devout together form the boat that carries the soul across the world-ocean:

Join the Sādh Sangat, the Company of the Holy,
vibrate and meditate on the Nām, the divine essence.
Make every effort to cross over the terrifying world-ocean.
This human life is passing away in vain,
in pursuit of worldly pleasures.

Mil sādh sangat bhaj keval nām ||
Saraṇjām lāg bhavjal taran kai ||
Janam brithā jāt raṇg māiā kai ||

(Guru Arjan, GGS: 12)

In contrast to the river-centrism of Punjabi culture, Sikhi centers on the ocean. In the Sikh worldview, the river is inseparable from and secondary to the ocean. Once merged, the river and ocean are indistinguishable, just like a drop of water joining a larger body of water. For Guru Nanak, the element of water is the same whether it flows along a river or churns in the sea. Guru Nanak

explains, "the streams and rivers flowing into the ocean do not know its vastness" ("nadīā atai vāh pavah samuṇd na jāṇīah"‖ Guru Nanak, *GGS*: 5). In Sikh ontology, water is a core metaphor for the dissolution of dualism and spiritual alienation when the individual understands the underlying unity of reality. According to Guru Tegh Bahadur, "Says Nanak, meditate and vibrate upon that One, and you shall cross over the terrifying world-ocean" ("kahu nānak tih bhaj manā bhao nidh utareh pār"‖ Guru Nanak, *GGS*: 427).

The Sikh scripture overflows with the oceanic and the interchangeability of water in its variegated forms in nature and within the human body. Water is the source of life, sustainer of all living beings, and nourisher of the land. Water is often invoked within the context of all natural elements: "Air is our guru, water our father, the great earth our mother" ("pawaṇ gurū pāṇī pita mātā dharat mahat" ‖ Guru Nanak, Japjī, *GGS*: 8, as translated by Singh 2022, 43).

Water is the manifestation of the divine that purifies, transforms, and unifies. It can convert from poison to Amrit (sacred nectar) if infused by the divine. Amrit is a frequent analogy in the *GGS* for the incorporation of the divine into the body: "Drop by drop, a stream of Amrit flows within. Hearing and reflecting on the divine word, the mind soaks it in" ("jhim jhim varsai amrit dhārā, man pīvai sun sabad bīchārā" ‖ Guru Arjan, *GGS*: 102). Individuals who drink Amrit in a sacred ceremony are believed to become immortal. Water is the medium for the divine's absorption into the human body in the form of drinking Amrit, as well as the outflow of devotion in the form of tear drops: "My eyes are drenched with Amrit, and my soul is imbued with the love of the divine" ("hari amrit bhiṇe loiṇā man prem rataṇā rām rāje" ‖ Guru Ramdas, *GGS*: 448).

In contrast to the Hindu faith, in which its followers are tied to the geography of Mother India, "home" and "abroad" carry distinct meanings in Sikh ontology. Both concepts refer to spiritual states in Sikh philosophy rather than physical geography that is divided between the sacred territory of Mother India and the associations with ritual impurity beyond India's shores. Inhabiting a foreign place, in Sikhi, refers to an internal state of spiritual alienation from the divine and the authentic self, an illusion of individuality and ignorance of the underlying unity of existence. Metaphysically, "home" refers to the moment of union with the divine:

> *Oh my beloved stranger mind, please come home!*
> *Meet with the divine Guru, my dear one,*
> *and the divine will dwell within the home of your self.*
>
> *Mere man pardesī ve piāre āo ghare* ‖
> *Har Gurū milāvahu mere piāre ghar vasai hare* ‖
>
> *(Guru Ramdas, GGS: 451)*

In Sikh metaphysics, the act of returning home occurs after crossing the world-ocean when the veils of illusion and dualism are dissolved. The divine resides within the home (body) of the devout: "Everything is within the home of the self; there is nothing beyond" ("sabh kichh ghar meh bāhar nāhī" ‖ Guru Arjan, *GGS*: 102). *In Sikhi, everywhere is made sacred by performing kirtan.*

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh highlights the powerful vision of gender equality in the *GGS*. The divine is boundlessly inclusive, irrespective of gender, race, caste, and class. The Formless One is, by definition, gender-free. Both the father and mother are revered as representing the divine. Women are not considered impure due to menstruation in the Sikh scripture. Additionally, the Gurus assume the feminine voice with great empathy when invoking the devotee's yearning for the Divine One. The pain of humanity's isolation is poignantly expressed from a woman's perspective: "Oh my beloved, don't leave me and go to foreign lands; please stay here with me!" ("pria pardes na jahu vasahu ghar morai" ‖ Guru Arjan, *GGS*: 1072).

However, the relationship between the Gurus' teachings about gender equality and the actual conditions of Sikh women's lives needs to be researched in greater detail. A recent report on gender in Sikhi by the Sikh Research Institute found a salient gap between gender ideology and practice among Sikhs worldwide. Of the 689 Sikhs surveyed in 21 countries, 86% espoused gender equality, and yet significant gender inequalities and discrimination remain in Sikh communities around the world. The report urged Sikh institutions to create mandates for greater female participation in leadership positions in gurdwaras and other institutions. It also implored individuals and institutions to "revoke the power of abusers or those who do not honor the foundational Sikh principle of equality."[2]

My research suggests that the migration experiences of the first cohort of Sikh women in rural California were profoundly shaped by their faith. Their adjustments to their new lives in California were deeply informed by Sikhi, as well as Sikh history and identity. Their faith also gave them strength to endure the new challenges and hardships they faced abroad. But these women also improvised and asserted themselves in public life in new ways. Further, they displayed flexibility in their understandings of various peoples and faiths; they were friends with women from diverse backgrounds; and their devotional expression did not always strictly adhere to cultural conventions and the Sikh Code of Conduct. For these reasons, this is a rare case history of gender relations, faith, identity, and creative expression in the Sikh diaspora.

Historical Context: Women's Experiences Moving Beyond a Distant Shore

The presence of the first generation of women in California helped transform the Sikh community. Before women arrived beginning in the late 1940s and 1950s, the local Sikh community was comprised mainly of bachelors who had

lived together in farm bunkhouses and men who had married women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, especially from Mexico. Within a decade of the arrival of Punjabi Sikh women to California, the reunited families moved to houses that they rented and eventually owned. This transition to domesticity, sparked by the arrival of women and children, as well as major changes in US immigration policy, citizenship, and property laws, was essential for building local Sikh institutions. Sikh women began to play a role in revitalizing the devotional life of the small group of Sikh families in California.

The first significant number of Punjabi Sikh women arrived in the United States beginning in the late 1940s, after US citizenship was restored to South Asians and immigration became legal again. The community had become small after years of exclusionary US policies: the population of South Asian Americans in the entire country had dwindled from about 6,700 in 1910 to 2,400 in 1940 (Jensen 1988; Chakravorty 2017, et al., 14).[3] Between the 1920s and 1946 when immigration from South Asia was restored on a limited basis, the South Asian immigrants who entered the United States did so illegally by crossing the border from Mexico.[4] Karen Leonard asserts that the Punjabi Mexican American family reflected the family normative pattern among people of South Asian heritage in the United States in the early to mid-twentieth century.[5]

Mentally unprepared for what to expect in the United States, Punjabi Sikh women arrived in California after a long four-day journey, with multiple stops along the way to refuel the planes. Most of the women interviewed said they felt great disappointment when they saw the poor quality of housing and life in rural California—and more than that, intense loneliness and isolation.

The women did not like their first year in the United States. They missed their households in India so filled with people and activity. During the day, their husbands went to work in the fields and their children attended school, and many of the women spent all day at home on their farms alone. Several women recalled sleeping during the day as a coping mechanism. Harbhajan Kaur Takher described feelings of depression common among women, recalling, "The crying came on its own."

The newly-arrived women rarely communicated with their families in Punjab; letter-writing was not an option for these women, most of whom couldn't read or write, and phone calls were prohibitively expensive. Veena Singh, one of the most highly educated women in this cohort, did write to her family, but she didn't share her true feelings:

> I *never* used to write *anything negative* to my parents. My parents were very old, so I never wanted to give them any grief that I am unhappy or anything. I made it seem like everything was good and that I was happy.[6]

Veena explained her emotions about arriving in the United States by conflating them with her emotions when she married and left her family. This shows

how the trauma of multiple dislocations was layered in women's memories of mobility, with emotional upheavals experienced later in life triggering the earlier trauma of leaving home after marriage. "When you get married and go to the marital home, that's when you realize, 'This is it.' You can't go back anymore. You have to stay here now.'"

The isolation these women experienced was exacerbated by the racial hostility they encountered in daily life. Harbans Kaur Panu described white people as extremely prejudiced: "Whenever they saw us, they would say, 'You Hindus!' and they would curse at us. In those times, nobody would step out of their homes in Indian dresses, not even the elderly ladies."[7]

Verinder Kaur Kajla experienced a shock upon encountering her husband's expectations about their marriage. She flew to the United States on the same flight as her friend Surjit Kaur Tumber, both dressed in their finest Punjabi suits to impress their husbands. On one occasion, shortly after settling into Yuba City, she socialized with her husband, who was twenty years older than her, and another couple. After Verinder's husband and his friend left, the other wife exclaimed: "There they go to see the old girlfriends."[8] Verinder felt an overwhelming depression whenever she saw this woman after that day. Later, Verinder derived profound solace and support from her friendship with Mary Singh Rai, a Punjabi Mexican American woman who formed deep friendships with a diverse array of women, including many in the Sikh community (UC Davis *Punjabi and Sikh Diaspora Digital Archive*).

Punjabi Sikh women experienced great pressure to rapidly conform to American culture. In Verinder's case, her husband gave her a complete makeover after her arrival, so that she looked like a fashionable American woman. She enjoyed her new clothes, but she felt distressed when her husband took her to the barber shop for a haircut. When she was seven years old in India right before she passed away, her mother had made her promise that she would never cut her hair. As a result, Verinder not only experienced the trauma of getting a haircut, which is a grave violation of one's faith and body for observant Sikhs, but also felt like she was betraying her mother's dying wish. She wept as she watched her shorn hair fall to the floor.

The daughters of the first generation of Punjabi Sikh women shared deeper sources of pain borne by their mothers and their female friends. Their mothers felt enormous pressure to give birth to sons. After the birth of several girls, and in the absence of a son, the mother experienced unbearable pressure, even when her husband held progressive views. Married women who "failed to give birth to sons" were judged negatively by their in-laws and the community. In one instance, the in-laws' family actively maneuvered to find a new wife for the father, believing that his current wife was to blame for the lack of male progeny. In one instance, a mother of daughters experienced suicidal ideation. The crisis was only averted after the birth of a male heir. Another daughter learned about the community's preference for sons while listening to her mother's phone conversations with her friends. As a young girl listening to her mother's heartfelt consolations to her friend, her daughter

couldn't discern whether a death had occurred or a girl had been born in her mother's friend's family. Both events were considered great calamities in the community.

An isolated community in a racially hostile landscape, the Sikh community in Yuba City offered extensive mutual support to each other. The small handful of families rallied together to help the newcomers get started in life. Several women remember arriving at the small airport in Marysville near Yuba City and finding a gathering of community members to greet them. The women would host a tea party to welcome the newcomer women into the fold. When a new family would arrive, the community would help them get started in their new lives by giving them household supplies (bedsheets, kitchenware, clothes, etc.). Many arriving families lived at no cost with distant relatives or community members to help them get started.

Nand Kaur was the matriarch of the community, among whom she was called "Mom ji" and "Mama Ji."[9] In a 1984 film about her life, she shared how happy she felt to finally enjoy the company of other Punjabi women: "It was great. I had people to talk to… I had nice friends. I was less lonely in those days! [She laughs.] They were very good to me."[10] Nand Kaur, who enjoyed friendships with a diverse array of women and men, still craved the company of other women from Punjab. She had spent 25 years as the only Punjabi Sikh woman in Yuba City before others joined her. Nand Kaur's living room was her home office. Unable to drive, she exerted influence on the community's development (Figure 4.3).

Naur Kaur's husband or children frequently drove her to visit members of the local Sikh community to check in on their welfare and offer help. She advised the newcomers on how to dress in public to protect themselves against the hostility of their white neighbors. Harbhajan Kaur Takher recalled Nand Kaur's motherly advice that was designed to protect her from harm: "'You should dress appropriately when you go out. You should wear [American] dresses and pants.'"[11]

Nand Kaur was also a respected community leader, the only woman at the time to occupy this role. When a female dignitary arrived at the Stockton Gurdwara in 1949, Nand Kaur placed a garland around her neck on behalf of the entire community as a sign of respect—showing that Nand Kaur, although a woman, was a leader in the Punjabi Sikh community. At the local annual Indian Republic Day events hosted by the Indo-American Cultural Society, Nand Kaur was also the only woman who spoke publicly as a community leader.

The Punjabi women formed intimate, overlapping circles of female friendships during these years. In the fifties and sixties, many Punjabi Mexican American families experienced class mobility. In the late 1940s, men from Punjab arrived who were more educated and spoke English fluently—they became the community's doctors and engineers and successful businessmen. These men and their wives socialized with a wider circle of people from a diverse array of faith backgrounds within and beyond the local Punjabi

Figure 4.3 Nand Kaur, 1983, Yuba City, CA.
Permission by Puna Singh and Nand Kaur family.

community. Other families were raised with little education in rural Punjab, interacted less with members of the broader American society, and tended to be more devout. However, the boundaries between these different groups were porous and overlapping. Intimate ties of friendship and support across cultural and faith backgrounds were common at this time when the South Asian community was small and tight-knit.

The women at the core of this study came from farming families in rural Punjab. Their lives centered around faith gatherings and later the local gurdwara. These families, especially the women, were close, routinely visiting each other's homes unannounced. During one group interview, Bakshish

Kaur Mann pointed to her friend and fondly recalled how she would often call her, exclaiming: "I've made tea. Come on over!" (Maiṇ chāh baṇāī … ā jā!) The women socialized with the warm hospitality of rural Punjab.

The newly-arrived women who spoke only Punjabi from villages frequently gathered on each other's farms. "Five or six of us would get together. We would cook and talk. We would go together to town," Harbhajan Kaur Takher recalled.[12] On the Fourth of July, the women would socialize together in Chico or on the banks of a nearby river with their husbands and children. In Harbhajan's recollection: "Everyone would make food. Someone would cook pakoras. Some would make samosas. Someone else would make roti. The kids would play there, and everyone would get together and talk."[13]

When they weren't together, the women spent hours talking to their female friends on shared phone lines called "party lines." They used phones with 20-foot cords to talk while they completed their household chores. Few women in this cohort could drive. When their children grew up, they would drive their mothers around town for social visits and doctor's appointments. The phone was their lifeline, easing their isolation and boredom while their husbands worked. Their children recalled their mothers talking with each other on the phone for hours each day.

Women played a key role in making California's Punjabi farm businesses successful in the 1950s and 1960s, at a critical turning point after South Asian Americans regained the right to own land. After World War II, Punjabi Americans from across the western United States moved to Yuba City to farm peaches and join the local community. Growing peaches provided a quick return on investment, but it also required intensive labor (La Brack 1988). Punjabi farmers carried their social conservatism about women working outside the home with them to the United States, considering "it shameful for [women] to be seen doing physical labor in the fields or canneries."[14] By the 1970s, however, the stigma about women working outside the home decreased. To recover their initial investment, the work of women and children in the family farm businesses was essential. Initially, Harbhajan Kaur Takher, one of the women known for her exceptional labor in farm operations, recalled that she would irrigate 40 acres of land, drive the tractor, pick prunes, and take peaches to the stations for processing. Many wives of Punjabi farmers increasingly took part in the management of the business operations in the family farms. In the sixties and seventies, Sikh women began working in local canneries during the summertime to supplement the family income. For some of the first generation of Sikh women in Yuba City, the cannery was the first space in which they interacted with diverse women outside the community.

For especially devout Sikh families, the step of transitioning from living in the farm labor camps to family-owned homes was essential for building a Sikh community and, eventually, a local gurdwara. Only a small minority of Sikhs in the world assume the great responsibility of taking care of the *GGS* at home each day, as well as the heightened discipline of adhering to the

code of conduct and ethics expected of each member of the household. A few families took the initiative to install the scripture in their homes.[15] The home of Swarn Kaur Johl, the woman who was well-versed in Sikh scripture, was one of the main gathering places for devout local Sikhs to perform religious rites and devotional kirtans. These informal gatherings played a critical role in the process of community building.

Sangrands: A Sikh Community Forged by Devotional Music

During the 1960s, the small Sikh community in the Yuba City area started to meet for Sangrand, the first day of the month in the Punjabi calendar. During these gatherings, an intimate circle of families listened to and sang hymns from the *GGS*. Over the course of the decade, a tight-knit community was forged by music in monthly gatherings that eventually led to the building of a local gurdwara in 1970. It is important to note that there is no significance given to performing devotional services at certain times in Sikhi—every moment is equally sacred. Monthly Sangrand gatherings have been part of Sikh devotional practice throughout Sikh history. For many Sikhs, these gatherings foster unity and offer a space for reflecting on and connecting to the principles and values in Sikhi.

At the heart of these Sangrand gatherings was the recitation of the Barah Mah, the song of the twelve months from the *GGS*. Both Guru Nanak and Guru Arjan composed Barah Mah compositions to emphasize the deeper meaning of the purpose of life in relation to the soul's journey in uniting with the Divine One (Guru Nanak, *GGS*: 1107–10 and Guru Arjan, *GGS*: 133–36). In this poetic composition, the blessed bride is the protagonist of a spiritual quest to unite with her Divine Groom. Her journey is set amidst the sensuous backdrop of the changing seasons, each of which carries powerful emotions in the poetic and faith traditions in North India (Orsini 2006; Orsini 2010; Rajamani, et al., 2018). The bride embodies the most intense anguish felt by the devout who long to be united with the divine. The bride alone feels the torture of separation from her Divine Groom, as well as their enraptured union.

Here, I seek to understand what meanings the families, especially women, created in listening to and performing this poetic composition with the bride as protagonist on a spiritual quest for the divine. I incorporate oral narratives of participants to create a history from the bottom up of the early devotional life of Yuba City's Sikh community, as well as how these performances created the momentum that led to community building.[16]

Stockton formed the center of the South Asian American community until at least the 1970s before other gurdwaras were established. Families drove three hours on backroads from Yuba City to Stockton to attend gurdwara services. Due to the long journey, Yuba City families would visit the gurdwara only a few times each year. "We would celebrate Vaisakhi there. We would feel very happy there. We would have *langar* [blessed food] there. It

was very tasty. They used to make it with joy," remembered Harbhajan Kaur Takher.[17] Veena Singh reminisced about the excitement everyone felt about the trip: "We would start preparing two months in advance."[18] Families would buy new clothes in preparation for visiting the Stockton Gurdwara, which combined the excitement of a family reunion, a *mela* (festival), and a spiritual gathering.

Before the 1970s, California's Sikh community did not follow the standard protocol in their gurdwaras. It is customary to enter the gurdwara wearing a head covering and after removing footwear in order to show respect to the *Guru Granth Sahib*. However, the early Sikh American community diverged from this practice. Following American customs, many (but not all) Sikhs in California used to remove their hats, wear shoes, and sit on chairs in the main prayer hall of the Stockton Gurdwara. The "old-timers" who had lived in the United States for decades believed it was possible, and even important, to modernize their devotional practices and adopt American customs while still adhering to the core values of the faith. (Figure 4.4)

The handful of Sikh families that organized and hosted these gatherings formed a tight-knit community.

Figure 4.4 Balbir and Gian Kaur Bains Wedding in the Stockton Gurdwara, March 30, 1964, Stockton, CA.

Courtesy of Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara.

Surjit Kaur Bhatti: We would make the food together. We made the decisions together.
Bakshish Kaur Mann: There was a lot of love between everyone then.
Harbhajan Kaur Takher: We lived like brothers and sisters. Everyone was family. That is how it felt then.

For the children attending these gatherings, the small community felt like an extended family:

> Being in a small-knit community, the relationship of all the families was very close. I think it was due to the fact that all of families were at the same social level at that time… you had joint families all living together and that contributed a lot to the closeness of individual families, and the families of Yuba City overall.[19]

The Sangrand programs were held in the participating family homes on a rotating basis. According to participating families, community members well versed in the *GGS* would recite the Barah Mah and other hymns in a ceremony lasting two to three hours. The ceremonies often occurred in the evenings or in the mornings during the weekend. If they were held in the morning, sometimes *āsa dī vār* ("the ballad of hope") was performed. Families enjoyed langar that the women prepared on site or potluck style, and some men joined the women in preparing the meals. Sikh men in the community in the 1960s knew how to cook due to their years living as bachelors abroad.

The song of the twelve months, the central scripture recited in the Sangrand gatherings, follows a female figure, the bride, in her spiritual journey at the start of each month of the Punjabi calendar. Guru Arjan asks how humanity can cross the world-ocean to achieve liberation from the cycle of rebirth. It is the blessed bride who navigates the community on her spiritual journey in uniting with the Divine One. She embodies the virtues of a person steadfastly focused on the divine, and who possesses the spiritual strength to surrender herself and her ego in her love for the divine. She represents the antithesis of people who drown in worldly pleasures, and as a result, remain stuck in the mud of attachment.

In her analysis of the Barah Mah, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh asserts that the bride is a central feminine figure in Sikhi as "the symbol for the presence of the Divine Spirit intimately within each of us" (Singh 1993, 96). In Guru Nanak's version of this hymn, the bride imagines the divine husband to be like "a deep and unfathomable ocean full of precious jewels—gahir gambhīr sāgar ratnāgar" (Guru Nanak, *GGS*: 1233 as translated by Singh 1993, 97).

On the bride's journey from spiritual isolation toward merging with her Divine Beloved, her feelings of anguish living apart from her divine lover are set against the sensuous backdrop of the shifting seasons. After the scorching

heat of the month of Hāṛ, nature rejoices when the monsoon rains arrive during the month of Sāvaṇ: "the drops of divine nectar are so beautiful! Meeting the Holy Saint, we drink these in" ("har amrit būṇd suhāvalī mil sādhū pīvaṇhāru" || Guru Arjan, *GGS*: 134). But the bride's thirst remains unquenched as she continues to pine for her husband, who is far away in distant lands ("pir pardesi sidhāe") (Guru Nanak, *GGS*: 1108). Fierce lightning and thunderstorms frighten her; she writhes in agony in bed. With the onset of fall, the light of each passing day grows dimmer and darkness grows, mirroring the bride's advancing age. The appearance of white flowers is likened to the bride's graying hair. The bride fears aging and her growing awareness of her own mortality as death approaches, represented by the approach of winter.

With the arrival of early winter, "the bride listens to the praise of her Divine Groom through song, music, and poetry, and her sorrow departs—gīta nād kavit kave suṇi rāmnāmi dukhu bhāgai" (Guru Nanak, *GGS*: 1109, translated by Singh 1993, 103).

Winter brings the pilgrimage season. In India, in winter, millions travel to *tirthas*—the confluences of holy rivers—to wash away their sins and obtain salvation. The bride realizes that there is no need to travel to the holy rivers, as the sacred rivers flow within herself:

The month of Magha is pure,
water crossings are seen within.
Find the beloved spontaneously,
immerse in virtues,
and find yourselves embraced.
Listen, beloved, my handsome Prabh,
if my body soaks up your virtues,
I will please you,
I'll bathe in the sacred waters.
The Ganga, Jamuna, their confluence with Sarasvati, and
the seven seas
will be my sacred dip.
My charity, almsgiving, and worship are Paramesaru,
the one supreme ruler known across time.
Nanak: in Magh our supreme joy is to remember Hari,
that's our immersion in the sixty-eight water crossings.

Māgh punīt bhaī tīrath aṇtar jāniā ||
Sājan sahaj mile guṇ geh aṇk samāniā ||
Prītam guṇ aṇke suṇ prabh baṇke tudh bhāvā ser nāvā ||
Gaṇg jamun tah beṇī saṇgam sāt samuṇd samāvā ||
Puṇ dān pūjā parmesur jug jug eko jātā ||
Nanak māgh mahā ras har jap aṭhsaṭh tīrath nātā ||

(Guru Nanak, GGS: 1109, translation by Singh 2022, 251)

Additionally, the bride now sees that the sacred rivers of India and the oceans are interconnected. She communes with the natural world holistically through the remembrance of the divine: "The very self becomes the center of all the variegated places of pilgrimage," Singh explains (Singh 1993, 104–5).

In the poetic imagination of Barah Mah, there are deeply interwoven associations between the feminine, the aqueous, and the musical. The bride integrates both space and temporality in her search across the twelve months for the Timeless One (*Akāl Purakh*). The process of incorporating the divine inside the bride's body is symbolized by water, which is associated with the monsoon season. Monsoon rains, for instance, are envisioned as pouring down toward the earth where they are poetically imagined as transforming into sacred nectar that trickles down the bride's throat.

Hear me, Hari, bathed in my lover's love,
mind and body soak and steep in you,
unable to forget you for an instant.
How can an instant slip?
I offer myself to you,
I live only to sing your praise.

Tū suṇ har ras bhiṇe prītam āpaṇe ||
Man tan ravat ravaṇe ghaṛī na bīsrai ||
Kiu ghaṛī bisārī hu balihārī hu jīvā guṇ gāe ||
(Guru Nanak, GGS: 1107 as translated by Singh 2022, 235).

It is through the act of devotional singing that the bride realizes that the divine resides within her. Guru Arjan offers a powerful image of women leading the way toward spiritual liberation by singing together: "Join with me, my sisters, and sing the praises of the Divine Spirit" ("mil sahīā maṇgal gāvahī gīt goviṇd alāi" || *GGS*: 136). The blessed bride is the embodiment of an enlightened Sikh due to her unique combination of virtues and qualities—her tenacity in seeking her lover, as well as her single-minded devotion, resourcefulness, and wisdom, within a nuptial relationship in which she ultimately yields her soul and her body to the Divine One. It is through the practice of devotional singing that the illusion of separation dissolves, thus awakening and attuning her soul to a continual state of divine bliss. She becomes *Jīvan Muktā*—liberated while still alive.

The Sikh community drew closer together as they listened to this hymn during their monthly gatherings. Few women, and only a handful of men, in the Yuba City area could proficiently recite the *Guru Granth Sahib* in the 1960s.[20] Those well-versed in the scripture would recite Guru Arjan's Barah Mah composition during the Sangrand gatherings. This first-hand perspective of a teenager captures the sonic and affective atmosphere in which his

father, Swaran Singh, played the brass cymbals, he accompanied him on the tabla drums, and Khazan Singh Johl played the harmonium. Baldev S. Chima recalls: "the whole room would fill with the *sangat* [congregation] reciting the shabad. The street and orchards would come alive with the sacred music."[21] Everyone interviewed emphasized the strong ethos of unity, affection, and social equality in these informal gatherings.

Most women participated in the devotional worship through listening and joining the communal devotional singing from the scripture. Few women were able to read or recite the scripture, and none enjoyed access to musical training in their youth living in Punjabi villages in the 1930s and 1940s. Music scholar Gurinder Kaur Bhogal notes that historically, most Sikh women were not permitted to receive, nor did they have access to, a musical education. These informal sonic gatherings have played an important role historically and into the present for Sikh women by creating "a space for women to collectively interpret the Guru's message through sound" (Bhogal 2017, 52).

Elderly Sikh women in Yuba City spoke of the congenial, informal atmosphere in the community in the 1960s:

Harbhajan Kaur Takher: The men all knew how to cook.
Surjit Kaur Bhatti: Some people sang.
Harbhajan Kaur Takher: Whoever knew how to sing. [Laughing]

The body language among this group of friends in the group interview evinced a relaxed, informal sociality reserved for family gatherings. After Harbhajan took the lead in speaking up, the other women felt emboldened to share their life experiences and opinions publicly in their film interviews with me.

Even without formal musical training, women (and men) accrued spiritual benefits through the act of focused listening. Within Sikh metaphysics, listening to sacred music is as powerful as performing it. Each morning Sikhs recite the Japjī Sāhib poem by Guru Nanak in which he dedicates four stanzas to the spiritual benefits of listening to sacred music. This refrain is repeated four times for emphasis: "Nanak: the devout enjoy bliss forever, listening removes all suffering and evil" ("nānak bhagta sadā vigās suṇiai dūkh pāp kā nās" ‖ Guru Nanak, *GGS*: 3, as translated by Singh 2022, 9). Through the act of listening, the devout are transported to a feeling of peace and communion with the divine (Singh 2006, and Singh 2014)—an inclusive practice that allowed women to accrue the same spiritual benefits as men. As Inderjit N. Kaur articulates the many benefits that listening to sacred music is thought to bring, including "virtuous living, union with the divine, peace, and healing" (Kaur 2018, 30).

Guru Arjan's Barah Mah is didactic, offering teachings to guide the devout in overcoming the temptations and challenges brought with the shifting seasons. During the month of Jeṭh, for instance, the Guru encourages the faithful

to abandon their egotism and materialism. But, as one woman explained to me: "Every month on Sangrand we listen to Barah Mah and hear the Guru Arjan's teachings we're supposed to remember that month. Of course, we don't always follow them."[22]

The act of embodied listening to the Barah Mah musical poetry together in an egalitarian setting provided a space for women to collectively interpret sacred music from the context of their affective lives in a new diasporic setting. This poem is a woman-centered quest for relief from the obstacles and pain of life. The space of the Sangrand gatherings enabled women to experience a new-found agency in their devotional lives as well as their female friendships, families, and the collective nucleus of a community.

In my group interview with the elderly female participants, they expressed their self-respect and collective agency in making decisions together. This contrasted with how they portrayed their lack of agency in marriage and coming to the United States, using phrases such as: "the husbands made the decisions," "it was arranged by the family," and "we weren't consulted."[23] Additionally, the setting for the performance of devotional music in the homes of a core group of families provided an extension of the sphere of women's influence—the home, especially the kitchen and the prayer room, was associated with women's influence and authority in their faith and in taking care of the family. From this perspective, the Sangrands offered a sound bridge between the private and the public spheres in the Sikh community represented by the local gurdwara after it opened in 1970. A central importance of the Sangrand gatherings for these elderly women is that they marked time according to the Punjabi calendar. These women lived in a world shaped by the shifting months and seasons of Punjab, as well as the rhythms of farming in the Sacramento Valley.

Building Yuba City's First Gurdwara

The Sangrand gatherings also sparked momentum among a cohesive, energized working group of dedicated volunteers that led to the construction of the first local gurdwara. According to community member Baldev S. Singh: "The concept of building a Gurdwara in Yuba City and the $5,000 seed money became the greatest contributions of the Sangrand families to the local Sikh Punjabi community."[24] As the Sikh community in Yuba City grew larger in the 1960s, and a tight-knit group met regularly for the Sangrand gatherings, "the families in the Yuba City area had a realization that it was too far to go [to Stockton] and maybe we can build a gurdwara closer."[25] Nand Kaur, the first Sikh woman to settle in Yuba City and a local community leader, appears to have been a driving force, expressing a maternal concern that local children frequently missed school on Mondays after making the long trip to Stockton on the weekend. Although this is largely forgotten in the collective memory of local Sikhs, Puna Singh and Nand Kaur were the first to step forward to realize the community's dream of establishing a local gurdwara. During the Vaisakhi harvest festival in April 1964, their

family donated one acre of land for the purpose of building a gurdwara on Walton Avenue in Yuba City. Later, the Walton Avenue site was put aside by community members in favor of a larger site on the west side of town (Figure 4.5).

There was a broad mobilization in the Sikh community in the 1960s to establish the first local gurdwara. Community members devoted their seva

Figure 4.5 Nand Kaur and her husband, Puna Singh, donated land for a Yuba City Gurdwara. Vaisakhi, 1964, Yuba City, CA.

Credit: Appeal Democrat.

(voluntary service) according to their means and abilities according to the three types of community service in Sikhi—physical labor, intellectual and creative talent, and financial donations. They performed the time-consuming work of canvassing for donations. The most educated and well-connected who were fluent in English, such as Mehar Singh Tumber, Hari Singh Everest, and Harbhajan S. Johl, played key roles in the formal planning process (e.g., writing the by-laws, working with the architect, garnering support from city officials, and obtaining the necessary permits). Those who had the financial means gave their wealth in the form of land and capital.[26] The Purewal family donated the land, and several community members gave substantial donations. Additionally, the Sangrands encouraged dozens of community members to make small financial donations toward building a local gurdwara. By today's standards, the sums appear modest, but they represent significant contributions for these families in the process of growing their farm businesses in the 1960s. Some families gave their life savings.

Many members of the community coalesced in a grassroots effort to establish a local gurdwara. Two women in the Purewal family signed the deed for donating three acres of land for the gurdwara,[27] together with their husbands.[28] Harbhajan Kaur Takher concisely summarized the broad community support: "Everybody gave money. We also gave money. The Purewal family gave the land."[29] Today, only the names of the patriarchs of the founding families are listed on a plaque that is prominently displayed on the façade near the front entrance to the Yuba City Gurdwara on Tierra Buena Road. The broader community's involvement in establishing the gurdwara remains publicly unacknowledged.

Creating Women's Spaces in Gurdwaras through Singing and Seva

The Yuba City Gurdwara and its Nagar Kirtan are closely associated with the leadership of Didar Singh Bains and his family in the global Punjabi imaginary. Women have rarely participated in the management of Yuba City gurdwaras.[30] Today, gurdwara management in Yuba City is exclusively male, and few are aware that women have ever served in management positions. Here I illuminate the essential role of women's extensive contributions to the functioning of the Yuba City gurdwara throughout its history on a daily basis.

Nand Kaur was the only Sikh woman among the "old-timers" (as they are locally known) who acted as a spokesperson for Yuba City's Sikh community. In a 1977 newspaper article, Nand Kaur explained the value of Sikh traditions in a personal and direct way that people unfamiliar with her faith could grasp. She talked about the meaning and emotions involved in preparing and sharing the holy pudding with other Sikhs: "If you have troubles, other people will share the burden, and if you're happy, you spread it around too."[31]

At most gurdwaras, the main prayer hall is gender segregated. After walking across the center aisle in order to pay respects to the *Guru Granth Sahib*,

women sit on the floor to the right and men sit on the floor to the left. The heart of the devotional experience is listening to hymns performed by *rāgis* (professional musicians) who are generally male, but can be female as well. Every gurdwara includes a langar hall, a communal kitchen in which meals are prepared and served to everyone regardless of their race, caste, or faith at no cost. As a symbol of their commitment to social equality, the congregation usually sits on the floor. Women's *seva* often takes place in the langar hall by preparing and serving langar, as well as cleaning the kitchen. Men also perform seva in the langar hall, but it is women who predominate in this space.

The women I interviewed spoke with self-respect about the seva they had performed together. The gurdwara formed the center of their world. Nearly every Sikh woman in the Yuba City area devoted a great deal of time to performing seva at the gurdwara. The Everests moved close to the gurdwara where they dedicated most of their free time. Amar Kaur Everest and Sham Kaur Johl frequently managed the langar hall. The other ladies remember Amar Kaur Everest as a strict boss of kitchen operations. Her son, Paramjit Singh Everest, recalls her many contributions to the gurdwara:

> My mom would often make the *kaṛa prashād* (blessed pudding) for the gurdwara. She taught the first *grantī* (priest) how to make it. She wanted to live very close to the gurdwara so she could go each day. For any function, she and the other ladies would prepare langar. She and the other ladies used to prepare all of the food for the local Sikh weddings.[32]

During the 1970s and 1980s, the women prepared the food for the weddings in the community. This involved an extraordinary degree of organization, planning, and labor in feeding dozens of people meals and sweets over the course of a full week of wedding celebrations. A scene from a beautiful short film about Nand Kaur's life captures the spirit of camaraderie among the women who sang together while forming and cooking rotis (Indian flatbread) by hand. Sham Kaur Johl, an experienced cook and close friend of Nand Kaur, supervised the preparation of the dal (lentil soup) and sabjis (vegetable curry dishes), tending to these dishes as they simmered in enormous metal pots on the stove. The only man present is Udham Singh Purewal, a large, muscular volunteer, who is remembered in the community's collective memory for his seva. He was seen frequently at the gurdwara making the dough for the rotis in a gigantic steel pot, which requires tremendous strength, dedication, and patience. The film captures a special moment in which women sing a folk song praising the glories of Guru Nanak while preparing langar. Among the lines they sing are:

> *Those who sing are saved, and those who listen are saved;*
> *all their sins are erased.*

> *Great is the door of Guru Nanak.*
> *I heard great praises and came.*
> *Great is the door of Guru Nanak.*
>
> *Gāvte udhareh suṇte udhareh binse pāp ghanere*
> *Ūcha dar bābe nānak dā*
> *Maiṇ sobhā suṇke āiā*
> *Ūcha dar bābe nānak dā*[33]

It is a joyful scene in which women created a strong sense of sacred space through devotional singing and seva. Harbans Kaur Panu described the sisterhood of friends who enjoyed performing *seva* at the gurdwara together:

> We would feel very excited going, volunteering, making the food and helping around. We used to make the food ourselves … We would go early in the morning [to] listen to the prayers. I used to go early in the morning, listen to the prayers for about an hour and then volunteer.[34]

This testimony shows Sikh women's extensive reliance on each other for emotional and practical support in almost every aspect of their lives. Several women shared that their female friendships were as important as their family ties:

> When I saw another Punjabi woman, I connected with her, I would think that's my Punjabi sister … You trusted them and could tell them your true feelings. In those times, there was a lot of love between the families.[35]

Immersing Oneself in a River of Sacred Nectar:

Women's Agency in "Taking Amrit"

The devotional life of Yuba City's Sikh community changed dramatically after the local gurdwara opened on December 18, 1970.[36] This was a period when Sikh preachers from India, Canada, England, and the greater Indian Ocean region traveled the world to reconnect diasporic Sikh communities to their faith. Two visits of Sikh missionaries remain vividly etched in the collective memory of the community for reviving Sikhi through the performance of Amrit ceremonies.[37]

The Amrit ceremony holds great significance for Sikhs. By completing the ceremony, the participant is fully initiated into the Sikh Order of Purity known as the Khalsa. Although often described as a brotherhood, the Khalsa is open to women and men of all backgrounds.

In 1699, Guru Gobind Singh created an army of warrior-saints in a dramatic event during the month of Vaisakhi, a time of renewal. The Khalsa was

formed when those present drank the Amrit that Guru Gobind Singh had created by stirring water in an iron vessel with a double-edged sword while chanting verses from the scripture. The devout believe that his wife, Mata Sahib Kaur, added sugar to the Amrit to balance its fierceness with sweetness. Together, Guru Gobind Singh and Mata Sahib Kaur are considered the Spiritual Father and Mother of the Khalsa.[38]

The Amrit ceremony is understood by Sikhs as incorporating the Divine One within the body and soul, as well as dedicating one's life to the ideals and way of life of the Khalsa. The deep significance of "taking Amrit" (as Sikhs refer to this ceremony) as a transformational act can be traced much earlier to the inception of Sikhi with Guru Nanak's divine revelation. While bathing in a river, Guru Nanak disappeared, and everyone except his sister feared he had drowned. However, when he emerged from the water after three days, he explained that after drinking sacred nectar from a cup containing the divine presence, he had experienced the true nature of reality for the first time.

Today, the Amrit ceremony also contains meanings that have gathered over the course of over 550 years of Sikh history. By taking Amrit, the faithful immerse themselves into the river of collective memory forged by the persecution and martyrdom of Sikhs. Each individual creates their own meaning of what the Amrit ceremony signifies in their lives. Members of the Khalsa wear the five articles of faith so that they are publicly identifiable as members of the Sikh community that is pledged to fulfill their duty in defending their faith as well as the most vulnerable in society. Being an *Amritdhāri* Sikh, one who is fully initiated into the Khalsa, involves great discipline, such as waking up before dawn to recite daily prayers and abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, and meat. Far more difficult is the inner cultivation of spiritual strengths (honesty, compassion, love, humility, and contentment) and the mitigation of weaknesses (attachment, anger, lust, greed, and selfish pride/egotism).[39] In daily life, however, there is a spectrum of belief and practice among Amritdhari Sikhs regarding their adherence to the Sikh Code of Conduct. Among the women in this study, some who had taken Amrit did not strictly adhere to the prescribed rules. For instance, one woman continued to eat meat; others admitted that they did not recite all of the prayers each day. In other words, the elderly women in this study who took Amrit tended to be more pragmatic and flexible in their adherence to the Sikh Code of Conduct. Others strictly adhered to this disciplined lifestyle.

On the Vaisakhi holiday in April 1973, Sant Amar Singh from Punjab, together with four other missionaries from India, England, and Malaysia, performed an Amrit ceremony at Yuba City's gurdwara.[40] Believing that the local community had strayed far from traditional Sikhi in their knowledge and practice, Amar Singh made several exceptions to the traditional performance of Amrit ceremonies to encourage local Sikhs, whom he felt had lapsed, to "return to Sikhi" (this is the phrase used by the people I interviewed). Although usually private, the Yuba City Amrit ceremonies in the 1970s were publicly announced in the newspaper along with photographs

to educate the community about the value of taking Amrit. Additionally, Amar Singh gave Amrit to women whose husbands chose not to participate (and to men whose wives did not). This diverged from common practice, in which both husband and wife take Amrit together so that they can support each other in maintaining a disciplined lifestyle. But Amar Singh believed it was necessary to adopt greater flexibility in the diaspora to inspire Sikhs to rejoin the Khalsa.

In the 1970s, the charismatic missionary Mihan Singh of Canada also performed large Amrit ceremonies in which more than thirty Sikhs participated, including many women interviewed in this book.[41] Recalling the Amrit ceremonies, the elderly women whom I interviewed spoke with excitement and joy about becoming fully initiated Sikhs together with their female friends. Harbhajan Kaur Takher reminisced: "We took Amrit together. Harbhajan Kaur [Purewal], and Swarn Kaur was with us too. All of us." These women felt that taking Amrit was an empowering act. They spoke of becoming Amritdhari as joining a sisterhood. (Figure 4.6)

Most noteworthy is the fact that women such as Harbhajan Kaur Takher took Amrit even though their husbands chose not to participate. A woman who grew up in rural Punjab in the 1930s was making a significant act of self-assertion by taking Amrit without her husband. This decision meant that the lives of husband and wife would diverge, spiritually and in their

Figure 4.6 A rare public photograph of women taking Amrit together, Yuba City Gurdwara on Tierra Buena Road, April 1973, Yuba City, CA.

Credit: Appeal Democrat.

daily routines. They also kept different company. The act of taking Amrit expressed women's solidarity with their female friends as well as other Amritdhari Sikhs. The ceremony bound this circle of intimates even closer to each other.

Swarn Kaur Johl assumed a respected position in the local community due to her ability to recite the *GGS* in Sikh ceremonies. Formal faith ceremonies in the Sikh community only required the presence of the scripture and five Amritdhari Sikhs. A priest was not necessary to officiate. In the words of Bhai Gurdas, the first scribe of the Sikh scripture: "One is a Sikh, two the true sangat (congregation), and in five resides the divine" ("ikk sikh dui sādh saṇg paṇj parmesar," Bhai Gurdas, Vār 13). Amritdhari women like Amar Kaur regularly joined the five Amritdhari Sikhs who performed continuous readings of the 1430 pages of the *Guru Granth Sahib* over the course of forty-eight hours. Today, these ceremonies generally take place in gurdwaras and are performed by male professional priests.

Taking Amrit was a woman's issue in a similar way that women's advocacy for temperance in early twentieth-century America was part of women's public assertion of their concerns and control over their family lives. In the families I interviewed, women sometimes took the lead role in encouraging their husbands to take Amrit. Swarn Kaur, for example, encouraged her husband. Although she had already completed the ceremony as a girl in India, Swarn Kaur took Amrit again in solidarity with her husband, relatives, and friends in the early 1970s.

For married couples who took Amrit together, the lives of their whole household changed dramatically. The early male Punjabi settlers were heavy drinkers, but most who took Amrit did not drink alcohol again. The daily routines and mindset of the family transformed. Before taking Amrit, the men tended to socialize together in the evenings. Afterward, the family activities were centered on daily prayers and seva at the gurdwara on the weekends. Their external appearance also changed dramatically. In the 1950s and 1960s, Sikhs in Yuba City fashioned themselves in the style of middle-class Americans in their clothing and hairstyles (Figure 4.7).

After taking Amrit, men and women wore the five articles of faith according to the Sikh Code of Conduct. Most visible were the men's turbans and long-flowing beards.

The women's appearance also changed as, after taking Amrit, they felt comfortable publicly wearing Punjabi outfits once again. By the 1970s, Punjabi American women finally felt free to choose how they would dress in public, wearing Punjabi or American clothes depending on the occasion and their personal preference (Figure 4.8).

Due to the small number of Amritdhari Sikhs in Yuba City, women played an especially active public role in their faiths in the 1960s and 1970s. The egalitarian Sangrand gatherings among the families that later founded the gurdwara also contributed to women's confidence.

After the gurdwara opened, a few women in the community openly disagreed with the decisions of its Executive Committee. One of the most

Figure 4.7 Harbhajan Kaur (standing) and Bakhtawar Singh Purewal, 1958, Yuba City, CA.

Courtesy of Sharon Singh.

controversial issues, ongoing today, concerned the presence of chairs. It was common practice in California gurdwaras until the late 1970s to include chairs in the langar hall, and even for a time in the main prayer hall. Many Sikhs, especially those who settled in the United States after the 1970s, believe in the importance of maintaining the core principle of equality in gurdwaras and especially in ensuring that no one is seated above the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Figure 4.8 Purewal family. Udham Singh and Preetam Kaur Purewal (seated). Gurmit Kaur Samra, Harbhajan Kaur Purewal, and Swarn Kaur Purewal (standing), August 14, 2004, Yuba City, CA.

Courtesy of Sharon Dhaliwal.

To do so is considered sacrilegious, as it challenges the supreme authority of the divine. This issue divided the community, with many opposing chairs in the gurdwara and others believing that the community should be able to choose where to sit. There was a consensus among the "old-timers"—including many women—that the gurdwara should include elevated seating for the elderly and others who found it difficult sitting on the floor as long as they sat below the *GGS*.

When the Yuba City Gurdwara first opened, the congregation sat on chairs in the prayer and langar halls. People even sat on chairs during the first weddings held in the main hall. By the late 1970s, the gurdwara management removed the chairs from the gurdwara to align with long-standing practice in Punjab, after the visiting Sikh missionaries urged them to do so. As a woman with strong convictions, Pritam Kaur Heir opposed the male leadership of the gurdwara on this and other issues. When there was an effort by management to remove the chairs, she and her friends held an all-night vigil sitting in which they chained themselves to the chairs and tables to prevent their removal from the langar hall. For Pritam, the chairs signified "paying respect to the *sevadars* [volunteers] who founded the gurdwara and

performed countless hours of service in the kitchen."[42] To this day, the presence of chairs remains a contentious issue in this gurdwara.

Leading Prayer Groups and Women's Singing Gatherings

Swarn Kaur may have been the first woman in the local Sikh community to start a prayer group. She was dedicated to Sikhi, often devoting hours to reciting the scripture each day. She was raised in a strict Amritdhari family in India, and her father, Ranjit Singh Grewal, was part of a tight-knit Sikh order. As a teenager, she took Amrit in India and participated in continuous recitations of the entire *GGS* over a forty-eight-hour period. Later, in Yuba City, she led an informal prayer group with women and some men in which they recited the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and she explained the meaning of the hymns. Joginder Kaur Dhaliwal, Swarn's sister, recalls fondly that her sister was like a second mother to her. Joginder would frequently seek Swarn Kaur's explanations for the meaning of the scripture. Swarn Kaur was an important source of spiritual knowledge for Sikh women in the Yuba City area.[43]

Later, Harbhajan Kaur Takhar and Harbhajan Kaur Purewal started a prayer group in which they recited Guru Arjan's Sukhmanī hymn on Tuesday mornings. Sukhmani, "the Pearl of Peace," spans thirty-five pages in the *GGS* and is one of the longest and most popular Sikh hymns (Guru Arjan, *GGS*: 262–96). Sukhmani is especially associated with women's prayer gatherings around the world. Its soothing musical quality, and its message, cultivates peace of mind. The final verse explains the benefits of singing Sukhmani for those who "remember the Divine constantly," all of their troubles subside—"suffering, sickness, fear, and duality." The hymn concludes, "The Nām (divine essence) is the pearl of peace—sukhmani" (ih guṇ nām sukhmanī ‖ Guru Arjan, *GGS*: 296 as translated by Singh 1995, 247).

In Sukhmani, the words and songs of the faithful are envisioned as jewels: "The words of the faithful are glorious; they are jewels most precious" ("utam slok sādh ke bachan ‖ amulīk lāl eh ratan" ‖ *GGS*: 295, as translated by Singh). The hymn extols good friends who sing divine praise together with one mind and one voice, and in so doing, fulfill their desires. For these elderly women who met with intimate friends they had known for decades and whom they loved like family, singing this hymn together was a powerfully uplifting experience. Sukhmani gatherings are support groups offering a space for the devout, particularly women, to escape from their worries and commune with intimates in divine worship. Sukhmani has a special quality in which if you recite it often, the melody and the words resonate within the mind long after reciting it.

Walking with the Maharāj: Women Journeying in Yuba City's Nagar Kirtan

Women played a prominent role in public expressions of the Sikh faith and identity in the early 1980s, particularly in Yuba City's "Sikh Parade," one of

the largest and most iconic South Asian festivals in the diaspora. During the first Sunday of November each year, approximately 100,000 people gather in this small town from as far away as India, England, and Canada. The festival has become increasingly commercialized with extensive shopping, carnival rides, jumbotrons blaring ads, and drones flying overhead that beam footage to global Punjabi TV stations. Few are aware of the event's historical and spiritual purpose, as well as the contributions of the local founding families of Yuba City's gurdwara, including women.

This event is a Nagar Kirtan, a traveling court of sacred music poetry in which pilgrims gather in a procession around town led by a float housing the *Guru Granth Sahib* (Kaur 2021). Pilgrims perform devotional music and distribute langar in a shared celebration of the Sikh values of service, mutual aid, and collective devotion. At the heart of this three-day event are continuous recitations of the scripture inside the gurdwara. After the scripture is recited, the *Guru Granth Sahib* is placed on a float that circumambulates the center of town before returning home to the gurdwara. Sikhs believe the *GGS* is the Eternal Living Guru, which is referred to as the King of Kings, or *Mahārāj*, presiding over the procession atop a throne (the float).

Yuba City's Nagar Kirtan, first held on November 9, 1980, reflects the unique history of this Sikh community. It is extraordinary that the local Sikh community would inaugurate such a public display of the Sikh faith and Punjabi culture amidst the hostile racial climate of the town when it began. During preparations for the first Nagar Kirtan, there was great apprehension that it would be accompanied by violence.[44] Fortunately, the event was peaceful. The mood was serene among the nearly 9000 pilgrims who participated. Also notable is the active participation of white Sikhs in the parade who follow a variant of Sikhi known as Sikh Dharma. The faithful walked, absorbed in prayer, beside the simple float past the orchards. The event combines a commemoration of the installation of the *GGS* in 1604 and publicly celebrates the Sikh faith and cultural identity.[45]

For the core group of families who founded the local gurdwara, this event marked the first time they publicly expressed their faith and culture together after years of feeling pressured to adopt American cultural norms. The women I interviewed beamed with joy as they described how they felt during Yuba City's first Nagar Kirtan:

Harbhajan Kaur Takher: It was beautiful!
Surjit Kaur Bhatti: There was a lot of happiness.
Harbhajan Kaur Takher: There was happiness and joy. We were walking together with our Mahārāj.

The women in this study experienced this event from its epicenter. Together with the men, they walked beside the float carrying the *GGS*, whom they described as their Maharaj – their sovereign and Eternal Guru.

Figure 4.9 Nagar Kirtan parade, 1981, Yuba City.
Photograph by Manohar Singh Grewal.

One of the fascinating aspects of the early Nagar Kirtans in Yuba City was the inclusion of five women who participated in the procession by standing behind the male *Panj Piare* (Five Beloved Ones) (Figure 4.9).

These five women also walked on one side of the float carrying the *Guru Granth Sahib*, with the male Panj Piare on the other side. In Figure 4.10, Harbhajan Kaur Takher leads the group of five female devotees while proudly holding a large sword in a display of strength and leadership (Figure 4.10).

Women were especially visible participants in Yuba City's Nagar Kirtan during the first decade. The prominence of the founding families, especially the women, diminished amidst the sea of crowds that grew over the years. These female volunteers did remain actively engaged in the preparations for Nagar Kirtan, however. They performed seva in the langar hall daily starting two months in advance. Closer to the event, women prepared sweets and other forms of langar in staggering quantities (Figure 4.11).

There are local traditions in Yuba City's Nagar Kirtan that are not visible to the public, but that reflect the local community's collective memory honoring the contributions of the founding families to the gurdwara. One such custom is the halting of the Nagar Kirtan float in front of the homes of the

Figure 4.10 Nagar Kirtan, 1981, Yuba City, CA. Harbhajan Kaur Takher walks on the right.

Photograph by Manohar Singh Grewal.

founding families on the procession route. In the past, the procession would halt in front of the home of Dr Gurbachan S. Janda and his wife, Gurdia, so that they could pay their respects by placing a garland of flowers on the *GGS* and the Five Beloved Sikhs. In 2019, Surjit Kaur Tumber performed this custom in front of her family house on Tharp Road.

Women from the founding families of this gurdwara felt a special connection to their local Nagar Kirtan, continuing traditions held by their families and female friends. They prepared the langar, such as sweets, food, and other supplies, two months in advance. Other families would distribute langar from their homes on the parade route. Others continue to sponsor continuous recitations of the *GGS* beginning in September. The special daily kirtans performed by renowned musicians from Punjab at the Tierra Buena Gurdwara also begin at this time. Therefore, Yuba City's local Sikh community enjoys a continuous celebration of faith, service, and sacred music during the fall season after the end of the intensive harvest of peaches and other crops. It is a collective rejuvenation of the community and faith over the course of two months rather than the general public's carnivalesque experience of the Sunday parade. As seen in Figure 4.12, this was also a special time for women to spend with intimate friends with whom they had shared most of their lives.

Figure 4.11 Women preparing langar during Nagar Kirtan, 2008, Yuba City, CA. Photograph by Manohar Singh Grewal.

Reflections

In this chapter, I have addressed three compelling questions of concern to scholars interested in gender and migration, as well as music and faith, involving diasporic women's adjustments and contributions to California communities: How did gender norms change in the Sikh diaspora after women arrived in the mid-century? Why were Sikh women able to exercise a greater degree of agency in their faith during this particular place and time in a rural California community in the last half of the twentieth century? And, what confluence of circumstances, combined with their own efforts, encouraged women of this generation to project their voices through speech and song? Moreover, I framed women's experience of migration within a Sikh worldview that is deeply tied to the oceanic, metaphorically and metaphysically.

These women crossed multiple oceans before settling in California between the late 1940s and 1969, and they understood their life journeys within the dominant metaphor in Sikhi involving crossing the terrifying world-ocean. As women in a farming community, their survival and prosperity involved the work of bringing water to the farmlands. Metaphorically, anchoring this analysis in Sikh water ontology is also useful as a de-colonial tool in dissolving the binaries in Western thought to explore the continuities in pre-colonial

Figure 4.12 Friends enjoying Nagar Kirtan (front row, left to right)

Rajinder K. Takhar, Gain K. Mann, Harbhajan K. Purewal, Swarn K. Johl, Darshan K. Johl, Shindo Dharni, and Hardev K. Mann, (second row, left to right) Gurmit K. Samra, Harbhajan K. Takher, Naranjan K. Basrai, Gurmit K. Takhar, and Swarno K. Johl. 2008, Yuba City, CA. Photograph by Manohar Singh Grewal.

understandings of community, faith, and gender in the Sikh worldview. The oceanic framework is useful for understanding the complex circulation of Sikh traditions and music in the diaspora, as well as the ebbs and flows in women's transformations of self and identity.

This generation of women experienced an unusual arc of cultural adjustment in which they were initially pressured to wear Western clothes and shed their cultural and faith traditions before readopting them when they felt safer to do so again beginning in the 1970s. Using the boat and the ocean metaphor, this cohort of women experienced unprecedented challenges, weathering years of isolation far from their birth families and their familiar world in Punjab. Finding themselves marooned on farms in rural California, women found succor in each other's company, talking on the phone and eventually forming devotional communities. They faced a loosening of patriarchal controls in their daily lives outside of Punjab in Yuba City for a variety of reasons, including the farm labor shortage that necessitated women's entry into the workplace, and the absence of extended kin who would likely have

enforced patriarchal norms abroad. However, this cohort of women also endured new forms of racial and religious discrimination in American society. The open, egalitarian atmosphere of the social and devotional Sangrand gatherings narrated the journey of the bride who reunited with her Divine Groom. It is not difficult to understand why women would relate to the blessed bride's predicament as they experienced the pain of separation and created enduring bonds through listening to and performing music together. The Barah Mah hymn concerns the individual's search for relief from life's hardships and pain through communcal singing. These women's faith, combined with their female support networks and devotional singing, afforded them greater resilience in the face of formidable challenges in their daily lives.

The informal, egalitarian nature of the small Sikh community in the decades after World War II provided a space for women to publicly express themselves through diverse devotional practices. Each woman's participation differed according to her interests and abilities. The community's matriarch, Nand Kaur, led planning and fundraising for the gurdwara along with the men. Swarn Kaur and Amar Kaur Everest, well-versed in Gurbani, would recite the scripture in Sikh ceremonies and play leadership roles in their seva at the gurdwara. Harbhajan Kaur Takher took the life-transforming step of taking Amrit even without her husband and walked alongside the Nagar Kirtan float with sword in hand. And nearly every woman in the community joined together in singing folk songs inspired by the Sikh scripture in praise of the Divine One, performing countless hours of seva with their families and friends.

In contrast to the male-centric scholarship about the performance of bhangra in Punjab and the diaspora, this work is anchored in women's sacred music. This generation of women displayed their great dedication to Sikhi, centering their lives on the gurdwara and the community, who, due to their limited access to education and musical training, drew from folk traditions to express their devotion in simplified verse and melody. More research on the beliefs and practice of Sikhi among various communities along gender, caste, class, and regional lines are needed to understand the rich diversity of Sikh devotional life in the diaspora. In the next chapter, I turn to a new development in the identity and musical expression of elderly Sikh women in California in which they composed original songs about their lives.

Notes

1 "Raising of the Sikh Flag," *Appeal Democrat* (Yuba City), December 1, 1969.
2 "Women and Gender in Sikhi," State of the Panth Report 9, Sikh Research Institute, April 2023, https://sikhri.org/articles/women-gender-in-sikhi.
3 According to official records, 6,656 Indians arrived in the United States between 1899 and 1913. See also Jensen, *Passage from India*. The size of the Indian American community in 1940 is derived from the U.S. Census (Sanjoy Chakravorty, Devesh Kapur, and Nirvikar Singh, *The Other One Percent: Indians in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 14).

4 Approximately 1,800 to 2,000 illegal immigrants from South Asia entered the United States between 1920 and 1935. Chakravorty, *The Other One Percent*, 18.
5 Leonard, *The South Asian Americans*, 46–56.
6 Sikh American women, second group, interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
7 Harbans Kaur Panu interview by Nicole Ranganath, December 18, 2017, Yuba City, CA. The use of "Hindu" as a pejorative insult for all South Asian Americans reflected ignorance about the diversity of South Asian religions, especially the predominance of followers of the Sikh faith among South Asian Americans until after the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act.
8 Verinder Kaur Kajla interview by Nicole Ranganath, December 18, 2017, Yuba City.
9 To learn more about the early Punjabi Sikh women in northern California, visit the "Women's Gallery" in the UC Davis *Punjabi and Sikh Diaspora Digital Archive*. Raj Kor (as her name was spelled) played an important role in establishing the family nursery business in the Roseville area with her son, Paritam Singh Poonian.
10 Shroff, *Sweet Jail: The Sikhs of Yuba City*.
11 Harbhajan Kaur Takher interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
12 Ibid.
13 Sikh American women, first group, interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
14 See Margaret A. Gibson, *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikh Immigrants in an American High School* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 56.
15 Based on Hari Singh Everest's meticulous notes and my interviews, the households that housed the *Guru Granth Sahib* in the Yuba City area before 1970 included but may not be exclusive to: Ajmer Singh and Amar Kaur Bains family, Ganda Singh Heir family, Karm Singh and Swarn Kaur Johl family, Udham Singh and Preetam Kaur Purewal and Bakhtawar Singh and Harbhajan Kaur Purewal families, and Hari Singh and Amar Kaur Everest family.
16 From the documentary history of the El Sobrante Gurdwara, it appears that the Sangrand gatherings in Berkeley in the 1960s and 1970s helped galvanize the Bay Area community to build its first gurdwara in El Sobrante that opened in 1980. Prithvi Singh, "Sikh Interfaith Journey," undated, YouTube video, https://youtube.com/watch?v=qwo4VJw2mJc.
17 Harbhajan Kaur Takher interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
18 Sikh American women, second group, interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
19 Baldev Singh Chima interview by Nicole Ranganath, December 19, 2016, Yuba City, CA. I am grateful to Baldev S. Chima for informing me about the significance of the local Sangrand gatherings. According to my interviews with participants who joined these gatherings and Hari Singh Everest's diary, the core group of families who regularly participated in Sangrands during the 1960s included but was not exclusive to: Khazan Singh and Sham Kaur Johl, Puna Singh and Nand Kaur, Swaran Singh and Gurbachan Kaur Chima, Hari Singh and Amar Kaur Everest, Ajmer Singh and Amar Kaur Bains, the Grewal family, the Purewal family, the Thiara family, Joginder Kaur Rai, the Atwal family, Ganda Singh Heir, Mehar and Surjit Tumber, Karnail S. and Gurmit Kaur Takhar, Harbhajan Kaur Takher, and Sewa Singh and Pritam Kaur Heir. Additional families joined these programs before 1970, but their names were not recorded in Hari Singh Everest's diary or mentioned in my oral histories.

20 Based on my interviews, the women in the Yuba City area who could recite the *GGS* proficiently in the 1950s and 1960s were Swarn Kaur Johl and Baldev Kaur Thiara. The men who could do so included, but may not be exclusive to: Hari Singh Everest, Ranjit Singh Grewal, Ajmer Singh Bains, Khazan Singh Johl, Dr Gulzar Singh Johl, and Kartar Singh Johl. Many local men and women read their daily prayers from small books called *Gutkas*.
21 Baldev S. Chima, correspondence, September 17, 2023.
22 Gurjit Kaur interview by Nicole Ranganath, June 24, 2023, Woodland, CA.
23 Sikh American women, first group, interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City.
24 Baldev S. Chima, correspondence, September 17, 2023.
25 Baldev Singh and Rajwant Kaur Chima interview by Nicole Ranganath, December 19, 2016, Yuba City, CA.
26 I am grateful to Baldev S. Chima for offering the important insight about the different types of seva that the community provided in establishing Yuba City's first gurdwara.
27 As Hari Singh Everest notes in his diary: "Sikh Temple's meeting in MP room of Tierra Buena School. Bakhtawar Singh Purewal donated 3 acres of land on Trease Road, Yuba City. Sunday, November 17, 1968."
28 These women were Harbhajan Kaur and Preetam Kaur, together with their husbands, Bakhtawar Singh Purewal and Udham Singh Purewal.
29 Harbhajan Kaur Takher interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City.
30 The two women who have served in leadership positions in Yuba City gurdwaras are Pritam Kaur Heir, who served on the Executive Committee of the gurdwara on Tierra Buena Road, and Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara who briefly served in a leadership role in the gurdwara on Bogue Road.
31 *Daily Independent Herald* (Yuba City), Wednesday, October 12, 1977.
32 Dr Paramjit Singh Everest interview by Nicole Ranganath, July 29, 2022, Yuba City. Dr Everest is the son of Hari Singh and Amar Kaur Everest.
33 Shroff, *Sweet Jail: The Sikhs of Yuba City*.
34 Harbans Kaur Panu interview by Nicole Ranganath, December 18, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
35 Sikh American women, second group, interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
36 Hari Singh Everest notes the "celebration of G. Nanak Dev's birth anniversary and opening ceremony, December 18–20, '70." Diary entry, Sunday, December 13, 1970.
37 The first Amrit ceremony in Yuba City's gurdwara occurred in July 1971; it was performed by Sant Amar Singh from India together with four other men, including Jagjivan Singh, who later became a granthi (priest) at Yuba City's gurdwara. See *Appeal Democrat* (July 10, 1971). Yuba City's local newspaper records Sant Baba Amar Singh's visit to Yuba City was part of a global Sikh revival, stating that he had performed Amrit ceremonies for Sikhs around the world between 1969 and 1973. See "Yuba City's Sikh Temple," *Appeal Democrat*, Monday, April 23, 1973.
38 Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh's, *The Birth of the Khalsa: A Feminist Re-Memory of Sikh Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005) is the definitive study of the feminine aspect of the Khalsa. See also Louis E. Fenech, *The Cherished Five in Sikh History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 73–74.
39 It is important to note that only a small minority of Sikhs complete the Amrit ceremony, even among those who wear external articles of faith and a turban.

40 According to Jivan Singh, one of the first *granthis* (priests) at this gurdwara, the first Amrit ceremony at a Yuba City Gurdwara occurred in July 1971 led by Sant Amar Singh.
41 For more information on Sant Mihan Singh, see: https://nanaksarsiahar.com/. I am grateful to Dal Dhaliwal for sharing his recollections of hosting Sant Mihan Singh at his home in Yuba City as well as this website.
42 Pritam Kaur Heir interview by Nicole Ranganath, Yuba City, August 23, 2022.
43 Manohar Singh Grewal interview by Nicole Ranganath, Phone, October 13, 2020 and August 15, 2022; Joginder Kaur Dhaliwal and Dal Dhaliwal interview by Nicole Ranganath, ZOOM, July 27, 2022; Kuldip Singh Grewal interview by Nicole Ranganath, ZOOM, July 28 and July 29, 2022; and Harjit Singh Grewal interview by Nicole Ranganath, Rocklin, CA, August 9, 2022.
44 "Sikhs plan giant Y-S Parade," *Appeal Democrat* (Yuba City), November 1, 1980.
45 Newspaper accounts of Yuba City's Nagar Kirtan emphasize the Sikh community's reaction to the attack on the Sri Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984, as well as the genocide against Sikhs across India after the Prime Minister's Sikh bodyguards assassinated her in retribution. The elderly women in this study expressed their distress and anger about the desecration of their holiest site and the escalating violence in Punjab in the 1980s and 1990s.

5 Rivers of Desire, Oceans of Separation

Women's Autobiographical Songs, 1990s–2000s[1]

On June 11, 2005, the local Punjabi Sikh community gathered at Ullrey Memorial Chapel in Yuba City, California to offer their respects to a prominent farmer, Harsev Singh Thiara Sr. After the customary scriptural recitation by a Sikh priest, the unexpected happened. The widow Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara walked up to the podium and sang a love song she wrote for her departed husband, "Desoṇ pardes." Her intimate lyrics expressed her love for him and the pain of separation she felt in Punjab (*des*) before she joined him abroad (*pardes*) in 1954, as well as his final departure for the unknown fifty years later. This kind of public declaration of romantic love by a local Punjabi Sikh woman of her generation—let alone at a funeral—had never happened in collective memory.

This chapter examines autobiographical songs composed by the first generation of Sikh women who settled in California's Sacramento Valley late in their lives at the turn of the twenty-first century. Through the course of extensive oral history research among the first generation of Punjabi women who settled in Yuba City, I encountered two elderly women, Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara and Harbans Kaur Panu, who had composed beautiful songs about their lives traversing pastoral landscapes in the Indian Ocean region before arriving in California.[2] Among this generational cohort, Mohinderjit and Harbans were the only two women who composed autobiographical lyrical poetry, to my knowledge. I pay attention to the water metaphors in their poetry to discern how Punjabi women's identity and sense of self changes decades after their transoceanic migration to California—with rivers more ubiquitous in Punjab, and the oceanic more prominent in these women's autobiographical compositions.

"Pearls from the seven seas" is an evocative metaphor for the songs composed by Mohinderjit and Harbans. Just as oysters create pearls around potentially harmful grains of sand as a means of self-preservation, women transformed grief, sadness, and pain into song as acts of survival, stringing together words and otherwise ineffable emotions into necklaces of lyrical poetry.

Careful attention to the song lyrics offers rare insights into women's interior emotional lives—into their loneliness, sorrows, desires, and aspirations. In North South Asia, where songs provide the medium for expressing otherwise

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suppressed emotions, song lyrics "allow … us a glimpse of people's intimate worlds" (Jassal 2012, 2–3). This focus on song texts is especially valuable given that women's lives remain largely neglected in South Asia diaspora studies. Elderly Punjabi Sikh women rarely garner public attention within the community and in the broader American society. The fact that elderly women composed lyrical poetry will come as a surprise to many in the local community.

Songs provide a window into the changes of Punjabi Sikh women's interior emotional lives in the diasporic context. The historical context, both locally and globally, is critical to understanding women's urge to compose original songs, as well as the conditions that allowed them to create music. Although inspired by traditional Punjabi folk songs, they composed songs reflecting their new sense of self and place in the diaspora. In contrast to the group performance of folk songs in South Asia, these two women composed and performed songs primarily for themselves. The hypermobility of their lives prevented them from bonding with other people through acts of communal singing. In essence, they created songs in search of listeners.

By the time women began composing autobiographical songs, they had spent a half century, the bulk of their lives, in Yuba City. Throughout that time, they relied on female friendships as an invaluable source of support and camaraderie. They also made close friendships with women outside the Punjabi Sikh community, including Punjabi Muslims and Hindus, as well as women of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Diasporic Negotiations of Loss and Love: The Songs of Harbans Kaur Panu and Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara

"Love may indeed be a universal feeling, but culture and language play a role in defining it at every stage," asserts Francesca Orsini in her history of love in South Asia (Orsini 2006, 1). The subcontinent offers a particularly rich field of ideas, idioms, and legends about love of every kind—familial, romantic, and spiritual. The heart of the women's songs created by Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara and Harbans Kaur Panu concern their intense emotions of love, and with it loss and longing, within the South Asian diasporic context.[3]

Since the 1990s, the greater ease of travel and the advent of new forms of digital communication has greatly accelerated movement and contact within diasporas and with the homeland—leading to the Punjabi diaspora playing a critical role in reconstituting global definitions of the homeland through digital technologies, as David Keith Axel's insight about the diaspora's role in reproducing the idea of the homeland (Axel 2002a, 2002b). Punjab is continually redefined through the performance of music; technologies of sound play a role in dislodging the "bounded-ness of the region as a spatial category" (Duggal and Kaparia, forthcoming, 7). Until now, however, the scholarship has mainly focused on music and sounds produced by men.[4]

A close analysis of Mohinderjit's and Harbans' songs reveals a great deal about the transformations in women's identities in the diaspora. Although

their poetic compositions borrow most frequently from Punjabi women's folk songs, the two women had heard and participated in diverse soundscapes in multiple countries in the Indian Ocean region, where they spent their youth, before settling in the Yuba City area after World War II.

Mohinderjit's songs, for example, are inflected with cultural and religious influences drawn from her formative years in Iran. In addition to Punjabi women's folk songs, her work shows familiarity with other musical and poetic genres in Punjab, the Middle East, and America. Mohinderjit also intersperses concepts and devotion for the divine borrowed from Islam and the Hindu faith as well as Sikhi.

Although both Harbans and Mohinderjit had multilingual childhoods, they chose to compose their songs in the Punjabi language. Harbans learned Tamil, Punjabi, and Hindi as a little girl in Malaysia and India, as well as English after arriving in the United States. Mohinderjit is fluent in English, Hindi, Punjabi, as well as some Farsi and a little Burmese. Yet both women clearly felt a special affinity for Punjabi, choosing to express their innermost feelings in their *mā bolī* (mother tongue).

Upon settling in Yuba City, the women had both actively joined small gatherings who performed Sikh sacred music. Before the first Yuba City gurdwara opened in 1970, Munsha Thiara's home in Live Oak served as a center of Sikh devotional music gatherings. According to Mohinderjit, hers may have been the only local family that sent their teenage daughters to India for musical training for extended time periods in the sixties and seventies. In addition to Sikh hymns, the women also enjoyed Punjabi folk songs, Hindi film music and popular American music.

The creative expressions of Harbans and Mohinderjit form a complex contrast in motivation, styles, and affect. The catalyst for both women's creative impulse was grief. Mohinderjit composed her first song in the days leading up to her husband's passing, which she performed at his funeral in 2005. Harbans composed her song after her son died tragically at a young age in the early 1990s. Mohinderjit composed over 50 songs, written in notebooks in Punjabi and in English, reflecting the heterogenous cultural influences in Iran, India, and the United States. Harbans states that she composed a half dozen songs in Punjabi amidst momentous events in her family life: the death of her son and husband, the loss of her daughter after marriage, and the joy of her other son's wedding. She performed her songs from memory. Her songs are closely tethered to the emotional imaginative world of a Punjabi village.

Women's language has a complex relationship to the dominant power relations in the family and in society more broadly. As Raheja and Gold explore in their study of women's expressive traditions in north India, women "construct and communicate alternative self-perceptions and alternative vantage points on their social world" (Raheja and Gold 1994, 2). Folk music highlights the nuanced ways that women negotiate power hierarchies. Women actively critique and subvert gender norms often in the same breath as they acquiesce to and maintain them.

The ancestors of the women in this study spent their lives in small villages in Punjab. They listened to, sang, and taught folk songs to younger people in their families and villages. Punjabi folk music was mainly performed by women, venting intense emotions that were collectively shared by other women that would otherwise be taboo to express in everyday life (i.e., frustrations with husbands and mothers-in-law, mourning a daughter's departure after marriage, bereavement, and sexual flirtation). Typically, women sang folk songs at important rites of passage (births, weddings, funerals) and at festivals. Due to the global migration of Punjabis beginning in the late nineteenth century, the continuity of these soundscapes was increasingly ruptured. The purpose of Punjabi music, as with other cultural forms, changed dramatically in the modern diaspora.

The meaning that women derived from music was also transformed reflecting the changes in their identity and life circumstances outside of Punjab. This study suggests that women's need to create original music also came from a new assertion of the self emerging within the diasporic context. This attempt to understand diasporic Punjabi women's music is part of Malhotra and Mir's broader effort to historicize the shifting ways that an imagined Punjab is "lived, experienced, and vitalized" by diverse peoples from the region (Malhotra and Mir 2012, xvi).

Within North Indian women's folk music, the songs composed by Harbans and Mohinderjit most closely resemble two genres: wedding songs and barahmasa (seasonal songs known as barah mah in Punjabi).[5] At the heart of the barahmasa genre (songs of the twelve months) is the abandoned woman who "pines for her absent lover or husband and describes her pitiful state, month after month, against the backdrop of seasonal changes and ritual events" (Orsini 2010, 143). The voice of this genre is feminine, expressed in a folksy vernacular with stock images of nature that are metaphorical for emotional states. This chapter analyzes how the barahmasa genre would appeal to diasporic women who experienced extensive separations from their husbands, and who also created nostalgic songs about their youths in rural Punjab years after they had settled abroad. Both women also wrote powerful songs about their separations from their families as young brides in Punjab.

Although Harbans and Mohinderjit drew heavily from traditional North Indian women's folk songs, their original compositions also reflect the dramatically altered geographies of memory, affect, and connectivity in the diaspora. I find that in listening to the abundant water metaphors in these autobiographical songs, there is a greater emphasis on the oceanic in their compositions than the music of Punjab.

Harbans Kaur Panu and Her Poetics of Loss

Harbans Kaur Panu (born on October 14, 1941) was part of the first generation of Punjabi women to settle in the Yuba City area. After her birth in Malaysia, she moved to a village near Amritsar, Punjab when she was

six years old. She fondly remembers her childhood, especially her parents' warmth and love. Having learned Tamil in Malaysia, she often spoke this South Indian language to her parents as a young girl. Her father was modern in his thinking and cherished his daughters as much as his son. He even distributed sweets when his daughters were born, a ritual that was only customary for the birth of sons. Her main regret was that she received only five years of education: "I wish I had become a lawyer, a schoolteacher, a nurse or a doctor or something."[6] But her family was more concerned with preparing her for marriage.

When she was twenty years old, Harbans married a peach farmer named Rashpal Singh Panu. Soon after, she joined her husband in Yuba City in 1961. She never forgot her sadness about leaving her family as a young bride. She also vividly remembered her fear as she departed for America. Her four-day trip to the United States was traumatic, as she missed her mother and spent the entire journey crying: "I loved my dad a lot, but I had my mom's milk for five years [laughing]."[7] Harbans developed a fever when she arrived. Fortunately, another Punjabi woman came to the hospital to take care of her. When Harbans was out of the hospital, this friend helped her grocery shop and adjust to her new life.

In her early years in Yuba City, Harbans recalls encountering a great deal of hostility from the local white community. Her friendships with other Punjabi women formed a lifeline for her: "The amount of love I received when I got here, I don't think I received even that much love from my family … The [ladies] were my friends, they were my parents, they were everything to me." She remembered Harbhajan Kaur Takher with deep affection: "She loved me like a little baby."

Slowly Harbans started enjoying her life in California. She loved wearing American clothes and learned English while watching soap operas. She worked for decades helping her husband on their fifteen-acre peach orchard by pruning, thinning, and irrigating. During her twenty-six years working at the Sunsweet fruit packing house, she created friendships with people of different backgrounds: "There were people of all races, and I loved them all."[8] Harbans also enjoyed performing seva at the gurdwara and socializing with other Punjabi women. She raised six children and has twelve grandchildren.

Despite her initial struggles adjusting to her new life, she described America as heaven. She offered this advice to young people: "Pain and happiness are a part of life … It is your choice to spend your life crying or laughing. Always stay with love, and your life passes with happiness"[9] (Figure 5.1).

Harbans composed beautiful songs about her life, especially to soothe herself during emotionally difficult times. Her songs dip into the wellspring of emotions in the Punjabi folk songs discussed in Chapter 3. They give voice to powerful feelings of the joy of a son's wedding, as well as traumatic loss of loved ones. These intense emotions were mainly expressed in musical form. In this way, the musical creates a contained space for grieving outside everyday life.

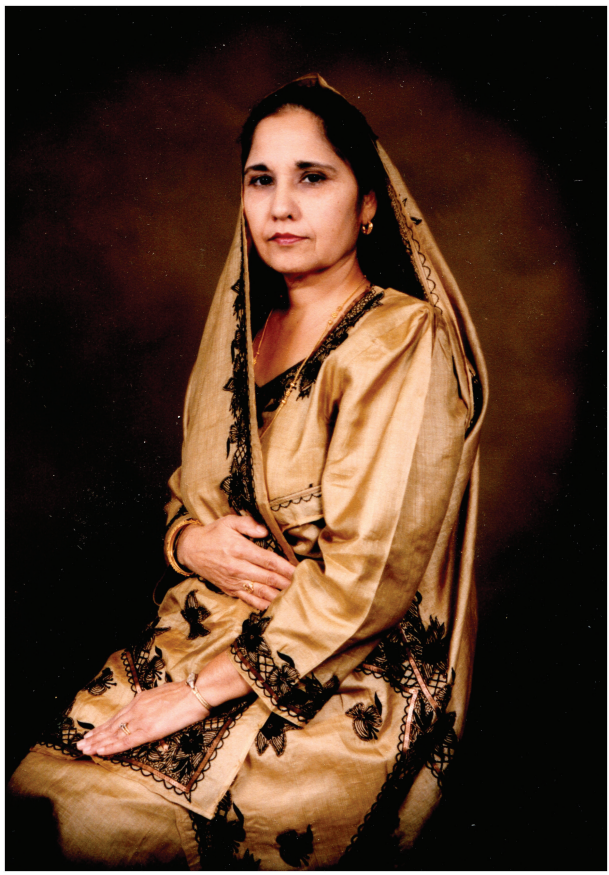

Figure 5.1 Harbans Kaur Panu, c 1990, Yuba City, CA.
Photo courtesy of Harbans Kaur Panu.

Through song, Harbans' experience of present-day family milestones is refracted through her memory of similar events from her childhood. This act of living emotional traumas and transitions through her childhood suggests that the emotional force of the earlier events remains unresolved in her psyche. It may also reflect the function of long-term memory in which childhood events and emotions remain indelibly imprinted in one's mind: they act as archetypes through which later events are understood and processed. Harbans' songs also invoke poetic tropes about nature and temporality in Punjabi folk songs, such as the associations between nature and the interior emotional world.

After her eldest son died in a motorcycle accident, Harbans believed she might succumb to her all-consuming grief. Composing her first song, "Why didn't you remember me?" was an act of survival:[10]

He was my moon and stars
I really loved him.
But one day he hid his face in the clouds
Why didn't he remember me?
My moon, why didn't you remember me?

Ik mera chan tārā sī
Mainū lagdā bara piārā sī
Par ik din uhne āpṇī sūrat baddlān vich chipāī sī
Uhnū yād kiuṇ nā merī āī?
Chann ve, uhnū yād kiuṇ nā merī āī?

The song ends with this verse:

Countless seasons passed
Countless seasons arrived
But those who left never came back to me.
Oh God, they never came back to me.

Lakhkhāṇ mausam bīt gae.
Lakhkhāṇ mausam āe.
Par jāṇe vāle phir loṭ ke muṛke kade nā āe.
Hai Rabbā, phir muṛke kade nā āe.[11]

In a major departure from the composers of Punjabi folk music, Harbans did not compose these songs to be performed in front of audiences during rites of passage or at festivals. She composed poetry to heal herself during her intense grief. In addition to her deep reservoir of sorrow, she also expressed her anger at her son for abandoning her as well as her feeling of helplessness to prevent loss—emotions that are nearly impossible to express publicly or acknowledge in one's heart.

Harbans' song resembles the barahmasa folk song in many respects. The most striking similarity is the voice of the heroine who despairs at the loss of her loved one. Her lamentation for her departed son is especially poignant given the intimate relationship between mothers and sons in Punjabi culture. Harbans likens her son to the moon and stars, a common trope in North Indian music and poetry.

The association between seasons and emotions is also key to barahmasa songs. Harbans employs the motif of the passing seasons to express her profound grief for her son as well as her beloved family members whom she had lost over her lifetime. The use of "hundreds of thousands of seasons" is an evocative way of expressing her experiential sense of loss across a temporal plane that feels both infinite yet also agonizingly slow as measured by the passing of each season. Every season brings a recurring sense of dread and disappointment when loved ones fail to return. Harbans' profound loss is

only tempered by her belief in the partial re-incorporation of the lost son inside her body: "He lives in my heart / But he doesn't speak." ("Par uh mere dil vich rahinde ā/Par uh mūhon kujh nahīṇ kahinde ā.")

The identity that Harbans asserts in her poetry reflects her diasporic life experience. There is a conspicuous absence of any references to places in her poetry that reflect the many dislocations she experienced in life. The protagonist of the song seeks comfort in a sense of belonging with nature and the cosmos rather than with a sense of rootedness in any geographical place. Her poetry is evidence of a sense of self that is removed, even disembodied, from a specific place. Harbans may have felt the need to create her own songs, her own lullabies to comfort herself, due to the absence of her mother and other female kin; she lived the majority of her life far from her family due to her move to California while her extended family lived in India, England, and other distant countries.

"Daughters are always someone else's," is Harbans' poignant song about her departure as a young bride from her family home in a Punjabi village at the age of twenty.

Beloved father, why did your eyes well up in tears?
Beloved father, daughters are always someone else's.
I am going to leave my father's village.
I am going to leave my mother's home.
Where I used to play hide and seek with my friends.
Beloved father, daughters are always someone else's.

Babul, terīāṇ akhkhāṇ kiuṇ bhar āīāṇ?
Babul, dhīāṇ te huṇdīāṇ parāīāṇ.
Chaḍḍ jāṇa babul da kheṛā.
Chaḍḍ jāṇā aṃbṛī da vehaṛā.
Jithe nāl sahelīāṇ maiṇ kheḍīāṇ sī lukaṇ mīchīāṇ.
Babul, dhīāṇ te huṃdīāṇ parāīāṇ.

The song concludes with the verses:

Why have you become sad, brother?
You are the diamond of our mother's heart.
Don't forget your mother's daughters.
Beloved father, daughters are always someone else's.
Beloved father, why do your eyes well up with tears?

This is an old custom.
Leaving the parents' home for the in-laws' house.
You are not to blame, beloved father.
Traditions are simply continuing.
Beloved father, daughters are always someone else's.

Beloved father, why do your eyes well up with tears?
Beloved father, daughters are always someone else's.

Tūṇ kiuṇ hoiā udās ve vīrā?
Tūṇ te amṛī de dil da hīrā.
Vekhī kidhre bhul nā jāī āpṇī mān dīāṇ jāīāṇ.
Babul, dhīāṇ te huṁdīāṇ parāīāṇ.
Babul, terīāṇ akhkhāṇ kiuṇ bhar āīāṇ?

Ih baṇī rīt puraṇī.
Peke Chaḍḍ ke sāhure jāṇā.
Tera babul dosh nā koī.
Turdīāṇ lekh likhāīāṇ.
Babul, dhīāṇ te huṁdīāṇ parāīāṇ.
Babul, terīāṇ akhkhāṇ kiuṇ bhar āīāṇ?
Babul, dhīāṇ te huṁdīāṇ parāīāṇ.

This song fits within the genre of Punjabi folk songs called vidai discussed in Chapter 3 in which the girl's family mourns their daughter's departure after marriage. What is unusual is that Harbans composed a song about her own departure as a young woman after marriage rather than expressing her emotions through the hundreds of folk songs dedicated to this theme. What is striking about Harbans' version of a folk song about the daughter's departure after marriage is her generosity of spirit: she reconciles with her past through this act of forgiveness. She exonerates her father for giving her away to her in-laws by accepting that her loss is part of the flowing stream of continuity of patrilocal family traditions.

Harbans' poetry also reveals the works of loss and memory, as every new loss taps into a well-spring of sorrow. She first wrote this song in response to her daughter's wedding, which then tapped into her reservoir of unresolved grief about her own separation from her family decades earlier. The only occasion where Harbans performed one of her songs in public was at her retirement from the Sunsweet fruit packing house in the 1990s, when the sadness she felt leaving her friends at work brought this sad song about her youth to her heart.

Harbans' third sad song, "Why did my memory not come to you?," expresses her grief after her husband's death:

My darling, my darling
You left for abroad

Where should I address my letters?
You didn't give me your full name.

Māhī ve, Māhī ve
Tūṇ tur giuṇ pardes

Dass chiṭhīāṇ kidhdhar nūṇ pāvāṇ?
Koī de ke nā giā sirnāvāṇ ve.

The song describes the experience of the loss of a loved one as a departure abroad without any way to find that person (no location, no address). Various lyrics of the song reflect the boundary between Harbans' body (and sensorial world) merging with her departed loved one (and the cosmos). In a metaphor of her body's imagined communion with the cosmos and her departed loved ones, she refers to *havā* (air or wind in Punjabi) and exclaims, "*Mere dil vichoṇ nikalaṇ havā ve* / Air is coming out of my heart."

Harbans' joyful song describes her feelings during her second son's wedding, she told me. However, the lyrics of her song refer to her brother's wedding. Again, the emotions she feels in the present in the United States were refracted through the memory of her joyful feeling at her brother's wedding in her youth in Punjab. The song is a celebration of an extended family at her brother's wedding. In contrast to the mixed feelings at a daughter's wedding in which a family member is lost or given to another family, a male family member's wedding is cause for great celebration. This song is filled with vibrant details in which her large extended family enjoy the wedding. The song closes with Harbans' intense feeling of joy:

God should bring such a joyful day to everyone.
This is my prayer.
We're going to dance today.
I'm going to dig up the earth dancing.

Iho jihīāṇ khushīāṇ Rabba sabh te dikhave
Iho hī a merī e duā
Ni ajj asīṇ nachchṇā ā
Nachch-nachch khushīāṇ de nāl te dhartī nūṇ puṭṇā hai.

Harbans' creativity was born as an act of survival during her greatest crisis in life. Creative expression is Harbans' tool for processing painful emotions that she refracts through traumatic experiences from her youth in Punjab that represent wellsprings of emotional archetypes for her later experiences in the diaspora. Her songs were not composed for the public; instead, composing and singing music provided solace to herself.

Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara and Her Poetics of Longing

Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara (born on January 5, 1937) has lived a remarkable life. After her birth in Burma, she grew up in Iran, before marrying Harsev Singh Thiara in Punjab in 1951. A few years later, she joined her husband and his family on their peach farm north of Yuba City, making her one of the first Punjabi women to settle in the area after World War II. Outspoken,

Figure 5.2 Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara, 1954, Punjab, India.
Courtesy of Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara.

unconventional, and fearless, Mohinderjit is also unusual in that she composed over fifty songs and even produced a CD (Figure 5.2).

Her father, Udham Pal Singh, loved adventure. During World War I, he served as a railway station master in Iraq. In the 1930s, he moved his family to Burma to work as a lineman for the Burmah Oil Company. Mohinderjit was born in Burma. In the decade before and during World War II, an exodus of Indians fled Burma due to the rising anti-Indian sentiment and communal violence. Some members of the family, lacking official help, were forced to travel by foot from Burma to Punjab. Mohinderjit and the rest of the family returned to India as well. Shortly after, Mohinderjit's father secured a contract as a foreman for the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in Abadan, Iran. The family lived there for nine years until the nationalization of Iran's oil industry forced them to leave the country. Afterwards, he and his wife remained in his ancestral village in Punjab.

Kartar Kaur Thanderi, Mohinderjit's mother, was the dominant force in the family. According to Kartar's son: "whatever we are is due to my mother. She had that much influence."[12] She was highly intelligent and ambitious to advance her family. Her tall, elegant frame was often draped in a sari or a fashionable Punjabi suit. A shrewd businesswoman, she made the decisions in selecting sites for land acquisitions for the family. She also made sure that the family's two-story home was visibly taller than the neighboring homes. Unusual for a woman of her time, she treated her daughters and sons equally.

She insisted that all of her children should receive an education and that they also learn to perform Sikh devotional music.

Mohinderjit's mother also played a public role as a village leader. She was a vocal advocate for women's education and an opponent of the dowry system. She formed a women's committee to address local issues of concern to women (such as social problems related to men's alcohol consumption) and to improve and modernize the village. She also helped raise funds for the local gurdwara. No one dared make noise as they passed by the family home out of respect to the matriarch.

Mohinderjit inherited many of her mother's personality traits. She also yearned for adventure. When she was a little girl, Mohinderjit dreamed of becoming a Bollywood film star—a highly unconventional aspiration for a Sikh girl from a respectable family growing up in the 1940s.

Mohinderjit spent her childhood and adolescence in four countries—Burma, Iran, India, and the United States. She completed a fifth-grade education, and learned multiple languages—Farsi, Punjabi, Hindi, English, and a little Burmese. In 1951, she married Harsev Singh Thiara in Punjab and joined her husband and his family in Yuba City a few years later.

Mohinderjit's husband's family owned a successful peach farming business in Live Oak just north of Yuba City. Mohinderjit exclaimed: "Everyone in my family says that I'm the lucky one. Wherever I went, I brought money to the family!"[13] She enjoyed an exceptionally privileged lifestyle. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the majority of Punjabi women in Yuba City lived in dilapidated buildings on farms where Indian men had lived as bachelors for years. It took most families at least a decade, with women and children working long hours alongside the men, before they could accrue the capital to buy their first family homes.

By contrast, Mohinderjit moved into a large home on a sprawling property with hundreds of acres of fertile land. The family even hired a maid to perform the household chores. The family's prosperity was due to the long-standing labor and sacrifices of her husband's uncle, Munsha Singh Thiara, who was one of the first Punjabi settlers in the area. Arriving in the United States in 1907, Munsha had lived a lean, frugal existence as an itinerant farm worker in the early years but eventually built a successful farming business (Miller 1950).

Mohinderjit learned English quickly and made it a point to befriend people from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. With her family's love of music, her home was a gathering place for Sikh devotional music and prayers before the local gurdwaras were opened. She is also one of the only women who has served in a leadership role in a Yuba City gurdwara. She has seven children and ten grandchildren.

Mohinderjit's songs provide a rich window into her interior emotional life. The poetry, combined with in-depth oral history, offers a complex portrait of

a bright, unconventional woman with an extraordinary life history. The central impulse for her creative expression was desire—yearning for romance, adventure, and freedom from the constraints of societal expectations of a woman of her background. Music was the medium in which she wished to connect with the world. "I want to share my feelings!" Mohinderjit emphatically declared to me.[14] She has composed dozens of songs, of which the majority focus on her youth in Punjab even though she largely grew up in Iran.

Her creative expression was born in the days before her husband's passing in 2005. According to her son, Harsev Thiara Jr., "mom retreated into her own world" as her husband's end approached.[15] As she walked through her peach orchards, the lyrics to her first song, "Desoṇ Prades" came to her. From that time to the present, she continues to compose songs about her life. She wishes to perform on stage but rarely has the opportunity to do so. She has performed songs at family events, her children's weddings and her husband's funeral. She also sings at the local women's festival (*teeyan da mela*) in Live Oak, CA.

Mohinderjit's peripatetic early life is evident in the plurality of linguistic, cultural and religious influences in her poetry. Roughly a quarter of her songs reflect the Sufi tradition of *ishq* (love) in which the poet expresses a longing to be united with the divine or a lover. In describing the divine, she borrows heavily from the Islamic faith, using the terms Allah and Rabba. She also seems equally comfortable imagining devotional worship in *mandirs* (Hindu temples) as gurdwaras.

Mohinderjit's songs have three main preoccupations: her imagined youth in Punjab, romantic love, especially the pain of separation from her husband, and the loneliness of her later life in the United States.

The first predominant theme in Mohinderjit's songs is an imagined nostalgia for a childhood in Punjab that she only experienced briefly due to her early peripatetic life shuttling from Burma to Punjab to Iran to Punjab to the United States. Her songs about Punjab contain many of the stock tropes from the barahmasa folk song, including the stereotypical images associated with nature (e.g., the arrival of the black rain clouds).

Although the many songs of her youth in Punjabi represent fantasies of a life that differed significantly from the one Mohinderjit lived, they express the enduring deep cultural connection of diasporic Punjabi women to their families' village in Punjab. Of the dozens of songs Mohinderjit wrote, nearly all concern her actual or imagined life in Punjab as a young woman. Mohinderjit's poetry is a rich historical source for understanding the complex ways that "the idea of Punjab, or Punjabiness might live in the imagination." (Malhotra and Mir 2012, xvii).

"The Cold, Cold Wind Blows" is an evocative song about a *teeyan da mela* (women's festival), a favorite subject of Punjabi women's folk songs. These festivals occur during the arrival of the rainy season in Punjab; it is a time when women return to their home village where they traditionally

gathered together to sing and dance. In this setting, it is socially acceptable for women to voice their complaints about topics that would otherwise be taboo, such as vexsome mothers-in-law, sorrows and hardships in their lives, and difficulties with husbands.

The cold, cold wind blows, filled with fierce winds
The rainy season has arrived and dark rain clouds have gathered …
Angels came from the sky wearing colorful necklaces
and anklets on their bare feet.
They forcefully dance on the earth ...
My friend, let's go to the fair. The daughter's festival has come.

Thaṇḍī ṭhaṇḍī vaggdī havā vich bulle vaggde.
Saun dā mahīnā ghaṭān charh āīān.
Arshā toṇ āīān parīāṇ, rang-birange gihṇe pā ke,
nange pairī, pairī jhānjarān.
Nachch-nachch pāvāṇ dhamālān dhartī te
Chall sajjṇā mele challīe, mele āīāṇ tīāṇ dā.

This song closely resembles a traditional Punjabi woman's folk song. There is an emphasis on natural elements that represent metaphors for intense feelings of foreboding and excitement. The language is informal, in the style of an ordinary village girl caught up in the anticipation of joining the fair. The imagery conveys women embracing their power, for example by dancing with joy and taking charge of the bullock carts, while the fierce winds signal the arrival of their special festival.

The second dominant theme in Mohinderjit's poetry is her longing for her lover, which presumably was her husband living abroad in the United States. However, her lover's identity is ambiguous in the song. Her love poems invoke the concept of *ishq*, or an intense longing for a lover or God, which is borrowed in Punjabi music from the Perso-Arabic cultural influence in South Asia. These songs seem to have been influenced by Bollywood films. According to Rachel Dwyer, Hindi film music is one of the most popular forms of poetry in India with "a rich idiom of love" that draws on a whole range of Indian lyric traditions, including the folksong and the Hindu devotional lyric, but most prominently the Urdu lyric. As is the case for Mohinderjit, Hindi film songs "allow things to be said which cannot be said elsewhere, often to admit love to the beloved, to reveal inner feelings, and to make the hero/heroine realise that he/she is in love" (Dwyer 2006, 292).

Mohinderjit's love songs fashion herself and her lover into the tragic romantic protagonists of the immensely popular ballads of the doomed Punjabi lovers, Hīr and Rānjha (Mir 2006, 2010; Malhotra 2017; Deol 2002; Singh 2016). This narrative tells the story of the tragic love between an intelligent, beautiful woman named Hīr and her lover, Rānjha. Hīr defies her powerful family who oppose the relationship. Many of the popular songs

about Hīr and Rānjha concern their painful separation after the heroine is forcibly married to another man. This legend often ends with both lovers taking their lives by consuming poison rather than living apart. Mohinderjit makes her identification with Hīr explicit by asserting in a song she composed: "Hīr should exist with the name, Mohinderjit Kaur" (Figure 5.3).

The two songs that Mohinderjit spontaneously sang for me expressed her longing for her husband during the difficult years of separation after marriage. Mohinderjit casts herself and her husband in the roles of Hīr and Rānjha. In the song "Hīr cries out," she describes the distress she felt after the train took her Ranjha away to a foreign land. She is left behind crying at the *charkhā* (spinning wheel) and making clothes in Punjab. She pleads with all Rānjhas (the husbands) not to forget their wives back home "[as] our blossoming youth fades."

The second song, "Desoṇ pardes," was the one Mohinderjit sang at her husband's funeral. She negotiated this final loss of her husband through her memory of her earlier painful separation after marriage when he left for

Figure 5.3 Harsev Singh and Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara as newlyweds, Punjab, India, 1951.

Courtesy of Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara.

California and she remained in Punjab. The song is a dialogue between herself and her husband, again imagined as Hīr and Rānjha.

***Rānjha**: I'm going far away, leaving home for a foreign land.*
***Hīr**: Don't forget your first love.*
***Rānjha**: My Hīr, forget your first love.*
***Hīr**: Tell me the address where you're going.*
Where can I send my love letters to you?
Darling, [tell me your address] so I can send them to you.
***Rānjha**: I don't know where I'm going. I have no address or place.*
I'll keep my heart in yours, my Hīr.
I'm going to keep my heart in yours.
***Hīr**: Departing lover, your Hīr calls out to you.*
Don't leave me crying, Rānjha, your Hīr is crying.
Your Hīr calls out to you.
Don't leave me crying, Rānjha, your Hīr is crying.

***Rānjha**: Desoṇ pardes āe te, maiṇ tur chaliā*
***Hīr**: Dekhīn kite bhull nā jāvīn mere pichle piār*
***Rānjha**: Hīr merīe nī bhull jāvīn mere pahile vāle piār.*
***Hīr**: Jaṇ vāliā das jā apṇa thān te ṭikāṇā.*
Jithe likhkh likhkh rudnā dīāṇ chiṭhīāṇ maiṇ tainūṇ pavān
Sajjṇā, maiṇ tainūṇ pāvān.
***Rānjha**: Nā merā thān te nā hī mera ṭikaṇā.*
Nī dil apṇā maiṇ tere dil vich rakhkh jāṇā e Hīre merīe.
Nī dil apṇā maiṇ tere dil vich rakhkh jāṇā
***Hīr**: Jaṇe vāliā, ajj terī Hīr kūkāṇ mardī*
Chadd ke nā jāvīn Rānjhiā rondī āpṇī Hīr nūṇ.
Hīr kūkān mardī
Chadd ke nā jāvīn Rānjhiā rondī āpṇī Hīr nūṇ.

Another song depicts her bittersweet feelings about leaving her family in Punjab. Despite her sadness at leaving her loved ones in Punjab, she expresses her excitement about starting a new life with her beloved: "Now I don't feel alone without my darling"/ *"Huṇ jī nī lagda vin sajjṇā merā."*

The third theme in Mohinderjit's songs concerns her loneliness of her later years in America. Of the dozens of songs she wrote in America, very few describe her life in her adopted country. The ones that do deal with her new life reflect feelings of isolation, loneliness, and alienation from society. One song exclaims, "No one recognizes my sorrows." She adds, "Everyone says, 'God, God' / I haven't seen God ever." It appears that she became more isolated after her husband's passing: "People taunt in my world / No one recognizes my hidden pain." Mohinderjit's songs about her later years are filled with feelings of emptiness, loneliness and despair after her husband's departure: "I didn't receive any love."

Why was Mohinderjit one of the only Punjabi American women of her generation who composed songs in *Gurmukhi* (one of three scripts for the Punjabi language) and English, and even produced a CD? Mohinderjit's personality is an important factor. Unlike most of her peers, Mohinderjit is gregarious and loves the limelight. In the local Punjabi community, Mohinderjit is known for her non-conventional behavior and attitudes, including fearlessness in speaking her mind.

Mohinderjit also had the financial means and time to reflect on her life. Isolation triggered nostalgia and the desire to express her feelings. She evinced an intense desire to connect with people through music, which, in her new home, she was mainly able to satisfy by performing at family gatherings. As a member of a well-respected, affluent family, socialized to express herself and to value music and education, she also felt secure to boldly express her emotions.

Reflections

This chapter asserts that the diasporic context is essential for understanding the motivations and conditions behind the musical poetry these women created. Their songs represent the intense feelings of loneliness felt by the first generation of Punjabi Sikh women who lived on isolated farms in the Yuba City area while their husbands worked long hours in the orchards. Their songs also reflect diasporic Punjabi women's early life experiences in Punjab, especially the trauma of leaving their family home after marriage.

Just as noteworthy is how the life histories of Mohinderjit and Harbans differed from other Punjabi women who settled in the Yuba City area in the fifties and sixties. Both women spent part of their youth outside India in the Indian Ocean region before settling in California, whereas most women of their generation migrated directly from their in-laws' villages in Punjab. Perhaps the hypermobility of their youth created a desire to immerse themselves in an imagined youth in a Punjabi village.

Their new lives of relative affluence in rural America also provided the time as well as the physical and emotional space for Mohinderjit and Harbans to pursue writing. For instance, Mohinderjit married into a wealthy, well-established farming family where she was one of the few Punjabi women of her generation who enjoyed the luxury of domestic help that gave her the time to devote herself to composing songs.

Mohinderjit and Harbans shared the urge to express their unique emotions as individuals within the emergent space of the diaspora. Their female ancestors would generally have participated in the venting of the collective emotions of sadness, grief, and joy in traditional folk songs. Some elderly Punjabi Sikh women in California found their voices to articulate profound emotions in California. Harbhajan Kaur Takher, one of the pillars of Yuba City's Punjabi American community and Harbans Kaur Panu's dear friend, remarked, "We didn't speak in India. *We learned to talk here.*"[16]

The same emotional and physical isolation these two women experienced in Yuba City—the motivation for them to express themselves creatively through songs—also disrupted the social bonds in which folk music was shared and enjoyed with family and friends, then passed down across generations in Punjabi villages. Punjabi women in rural California did gather to enjoy folk songs and dances at weddings, and more recently at the tremendously popular Punjabi women's festivals, but overall there were few occasions in which Harbans and Mohinderjit performed their songs for audiences. Harbans composed lyrical poetry for herself. Despite her desire to become famous, Mohinderjit rarely enjoyed the opportunity to perform her songs, and mainly did so at family functions.

In short, the diasporic context both created the intense desire for social connection through music while simultaneously rupturing the social fabric in which songs could be intimately shared and enjoyed within communities. Women such as Harbans Kaur Panu and Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara felt the need to innovate by expressing their unique emotions privately or in family gatherings. These women sang for themselves, and occasionally for family and friends, to heal and honor emotional losses or relive joyful moments from their youth. Mohinderjit joyfully performed her songs in women's festivals. As Mohinderjit expressed, she felt a strong urge to connect her most private emotions with the world: "I want to share my feelings with the public!" Songs offered a vital modality for connecting these women to their family and social circles, and occasionally to the broader community in women's festivals.

Notes

1 This chapter is a version of the paper "Soundscapes of the Self: Music and Identity Assertion among Diasporic Punjabi Sikh Women in California at Midcentury," in *Punjabi Centuries: Tracing Histories of Punjab,* ed. Anshu Malhotra (Hyderabad, India: Orient BlackSwan, 2024).

2 This finding was due to the invaluable help of Rajinder K. Tumber and Sharon Singh and their families' long-standing ties with the women who composed music.

3 In thinking about the diasporic context, I follow recent scholarship that emphasize hybridity, heterogeneity, and complex circuits of global migrations. This challenges earlier conceptions of diaspora that focus on the model of a shared origin based on an essential feature, such as religion, language, and race. Anjali Gera Roy, "Rethinking Diaspora," *Transforming Cultures eJournal* 3, no. 1 (2008), 1-25.

4 Global Punjabi music has been a focus of scholarship. With the rise of "Bhangra pop" in the 1980s, the loud and energetic sounds of music and dance associated with Punjab, and its mixture with hip hop, have dominated global perceptions of the region. More recently, the tremendous global popularity of Coke Studio in Pakistan and India have contributed to the dominance of sonic registers of the Punjab region and South Asia more broadly. New digital technologies, including the Internet, especially YouTube and social media, have led to a proliferation of the global knowledge, interest, and performance of Punjabi dance and music. Kapuria and Kumar's "Singing the River" traces the centrality of the river in Punjabi identity and affective geographies as heard through numerous musical forms, including classical, sacred, folk, and contemporary popular music (Kapuria and Kumar, "Singing the River").

5 See the detailed discussion of Punjabi wedding songs in Chapter 3 and the barah-masa genre (also known as barah mah in Punjabi) in Chapter 4.
6 Harbans Kaur Panu interview by Nicole Ranganath, December 18, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 The four songs composed by Harbans Kaur Panu were recorded by Nicole Ranganath, August 8, 2019, Yuba City, CA.
11 I am grateful to Dr. Kuldeep Singh, Punjabi Lecturer, University of California, Davis, for his invaluable collaboration in translating the songs from the Punjabi language.
12 Mohinder Singh Ghag interview by Nicole Ranganath, February 23, 2020, Yuba City, CA.
13 Mohinder Kaur Thiara interview by Nicole Ranganath and Rajinder K Tumber, August 12, 2019, Live Oak, CA.
14 Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara interview by Nicole Ranganath, July 17, 2023, Live Oak, CA.
15 Harsev Singh Thiara Jr. interview by Nicole Ranganath, July 17, 2023, Live Oak, CA.
16 Harbhajan Kaur Takher interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA.

Reflections

Echoes and Resonances

During the historic protests against India's farm bills in 2020–21, women's voices could not be ignored. In the world's largest International Women's Day gathering in 2021, 50,000 women in Delhi defiantly demanded the repeal of the farm bills that threatened to make Indian farmers even more vulnerable to global markets.[1] When a male union leader addressed the female crowd, praising their efforts, the women let out a thunderous applause and raised their fists. Defying the prevailing perception of farming as a male occupation in which their contributions remained invisible and unheard, thousands of women from the most traditional parts of Punjab and Haryana joined the protest camps near Delhi. Women from across the socioeconomic spectrum spoke powerfully of the long-standing farm crisis. Thousands of widows held photographs over their heads for all to see the faces of their departed husbands who had committed suicide due to crushing farm debts. In these protests, women articulated their wide-ranging concerns related to the inequities and discrimination they faced in their daily lives. Despite women's critical role in the historic victory when Prime Minister Narendra Modi repealed the farm bills in 2021, women's voices and contributions have been largely displaced by the valorizations of male leaders and martyrs in the Punjabi global collective memory, such as Deep Sidhu.

In articulating their demands in public, women in India drew inspiration from gadar protest songs composed far away in California a century earlier. The echoes of these anti-colonial songs still powerfully give voice to the inequalities and injustices experienced by rural Punjabi women today. The protest stage on which women spoke in Delhi in 2021 was named in honor of the only female gadar revolutionary leader, Bibi Gulab Kaur. Women also adapted their wedding customs to meet the political exigencies of the farm crisis. At night they organized *jagos*, which are folk dances in which women walk throughout the village encouraging everyone to stay awake to join the wedding festivities. But, in the context of the farmer's protest, women repurposed this tradition to spread the message of protest and strengthen the resolution of farmers to continue the struggle. Videos of the jagos went viral, circulating globally, where they sparked solidarity protests in San Francisco, Sacramento, London, and many other places around the world.

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I employ the example of women's recovery of gadar songs in India's farm protests to emphasize how music resounds across spatial and temporal distances. The farm protests also highlight women's creativity in recovering and performing protest music from earlier struggles to voice their present-day issues and resistance to contemporary power hierarchies within local, national, and global contexts.

Reflecting on the generational cohort of Sikh women who relocated to California in the mid-century—the heart of this book—I suggest that it is crucial to resist the tendency to attribute the complex changes in gender norms and identity in the diaspora solely to national contexts. Too often the study of immigrant women in the United States is guided by the assumption that women achieve greater gender equality due to American cultural norms and lifestyles. However, I assert that it is valuable to carefully consider the historical and biographical circumstances in the lives of the first generation of South Asian women who relocated to rural California to understand changes in their self-conceptions and agency. How should we understand Harbhajan Kaur Takher's articulation in a group interview with elderly Sikh American women: "We didn't speak in India. *We learned to talk here*"?[2] The profound yet subtle changes in women's expressions of vocality and agency require nuanced interpretation. The first South Asian women who built new lives in rural California carved out greater space for themselves in their social and devotional lives due to a confluence of factors in their daily lives—their specific family circumstances (especially the absence of extended kin), a growing self-confidence from their contributions to the farm businesses and paid work in the canneries, their faith and their especially active role in Sikh public life in informal gatherings and the local gurdwara, and especially due to the support they derived from their powerful bonds with other women. Research that involves deep listening to women's speech and songs also captures the importance of individual personalities and proclivities, biographical circumstances, and fortuitous events in addition to larger changes in community and society at the national and global levels.

This book offers a method influenced by oceanic humanities to make the historical narratives and music of women audible and to spark a dialogue about gender, music, and migration, as well as the politics of women's agency and vocality about these questions: What set of circumstances prompted women to speak, speak up, and speak out at certain times and places? What was the confluence of factors that enabled and encouraged women's voices to be heard in particular moments and places? Who carried the echoes of women's speech and songs forward publicly to prevent their erasure from history?

In this case history of Punjabi Sikh women who relocated to rural California before 1970, I have explored women's musical expressions in diverse genres as a means to narrate their history and interior lives from their perspectives. I've examined how women were associated with mobility (water and air), and men with the fixity of inherited land in Punjabi culture. Narrating the

history of the Sikh diaspora from a female perspective opens up a theoretical space for interrogating new narratives of mobility, as well as a fluid, dynamic understanding of the relationship between culture and place. Certain themes emerged in the individual and collective experiences of the Sikh women I interviewed, who had negotiated unprecedented displacement and trauma as they came of age in Punjab during Partition, and then relocated to rural California at a time when they encountered a hostile white-dominated society. Isolated on farms, women also lacked their traditional forms of support. Their music reflects the unusual circumstances of their transoceanic lives. These women spoke and sang about their liminal status between their birth and affinal families, homes and villages growing up in Punjab, as well as their challenges in forging new lives and communities in a distant location in California. This generation of women sustained enduring bonds with each other in the 1950s and 1960s that remained their pillars of support throughout the rest of their lives.

Amardeep Kaur's poem—"Red Dye: Barahmah Di Chitthi Guru Nanak Nu: A Letter of Twelve Months to Guru Nanak"—is a beautiful illustration of this book's core themes.[3] In the poem's refrain, the poet addresses Guru Nanak, imploring him: "Sai, my Beloved! / Fill me into your red dye / You ferried me across the Pacific once …" The song narrates the history of the Sikh diaspora from a woman's perspective within the temporal framework of the calendar year used in the Barah Mah composition from the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The female poet's articulation of Sikh mobility is deeply informed by Sikhi and reflects the boundlessness of Sikh sacred space. The embodied feminine voice travels to key moments in Sikh history, moving seamlessly back and forth between the diaspora and Punjab, throughout the twentieth century.

"Red Dye" invokes Amrita Pritam's famous anguished poem, "Waris Shah Nu," about the Partition of Punjab, as well as the accumulation of historical traumas in the collective memory of Sikhs. The female protagonist in this poem travels to the main sites of injustice and martyrdom seared into the collective consciousness of Sikhs, from the Komagata Maru incident in Vancouver to the gadar revolt in the 1910s, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919, the Partition of 1947, and the community's fraught history in postcolonial India since the 1980s. The bloodshed of Partition, and Punjab itself, is embodied by the female poet:

Sai, my Beloved!
Fill me into your red dye
You ferried me across the Pacific once
Today, I return, to find the broken parts of Partition—Panj Ab—
The cost of that azadi [freedom]
Where the map of Radcliffe carved on paper
cut through my body like a dagger through my liver
And erected Wagah,

the border of corpses seeping through my gushing veins
Now, I carry them all
in the heaviness of this hair …
Endless river streams turned graves
Of all your identities and names
Is this the memory of all your forms?

A prominent theme is the loss of the rich and diverse culture of the Punjabiyat: "Today, I return, a wandering ghost even after sixty-eight *hajj* / and across the seven seas / Adrift from my cherished One/and still longing the kiss of *qisse*, / a birth *sakhi* of your *udasi*." She yearns for a return from the seven seas to join the spiritual and cultural world of the Punjabi love legends, and the stories of Guru Nanak's world travels.

This final stanza beautifully articulates a core preoccupation of *Women and the Sikh Diaspora*—the centrality of the oceanic in the Sikh worldview and global history as articulated and experienced by embodied feminine diasporic voices:

O Nanak, my Beloved!
You ferried me over the Pacific once
Today, I sail in circles in search of your Indus treasure chest
The ruby of your true red dye
Lost in the Indian Ocean
The jewel of your piri
Sai, my Beloved!
Drench me with your true red dye
Imbue me with all your pigment
And colour
me
red.

Notes

1 See Navsharan Singh, "Women Bring a Spring of Hope to the Farm Movement," www.TheIndiaForm.in, uploaded May 7, 2021, accessed June 8, 2023; and Navkiran Kaur Natt, "Refusing to Be an Exception Anymore: Women in the Farmers' Protest," *Sikh Research Journal* (Spring 2021), https://sikhresearchjournal.org/refusing-to-be-an-exception-anymore-women-in-the-farmers-protest-by-navkiran-kaur-natt/.
2 Harbhajan Kaur Takher interview by Nicole Ranganath and Davinder Deol, December 17, 2017, Yuba City, CA.
3 Amardeep Kaur, "Red Dye: Barahmah di chitthi Guru Nanak nu (A Letter of Twelve Months to Guru Nanak)," *Sikhri*, November 12, 2019, https://sikhri.org/podcasts/red-dye-barahmah-di-chitthi-guru-nanak-nu-the-sikhcast. An audio reading of the poem is available on the website. I am grateful to Amardeep Kaur for informing me of this evocative poem.

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