

***PAPER MELGEA<sup>1</sup> ?***  
**SIKH MIGRATION TO FRANCE IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

**Christine Moliner (EHESS-CEIAS)**

(Draft. Not to be quoted)

The notion of a Sikh Diaspora has emerged forcefully over the past twenty years in the social sciences. Despite the diversity of topics characteristic of this expanding academic field, it suffers from a limitation: it has almost entirely been fashioned by studies on Sikh diasporic settlements in the UK and North America, where a majority of *pardesi* Sikhs live. It has therefore overlooked those smaller, less stable Sikh communities, for instance in continental Europe, with a different migration history, different socio-economic profiles and most importantly confronted to very different local contexts. Sikh Diaspora studies have also tended to overlook the importance of intra-diasporic networks fashioned, as opposed to a marked focus on the links between Sikh diasporic communities and their homeland, the Panjab.

Hence, Sikhs in France present a very particular case: whereas Sikhs started migrating to the West Coast in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sikh migration to continental Europe and France is a very recent phenomenon. Whereas their counterparts in the US, Canada and the UK are very numerous and usually well settled, Sikhs in France constitute a precarious and mobile group. National policies regarding immigration are also important factors: the classical opposition between the French model of integration and the multicultural one favoured in the UK and the US has tended to melt down since 2001, but remains valid nonetheless, as far as Sikhs are concerned.

After briefly laying out the genesis of Sikh migration to France, I will present the major features of Sikh settlement in France, marked by the illegal status of most migrants, their mobility and solidarity and the emergence of a generation of French Sikhs.

Finally I will point at a few issues about Sikhs in France and continental Europe that could be of some relevance for a comparative approach of the Sikh Diaspora.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Did you get (residence) papers?'

Despite the important presence of Sikh soldiers during the two World Wars, there was no Sikh settlement on the European continent until very recently. Sikh migration to Europe was indeed entirely channelled until the 1970s towards Great Britain. It started as a mass-movement in the post-second World War economic boom of the former colonial metropolis, before coming to a halt in the 1970s, after the implementation of a very restrictive immigration legislation. British Sikhs today constitute a numerous (350.000 people), visible, influential and rather prosperous community.

Sikhs in France offer a stark contrast since they are hardly 15.000. Their settlement is recent, very precarious and until the turban case, nobody in France knew about them. Indeed those Sikhs who wear the turban (*keshdari*) are still routinely mistaken for Muslims (Arabs), those who don't (*mona*) for Hindus (note the confusion in French between Indian and Hindu).

Sikh migration flows to continental Europe appear as a side effect of British immigration policy that has turned the UK into a fortress for all South Asians, from the 1970s onwards. Therefore the prospective migrants who could not go to the UK, the US or Canada to join family members tried their luck in France, Belgium or Germany, later to Italy, Spain, Portugal.

## **I. Genesis of Sikh migration to France**

A few Sikhs arrived in France in the early 1980s, as undocumented immigrants, without any familiarity whatsoever with the host society, without for most of them permanent housing or job. Some of them benefited from the legalization policy of the newly elected left government after 1981 and could therefore move away from this absolute precariousness. These pioneers set up the community institutions and networks, in particular the first gurdwara started in 1986.

They were followed in the late 1980s by a second wave of migrants, linked to the political situation in the Panjab. Claiming to be Khalistani militants (considered as terrorists by the Indian government), thousands of Sikhs sought refuge abroad, in the UK, the USA, Canada and less so in continental Europe. But a much more important flow consisted of

young Sikh men, who without any militant background, fled the total insecurity encountered in rural Panjab in those years and applied for political asylum. Interestingly, this wave of Sikh political refugees coincided with the tightening of European immigration policies. From 1986 onwards French policy has generated hundred of thousands of *sans-papiers* (undocumented immigrants) who applied for political asylum as the only way to remain legally in France, at least while their case was under study.

In parallel, the wives and children of the early migrants arrived in France under the family reunification provisions, which lead to the emergence of a second generation in the early 1990s. The well known process of chain migration started at the same period, with new migrants joining members of their *biradari* (clan) already settled in France and relying on them for access to employment, housing and dealing with French bureaucracy.

## **II. Demographic and socio-economic profile**

As I said, there are an estimated 15.000 Sikhs in France, but there are no official statistics available, since most Sikhs are illegal migrants. And the flow of people coming and going over the past 15 years has been much more important. Sikh population in France is demographically imbalanced, with a majority of men, unmarried, in their 20s and a growing proportion of women and children (mostly born in India until the mid- 1990s, since then born in France).

They come from Doaba, the central region of Punjab that has been a traditional reservoir of international migration for over a century now. They belong to a rural background, generally to families with a prior migration history and, except for the pioneers, arrived in France as part of a process of chain migration.

Castewise, there are three main caste groups represented in France: Jats, Ravidasis and Lohana. Jats are numerically, socially, economically and politically dominant in the Punjab, and in some respect in the Diaspora, although this dominance is contested by other castes, particularly the Ramgarhia and the Ravidasi. Ravidasi belong to the Chamar caste, an untouchable group well represented in the diaspora. Lohana are a service caste in rural Punjab, whose position in the caste hierarchy is close to Ramgharia.

What is the relevance of caste in France? It seems to be still significant in four respects. Firstly, marriage practices strictly follow the endogamous rules observed in Punjab and elsewhere in

the Diaspora. Sikhs marry within their caste group and outside their *gotra* (sub-caste of both their parents and grand-parents). Interestingly, the specific constraints of living in France (in particular the difficulty to get a visa for the prospective spouse and the small size of the community settled here) have not resulted in the relaxing of these rules and there are none of the inter-caste marriages that can be observed in urban Punjab or in other diasporic settlements. Secondly, caste membership remains relevant as far as places of worship are concerned. Except for the major gurdwara in Bobigny (a suburb area, North –East of Paris, where most Sikhs live) whose *sangat* is intercaste (but whose management committee is under Jat control), the four other gurdwaras tend to be caste-based (one Ravidasi, one Lohana, one Jat). Thirdly, caste membership increasingly represents the basis of strong transnational links with fellow caste members living in the UK, the USA and in India. This is particularly the case of Ravidasis from England who are engaged in philanthropic activities not only in Punjab (funding of hospitals, schools, colleges and gurdwaras for the members of their caste) but also in continental Europe, among recently settled Ravidasi communities. They have for instance contributed to the purchase of the Ravidasi gurdwara in Drancy (another suburb area, near Bobigny) and every year they help with the organization in Paris of the celebrations of Guru Ravidas Janamdin, attended by two coaches-load of British Ravidasis.

Finally a kind of professional specialisation along caste lines can be observed: although this is not systematic: Jats and Chamars tend to work mostly in catering and building sites, whereas Lohana are almost exclusively engaged in self-employment, as petty traders with small, usually illegal, market stalls on the streets of Paris and its eastern suburb. But quite remarkably, the main marker of status among Sikhs in France is not caste, although as discussed above it does matter, but the possession of legal documents of residence – I shall develop this point later.

As for their geographic distribution, Sikhs in France present a unique case of concentration in one place: Paris and its north-eastern suburbs-whereas Sikhs in Italy, Germany, Belgium or Spain and even more so in the UK are settled in several cities. This specificity owes much to the process of chain migration and might also be explained by the lack of stability, the precariousness of this group, whose members don't feel economically and socially secure enough to venture outside their unique centre of settlement.

Their occupational profile is characterized by a strong concentration in three sectors that are in great demand of a cheap –mostly migrant- workforce: clothing, catering and building site. In a transnational city such as Paris, ethnic business activities are thriving and these three sectors are evolving into ethnic niches, with the development of ethnic entrepreneurship, among long established communities, like the North Africans, the Chinese

or the Turks, and also among ‘newcomers’, such as Pakistanis and Indians. In each trade, newly arrived migrants work for well established ones, who have secured residence documents and work permits. Hence a lot of Sikhs work for Pakistanis *malik* (boss), with whom they share the same language (Punjabi), as Pakistanis constitute a much more numerous, relatively older and better-settled group in France.

### **III. *Paper melgea*? Undocumented and mobile migrants**

As noted above, their illegal status determines much of the social life of Sikhs in France, at both individual and collective level, as their top priority consists in acquiring ‘*des papiers*’ (*paper milna*).

There has been actually various ways to get a legal status in France since the first Sikhs arrived in the early 1980s. A few pioneers benefited from the limited legalisation process initiated by the left government in 1981-82. Political asylum has been granted to a few dozens of others, as Khalistanis militants, and their refugee card has been transformed after some years into a permanent residence card (which allows its holder to go to India, whereas it is not possible for a political refugee).

Many both among the pioneers and later migrants, have had to resort to *marriages blancs* (fake marriages) with French women, as marriage with a French national helps getting residence papers. In the past couple of years, others have benefited from a legalisation procedure applying to undocumented immigrants able to prove they have been living in France for the past 10 years. For the rest, another way out of illegal status consists in applying for temporary residence in Italy or Spain while living and working in France, and later getting Spanish or Italian documents converted into a French residence card

What looks very much like an obstacle course has had several consequences. Firstly, it translates into an extensive geographical mobility. As noted earlier, migration to France was initially determined by British immigration policy, and its continuation was linked not only to the evolution of French immigration policy but also to that of neighbouring European countries. Adjusting to an evolving legal landscape, Sikhs are engaged in a process of multiple migrations, of ongoing displacements between France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain...A lot of them tried to cross the Channel in the 1990s and a few succeeded, others have gone from France to Belgium and Germany then back to France, or the other way

round. In the mid 1990s, the Italian policy of legalizing undocumented immigrants has encouraged hundreds of Sikhs to go there from France. More recently, the same has happened in Portugal and Spain.

These multiple illegal shifts are translated into personal narratives that tell of the difficulties of life abroad, of the courage needed to overcome them, and whose chapters unfold according to the successive places of residence. Stories, anecdotes and exchange of information about the evolution of immigration laws in Europe (and beyond) are present in most conversations

The relations between mobility and (il)legal status of the migrant are actually quite complex. Undocumented migrants are indeed particularly mobile: they move from one European country to another in search of legalization. But their movements are limited and they cannot possibly travel to India, on a family visit for instance, as long as they remain undocumented. These constraints have heavy consequences on social and family life. Those migrants who came as single men postpone their marriage and this situation has led to the development of extra-marital relations with women outside the community, with in some instances, the celebration of mixed marriages (not to be confused with fake marriages). It has also resulted in a peculiar socio-demographic phenomenon: that of late marriage of Sikh males settled in continental Europe (as late as 45, as compared to an average of 25 years old in Panjab), with girls from India, as much as 15 to 20 years younger.

As far as those who were married and had children before migrating, they don't meet their family for years. I have come across several cases of long separation, for more than 10 years sometimes, without meeting wives and children who have remained in Panjab. This specific situation is in fact similar to that encountered by Panjabi pioneers in California in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is obviously generating a lot of suffering and frustration but it is accepted on both sides as the price to pay 'to make it abroad'. In Doaba, the urge to go abroad is so strong, the expectancy so high among the whole family that very few of these men think about going back home empty-handed.

In contrast, the mobility of legal migrants is on the whole more extensive and of a very different nature. Hence, they regularly go to India to attend marriages, they also travel frequently to the UK and to other European countries and less often to the USA and Canada, where the members of their *biradari* are settled. These travels, with regular telephone

calls and the transnational circulation of family video films help maintain very strong family bonds.

#### **IV. The consequences of illegal status on the community social patterns and its relation to the host society**

Finally, we shall examine how this illegal status in France has fashioned the community social patterns, characterised by the importance of mutual aid networks and insulation from French society. Mutual aid networks are clearly the only way to survive in such an environment, especially for the newcomers, who rely on their *biradari* members, as mentioned above, to find a job, housing and to help them getting reliable information on migration opportunities in neighbouring countries or on French evolving policy;

Social relations within the community are ordered by two principles, apparently contradictory, that of solidarity and hierarchy. As for hierarchy, a residence card or, even better, French citizenship constitute the ultimate marker of social distinction within the group, much more than caste, as noted above. The relationships between newcomers and older migrants are akin to client-patron type of relations, this similarity being reinforced by the fact that the latter may be at the same time the landlord and the employer of the former. Hierarchy coexists with solidarity and mutual aid in the fashioning of community networks. Most of the well-settled migrants have been undocumented at some point of their life (and relied then on members of their *biradari*) and still have family members (a brother, a cousin) in such a situation. Interactions between the two groups are a plenty. Families help single men to maintain 'normal' social bonds, invite them regularly on weekends, for marriages and religious celebrations.

The gurdwara as elsewhere in the diaspora, besides its spiritual function, is the cornerstone of these social bonds, a major arena of socialisation and of political ambitions. The major gurdwara in Bobigny is the oldest, started in 1986 as a Sunday service and has been since then supplemented by four other gurdwara in nearby places. It assumes a crucial role for the newly arrived migrants, as a way to develop contacts outside the *biradari*, within the boundaries of which the migrants might otherwise be confined. It operates as a job centre within the community, where information is exchanged on job opportunities, always within the same ethnic niches as described above.

For the emerging second generation, it assumes a different role: besides the family, as the only arena of socialisation within the community, it plays a key role in the religious and cultural transmission of children and teenagers. Finally, for the elders, the first generation, it is a platform of political ambitions. In France, as elsewhere in the Diaspora, who controls the local gurdwara leads the local *sangat* (congregation), and Sikh leadership, in France as elsewhere, is essentially a religious leadership. For long, the Khalistan movement has dominated the political scene in the diaspora, France is no exception and has witnessed confrontation between Khalistanis and their opponents- the former, although forming a small minority of the *sangat*, finally gaining control of the Bobigny gurdwara. But interestingly, this confrontation has never reached the same level of polarisation and violence as in the UK or North America, probably because the two groups were too socially and economically interdependent and the community too small to allow for internal strife to develop beyond a certain point.

Lastly, illegality fashions certain types of relations with French society. This issue of relationship to the host society is crucial and conditioned by a variety of factors: as noticed above, Sikh migrants in France belong to a rural background; they settled at a time of increasingly restrictive immigration legislation and of politicisation of immigration ; they have no colonial connection to France, which has ambivalent potential consequences (no negative stereotype attached to former colonised people; but no shared past, no collective representation of themselves in the dominant society). Illegal migrants are largely invisible migrants, and this is even truer of Sikhs, who lack a common history with France. They have to rely heavily on ethnic networks, particularly for job and housing. The social life of the newcomers is entirely delimited within the boundaries of the community. Their lack of proficiency in French explains also their very limited contacts with the dominant society. After some years, they acquire a limited command of the language and through work come into contact with a variety of ethnic groups - North Africans, Black Africans, Pakistanis, Chinese- engaged in the same occupations and more marginally with French people.

The first generation's attitude towards French society is very ambivalent: interactions with it are highly valorised (so is the command of the language), but at the same time they strongly oppose what they consider as the "evils" of Western civilisation, such as neglect of the elders, sexual freedom and the like. This ambivalence is perceptible in the cultural transmission to the youth.

As far as the emerging second generation is concerned, as most migrant youth, it has multiple identities, practising code-switching according to their different environments, as well as



well as language switching, speaking Panjabi to their elders, French otherwise, including with their Panjabi peers. Through their schooling and after-school socialising, they obviously develop very different relations with the host society, as compared to their parents or the newly arrived migrants.

## V. From Sikhs in France to French Sikhs? Sikh mobilisation for the turban

With the emergence of a second generation, born and educated in France, we are witnessing the search for recognition by the host society that has been described for other migrant groups. To illustrate this trend, I wish to discuss Sikh mobilisation for the turban, as it is my contention that it demonstrates a desire to integrate into French society.

There was no turban case in the 1980s, as the early migrants were mostly *mona* Sikhs (shaved), either because they had cut their hair in India or did so when they reached France. The first cases involved in the 1990s two groups of people. The first consisted of asylum seekers and political refugees whose turban had been accepted at first by French administration—it was furthermore perceived as improving their chance to get political asylum as Khalistani militants. But they were later asked to provide for the renewal of their driving licence or residence card an ID photo *tête nue*, that is without the turban, and they refused to comply. From the early 1990s, a second group comprised *keshdhari* pupils newly arrived from India, whose *kheski* (small turban) was problematic in state schools. Long before the 2004 mobilisation, the turban became an issue French administration had to cope with, leading to several lawsuits. At school, a handful of *keshdhari* children were concerned. Following a Supreme Court ruling in 1991, a case-by-case settlement was adopted: turban was accepted in some schools, not in others, but no student was excluded until 2004, and a few parents chose private schooling.

The 2004 Act banning the wearing of religious signs in State-run schools was primarily targeting Islamic headscarves, not only perceived as a religious sign but also as a symbol of women oppression. Indeed the wearing of the Islamic veil (unknown until the mid-1980s) at the centre of an impassioned public debate since 1989 has been constructed as a threat to the whole Republican framework, to be safeguarded by the act. It is therefore an irony that this Act mostly affected Sikh males sporting the turban.

While the bill was discussed in Parliament in January-February 2004, Sikh mobilisation gathered momentum, through support in India and the diaspora and a wide coverage by the Indian and British media, less so by the French media –till then nobody in France knew about the Sikhs and their turban. Once implemented from September 2004, the Act has led to the exclusion of a few Sikh students from public high school.

This mobilisation is to be understood in terms of politics of recognition of a migrant group engaged in a process of integration into French society. The issue of recognition, as analysed by Charles Taylor (Taylor: 1992) appears as crucial for all minority groups, and particularly for Sikhs who form probably the least known ethnic minority in France. Their invisibility is mostly due to the lack of collective representations borrowed, as in the case of Sikhs in Britain, from the colonial past.

And this turban affair has indeed dramatically increased their visibility, nationally and internationally: French media in particular have ‘discovered’ this community and interviewed turbaned Sikhs about their religious identity. Several meetings have been convened with French authorities, particularly the education ministry. Through these regular contacts with the government and the press, a Sikh leadership has emerged. Without debating the question of its legitimacy to represent their community (whose vast majority was not affected by the new legislation, since they and their children are *mona* Sikhs), it is interesting to observe how this unprecedented exposure has created new divisions and conflicts for a share of power. These tensions have been enhanced by outside interventions, particularly those of British Sikhs. The generational divide played also a role: because of the lack of proficiency of their elders in French, the youth has become for the first time spokesmen of their community. It might be under their influence and due to their understanding of the French ideological context –and that of *Gore* Sikhs, western converts to Sikhism- that Sikh discourse has shifted: to circumvent the ban on “ostensible religious signs”, the turban has been at times presented as a “cultural” or ethnic symbol, rather than a religious one - to the disapproval of Sikhs abroad.

Another aspect of the mobilisation points at the politics of recognition mentioned above, pursued by minority groups that are either organised, influential and well integrated into the dominant society or at least, as is the case here, willing to be fully part of it. When asking for the right to wear the turban today, Sikhs have referred to the sacrifice of their forefathers during the two World Wars and the debt France has to honour. What might be considered as a specious argument represents in fact an attempt to conjure up a common

history with the host country. Hence Sikhs regularly attend 11th November celebrations of the Armistice in North of France where thousands of Indian soldiers (with a majority of Sikhs within their ranks) are buried.

### **What can the study of Sikhs in Continental Europe tell us about the current evolution of the Sikh Diaspora?**

- Within the Sikh Diaspora the particular experience of smaller Sikh settlements has to be taken into account. They are also rather easy to study, because of their modest size and offer a unique opportunity to study a community in the making (pioneer phase, emergence of a second generation, institution building...).

- They also give an insight into the pioneer Sikh settlements of the late 19thc, early 20<sup>th</sup> century in North America, New Zealand and Australia, or of the 1930 and 1940s in the UK. What is very similar between Sikh settlers in North America and today's Sikhs in Europe:

- ▶ The adverse context (anti-Asian legislation in North America, restrictive immigration policies and anti-illegal migration in today's Europe). In both cases, the ability of unskilled migrants of rural background to adapt to such contexts is particularly remarkable. This ability is based on: their socio-cultural resources (solidarity and mutual aid network; concepts of masculinity valorizing hardwork and overcoming of hardship...); new strategies of mobility: to study them, we have to revise our understanding of migration and the classical dichotomy between sending/receiving countries, push/pull factors.... So the study of Sikhs in continental Europe calls for a new approach of migration insisting on multiple, circular movements

- ▶ The importance of illegal migration: it has actually been a long-term component of South Asian migration in general, and of Panjabi migration flows in particular. What are the consequences of this illegal status at both collective and individual levels?

- A possible area of investigation could be that of the moral and political economy of contemporary Sikh migration to Europe (cf Fariba Adelhah on Iranian Migrants), focusing on the flourishing underground economy of smuggling: how are information on traveling and settling abroad exchanged? What are the activities of so-called agents and other providers of services to prospective migrants? One has to take into consideration the extraordinary appeal

of emigration in Panjab, the imaginary dimension of migration. How are fashioned the motivations to leave? How migration flows sustain themselves?

- The issue of the relations maintained with the place of origin: are they of the same nature/extent among Sikhs in continental Europe as elsewhere in the Diaspora?: what are their social remittances? Considering that closer connections are maintained with Panjab among recent migrants. Another issue is that of cultural reproduction in various local migration contexts: religious nurture cannot be the same in France and in the UK. Crucial role of the gurdwara in small Sikh settlements. Recent emergence in France of cultural organisations (Khabaddi team, Giddha and Bhangra groups, Maharani Jind Kaur memorial association), encouraged by the French legislation on laïcité.
- The issue of intra-diasporic connections. For instance, British Sikhs play a major role in the religious nurture and cultural transmission to young French Sikhs (annual Gurmat Camp organised by British Sikhs...). Role models?
- The (post)colonial issue: we know Sikh contemporary identity and representations of that identity have been in part fashioned by the colonial and post-colonial experience. So it is quite interesting to study Sikh diasporic communities in non-colonial contexts. One has to bear in mind that the countries where they are settled do share a colonial past with other migrants groups (France with North Africans, West Africans and Indochinese, for instance).
- The issue of relations with other migrant groups, in particular with other South Asians (especially Pakistanis Panjabis).