

Of Caste and Its Cost The Story of a 'Little Punjab' in Canada

*The Making of Little Punjab in Canada:
Patterns of Immigration*
by Archana B. Verma
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In this book, Archana B. Verma, who obtained her doctoral degree from the Simon Fraser University, Canada and currently teaches history at Hindu College, University of Delhi, takes up for discussion the case of migration to Canada of members of a certain small group in Punjab. Such a topic, concerning migration, hybridity and resultant changes in identity both at home and abroad, is quite common in contemporary postcolonial scholarship. However, through her innovative dealing of the subject, her extensive archival work, and her superb narrative style, Verma makes her book stand out even within this large and often impressive corpus of similar works.

The first novelty of Verma's work lies in the choice of her subject itself. Instead of choosing to comment on migration patterns of a large and thus essentially heterogeneous community, she decides to go for the minuscule. She discusses the migration to Canada not of Punjabis in general, but of members of a certain relatively small Sikh caste—the Mahton. Neither does she study the migration patterns of the Mahton community over all of time, but only in the first half of the twentieth century—to be even more precise, from 1905 to the 1940s. She restricts her subject further by discussing not all cases of migration by members of this caste within this time period, but only of those who lived in the rather small village of Paldi in Garhshankar Tehsil of Hoshiarpur district. The choice of this village is not fortuitous: there is on the Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada another village by the same name—a village set up by Mahton emigrants from the original Paldi—thereby setting up in this Canadian Paldi a 'Little Punjab' and a direct case of comparative study with its Punjabi counterpart. The author's second claim

to novelty would surely lie in such a selection; cases of people from a certain village in Punjab migrating to Canada and setting up their home village by the same name there could surely not have been the most usual practice.

The third and probably the most important novelty of this work lies in the interpretation of the reasons and fallout of these particular cases of migration that it offers. Departing considerably from the most accepted economic thesis of migration having been primarily instituted by poverty, Verma argues that the cases she takes up for discussion show that well to do landholders, and not the utterly poor, constituted the bulk of the emigrants. Her thesis is that it was not poverty at home but rather a lower caste position that compelled certain members of this otherwise affluent Mahton community to migrate to Canada. She goes on to show how the newly acquired status of community members in Canada alleviated the social situation of not only the emigrants but also of their kith and kin back home, so much so that while the Mahtons were enumerated as lower castes in all earlier censuses, from the 1941 census onwards, they have been proclaimed as Rajputs, an upper caste. While some of the ways in which she establishes this point of hers can definitely be contested, one cannot marvel at the novelty of the thesis itself.

The most striking qualities of this work, however, lie not in its selection of topic or the thesis it offers, but the methods it adopts to do the same and, of course, its style. The author does fundamental primary research in Punjab and British Columbia, that too in rather obscure parts of these two provinces—neither of the two Paldis being major urban centres—by accessing diverse documents and interviewing all kinds of people, most quite old, considering the

period that she chooses for her study. She has had extensive interviews with the immigrants to Canada from Paldi, their contemporary members of other races like whites, blacks, Chinese and Japanese, as well as the emigrants' relatives and peers back at the Indian Paldi, and she quotes from them at ease throughout the book giving a fantastic flavour of authenticity to her work. She has also studied, and presents at ease, numerous documents—land and revenue records from Punjab, immigration records from Canadian and British authorities, personal letters of the emigrants and their relatives, newspaper articles and announcements from those times, and even tickets and cash memos and letterheads—all presenting her thesis in a most acceptable and authentic way. The extent of her archival scholarship apart, what really endears this book to the reader is its style. While continuously dealing with concrete data and figures, and constantly striving to prove a thesis of sociological import, Verma's style remains far from pedantic. In a style that could put many established raconteurs to shame, she narrates the travails of this little group of Punjabis, their emigration, their hardships, their successes, and the consequences at home, much like an epic storyteller, unfolding before a curious reader the narrative canvas of the trajectory of a community. The best thing about this book is surely that it can be read by anybody as a most engrossing record of human drama.

The book begins, customarily, with a 'Preface' (pp. 9-10) and 'Acknowledgements' (p. 11) and is followed by an 'Introduction' (pp. 13-18). In the 'Introduction', Verma gives an outline of the scope and objective of her research stating clearly her caste-identity oriented thesis of migration, and also introduces the reader to a brief literature survey of

existing research in the area. It is, however, from the next section, the first chapter, that she fully takes off into her study. The first chapter, titled 'The Place of Mahton in the Caste Structure of Punjab' (pp. 19-61), gives a clear and incisive picture of the peculiar situation of caste in Punjab. The fact of Punjab being dominantly tri-religious, and the fact of two of the three religions—Islam and Sikhism—theoretically disavowing the category of caste, lead to a shift in the traditional fourfold occupational typology of Hindu casteism into a more complicated system based on *baradari*. Thus, as the author shows, the Jats, Rajputs, Mahtons, and Arains, were all cultivators and so possibly members of the same caste in the traditional occupational classification, but in Punjab they formed distinct *baradaris*, with the first two groups, comprising both Hindus and Sikhs, considered as higher castes, and the third primarily Sikh and the fourth primarily Muslim groups marked as lower castes. The reason for the Mahton to be considered a lower caste was partly because of their being 'market gardeners' or vegetable producers as opposed to the crop producers that the higher castes were, but the primary reason was because of the kinship structures and marriage rules they followed.

Accordingly, in the second chapter, titled 'The Kinship System of the Mahton and Emigration' (pp. 63-96), the author analyses the kinship structure of this *baradari* and shows that while the Mahtons, like most castes in India, were endogamous with regards to the caste group (*baradari* in this case) and exogamous with regards to *got*, or the patrilineal ancestral sub-caste group, their *got*-based exogamy was restricted only to the *got* of the father and mother and not of the paternal and maternal grandmothers too. Furthermore, the Mahton also practised *karewa*, or remarrying a widow with an unmarried brother-in-law, which was not accepted within the *got*-based exogamous incest taboos of upper caste practices. This omission of two of the four points of the

got-based system of exogamy and their practice of widow remarriage made Mahtons outsiders to the rigid caste-based kinship system and considered lower in the hierarchy, in spite of their occupational and monetary position. Conversely, however, these systems of isogamy, whereby a Mahton could marry someone of one's own village or clan, led to a more cohesive and better-knit structure of this *baradari* than other higher castes, prompting a more collective desire to alleviate one's lower caste position. The author shows, however, that the Mahton was itself not a homogeneous group with there being further subdivisions based in a progressive classification of *got* or original ancestral groups, *patti* or the share of cultivable land amongst several households within a *got*, *al* or the identificatory nickname given to particular units within a *patti*, *parivar* or a joint family structure within an *al*, and finally the most atomistic unit of a *tabbar* or the nuclear familial unit of spouses and children. But her fundamental argument is that though individuals migrated from particular *tabbars*, the way decisions were taken, the way migration patterns were co-ordinated, the way the immigrants set up their firms and mills in Canada and the way the wealth thus earned was disseminated in the native Paldi, all point towards a strong communitarian system aimed at alleviating the caste position of the *baradari*, rather than individual fortunes.

The third chapter, titled 'Developing the Canada Connection' (pp. 97-131), and the fourth chapter, 'The Establishment of Little Punjab in Canada' (pp. 132-181), together trace the history of how the first Mahton emigrants from Paldi left for Canada in 1905 to work as mere labourers in lumber mills, how soon they came to own firms themselves, and how, by 1941, they could carve out a whole village for themselves in Canada, bearing the same name as their original abode. The history is spectacular and offers great reading. The narrative of how a motley group of Mahtons set out on foot from Paldi and reached Vancouver via

Jalandhar, Calcutta and Hong Kong by the end of 1905 and the beginning of 1906 is stuff for any adventure story. But, what follows after this—how the Mahtons started off as railway construction workers, moved on to be labourers at lumber mills, continuously saving money while bearing inhuman hardship and racism, to lease a mill collectively by 1913, to form a collective company for themselves on 16 October 1916, named Mayo Lumber Company after their youngest member Maiya Singh, and to start their own mill at Mayo Siding in the Cowichan Valley of the Sahtlam district of Vancouver Island, to finally get the place officially renamed after their ancestral village Paldi in 1941—sounds like something straight out of a fairy tale. The author goes on to recount how through this entire phase of economic metamorphosis, the Mahtons also underwent social and cultural transformation. In Canada, social changes were achieved through a tinkering of racial relations by actually becoming employers of whites and other races of immigrants, and cultural changes comprised setting up at the mill township an Anglicised school and hospital as also a *gurdwara* which standardized several features of their erstwhile amorphous faith, and several Sikhs departing for socio-economic reasons from their traditional markers like beards and turbans. At the native Paldi, the economic and socio-cultural changes brought in by the money sent by the emigrants were even more radical.

In the fifth and final chapter of her book, titled 'Change and Social Separation' (pp. 182-225), Verma discusses the changes brought about by this inflow of money to the Mahtons in Paldi, and how, initially though it led to the upliftment of the entire community and village, it soon led to disparities in wealth and status amongst different Mahton families in the village. She shows how the massive inflow of money sent by emigrants was used to improve infrastructure at Paldi, with the roads getting metalled, almost every house becoming *pucca*, hospitals and schools

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The book ends with a 'Conclusion' (pp. 226-30), where the author sums up her already elaborated points more succinctly,

an 'Appendix' (pp. 231-32), where she gives a note on her sources, a 'Glossary' (pp. 233-38), where she gives a full list of Punjabi words used in the text along with their English translations, and a customary 'Bibliography' (pp. 239-47), 'Index' (pp. 248-54) and 'About the Author' (p. 255). The 'Glossary' itself is so meticulously done that it can form an independent, extremely informative reading into Punjabi culture. The book is also provided with several maps, both of Punjab and British Columbia showing different images of the physical features and land holdings in and around the two Paldis at different points of time. These maps along with the glossary can themselves make the book worth possessing.

However, at the end, one cannot but add a little sceptical note towards the out and out anti-economistic thesis that the book offers, because while Verma continuously tries to show how caste becomes the real determining factor behind emigration, one cannot deny that the means to alleviate one's caste position is shown to happen even in her analysis through monetary means alone. It is only when the Mahton has sufficiently more money and substantially greater land holding than the Jats and other upper castes that they can 'buy' the status of Rajputs. Furthermore, the disjunctive observations in the last chapter as to how the Mahtons get somewhat disunited on grounds of economic disparity, further confirms how monetary concerns can seriously undercut the assumptions of a uniform caste identity. The rivalries between different Mahton families in the Punjabi Paldi and the story of Mayo Singh almost cheating fellow Mahtons to procure singular ownership of the mill do not do much justice to the caste-identity thesis. It may not be Verma's fault, however, that she underplays economism and foregrounds caste identity. This is one of the fundamental features of the

post-Marxist episteme we all live in, where suspicious of the totalitarian possibilities of economic determinism, the social sciences are constantly moving away from economic explanations to studies of apparently extra-economic 'local' identity-based categories like caste. And since virtually no one has the transcendental capacity to escape the overwhelming knowledge-power nexus of the dominant episteme, Archana B. Verma cannot be blamed for not having done so. And this is especially so, considering the otherwise brilliant, eminently readable narrative she has woven with data and words, which cannot but be recommended to social scientists, lay enthusiasts of Punjabi culture, and general inquisitors into the human predicament alike.

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