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Respecting the East, Embracing the West: A Tribute to the Women of the Maritime Sikh Society

By Pavna Sodhi¹

Abstract

This article pays homage to the women of the Maritime Sikh Society² as they juxtapose values from the western and eastern cultures into one mindset. Their quest to preserve, transmit and share their Punjabi³ culture is reflective in the cohesiveness of their community and religious congregation. Unfortunately, similar to most immigrants, this population dealt with a variety of obstacles in order to develop a bicultural identity and live comfortably in their third space. A third space represents a safe, mutually respectful, comfortable and authentic environment, which encourages an individual to be proud of his or her ethnic heritage and in turn, integrate it into their individual identity (Bhabha, 1994; Sodhi, Gamlin, Maracle, Eamer, Komorowsky and Yee, 2001). This article also alludes to the triumphs these women achieved in order to re-invent their identities and positively communicate their culture to future generations.

Keywords: Punjabi women, bicultural identity formation, intergenerational communication.

Introduction

Over the last forty-seven years, Sikh⁴ women have left and a positive and altruistic impression in eastern Canada (Ralston, 1996). Aside from the assortment of barriers and triumphs encountered, these remarkable women simultaneously developed bicultural identities, which allowed them to *pick and choose* certain cultural aspects and live authentically in both cultures (Sodhi, 2002). Biculturalism entails, “the ability of a person to function effectively in more than one culture and also to switch roles back and forth as the situation changes” (Jambunathan, Burts, and Pierce, 2000). Essentially, these women in their pursuit to strengthen their new identity amalgamated values from both cultures. They were successful in transmitting and preserving these values in their offspring, as well.

This article will share highlights from my doctoral research, which explored the diasporic and lived experiences of Punjabi-Sikh women living in eastern Canada. The purpose of this study was to explore how parental attitudes influence intergenerational cultural preservation and ethnic identity formation among Punjabi women living in eastern Canada. The objectives of this study were first, to examine how culture and values are communicated, transmitted and preserved among intergenerational Punjabi women and second, to clarify intergenerational Punjabi women’s perceptions and experiences concerning cultural preservation and their ethnic identity formation. This

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² The Maritime Sikh Society is located in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

³ Punjabi is the culture and language spoken in the northern Indian State of Punjab, India.

⁴ Sikhism is a religion represented in the Indian state of Punjab.

research was a requirement for my doctoral dissertation which I completed in December, 2001.

The primary reason for writing this thesis emerged from my interest of how culture is preserved and passed down to future generations. I was also fascinated by the development of ethnic identity of individuals engaging in this process. I was born and raised in Halifax, Nova Scotia by two Punjabi-Sikh immigrant parents. Their explanation for migrating echoes the words of several other immigrants: to provide a better life for their family. I was very fortunate to experience the main traits of the Nova Scotian and Punjabi cultures.

I didn't realize that my childhood differed from that of other Punjabi-Sikh individuals until I moved away from Nova Scotia to pursue further education. I thought I had preserved a tremendous amount of culture. My definition of preserving culture included: spending time with my Punjabi peers on a regular basis, eating Punjabi cuisine, listening to Indian music and performing *Giddha* (Punjabi folk dancing) annually at various cultural events. I truly believed I combined 'the best of both cultures.'

Being a product of two cultures has its advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is being able to 'pick and choose values' from both cultures that you would like to preserve and pass on to your children. I suppose our immigrant parents had that option as well. But not all parents pick and choose the same values.

I observed that while particular cultural values were transmitted and preserved in some families they were being neglected in others. Once I moved to Ontario in 1995, I started interacting with other second-generation Punjabi peers and noticed that they were fluent in Punjabi and preserved an in-depth knowledge of Sikh traditions. I also noticed a lack of certain values and communication between the children and parents. It seemed they preserved different cultural values and created different definitions of biculturalism. How did this happen in the same country?

What I started to realize is that socialization practices affect the ethnic identity formation of second-generation individuals. What parents deem important to teach, transmit, or expose to their offspring, develops their ethnic identity. In my case, I was taught everything to the last detail except for language whereas immigrant children in other parts of Canada may speak Punjabi fluently, but may not be able to communicate openly with their parents.

In June 2000, after presenting at an International Sikh conference in Toronto, I became more aware of the need to explore the ethnic identity formation of Punjabi women in eastern Canada and how they have transmitted, preserved, and communicated culture to their offspring over the past forty years. My doctoral research captured the insights and thoughts of fifteen Punjabi women and their search for cultural preservation and ethnic identity formation. Each of these women shared their experiences, accomplishments and hardships of being a Punjabi woman living in eastern Canada via informal interviews, personal narratives and follow-up interviews. My thesis builds upon existing knowledge in this field and provides a clearer understanding of the ethnic identity formation of Punjabi-Sikh women living in eastern Canada.

While completing my doctoral studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, I started presenting papers concerning immigrant and diasporic issues, biculturalism and multiculturalism. I continue to share my research at diverse scholarly conferences and relevant journals. I enjoy reaching out to a variety of

audiences and believe in the importance of circulating this information to future generations in order for them become culturally aware and live comfortably in both cultural milieus.

Theoretical Framework

To gain a better understanding of my research topic, the following concepts were explored via an in depth review of literature: parental attitudes, ethnic identity formation and intergenerational cultural preservation. From the review of literature several relevant themes emerged. These included: parental attitudes affect the identity formation and development of biculturalism in offspring (Jambunathan et al., 2000); cultural transmission via communication, family interaction, and language retention is significant for an adolescent's ethnic identity formation (Ghuman and Kamoth, 1993; Ghuman, 1994a); the home promotes traditional beliefs, whereas the school environment manifests the norms and values of the dominant society (Ghuman 1994b); women (mothers) are the bearers of traditions and are expected to teach their daughters about the role of woman in the Indian culture (Naidoo, 1992; Das and Kemp, 1997); conflicts concerning cultural preservation often stem from a lack of communication or compromise between parents and children (Kurian, 1992; Segal, 1991, 1998; Patel, Power and Bhavnagri, 1996).

It was noted that the common premise of these converging factors was the lack of intergenerational communication. I was interested to learn if more intergenerational communication would encourage cultural preservation and ethnic identity formation in future generations.

These topics were studied in different parts of the world, yet none of these premises have recently been explored in eastern Canada. Ralston (1992, 1996) and Sandhu (1979, 1981) conducted research in eastern/Atlantic Canada but did not focus primarily on parental attitudes, intergenerational cultural preservation, and ethnic identity formation of Punjabi-Sikh women living in this region. There are no studies exclusively pertaining to Punjabi-Sikh women in eastern Canada: hence the motivation to study such a dynamic and progressive population.

Methodology

My doctoral research examined the lives of fifteen Punjabi women with overlapping experiences and concerns. As noted before, my intentions in working with this population stem from minimal literature disseminated exclusively on Sikh women from eastern Canada. As well, I have a strong affiliation with the Maritime Sikh Society and felt there was a need to recognize the cohesiveness within this community and amount of cultural preservation that has transpired during the last forty-seven years.

As a second-generation Punjabi-Sikh woman, my experiences growing up in Nova Scotia to helped guide my research. In addition, I was able to develop an open and honest rapport with the majority of my participants. By allowing the data collection to be extremely interactive, participants were able to disclose their experiences to me and in turn provide valuable data for this research.

Fifteen participants (five first-generation women, ten second-generation women) took part in this research study. All participants lived in eastern Canada for the majority of their life and represent cities and towns in the Maritime Provinces. All participants are of Punjabi background. First-generation participants ranged in age from forty-six to sixty-

seven years. Second-generation participant's ages ranged from eighteen to thirty-five years. At the time of data collection (July 2000-February 2001), four first-generation women were married and one was widowed. One out of the ten second-generation participants was married.

As appropriate to my research, I chose a qualitative feminist methodology (Reinharz, 1992). Qualitative methodology refers to, "research procedures which produce descriptive data: people's own written or spoken words and observable behavior" (Jayaratne, 1983, p.145). Complementing the qualitative methodology, feminist research allows participants to be the focus of the inquiry and encourages meaningful discussion. Feminist strategies also promote supportive, open and mutually respectful rapport between the participants and the researcher earlier on in the research process (Reinharz, 1992).

The systematic data collection process consisted of three parts: an informal interview, personal narrative and a final interview. All portions of the study were conducted in English. Informal interviews "attempt to understand the complex behavior of members of a society without imposing any priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p.653). The purpose of this methodology was to allow participants to respond spontaneously to interview questions, reflect upon their responses, write about these reflections in their personal narrative and allow closure in the final interview.

This multi-method approach was a means of triangulation as it provided me with the opportunity to verify and compare emerging themes from the informal interviews with emerging themes from the personal narratives (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Triangulation can be described as the "...use of multiple and diverse data sources and collection techniques to study a single research question or understand complex phenomena" (Shockley-Zalabak and Staley, 1989, p.250). The total duration of the data collection and analysis entailed nine months. I was fortunate to complete the thesis in fifteen months.

As with any research, there were advantages and disadvantages to conducting a study with Punjabi women living in eastern Canada. It has been my dream to document and recognize the uniqueness of Punjabi women in eastern Canada. I chose to work with Punjabi women as I am of the same background and am able to empathize with their thoughts and emotions. Consequently, I was personally equipped to undertake this study given that I understand "the language and culture of the respondents" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p.654). Participants who were uncertain of translating particular Punjabi idiomatic phrases into English felt comfortable expressing themselves in Punjabi. I was able to understand the various traditions, rituals and ceremonies that take place annually in Punjabi households.

Yet, throughout this process, I experienced various obstacles. Within smaller eastern communities, individuals were aware that I was collecting data for my doctoral thesis. Those that were approached to be in the study were informed that this was a confidential study and not to discuss the nature of the study with other individuals within the community. However, some participants did not acknowledge my request and continued to discuss their responses with other participants in the study.

The following section will acknowledge background information pertaining to the migration patterns of Punjabis to eastern Canada and the evolution of the Maritime Sikh Society.

History of Migration and Evolution of the Maritime Sikh Society

There is limited information pertaining to the settlement patterns of Punjabis in eastern Canada. Tomar (2002), Dogra (1987), Sandhu (1979, 1981), Ralston (1996), Tiwana (2000), allude to the reasons for migration to eastern Canada, as I will outline in the following paragraphs. However, little is still known regarding the hardships endured by these immigrants upon arriving in Canada.

The first Punjabi individual landed in eastern Canada in 1959 (Tiwana, 2000). Shortly after this time, in 1965, there was demand in this part of Canada for highly skilled professional such as: Medical Doctors, University Professors, Engineers, Teachers, Architects, Lawyers, Realtors, Businessmen, and Doctoral Students (Dogra, 1987; Sandhu, 1981). East Indians were invited to occupy these positions due to a shortage of qualified individuals in the field. Some of these employment opportunities were situated in areas of eastern Canada where Canadian born individuals preferred not to work (Sodhi and Chopra, 1992). Comments were made suggesting East Indians immigrated to Canada to take jobs away from other Canadians citizens. This was not the case, as several East Indian were encouraged to fill vacant professional jobs throughout eastern Canada (Tomar, 1992).

Most East Indians settled in the larger cities in eastern Canada such as Halifax, Dartmouth, Fredericton, Saint John, Moncton, Charlottetown, and Sydney. These immigrants did not directly travel from India; some traveled via the United Kingdom, Africa, Malaysia, Mauritius or different parts of Canada before settling in eastern Canada (Dogra, 1987). Between 1960-1966 over one hundred families moved to eastern Canada and by 1968 one hundred and fifty-five families settled in Nova Scotia alone (Sandhu, 1981).

The Maritime Sikh Society, located in Halifax, Nova Scotia was founded in 1968. It was named the Maritime Sikh Society to represent the growing Sikh community throughout the Maritime Provinces. At that time, Sikh individuals would congregate at each other's homes, conduct religious services, reminisce about Punjab and devour Punjabi food. One of the largest disadvantages in moving to eastern Canada involved the lack of social support networks that exist in larger urban centres such as Toronto and Vancouver. Fortunately, these new immigrants rapidly became a cohesive and organized congregation supporting one another's nostalgia and consequently were able to preserve new and old cultural traditions in their new homeland.

As mentioned by Phinney and Rosenthal (1992) and Breton (1964), "the ethnic community provides a subculture that allows for many activities central to an individual's life (i.e., school, religion, recreation) to be carried out within the group; that is, the group has a high level of institutional completeness" (pp.154-155). Similarly, from my doctoral research, a first-generation Sikh woman remembers her affiliation with the *Gurdwara*⁵ fondly:

⁵ Gurdwara is literally translated as the house of God.

Since we came here in 1967, we went to *Gurdwara* every Sunday. But at first, we had to use our house and take turns so it was only possible once a month and then a few years later it was once a week- but we started renting places.

Members of the society continued to reconvene at each other's homes to celebrate *sangrand*⁶. Soon after, as noted by Kulvinder, the *sangat*⁷ started renting the basement of a church to pray and socialize every Sunday. As the community started to grow, the original members of the Maritime Sikh Society decided it was time to build their own *Gurdwara*. As a result, the first *Gurdwara* in Nova Scotia, Canada was built in 1978 and continues to provide religious, cultural, language and dance instruction to all members (Tiwana, 2000). A second-generation Sikh woman from my research discusses the cohesiveness of the Maritime Sikh Society community in the following passage:

And while we would have had a large extended family in Punjab, my sense is that the people in the *Gurdwara* have become our extended families as we have shared so many ups and downs through the last 30 plus years here in the area.

The Sikh community continues to flourish and welcome their facilities to new families. In 1997, the Maritime Sikh society recognized the growth of their community and renovated and expanded upon the existing *Gurdwara* building (Tiwana, 2000). Additional rooms were built for out-of-town guests and language instruction purposes.

Currently, the *sangat* consists of 60-70 families and the executive is comprised of second-generation Sikh individuals. In January 2006, the *Gurdwara* elected its first Caucasian president (who converted to Sikhism in the early 1990s). As well, there is a tremendous amount of involvement from third-generation Sikh children who participate weekly in the religious hymns and celebrations. Consistent efforts are being made by the senior members of the *Gurdwara* to improve the cultural and language preservation for future generations.

Diaporic and Lived Experiences of the Maritime Sikh Society Women

First-generation Punjabi women experienced a myriad of barriers upon migrating to Canada (Ralston, 1996). For example: loneliness, language difficulties, discrimination, cultural traditions, different cuisine and harsh weather (Dogra, 1987, Tomar, 2002). Sodhi and Chopra (1992) suggested:

Immigrants have to make personal adjustments. They experience loneliness and homesickness. They have to learn to adjust to their new home different languages, ideals, traditions and values. Personal adjustment becomes difficult if the newcomers, in spite of their willingness to work hard, are resented or are not professionally rewarded. Feelings of alienation and grief are some

⁶ First Sunday of the month.

⁷ Sangat is translated as religious congregation.

of the deep-seated emotions that affect the mental well being of these newcomers (p. 60).

A first-generation Sikh woman from my study describes her first impression of Canada:

When I first came to Canada, I had very high self-esteem because I was practicing Supreme Court Lawyer in a big city. Then I immigrated to a small town in Western Canada, The first year I was unable to work full-time, so I supply taught. I even taught in my traditional Indian clothing. Since I was the first Indian female in the town, I was very welcomed and felt fully supported. The only difficulty I experienced was being separated from my family and the harsh cold winters. It took me some time to adjust to the weather and the distance away from my family in India.

A second-generation Sikh woman, also from my previous research, expresses the hardships these women endured upon immigration to eastern Canada:

As you get older, you start to realize what people struggle through and the fact that they came here from another country, they all worked; it wasn't like they were housewives and didn't venture out into the community, they all had to work. Some of the men aren't as supportive as they could be. So the women came here, far away from their families, did a super job raising their kids and some of the husbands weren't as helpful as they could have been.

Amongst the difficulties upon immigrating to eastern Canada included sacrificing career aspirations. Many women made the choice to move wherever their husbands gained employment, realizing it was culturally expected and accepted to nurture their family. Even though these women were intelligent and highly educated, first-generation Sikh women chose to stagnate in their profession in order to provide a better life for their family. Depending on the educational backgrounds, both men and women were employed respectively. However, employment that required irregular hours or weekend shifts were not pursued by first-generation women in order to cultivate positive family dynamics in the home milieu.

Another career related barrier encountered by this population involves the covert and overt discrimination within the workplace. A first-generation Sikh woman states her experience:

Within the work environment, I was more competent, more qualified for the kind of job that I was doing. I would apply for administrative jobs and wouldn't get them. Sometime I didn't want to dwell upon it, so I would dismiss it. I assumed I didn't get it because I didn't have the connections or maybe somebody is more

qualified, which was not the case. But it could have been my color or accent that turned the prospective employers off.

Numerous first-generation Sikh women living in eastern Canada are professional; in fact many of them were invited to apply for teaching positions in the mid 1960s, but were not invited for interviews for senior administration positions. Several of them attributed this dismissal to ominous forms of discrimination or racism. Additionally, time was required to adjust to new responsibilities that were acquired upon immigrating to a new country.

This was a major hardship first-generation Sikh women endured; that is, balancing both current work and home responsibilities. Even while living in smaller communities with limited resources and less community events, these women were still successfully able to child-rear and transmit cultural values to their children in their new homeland. Unable to rely on their husband's continuous support and other cultural resources, these women recognized the importance of cultural preservation and attempted to recreate positive experiences for their children on a regular basis. Fortunately, the participants from my research specified that they benefited from the communication and efforts their mothers provided for them over the years. The expressed gratitude towards their mothers and feel they have a better understanding and appreciation of their Punjabi culture.

Currently, women from the Maritime Sikh Society play an integral and respectful role in the religious services and cultural preservation of future generations. Unlike other *Gurdwaras*, world and nationwide, women from this community are neither restricted to preparing lunch nor cleaning duties. In fact, they are invited to participate in all facets of the religious and executive responsibilities (Tiwana, 2000). According to Ralston (1996), "In Canada women are active participants who perform the rituals, whereas in India they are passive observers and listeners" (p.106). In eastern Canada, women perform all religious roles within the service, including singing religious hymns, reciting prayers and have served on the executive since 1992.

Furthermore, the women of the community also organize language classes, contributions to the annual multicultural festivals and other activities outside of prayer time. Within the last eight years, the women of the Maritime Sikh Society have begun gathering at each other's homes in order to talk and support one another. A first-generation Sikh woman from my study discusses the interconnectedness of the Maritime Sikh Society community in the following passage:

The *Gurdwara* has not only served as an institute of meeting my spiritual and religious needs, but it has also evolved into a very strong social support network. The women of the *Gurdwara* have come to depend on each other in the event of any physical, emotional, family or financial crisis. In the last couple of years, we have even formalized our bond outside of the *Gurdwara* premises with our Ladies' get-togethers.

The next section will discuss methods of cultural transmission, preservation and intergenerational communication employed by Sikh women living in eastern Canada.

Cultural Transmission, Preservation and Intergenerational Communication

Respect for elders, importance of education and family, language retention and attending *Gurdwara* regularly are considered important aspects of cultural transmission for first-generation Punjabi women. It was suggested that the role of the woman in the household is to transmit culture and values to their offspring (Drury, 1991; Ralston, 1996; Sodhi Kalsi, 2003). As well, from my research first-generation Sikh women are also emphatic about becoming educated and financially independent prior to getting married.

Shaikh and Kelly (1989) discuss this notion in their study pertaining to the bicultural identity formation of Pakistani adolescent girls. One mother from this study claims, "I want my daughter to be educated, so that she can stand on her own feet in hard times...anything can happen in life" (p.14). That is, not to say that marriage is second, but rather a career or education should be pursued before marriage.

Over the years, the *Gurdwara* encouraged several of the participants to preserve various dimensions of their ethnic identity. For many individuals, the *Gurdwara* is not only a place of worship, but also a place to transmit, preserve and communicate culture to future generations. Over the last forty-two years, the *Gurdwara* has made an effort to promote Punjabi culture and religion to its children. Retired educators volunteer to teach Punjabi classes and music lessons to the younger generation (Tiwana, 2000). Second-generation Sikh adults also continue to teach younger children Punjabi folk dancing. A second-generation Sikh woman from my research elaborates:

As far as cultural retention goes, I think our parents were ahead of the times, really. They had us learning Punjabi folk dancing long before it became fashionable. And a lot of effort was put into teaching us the religious aspects and history of Sikhism. Even now, Punjabi and Sikhism classes are being taught to a new generation of Sikh children at the *Gurdwara*. Nevertheless, it is true that the language is a huge part of cultural retention, and our parents do feel very guilty about not imparting this on us as youngsters.

For the second-generation, a small gap in language and cultural instruction has emerged. However, as mentioned previously, the Maritime Sikh Society is making more of an effort to teach third-generation Sikh children about Punjabi-Sikh traditions, religion, language and customs.

Personal Identity and Perception in the Dominant Culture

Referencing my doctoral research, first-generation Sikh women perceive themselves as: professional, adaptable, spiritual, family oriented, beautiful souls and hard working. One second-generation Sikh woman expresses that first-generation Sikh women are, "...strong willed because they are living in a new place where they had to change their whole lifestyle." She adds:

When I think of Sikh women, I automatically think of the women in the *Gurdwara*. I think they are incredibly strong women. I think

they have accomplished a lot in their lives and some of them have had hard situations. They are very family-oriented; they'll do anything for their family. They are very spiritual people; God is a big part of your life when you're a Punjabi woman. They are very loving mothers; they will do anything for their children.

As for their own bicultural identity formation? First-generation Sikh women feel they have "...adopted the best things from this culture" but still stay true to their Sikh values and beliefs. She continues to explain:

I have taken that [Canadian values] and it has become a part of me. Because I was a teenager when I came here and I don't think I really had a personality then...and I grew up here so I would say, maybe half-half, more than half I adopted from here.

According to Kakar (1994), women define their identity in terms of their relationships with others and often suppress individual needs to adapt to the demands of their husbands, children and families. In addition, the need to balance both career and domestic obligations is expressed by first-generation Sikh participants from my research. Additionally, Buchignani and Indra, (1985) contend, East Indian women "seem to want the best of both worlds...they desire a greater range of freedom outside of the home...but they continue to ground their identity in the family" (p.157).

Conclusion

Evidently, upon overcoming various barriers and accomplishing considerable achievements, Sikh women are successfully developing bicultural identities. These women created a third space whereby they are able to live comfortably in both cultures. A third space represents a safe, mutually respectful, comfortable, and authentic environment, which encourages an individual to be proud of his or her ethnic heritage and in turn, integrate it into their individual identity (Bhabha, 1994; Sodhi et al., 2001).

Intergenerational cultural transmission and preservation equally play an integral role in one's bicultural identity formation. Sikh women are able to balance the expectations of both cultures (dominant and home) into one mindset. They have become progressive in their thinking and are aware that traditions are continuously evolving and may even need to be altered (i.e., child-rearing, career).

Bicultural identity formation is a lifelong process, which continues to evolve as one attains momentous milestones in their life. With relentless intergenerational efforts, it is anticipated that Sikh women will continue to be proud of their heritage, preserve their culture and transmit their values to future generations.

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