

# Identities

Global Studies in Culture and Power

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gide20>

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To cite this article: Arratee Ayuttacorn, Jane M. Ferguson, Ariya Svetamra, Yos Santasombat & Kian Cheng Lee (2023): Turbaned Northern Thai-ness: selective transnationalism, situational ethnicity and local cultural intimacy among Chiang Mai Punjabis, *Identities*, DOI: [10.1080/1070289X.2023.2182962](https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2023.2182962)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2023.2182962>



Published online: 21 Feb 2023.



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ARTICLE



## Turbaned Northern Thai-ness: selective transnationalism, situational ethnicity and local cultural intimacy among Chiang Mai Punjabis

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### ABSTRACT

Chiang Mai is home to approximately 400 diasporic Punjabis, some of whom are sixth-generation residents of Thailand. While their transnational orientation, distinct sartorial choices and cultural practices might present them as outsiders to essential Thainess, Northern Thai Punjabis transgress the national image of Thainess and subjectively consider themselves to be Northern (Lanna) Thais. At the same time, these Thai citizens avail themselves of Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) status for privileged access to economic, cultural and educational resources in India. Based on 51 in-depth interviews and 17 focus group studies among resident Hindu, Sikh and Namdhari Sikh communities in Northern Thailand, this research explores family histories, selective transnationalism, and regional Lanna identities among these overseas Punjabis. As this article will argue, while Punjabi Thais maintain their networks and cultural connections with an historic ancestral homeland, they also cultivate forms of local cultural intimacy in ways which leapfrog the linguistic and cultural hegemony of Thai national identity.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 25 June 2021; Accepted 17 February 2023

**KEYWORDS** Transnationalism; situated ethnicity; citizenship; Punjabi Thais; localism; Chiang Mai

### Introduction

My appearance is Indian, but my heart is 100 percent Thai. When I went to India, I could not stay there for longer than ten days. I was not considered as Indian because I was born in Chiang Mai. I missed 'Kanom Chin Nam Ngeaw'<sup>1</sup> (Northern style noodles with Shan spicy sauce).

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Northern Thailand is home to a sizable population of Punjabi Thais,<sup>2</sup> many of whom are fourth or fifth generation residents in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Lampang Provinces. In Chiang Mai alone, the population of Sikh and Hindus is approximately 600 people,<sup>3</sup> comprised by about 150 families, with 90% who identify as Sikhs or Namdhari Sikhs (Sattineni 2018). Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs have a shared language (Punjabi), and the Sikhs have historically provided financial support to Hindus to start businesses in the area (Mani 2006, 943).

Punjabis in Northern Thailand, because of their phenotype and selective adoption of forms of dress and grooming – for the men, turbans and beards – are often rendered as permanent outsiders to the country by mainstream Thais for not appearing as stereotypical Thai. However, they are Thai citizens, and they are assimilated locally in their own subjective cultural understandings and linguistic performances. At the same time, some maintain state-conferred privileges with India, often adopting these strategies for their own personal benefit, or to pursue business opportunities not available to other Thai citizens.

As this article will argue, these transnational practices are not experienced as separate from their Northern Thainess. In fact, it is through ongoing business and cultural connections with India as well as frequent encounters with Thai cultural marginalization that Punjabi Thais reaffirm cultural intimacy with Northern Thai identities, which they express through their fluency in Northern Thai, and proud discussion of local sensibilities, transcending Bangkok-sanction notions of Thai-ness. For some, their experiences of an Indian ancestral ‘homeland’ makes them intimately attached to Northern Thai sensibilities in palpable.

Following a review of approaches to transnationalism, situational ethnicity, and assimilation, this paper will discuss previous studies of Indian migration and issues of diasporic economic and cultural practices. Then, it will turn to the dynamic history of Punjabis in Northern Thailand, ideas of Lanna regionalism, and their relationship with the local context and conceptualization of homelands. Drawing on ethnographic research among Punjabi Thai communities in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Lampang, this article will explore the oscillating interrelated issues of Indian transnationalism and Northern Thai cultural intimacy.

## **Transnationalism and the nation-state**

Transnationalism is described as the process through which immigrants forge or sustain social, economic, religious and political relations that link their societies of origin and settlement through transnational connection (Basch, Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Levitt and Schiller 2004; Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc 1995; Schiller 2010; Vertovec 2003). Successful transnational activities accompany and support adaptation to the host country (Portes

2001). Many diasporic populations create an imaginative return through memory, visual texts (Tölölyan 1996, 14), or through technology and mediascapes (Appadurai 1990). Migrants engage in long distance nationalism as a means of resisting exploitative relations in host countries or re-imagining their homeland (Anderson 1992).

As such, immigrants often engage in nation-state-building and connect with institutions in one or more nation-states (Schiller 2010; Faist 2010). The cultivation of strong economic and political networks helps migrants solidify their status in the host society (Portes 2001). In recent decades, transnational scholars have tended to reject methodological nationalism and eschew the any unilinear assimilation paradigm.

Territorial limitation often confines the study of social processes to political and geographic boundaries of a particular nation-state (Levitt and Schiller 2004) and flexible citizenship can be a strategic choice (Ong 1999). States also cultivate flexible citizenship to improve their own position on global markets by attracting skilled workers.

However, the nation-state retains the power to confer dual citizenship under specific conditions (Kim 2013; Kirk and Bal 2019). The Indian government strategically frames dual citizenship to co-opt diasporic populations in high-income countries. This tactic of transnational governance reworks the political, economic, and cultural aspects of membership (Xavier 2011). Sending governments sometimes do not want emigrants to return, but instead remit contributions in the name of patriotism and home loyalty (Portes 1999).

Overseas, migrant populations as minorities often face prejudice and discrimination; they experience 'glass ceilings' referring to their exclusion from high levels of occupational structures. In response, they might seek to assimilate or position themselves as 'model minorities': grateful subjects of the host culture. Some engage in 'segmented assimilation' (Portes and Zhou 1993) by selectively integrating into the new dominant class while remaining embedded in the immigrant community. However, this integration, as we will see from the study of Punjabi Thais in Northern Thailand, does not preclude code-switching between the dominant cultural code of Central Thai and the deeply local code of *kam mueang* (Northern Thai Language).

### **Segmented assimilation, resistance or situational ethnicity?**

Assimilation usually refers to individuals abandoning their cultural identity for that of the dominant group (Bhatia and Ram 2009, 141). In their concept of segmented assimilation, Portes and Zhou (1993) explained several distinct forms of adaptation of immigrants into mainstream American society. The first path of non-white immigrants is integration into the white middle class; the second path is in opposite direction to permanent poverty and

incorporation into the underclass; the third alternative is a selective acculturation in which the immigrant remains embedded in their immigrant community. This community can provide important resources for mobility such as social capital and connections to jobs, loans, and other forms of economic assistance (Neckerman, Carter, and Lee 1999).

Possessing economic capital, however, does not always lessen forms of cultural discrimination and bigotry. Jonathan Okamura's (1981) notion of situational ethnicity emphasizes the fluidity of ethnic boundaries. This situational perspective avoids the problem of the concept of ethnic group that follows from identification with an objectively defined, shared, uniform cultural inventory (Okamura 1981, 452). Individuals are capable of making and unmaking ethnic boundaries, and they sometimes have agency to choose the level of ethnic distinction that will best support their claim to prestige, moral worth, and political power (Wimmer 2008, 1007). For a member of a stigmatized ethnic group, it may be emotionally worthwhile to assimilate even if it does not pay off economically, as long as it removes the stigma (Eriksen 2010, 47–48). There is an affective relationship for Punjabis in Northern Thailand; their enthusiasm for Northern Thai culture can also serve to represent belonging and reduce stigma.

### **Transnational Indian citizens or divided loyalties?**

Indians have a long history of transnational migration and maintenance of long-distance trade networks. The colonial networks of British empire, later globalization spurred modern migration through efficient transportation and new economic opportunities. By 2019, the United Nations reported that India was the leading origin country for international migrants, boasting a diaspora of 17.5 million people (The Economic Times 2019). In the same year, India was the world's top destination for remittances, totalling US\$83 billion (The World Bank 2020).

The Indian state has long been keen to reap the political and economic rewards from its extensive diaspora (Dickinson and Bailey 2007). In 2005, the Indian government announced that it would allow special status for Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) living in certain countries and instituted the Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) system. The OCI offers multiple entry, multi-purpose life-long visas on holders' foreign passports. These permits allow the holders to visit India for several reasons, including pursuing certain middle class professions. The OCI cards do not confer full citizenship, voting rights or public employment. Under special circumstances, cardholders can apply for Indian citizenship if they hold their cards for five years and reside in India for at least twelve months. As the Indian constitution prohibits multiple citizenship, upon acquisition of Indian citizenship, they are required to surrender their other citizenship. However, the quasi-dual citizenship of OCI provides

access to the socio-cultural and economic resources of two countries. It not only allows migrants to increasingly engage in transnational practices, but for some it also gives them a sense of belonging to India.

There is some debate over whether such dual access will impede the integration of immigrants and undermine a common national identity of the receiving state (Butsch 2018). Many scholars demonstrated that dual citizenship facilitates integration process, and it reinforces the immigrants' attachment to their host country (Schuck 1998; Leidig 2019). However, it does not mean that transnationalism erases local identification; instead, it relies on migrants to sustain transnational ties (Guarnizo and Peter Smith 1998). Immigrants invent particular strategies of ethnic boundary making, which depend on the institutional order, hierarchy of power, and political networks (Wimmer 2008, 1007).

Middle class Indian immigrants to America have strived to assimilate into mainstream society while maintaining involvement with their ethnic community. New forms of Indianness are taken on by Indian Americans in response to racial discrimination by host country institutions while Indian-ness is simultaneously mobilized to foster a sense of membership in American pluralism (Morawska 2003). They often shape and reshape their cultural identity with reference to their home and host countries. After the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, some members of the Indian diaspora in New York did not identify themselves as members of the Indian community. They also expressed feelings of marginalization within the local Indian community; class differences came to fore (Bhattacharya 2008).

Indian immigrants have also demonstrated extreme reactionary forms of attachment, even xenophobic anti-immigrant attitudes. For instance, an Indian American community initiated a 'Hindus for Trump' campaign as part of an effort to strengthen both US and Hindu nationalism, as well as to differentiate themselves from Muslims (Thobani 2019). Sikh, Hindu and Christian Indian diasporic communities in the US and the UK have sought to distance themselves from Muslims through their support for Trump and Brexit. At the same time, such estrangement politically situates themselves as socially well-integrated into Western societies (Leidig 2019). This could also be seen as an over performance: becoming 'more white than the whites' for the purposes of assimilation, or taking on extreme nativist politics.

Indians have settled in Africa for five or six generations and have been shown to eschew full assimilation with the local population, choosing to retain cultural, religious practices as well as racial endogamy (Bhattacharya 2014, 149). Politicized racial populism in Tanzania has pressured members of the Indian diaspora to identify as Tanzanian citizens and to develop aspects of an Indian African Identity (Burton 2013).

Members of the Indian diaspora in the majority or well-established minority might have many social contacts with people in India, yet have

no longings go to India (Safran 1991). Second generation Hindustanis in the Netherlands, for example, reconnect to their homeland through tourism and mass entertainment, but not return migration (Gowricharn 2009). The second generation of Indians based in Singapore (Velayutham and Wise 2005), Punjabi Sikhs in Australia (Voigt-graf 2004), and Punjabis in Canada (Walton-roberts 2003) maintained connections, and some have fostered new relations with India through transnational marriage arrangements. Many Punjabis successfully migrated to other countries through marriage by using family contacts or friends to find a suitable spouse. Transnational marriage reproduces a sense of shared identity as language and culture can form workable bridges to national difference. Second generation Indians in Canada have established transnational networks to construct and reconstruct their identities (Somerville 2008).

Adjustments include adopting the local language and food. Early migration and intermarriage had resulted in the formation of localized Indian communities. Indian Fijian and Trinidadians have adopted Fijian cultural elements in their everyday lives spanning from local food to common vocabulary (Voigt-Graf 2008). The localization culturally transforms the migrant and their descendants; Indian migrants express their cultural identities differently from those who remain in India. Language and food are intimate cultural elements and remigrants can continue their attachment to their formerly localized language and food (Chee-Beng 2015).

## Method

This analysis draws on ethnographic research among Punjabi Thai communities in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lampang and Bangkok from December 2018 to February 2020, and November 2020 to March 2021. The data were gathered from 51 in-depth interviews and 17 focus group meetings carried out at the micro level with Punjabi Hindu, Sikh, Namdhari Sikh, and community leaders. We recruited key informants of varied ages, genders and religious sects to describe their experiences of migration, family background, social interaction, education and business networking. We established contacts through connections with community leaders including presidents of Hindu, Sikh, and Namdhari Sikh temples,<sup>4</sup> and used the snowballing technique to get in touch with further potential informants. Participant observation is also employed to examine the Indian Northern Thais' everyday lives including religious ceremonies. We observed many social and cultural events organized by Indian communities such as weddings, film screenings, and a beauty pageant.

## Punjabis in the new city: the first generation

The so-called Indianization of Southeast Asia has been taking place for millennia. Archaeological evidence show that Indians started migrating to the area more than 2,000 years ago (Sarhee 1991, 12). The influx of traders and immigrants brought with them arts, customs, and religious practices (Coedes 1975). The Bowring treaty between Great Britain and Siam in 1855 allowed foreigners to stay in Siam for trade purposes. The establishment of the British Embassy in Bangkok in 1856 and the British Consulate in Chiang Mai in 1884 facilitated trade across the Siam-Burma border (Khumwang 2011, 74). With that development, Sikhs from Punjab became a significant group to migrate to Siam. Kirparam Madan was the first recorded Punjabi merchant who travelled to Siam during the reign of King Rama V in 1884 (Mani 2006). He brought his family and settled in Bangkok.

In 1905, Echer Singh became the first known Sikh trader to settle in Chiang Mai, establishing his household near the Mae Ping River (Khumwang 2011, 70). He journeyed from India to Rangoon, went north to Shan State, then took a cart and crossed the border to Siam at Wieng Haeng District, Chiang Mai Province. He was the first of a few Punjabi families who participated in this crossborder trade, importing fabric from India and Burma to sell in Chiang Mai. One of the descendents of these original families detailed this process:

My grandfather and his friends heard that Chiang Mai was a good place for trading, then they brought fabric from India and Burma to Chiang Mai. After selling fabric to the Chao Nai (nobleman), they bought Chiang Mai gold and resold it in Burma. The chemical composition of gold in Siam was higher and its cost is cheaper in Siam than that in Burma, so they earned a large profit from this business. My uncle sent all his profits back home. We were affluent with big house, land and cattle in Punjab.<sup>5</sup>

The first Sikh temple in Chiang Mai was established in 1905. The Gurdwara Temple is not only a centre for ritual practices and social events, but it also serves as a space where the Punjabis affirm their communal ties, social relations, and economic networks. Newcomers often seek special favours in the form of business opportunities from fellow Punjabis, emphasizing their intimacy through speaking a common language or discussing common regional origins.

In the 1930s, availability of credit was critical for the immigrants because they often had insufficient resources for investment. Economic obligation sometimes took on cultural elements. For example, the Namdharis would only extend credit to fellow Namdharis. As a result, many Sikhs and Hindus converted to Namdhari Sikh. Mitte mentioned that his grandfather was a bicycle repairman and was very poor. Mitte's grandfather met a Namdhari's Guru who visited Chiang Mai with a group of successful businessmen from Bangkok. This group encouraged him to convert to Namdhari.



During that time, the Namdharis conducted business ventures successfully. Like the Christians, the Namdharis would like to evangelise to people. The owner of the Burma Store in Bangkok asked my grandfather to convert to Namdhari and in return, my grandfather would get credits for the fabric.<sup>6</sup>

As a Namdhari Sikh, Mitte's grandfather ran a fabric business as well as a currency exchange business for cross-border customers to change their Thai Baht for Rupees and vice-versa. As Rupee coins were 100% silver, he resold these at the silver shop and earned more profit. Eventually, Mitte's grandfather married the daughter of the silver shop owner who was also a relative of the *Chao Nai*. In the early waves of male Punjabi immigration, marital exogamy was often reckoned along commercial lines.

### **Punjabis in the new city: the next generation**

While the first generation of Punjabi migrants to Siam tended to migrate back and forth, the reasons for the second wave of Sikh migration to Thailand were connected to British Colonialism. Following the end of Second World War, the partition of India induced massive migrations and strife. The land division of Punjab according to Hindu and Muslim territories initiated the largest forced migration in history. An estimated 12 million people migrated between the two new countries (Tatla 2005, 9), and 500,000 were massacred during migration (Sarhee 1991, 139). In this period, many people from India fled to various countries in Southeast Asia.

Refugees were forced to abandon their properties in Punjab. Some families migrated to Bangkok and some to Chiang Mai where they met established relatives and contribute to their fabric business. Most Punjabis in Chiang Mai had migrated from the same villages. After the Partition of India, many Punjabis in Chiang Mai stopped sending remittances back to India because their families had relocated to Thailand. At that time, the Anglo Thai Company imported fabric from Britain and had a monopoly on this trade. One Punjabi family became the representative for Anglo Thai Company in Northern Thailand, and transported fabric from Bangkok to Chiang Mai. With the first generation of Punjabis already established in the fabric business, it was easier for newcomers to enter the trade by earning credit from the owner. The newcomers sought new markets in rural areas, carrying their loads of fabric by bicycle. The Punjabi merchants could accumulate capital by selling their goods with instalment plans and later with extended loans to their customers.

The first-generation Punjabis who had not acquired Thai citizenship and those who held Indian passports invested into Ram's businesses because they could neither read nor write in Thai and they did not trust the bank. Obstacles to full economic participation were not limited to trust or facility in the local

language. Others encountered problems related to their lack of bureaucratic enfranchisement as well as everyday racism or experiences of bigotry from Thais during the Cold War. Aran, the owner of a fabric shop explained how his grandfather never applied for Thai citizenship:

My grandfather had constantly lived in fear that the Thai government would expel him from the country. This was clearly evident during 1962 when Prime Minister General Thanom Kittikhachon had negative attitude toward the Chinese and Indians. Then, the Chinese and Indian immigrants were afraid of being arrested. Thus, my grandfather and grandmother held onto both their Indian passport as well as their migrant cards issued by the Thai state. With an Indian ID card, my grandfather continued to send money to India and deposited his funds in an Indian bank account for security reasons.<sup>7</sup>

Despite their lack of Thai citizenship, or maintenance of economic ties with India, Punjabis forged strong ties with the local population. First generation Punjabis were predominantly male. Some of the single Punjabi men established<sup>8</sup> their households in Chiang Mai through marriage with Northern Thai women. These marriages sometimes fostered business connections. For example, Ram married Nangchan, and she helped to liaise with the *Chao Nai*. Since Nangchan is a Thai citizen, and only Thai citizens have the rights to own land, Ram could purchase land and many properties at Kad-Loung Market in Chiang Mai. Nangchan also acted as an interpreter for the Northern Thai, Thai and Indian languages. In addition, she acculturated their children into Northern Thai lifeways, as she raised them in her extended family. As a result, their children grew up partially in the Punjabi community, but were integrated in Northern Thai peer groups; hence, the second generation has native fluency in *kam mueang* (Northern Thai) language. Although they would be schooled in Central (Bangkok) Thai and were fluent in Central Thai, they maintained relationships with their closest peers and Northern Thai families in the Northern Thai language. This facility conferred a subjective feeling of local cultural rootedness and intimacy.

Through their demonstrated affection for – and affinity with – Northern Thai language and cultural practices, Punjabi Thais in Chiang Mai outwardly demonstrate an embedded localism that steps beyond national identity and hegemonic Thainess, or *kwamphenthai*. More than a geopolitical border, Thainess represents an essentialized taken-for-granted national identity or essence. The Thai nation-building project sought to erase local difference and create a unified sense of national identity around the symbolic triad of *nation-religion-monarchy*, and amalgamating regional difference around a notion of shared history (Winichakul 1994, 12, 170). In 1899, the Ministry of the Interior replaced regional ethnonyms with the uniform term Thai (Peleggi 2007, 36).

In this context of centralization and cultural imposition, the symbolic importance of *kam mueang* is not to be underestimated. While central Thai is the dominant language of the bureaucratic nation-state, it is the native

tongue of only 33.2% of Thais; in other words, nearly 70% of Thais speak the dominant language as a second language (Diller 1991, 95). When foreigners or recent migrants are taught a Thai language, they are almost invariably taught Central Thai; Shan-speaking migrants from Shan State, Myanmar will often prioritize learning Central Thai over *kam mueang* because the former is the language of school, bureaucracy, and television (Ferguson 2021, 172). Ethnic minorities often feel stigma if they do not speak the privileged national language with a correct accent (Kitchanapaibul et al. 2022, 9). Even for native speakers of regional languages such as Isaan, or the Northeastern language, Thai linguistic hegemony is such that Central Thai is not only the dominant *lingua franca* but is also considered the more 'proper' or 'polite' form of communication in the country (Author, year: 169). However, speaking a regional language is thus an act of greater cultural intimacy in the Thai cultural milieu. By being fluent in both Central Thai as well as Northern Thai, our interlocutors present themselves as more authentic and organically local than a recent migrant or long-term migrant who only speaks Central Thai in addition to their ancestral or international language.

The linguistic issue was demonstrated by our interlocutors in a number of ways. One Punjabi Thai participates in a podcast organized by the Indian Studies Center at Chiang Mai University, and chooses to narrate his life experiences in the Northern Thai language. Our Northern Thai research team member observed that his accent was flawless; no hint of a Bangkok, let alone international accent. The leader of the Sikh temple felt more comfortable using Northern Thai in the interview, but later switched to Central Thai because not all of the members of our group spoke the Northern Language.

### **From local Lanna to Punjabi culture**

While early migration and intermarriage resulted in the formation of localized Punjabi community that was partially assimilated to Northern Thai culture, at the same time, there was anxiety, particularly among the earlier generation migrants, that their children were losing their Indian identity. Some saw arranging their children's marriage with partners from India as a way to ensure aspects of Indian cultural continuity.

Punjabis often met their life partners via arranged marriage. These spouses were chosen by their parents based on Indian ethnicity as well as good reputation that had been validated through their relatives' recommendations. They normally had bride exchange practice to avoid bride price. This intermarriage enables the Punjabi Thais to retain cultural authenticity. If they could not find any appropriate persons in Thailand, they would select from amongst their relatives in India. Religion was the fundamental criterion in spousal selection. Cultural reproduction occurring across borders is an

integral part of migration. In this study, we witnessed Punjabi Thais in Chiang Mai engaging in transnational marriages. Kanya told us about her arranged marriage:

I was 24 when I married a man who moved to Chiang Mai from Punjab. Before that, some men from Bangkok had proposed an arranged marriage but my mom wouldn't agree to it. Later, my mom got in touch with the uncle of a prospective groom in Punjab, and they arranged a meeting for us. The uncle bought his nephew a plane ticket, and the young man came to visit our family. When he came for dinner, my mom asked me to serve the food; I did not realise that the purpose of the visit was to see me! I did not refuse this arranged marriage because I believed that my parents chose a good man for me.<sup>9</sup>

Punjabis in Chiang Mai assimilated into the local society while they strengthened their social ties with India through marriage. However, the transnational space connecting between the communities from India and Thailand are ambivalent. One Punjabi Thai businessman has chosen to identify himself as a Thai citizen with an attachment to Thailand rather than India.

My grandfather would have thought that he was an Indian, but my generation has changed. We were born and raised here. Thailand is my country. Essentially, situating our identities is indeed a challenging task for us. When we are in India, Indian nationals would address us as "Thai" people because we speak the Indian language with a Thai accent. On the other hand, when we are living in Thailand, ethnic Thais would address us as "Kaek". Such receptions often baffled us.<sup>10</sup>

Another Punjabi Thai man told of his youth studying in India. He was there for 5 years but returned to Chiang Rai in 1984 when violence emerged following Indira Gandhi's assassination. He continued middle school in the Northern Thailand. As he had not been part of the Thai school system before, the only Thai language he could speak was *kam mueang* for his family spoke it at home. As an adult, he not only prefers life in Thailand with Northern Thai foods and sensibilities, but he is also reticent to send his daughter to India. He does not feel that the place is safe for young women.

I had a very difficult life when I studied in India. I love my daughter and don't want to put her in trouble (gender discrimination). The food was so bad that I had to pinch my nose when I put it in my mouth, then drank water to swallow the food. The teacher also hit me when I didn't get up early. However, I was trained to be a strong man through these experiences. The youth might lose their Punjabi language since they neither go to India nor the temple.<sup>11</sup>

For immigrants, the important processes of their settlement are adaptation and localization. We have demonstrated that the Punjabis adapted with local conditions and ways of life, especially food and language. Punjabi families cook northern Thai food and Punjabi food on a daily basis. One Punjabi Thai woman (born in Chiang Mai) noted that following her marriage and move to Bangkok, she continued her love of Northern Thai foods, and for her, it

signifies her own childhood nostalgia. For Punjabi Hindu and Sikh men, they are often not strictly vegetarian, so when they married Northern Thai women, they do not change their food habits because of marriage. On the contrary, Thai women who married Hindus generally have had to avoid beef consumption.

Sujit, a Namdhari Sikh married a Punjabi Northern Thai woman. He told us that he learned to enjoy Northern Thai cuisine such as *khao soi*, *kaeng hang-le*, and *kaeng ho*. While his marriage was arranged because of a shared ethnic and religious identity, his transnational identity shifts and becomes oriented towards Northern Thai sensibilities because of his wife's assimilation of Northern Thainess and ability to prepare Northern Thai foods. As Namdhari Sikh family, they are still strictly vegetarian.

In addition to language facility and food sensibilities, many Punjabi descendants have thoroughly assimilated Lanna spiritual practices, including the animistic practice of ancestral spirit worship (*phi phu ya*). One Punjabi Thai woman describes her family's ritual practices:

Our family worships ancestor spirits (phi phu ya) every June at grandma's house. The sacrifices include a pig head, Laab (mince pork cooked with chilli), goat, and Roti. After grandma has passed away, her sister maintains the ancestral spirit worship and other ritual practices.<sup>12</sup>

Migrant cultural identity is influenced by localization, which incorporates intimate sensibilities as well as spiritual efficacy.

### Hybrid citizenship and bureaucratic connections

After the introduction of the Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) card system in 2005, numerous Punjabi Thai citizens took advantage of this new bureaucratic privilege. The card was cheaper and more convenient than applying for a tourist visa to visit India, plus it would facilitate their business engagement with the country. As small investors, these OCI cardholders are generally not interested in making investments due to the fluctuating global economic landscape. All OCI cardholders could open bank accounts with Indian banks in Bangkok. Since the interest rates at Indian banks in Thailand are relatively higher than those at other Thai banks, the majority of OCI cardholders deposit their money at the Indian Overseas Bank in Bangkok.

The Punjabis have had some agency to manipulate their citizenship status according to political and economic conditions. In the past, the first generation Punjabis maintained their Indian citizenship and did not apply for Thai citizenship because they had hoped to return to their home country. Then, the political situation in Thailand was not favourable towards migrants. Many feared evictions by the Thai government, so many chose the paths of integration or assimilation as far as possible. Nowadays, all long-term resident

Punjabis are Thai citizens, which confers rights to own land, voting and access to public welfare and resources from the Thai state. However, 208<sup>13</sup> or one third of Punjabi Thais in Chiang Mai hold OCI cards for their personal benefits as illustrated earlier.

Chiang Mai Punjabis create transnational ties through physical and virtual connection such as marriage, education, religion practices and media consumption. These transnational practices are supported by assimilation process since Indian immigrants integrate with Thai society through marriage and community engagement. The Indian diaspora community in Thailand selectively retains a distinct appearance through sartorial choices in the secular public sphere and especially through their religious gatherings and participation in rituals. Sikh parents often strive to ensure that their children maintain their Sikhism and do so by including them in the larger Sikh community. If they could not maintain the external symbols, they will be excluded from the power and prestige associated with the Thai Sikh community (Virankabutra and Kusakabe 2014). However, Thai Sikh diaspora youth seek to negotiate with both tradition and modernity by contesting and complying with ethnic boundaries. There is diversity of negotiation of Sikh identity with community itself. Some men might trim or cut their beards, but they still wear turbans (Srichampa 2016). A son who cut his hair and chose to marry a Thai woman, still allowed his family to organize a wedding ceremony at the Sikh temple. The younger generation is involved in and participate in religious activities at Sikh temple in a variety of levels; some are more devout than others. Linguistically, the younger generation sometimes prefers to communicate with family members in English and Thai, though more often with each other or Northern Thai peers in Northern Thai; the latter language is also essential in the marketplace for establishing relationships with local businesspeople and everyday customers.

Having grown up and participated in activities with Thai people, these younger generation of Punjabi Thais has largely absorbed Thai mainstream cultural attributes. Without language skills, cultural attachment and inner orientation towards their ancestral homeland, the new generation of Punjabi Thais dislikes leaving their family while preferring to remain in Thailand for their education. Nonetheless, many of them were still sent to India for a few years before returning to pursue higher education in Thailand. The Punjabis recognize that the English language is necessary for high level of occupations. Those educated in India are more likely to get a middle class job. One respondent who is a fourth generation Chiang Mai Punjabi stated that:

Initially, I didn't want to go to India. However, I found out later that my relative could speak English fluently after she had studied in India. With her abilities, she could realise her dream to be a flight attendant. Since then, I asked my dad to send me to India.<sup>14</sup>

Today, some Punjabi Thais enhance their Indian identity to access education networks and then turn it into symbolic capital for integration into Thai society. However, this symbolic capital is not always recognized as such by the dominant Thai population. Many Punjabi Thais have had experiences of bigotry and social stigma.

Pakorn, a Punjabi Thai artist formerly resented his own Indian identity. However, after he became well-known artist at national and international levels, his attitude changed. His art exhibitions have been installed in many countries such as Japan, Singapore, England and the United States of America. Pakorn has created art works from Indian roots and the history of migration. He has constructed Indian identity from the stigmatized experiences as described below:

When I was young, I didn't want to hear about Kaek (Indian) topics, such as songs or movies. I could not speak Punjabi and had never gone to a temple. But I like Kaek food because I eat it at home. When I went to school, I was called a Kaek and my friends always teased me about my food. I was prohibited from dating a Thai girl. Her parents said I had a fierce face, smelly body, and misrecognised me as a Muslim; they feared their daughter would be one among four of my wives. Later, I'm proud of being Kaek and I started creating art works from my roots and ancestral history.<sup>15</sup>

Transnational networks and experiences have shaped their local identities towards transnational education and media. The Punjabis accentuate their Indianness and turn it into symbolic capital for integration into the Thai society. However, many Punjabis have had experiences of social stigma and exclusion from Thais. These experiences enforce them to construct their subjectivity and make attachment to Lanna community and culture.

### **Facing the Thai state as grateful subjects**

An important part of Sikh ethos includes charitable acts. These include works that have gained visibility and are articulated according to Thai national paradigms of good works, which have come to involve recognition by the Thai royal family.

Motiram is a prime case study for such contributions of Punjabi Thais. In 1964, when his wife Chansom passed away, Motiram initiated an idea to construct the 'Chansom Memorial Bridge', a concrete structure of reinforced steel to replace the old bamboo bridge across the Mae Ping River. Motiram intended to make merit for his deceased wife, and he also adopted Buddhist practices for a long period. He mobilized funding to build Chiang Mai Buddhist Place as a religious practicing centre.

To coordinate charitable works, Punjabi Thais in Chiang Mai established their association, 'Indian Community of Chiang Mai'. This association annually donates blankets to different ethnic minority groups in rural areas. The

Punjabi Thais also participate as volunteers in various social activities, such as cleaning day, sport events, marathon, and International yoga day. Recently, due to Chiang Mai's grievous haze issues, this association distributed masks to local people.

Chiang Mai Punjabis<sup>16</sup> have also been recognized by the Thai monarchy. For example, Motiram and his family had the opportunities to offer gifts publicly to King Rama IX and Queen Sirikit. When Queen Elizabeth of England and King Rama IX visited Chiang Mai, Motiram offered them gifts as well. Motiram's family has framed photographs of these royal events, and the family has proudly presented them to visitors as evidence of the family's prestigious connections while displaying allegiance to the Thai royalty, and by default, subjectivity within Thai patriotic values. Many Punjabi Thais are members of the local chapter of Lions Club that supports charities and mobilizes funds to help the rural poor. They initiate various activities to demonstrate that they are good citizens so as to be accepted by the Thai society.

In sum, Chiang Mai Punjabis have gone beyond strengthening co-ethnic social relations within Indian communities. They have also developed social relations with the Thai populace as well as the Thai royal family through social initiatives and development projects. Nonetheless, albeit their intensive engagement with the general Thai society, the Chiang Mai Punjabis still maintain their multiple identifications and cultural manifestations through language, food and ritual practices. The Punjabis are involved in transgressing ethnic boundaries with reference to the prevailing institutional order, hierarchy of power, and economic networks.

## Conclusion

The migration of Punjabis to Chiang Mai and their permanent settlement over the last century has generated hundreds of Thai citizens with Indian heritage in Northern Thailand. Most of this population of Punjabi Thais define themselves as Northern Thai people (*kon mueang*) because they were born and raised in the northern provinces. They speak *kam mueang*, the Northern Thai language fluently and with the local accent. They have identified themselves as Northern Thai and they have demonstrated strong ties with Thai society in general and Lanna culture in particular while preserving their distinctive identity through their collective memory of the homeland.

The Punjabi Thais have also created religious, familial and economic networks in transnational spaces. The Indian state offers Overseas Citizenship of India for Indian migrants and their descendants, and thus enabling Indian diaspora to strengthen their networks. The Chiang Mai Punjabis have Thai citizenship, and they also hold OCI card, thus demonstrating their bureaucratic citizenship to two nation-states. Beyond the level of national hegemony, Chiang Mai Punjabis are



proudly Northern Thai; paradoxically, their Thai identity is organically more authentic because of their ability to code-switch between Lanna and Central Thai languages. They establish their social roots and cultural affinity in Chiang Mai while embarking transnationalism between Thailand and India.

This research illustrates that multiple citizenship, rather than dichotomizing allegiance, shows the multifaceted and overlapping natures of social identity, economic and social practices. Diasporic practices, for our interlocutors, reinforce Chiang Mai Punjabi's practical attachment to Lanna language and culture. Northern Thai social identity presents a meaningful form of rootedness, which is based on language, friendship, and everyday social connection. For Chiang Mai Punjabis and their local community, Northern Thai identity is not bureaucratically formed or a citizenship presented on paper, it is tasteful, tactile and real.

## Notes

1. Interview with Charat on 26 January 2019.
2. Punjabi Thais is defined as descendant of Punjabi diaspora who were born in Thailand, while Punjabi refers to those born Punjab and migrated to Thailand. Punjabi Sikhs and Punjabi Hindus refers to Sikhs and Hindus who migrated from Punjabi.
3. Interview with Suchit on 3 November 2020.
4. Namdhari Sikh is one sect of Sikh religion, it was established by Baba Ram Singh in 1857. Namdharis reject the death of the tenth Guru, and continue the line of human Gurus, but they still emphasize on the Khalsa form as Sikh. Namdhari's movement has contributed to Indian independence, their initiatives such as non-corporative are considered as the resistance against British colonialism (Takhar 2014, 354).
5. Interview Waran on 17 March 2021.
6. Interview Mitt on 26 February 2019.
7. Interview Aran on 24 May 2019.
8. According to the interviews, the majority of Punjabi men were married prior to migration. Their wives were left behind at first, and some later migrated to Chiang Mai to join their relatives. Approximately one fourth of Punjabi men married Northern Thai women.
9. Interview Kanya on 3 November 2020.
10. Interview Mitt on 15 May 2019.
11. Interview Aran on 24 May 2019.
12. Interview with Jinny on 19 Feb 2019.
13. Information from Consulate of India in Chiang Mai.
14. Interview Janit on 26 Feb 19.
15. Interview Pakorn on 19 February 2020.
16. Chiang Mai Punjabis refers to Punjabi Thais who were born in Chiang Mai.

## Acknowledgements

This project was supported by Chiang Mai University. We would like to express our gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for constructive comments that greatly helped to improve an earlier version of this article. A portion of this research paper was presented at the EuroSEAS Conference 2019 in Berlin, Germany in September, 2019; we wish to acknowledge the generous support of Chiang Mai University to attend this conference. Finally, we are very grateful to all of Punjabi Thais for sharing their stories and experiences in this study.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Chiang Mai University [06122018]

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