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# Vulnerable Masculinities? Gender Identity Construction among Young Undocumented Sikh Migrants in Paris

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the impact of immigration policies on the ways young undocumented Sikh migrants in Paris negotiate their masculinity. The current criminalization of labor migration from the global South in Europe is disrupting long established patterns of upward mobility through international migration, that entailed remitting money home, getting married and reuniting with one's family in the host country and moving up the socio-professional ladder from low-paid jobs to self employment. Instead, the life of an increasing number of Sikh migrants in France and elsewhere is marked by irregular status and socio-economic vulnerability. In this context, undocumented Sikh migrants try to assert their gender identity in multiple ways, characterized by homosociality, the importance of manual labor, specific forms of male sociability marked by the cultivation of their body, while remaining firmly grounded in a Sikh/Panjabi religious universe through *seva* (voluntary service) and gurdwara attendance.

**Keywords:** Sikhs in France; undocumented migration; masculinity; construction sector; fitness; philanthropy

## 1. Introduction

This article seeks to address some gaps in Panjabi/Sikh Diaspora studies, namely the lack of engagement with undocumented migration, all the more surprising that the latter has become a prevalent pattern in current migration flows from Indian Panjab to Europe. The specific experience of Panjabi *kabooter* (pigeons, irregular migrants) has started to be addressed in Panjabi popular culture, in numerous films and songs, but remains silenced in academic literature. One reason pertains to the theoretical framework that has become dominant in migration studies, and more specifically in studies of the Sikh diaspora: transnationalism. It accounts for the intense and multiple ties and connections sustained by migrants across borders, and allowed by technologies of travel and communication. Some major contributions to the field have hence explored a wide range of transnational practices and highlighted issues of institutionalization, socio-economic incorporation, identity politics and religious and cultural transmission. But none of this addresses the specific experience of irregular migrants, nor the material conditions of migration. Another reason might be that this category of migrants represents the hidden face of the enterprising, law-abiding, gurdwara-focused Sikh diaspora and an embarrassing reality for their well-settled and documented counterparts, that perceive themselves as a model minority, as well as for the Indian State and its diplomatic representatives abroad.

I will here explore how their irregular status shapes Panjabi men's experience of migration in France, and more particularly how they negotiate their masculinity in the face of an unprecedented set of socio-economic and legal constraints, which confine them to low-paid, exhausting jobs, a position of inferiority and subordination vis-à-vis well settled migrants and social invisibility and marginalization

within their community and the wider society. After discussing the contribution of masculinity studies to my research topic, I will investigate the social world of manual labor that plays a major role in the making of working-class immigrant manhood. The construction sector where most of them are employed operates as a highly gendered and ethnically segmented social space, where as undocumented newcomers, they occupy a subordinated position. The various practices of cultivation of their body (fitness and bodybuilding, hair styling and dyeing, tattooing). can be analyzed as a response to situations of alienation and domination, while also pertaining to a new globalized male aesthetic glorifying the muscular, bearded and hypermasculine body. Lastly, we will explore how ethics and religious beliefs and practices contribute to shaping spaces of self-respect, collective belonging as well as resilience and resistance to their vulnerability.

## 2. Methodology

The empirical data used in this research has been collected over several years during informal interviews with about twenty undocumented Panjabi/Sikh migrants in different settings: a day care center for homeless people with an addictive condition;[1] the Singh Sabha gurdwara, the main gurdwara located in the Northeastern suburbs of Paris; a small Panjabi restaurant whose owner belongs to the gurdwara management committee; private homes and public parks. It has also involved a great deal of long-term participant observation in those social spaces. My interviewees were men aged between their early twenties and late forties, with the vast majority of them being in their twenties. Most were single, except for the eldest among them who had got married in India before migrating. The medium used to communicate was predominantly Panjabi, with a mixture of French and English words (or more precisely, their frequently distorted pronunciation of the French terminology borrowed from the building sector, as quoted below). Working among undocumented male migrants involves a set of challenges, the main one being the social asymmetries and underlying power relations between a white middle-aged French woman and young irregular migrants. All of them were approached either through common acquaintances, amongst well-settled families or individuals that I had met at the gurdwara or in the day care center where I worked for a while. The most important factors that helped to bridge the gap between us were the use of their mother tongue and my fieldwork experience and knowledge of their place of origin, the Panjab, particularly of a cluster of villages in Doaba, where most of them originate from. Interestingly, the very fact that their knowledge both of the language and of the land was far more intimate and experiential than mine somehow contributed to rebalance our asymmetrical relations and created forms of commonality and familiarity. My status as a researcher was difficult to ascertain: in the day care center, migrants originally mistook me for a social worker, and despite my recurrent clarifications, I was regularly asked to translate administrative documents and mediate between users and the staff. It was easier to explain my work to my interviewees met outside of that institutional setting, and most of the time they seemed truly interested in sharing their plight with an empathic listener.

Panjabi and Sikh as categories are used in this paper in an almost interchangeable manner, along with the term Indian and this requires some clarification. Panjabi refers to a regional identity based on a common language, the cultural heritage, social practices, values and norms shared by Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus alike and infused with a marked nostalgia for pre-partition undivided Panjab, idealized as a unique space of communal harmony. In a migration context though, it tends to be equated with Sikhs only, while Panjabi Muslims primarily identify themselves as Pakistanis (Panjabi Hindus are numerically insignificant in France). The usefulness of those categories obviously varies, depending on

[1] From 2009 to 2014, I conducted a research at the Beaurepaire Centre, a day care center located in an ethnically diverse neighborhood of Paris, where I worked as a consultant anthropologist on a specific health project aimed at Panjabi undocumented migrants, most of whom demonstrated severe forms of alcoholism (for a more detailed presentation of the project, see Kirpalani et al. 2015). I have chosen not to address the issue of addiction, as this has been the focus of previous publications (ibid.)

the context. The migrants interviewed self-identify mostly as Panjabis, when they are in a community environment and as Indians in their interactions with outsiders. The religious category as Sikh tends to be restricted to the institutional setting of the gurdwara. This is not to signify that religion is a negligible factor, but it is mediated by a wide range of additional identifications and social relations.

Finally, the conspicuous absence of caste has to be accounted for. Caste plays a major role in the migration process, in the way migrants, including undocumented ones, have better access to resources and networks depending on their caste affiliation. However, it is my contention that in the French context, residence status constitutes the decisive factor accounting for internal stratification and hierarchy as well as discrimination and exploitation, much more than caste.

## 3. Sikhs in France: The Community's Profile

Because ethnic and religious data cannot legally be collected in France, except for research purposes, ethnic and religious groups are statistically invisible. Sikhs who have retained their Indian citizenship are subsumed under the Indian national category, and those who have acquired French nationality are categorized as French (Moliner 2016). For that reason, one has to rely on estimates provided by the local authorities, putting their numbers at 25,000. Sikh migration to France and continental Europe is a recent phenomenon, starting in the late 1970s and 1980s when the United Kingdom, the preferred European destination for migrants from South Asia, closed its doors to further labor migration from Commonwealth countries. Interestingly, it occurred after the French government had officially put an end to labor migration in 1974, so that most first-generation Sikh (and South Asian) migrants have experienced some form or another of irregular administrative status, with respect to their journey, entry, and work or residence status.

Sikh migration history to France can be divided into four major stages (Moliner 2016). The pioneer phase saw a handful of Sikhs arrive in the late 1970s and early 1980s as undocumented immigrants in Belgium or Germany first, from whence they moved on to France. They lived in extremely precarious conditions, without permanent housing or job, unable to speak a word of French. Most of the pioneers benefited from a massive regularization campaign launched in 1981–1982, which allowed them to settle down and set up the first community institutions and networks—in particular the first *gurdwara* created in 1986—and initiate a process of chain migration. They were followed after 1984 by a second wave of migrants, linked to the political situation in their homeland, namely fifteen years of Khalistan insurgency and State repression, which propelled thousands of young Sikh men to apply for political asylum in Western countries, at a time when European immigration policies were becoming stricter, particularly for asylum seekers. A third stage comprised the wives and children of the pioneers who migrated under the family reunification provisions, with a second generation of French Sikhs emerging in the early 1990s. In the same period, single men joined members of their *biradari* (clan) already settled in France, relying on them for access to employment, housing, and dealings with French bureaucracy; this wave took advantage of another regularization operation in 1997–1998.

A fourth stage started in the early 2000s with the boom of irregular migration from South Asia, particularly from Panjab (both Indian and Pakistani) as well as Bangladesh to France. The progressive erosion of border controls between EU members states enabled migrants to move between France and neighboring countries, in search of documents; these multiple cross-border movements were also related to the segmentation of labor markets and to differing immigration regimes within the EU. As discussed by Ahmad (2011), France and Germany in the 1980s and 1990s constituted the core of a hierarchically organized Panjabi migratory space in continental Europe. Both countries offered well paid full-time jobs, but little to none opportunity to regularize one's residence status, because of increasingly tough immigration and asylum policies. Southern Europe presented a contrasting picture: low skilled, underpaid jobs, particularly in the agricultural sector, but easier access to regular status—albeit a long and costly process (Moliner 2018). Therefore, a pattern of commuting emerged whereby South Asian irregular migrants applied for documents in Italy, Spain, Portugal or Greece while living and working in France. But since the mid-2000s, most of these paths to regularization are more

or less closed—at least to migrants without strong connections and family or community backup—and labor migrants who have arrived in France since then are trapped into long term clandestineness and a state of "ontological insecurity", to borrow Ahmad's apt formulation, with little to no hope of regularization and an endless quest of residency status (Ahmad 2011). These issues will be addressed later in this article

As for their socio-demographic characteristics and spatial distribution, the vast majority of Sikhs in France belong to a rural background, usually to families with a prior migration history and widespread transnational connections. However, several of the most recent migrants arrived in France solely on the basis of their smugglers' contacts along the migration route, while their own lack of prior kinship or village ties in France has greatly impinged on their socio-economic incorporation process (Moliner 2016). Until recently, Sikh migrants typically originated almost exclusively from Doaba, the central region of Panjab and a traditional emigration reservoir since the 19th century, but now an increasing number comes from Majha (mostly from Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts) and even Panjabi speaking areas of Haryana (Ambala) and Rajasthan.

As far as caste composition is concerned, the French Sikh population comprises three main caste groups: Jats, Ravidasias, and Labanas. Whereas the numerical preponderance of Jats and the significant number of Ravidasias come as no surprise, as these two castes are conspicuous in many diasporic settlements, the presence of a large number of Labanas is rather unusual (Moliner 2016); in Panjab, they form a small caste group, not known for its propensity to migrate abroad. But in the past ten years, Labanas have engaged in transnational mobility, migrating mostly to relatively cheaper and less popular destinations (as compared to more coveted ones such as Canada and Australia), including France, Italy, and Spain, slowly building their own transnational caste and kinship networks.

As for their geographical distribution, Sikhs share most patterns with other South Asian migrants: a territorial clustering in the French capital and its eastern and northern suburbs, particularly the departments of Seine-Saint-Denis, where the six gurdwaras are located, and Val-d'Oise. Their occupational profile is characterized by a strong concentration in three ethnic niches, construction work, clothing and catering—this will be discussed further below.

## 4. Masculinity and Irregular Migration

Several authors have highlighted the absence of men in the gender turn taken in migration and mobility studies and the resulting sole focus on female migrants. In a very comprehensive introduction to a special issue on the topic, aptly entitled "The invisible (migrant) man", Charsley and Wray (2015) discuss how the gendered experiences of male migrants have been largely neglected, and their emotional lives, motivations and subjectivity dismissed. All too often, male migrants are either portrayed in a negative light (as oppressors of women) or reduced to working bodies.

The field of masculinity studies has explored how masculinities are hierarchically ordered and are culturally specific social constructs, configured not only by the relations between men and women but also by intra-male relationships and individual negotiations of idealized forms of masculinity. In that respect, the very influential notion of hegemonic masculinity was originally defined by Connell as the configuration of gender practices based on the dominant position of men and the subordination of both women and alternative masculinities, including the stigmatization of homosexuals (Connell 1995). Recognizing the diversity and fluidity in masculinities, Connell stresses that hegemonic masculinity draws its power from idealized forms of masculinity that individual men identify with, perceive as a norm or contest. He insists this is not how men behave but it represents a framework of reference creating a scale of masculinities, against which they judge their own and that of others.

Migration introduces an unprecedented diversity and fluidity in those gender constructions and contestations because of the multiplicity of signifiers and performances of masculinity encountered by migrants. Intersection of gender with residence status, class, ethnicity and employment situation is particularly relevant in exploring migrant men gender identity construction, and more specifically that of irregular migrants (Charsley and Wray 2015). Their administrative vulnerability makes them

prey to severe forms of stigma and exploitation both from within their own community and from the dominant society, to the point that they find it increasingly difficult to fulfill the role of provider, considered as a key component of labor migrants' manhood ideal.

Building on those findings, a small body of research has emerged focusing on the interrelations between South Asian masculinities, sexuality and international mobility (Chopra et al. 2004; Charsley 2005; Gallo 2006; Ahmad 2011), with some publications more specifically focusing on Panjabi/Sikh masculinities (S. S. Gill 2005, 2014; H. Gill 2012; Lum 2016).

The concept of "culture of migration" proposed in the context of Mexican migration to the US refers to a situation where communities characterized by a long-standing tradition and high rates of international migration place a high value on emigration and the attitudes, values and lifestyles associated with it (Kandel and Massey 2012). As a strategy of upward social mobility, international migration extends throughout the community to become the norm, particularly for young men for whom it amounts to a rite of passage (on migration as a rite of passage for young men, see Monsutti (2007) on Afghanistan and Osella and Osella (2000) on Kerala).

Panjab has developed such a culture of migration, idealizing international mobility perceived as the hallmark of the Panjabi male. In Panjabi popular culture, migration and masculinity have come to be defined in relation to one another. In films, as Gill argues, the performance of masculinity is exemplified by the ability of the male heroes to move effortlessly between rural, urban and transnational spaces (H. Gill 2012). International mobility serves as a rite of passage for young men, that necessarily brings wealth, prestige and status to their kinship group and expands their range of marriage opportunities, while immobility amounts to failure, lack of courage, enterprising spirit or manliness. Whereas mobility defines masculinity, immobility is a traditionally understood attribute of women.

This considerable social pressure exerted on young Panjabi men to migrate in order to prove their manhood, leads them to take major risks in the current legal and political context in destination countries that places unprecedented limitations to the labor mobility of men from the Global South. Ahmad has eloquently captured the tragic paradox of current (im)mobility patterns from South Asia to Europe: migrants travel thousands of miles across continents and complex migratory systems, which involves paying a large amount of money to smugglers (currently 12,000 euros for a Schengen visa), longer routes, including dangerous border-crossings, only to be stuck upon arrival in Europe, because of their irregular status, with their spatial movement becoming very restricted and no hope of upward social mobility (Ahmad 2011).

Recent research in migration studies has precisely documented how labor migrants' experience has decisively shifted from mobility to forced immobility (Carling 2002). Subordinated during their travel and at destination to an unprecedented edifice of state surveillance, border policing and repression, irregular migrants are confined to what Ahmad calls a state of "ontological insecurity", characterized by indefinite waiting, marginality and "stuckedness" (Ahmad 2011). This set of constraints exerts a heavy toll on their wellbeing, as well as on their mental and physical health and can be experienced as a form of emasculation, all the more so that undocumented migrants may find no socially acceptable way to express their powerlessness and sense of frustration. As discussed elsewhere, current migration policies that criminalize labor migration have disrupted long established patterns of upward mobility through international migration (Moliner 2018). For Panjabi migrants, it traditionally entailed regularly remitting money to their families, building a house in the ancestral village, getting married and reuniting with one's family in the host country as well moving up the socio-professional ladder from low-paid jobs to self-employment and social respectability. This trajectory toward family fulfillment and economic success followed by earlier waves of Panjabi migrants has now closed for most newcomers who find it increasingly difficult to fulfill the role of provider, so central in the definition of Panjabi hegemonic masculinity. As noted by Ahmad in the case of Pakistani Panjabis (Ahmad 2011), instead of being a financial asset and a source of prestige for their family in Panjab, these men can become a liability, when for instance they fail to remit money regularly because most of their earnings are

invested in the quest for regularization. In some cases, they have to borrow money from home for that same purpose.

## 5. Undocumented Work: Between Exploitation and Self-Respect

Masculinity is often narrated, shaped and performed in relation to work. In the case of labor migrants, particularly undocumented ones, it provides the only legitimate reason for their otherwise unwanted presence in Europe. Because they are without the proper documentation allowing them to reside and work legally in France, newcomers are incorporated in a very disadvantaged position in pre-existing Panjabi (Indian and Pakistani) employment networks, structuring the ethnic enclaves located in Paris and its region. These enclaves were set up from the 1980s onwards by early migrants who specialized in ethnic niches, such as small-scale retailing, catering and most predominantly construction work. Among the new migrants, those who lack family or caste connections within this closed labor circuit cannot access those jobs considered as relatively well paid, hence they are confined to petty jobs at the very bottom of the occupational ladder: they load and unload trucks for Chinese textile wholesalers, work as helpers on market stalls for documented Panjabi or North African migrants, sell flowers at night in restaurants, distribute flyers in letter boxes, or have small street stalls selling toys, belts or hot chestnuts.

We will focus particularly on the construction sector that employs almost all of my interviewees, a sector that according to Waldinger represents "the quintessential ethnic niche," that has played a major role in the initial insertion in the labor market of several waves of immigrants in the USA as well as Europe, offering job opportunities to low skilled newcomers (Waldinger 1995). In the Parisian economy, construction work is highly segmented along ethnic and racial lines, with Indian and Pakistani Panjabis now being well established as subcontractors in painting, electric work, flocking and plumbing.

Kinship and community networks are crucial in procuring a job, the initial training, raising capital to establish one's own business, recruiting employees and finding new clients. The sociology of social networks and social capital has so far emphasized the supportive role of immigrant networks, reducing the costs and risks of migration. But as highlighted by Ahmad, these networks are also fashioned by larger forces, such as restrictive immigration policies, criminalization of labor migration and a neo-liberal flexible economy and they create dynamics of exploitation, exclusion and class formation (Ahmad 2011). Far from being egalitarian and protective for their most vulnerable members, Panjabi ethnic networks in Paris are characterized by power asymmetries, an intricate web of moral obligations and reciprocation, and the domination of newcomers by well-established migrants, disguised as mutual help and solidarity.

The labor regime prevalent in Panjabi ethnic enclaves is characterized by informality and paternalistic relations, that leave employees at the mercy of their employer and prevent collective demands from emerging. Panjabi migrants are notably absent from the undocumented workers mobilization involving mostly North African, West African and Chinese immigrants who take to the streets and regularly go on strike, demanding their regularization.

Panjabi construction workers are employed by Indian and Pakistani Panjabi *malik* (employers)[2], and are submitted to very poor working conditions, with major health and security issues resulting in accidents and injuries. They work without contract, without paid holiday, sick leave nor unemployment compensation and for a salary much lower than that of documented workers. Although construction work is supposed to be more regulated than catering or retail, with fixed working hours five days a week, in effect, employers find ways to circumvent official regulation. Arguing that themselves are

[2] Pakistanis make up a more numerous and a relatively older and better established group in France. In the construction sector, the employment networks of the two groups largely overlap.

paid late by their client, Panjabi subcontractors always delay paying their own employees by several weeks, which results in them being perpetually short of money, despite being employed full time.

As noted by Ahmad (2011), the labor regime in the Panjabi ethnic enclave is characterized by a blurring of the separation between working and non-working hours, with no real respite in terms of holidays or weekends. Workers only get time off in between two *chantiers* (construction sites) or when the *matériel* (construction equipment) is finished—but they pay a high price for it, since contrary to regular workers, they don't get unemployment benefits during this work-free period.

Sandeep[3], a thirty-one year-old man with Italian residency documents, delivers big cable equipment to several Panjabi *mali* on construction sites. He expresses a lot of resentment with respect to his professional life:

> I don't like this job, I see no sense in this . . . We are paid very little and always with several months delay . . . Here in France, Panjabi *malik* are the worst. Mine was supposed to pay me for the past 3 months, but he postpones every week, finding all kinds of excuses . . . At least, when I was working in a factory in Italy, I got my wages each month and there was some respect. Here I feel powerless . . .

Most of the young workers interviewed expressed a mixture of envy and strong resentment vis-à-vis their Panjabi *malik*, whose economic and professional success largely depends on the exploitation of vulnerable undocumented employees. However, they don't question the structural patterns of these exploitative relations and only wait for their own residency documents to follow in the first generation's footsteps.

Work is also a source of pride, of *izzat*, and is a prime site for the enactment of manhood where men encounter very diverse models and practices of masculinity. A hierarchical ordering of professions ranks electricians and plumbers at the top, and specialists of flocking at the bottom, the former because they are considered as skilled, better paid and hence respectable (*izzatdaar*) professions. The latter are regarded as *ganda kam* (dirty work), since it involves the use of fiberglass, a material hazardous for health, as most undocumented migrant workers are not provided with the required protective equipment. Interestingly, flocking was one of the first occupations through which Indian Panjabis entered the construction sector; since then they have tended to move out and up.

Sukhdev, a twenty-three year-old electrician who migrated to France four years ago, states:

> I love electrical work, it is a job where there is *izzat* (prestige), not like these odd jobs selling flowers or helping in *marché* (market stalls). On a construction site, when the work starts in the morning, everybody is asking: where is the electrician? When is he coming?

Similarly, Parminder, a twenty-nine year-old undocumented Panjabi worker, with seven years of experience in the electricity trade, takes pride in his job, despite the constraints discussed above:

> I knew nothing of electric work, the only job I knew was truck driving, which I did for two years in Dubai. I learnt everything from my second *malik* here in Paris. He trained me first to install a socket and a power switch, then the next step is electric wiring in the kitchen and last is the electrical board. It took me two years to learn all the tricks, and now the only thing I need is a residency card to set up my own business.

> What I like the most in this job is the status it gives us. We have skills and expertise and therefore we have power over people: whether people have access to internet or their TV channels depends on us. Even French people treat us very nicely to get work done faster or to have an extra socket installed.

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[3] All the names used here are pseudonyms.

Jasmeet, a painter in his early twenties, insists on what he considers as a Panjabi work ethos and on the bodily capital he possesses:

> When I was in India, basically I was doing nothing, after high school. My parents were getting desperate, I was not interested in farm work; this is not proper work . . . Here I have learnt the hard way what is the meaning of hard work, getting up everyday at 5.30, travelling on the train 3 hours daily to the *chantier*. We Panjabis, we work really hard, without counting our time, and I think French people respect us for that. Myself, I have never missed a day at work, even if I am sick, or exhausted, I still go.
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> Work and earning a living is the only reason why I am here in France . . . You must know that *bani* in our Guru Granth Sahib that says that we should earn our living by honest means, share with others and remember God.[4] Even in our desperate situation, we should strive to do that.

In response to their marginalized position in the labor regime of the ethnic enclaves and to the exploitative relations with their co-ethnic employers, Panjabi undocumented workers strive to construct an ideal of working-class manliness and self-respect through hard work and skill acquisition. This ideal borrows most of its values from the locally dominant version of Panjabi manhood, embodied by the documented and economically successful immigrants, with whom very complex relations, based on exploitation, mutual dependence, solidarity and emulation, are fashioned under an increasingly constraining administrative regime that criminalizes new labor migrants.

## 6. Cultivation of the Body

Facebook and other social media constitute prime arenas where forms of hypermasculinity are performed and reaffirmed. Undocumented Panjabi youth in Paris, despite or because of their marginalized and vulnerable status, partake of a global consumer culture, nurturing fantasies about international migration and life in the West among their peers back home. Their Facebook posts feature, for instance, prominent symbols of material success such as luxury cars (which they don't own, since they don't have a driving license), branded watches and designer clothes.

Many of them also display online their bodily transformation and their almost daily workout routine in suburban fitness centers. This section will explore the cultivation of their bodies through practices such as fitness and bodybuilding, hairstyling and hair dying, piercing and tattooing. We will discuss how these practices can be understood as a way to promote self-worth, autonomy and reappropriation of one's body in a social context characterized by severe constraints, already explored above.

Bodybuilding and fitness have become extremely popular physical practices both in France and in India. Rural as well as urban Panjab has in the past decade witnessed a craze for bodybuilding and fitness with innumerable gym clubs doting its landscape; fit, muscular and athletic male bodies prominently displayed in the public space, on billboards and in popular media—particularly in Bollywood and Panjabi films as well as bhangra videos (a popular dance and music genre of Panjab). This pervasive gym culture can be destructive, with several newspaper articles reporting an increased use of anabolic steroids by Panjabi youth, causing severe addictions and even leading to death (Kumar 2019). In some cases, bodybuilding is seen as a way for the unemployed youth to procure a job under the sports quota in the Panjab police, the railways and other government services (Dogra 2003).

Bollywood films have played a major role in the spectacular growth of fitness among the Indian urban middle-class, albeit a rather recent phenomenon, that Baas dates back to the blockbuster film

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[4] Jasmeet refers here to the following teaching of Guru Nanak, the first Sikh Guru: *Kirat karo, naam japo, vand chakko* to be found in the Adi Granth, the Sikh sacred scripture.

*Om Shanti* Om (2007), where Sharukh Khan displayed his six-pack abs and a muscular body that has become a standard for male actors to emulate (Baas 2017). Since then, several films have narrated the bodily transformation of their lead actors (such as *Ghajini* or *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, and several subsequent sports films, such as *Dangal*), pushing young Indian males to attend fitness clubs in the hope of acquiring the ideal muscular bodies glorified in popular cinema. According to Baas, this new ideal male body is increasingly equated with professional success, a cosmopolitan lifestyle & upper middle class belonging.

Borrowing from Panjabi sport culture and the recent craze for fitness & bodybuilding in India, Panjabi migrants in France are also influenced by the prevalent sport culture of the immigrant working class neighborhoods where they live. Oualhaci has highlighted the extent to which sports related socialization contributes to the shaping of working-class masculinities (Oualhaci 2016). Self-transformation through sport amounts to a strategy of resistance and empowerment of subaltern groups, seeking to distance themselves from a "deviant" street culture and gain some local respectability (Oualhaci 2016). Self-esteem and reappropriation of one's body, space and time are also among the stated motivations of the young Panjabi migrants practicing fitness, that I interviewed, such as twenty-five year-old Manpreet, a painter by profession:

> I come from a family of *kabaddi*[5] players. But I was too frail for *kabaddi*, so I used to play cricket in my school days. When I grew older, most of my college mates had joined a gym in Jalandhar, there were over sixty of them back then. So, they quickly started looking much more muscular and manly than me. I couldn't join because I had already the plan to go to Europe and my parents had started saving some money to send me there, so they would have refused to pay for the gym fees.
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> When I arrived in France, it took me three months to get my first wages, and that same week I enrolled at a local gym. Now almost every day I go there, I take this time for me to work on my body, to stay fit and look good. There, I don't wear my painting outfit, I am not a *nauker* (employee), waking up at five am every morning, there I don't fear the police, it is just me, my abs and my muscles, and the machines. When I feel depressed by my situation, the gym helps me a lot.

Sukha, a twenty-two year-old electrician, who belongs to a close-knit group of youngsters from the Labana caste, expounds on his own motivations:

> All my friends have joined the local gym here. A man has to be strong, fit and muscular to make himself respected. We Indians have a reputation at work of being docile, we don't speak up because we are not conversant in French and we don't get much respect because of that, workers on the *chantier* often crack jokes on us. But when you display muscles, they behave differently. Also, where I live, we Indians are much less numerous than Arabs or Blacks, so when we get in a fight, we are always outnumbered. So, this is also to protect ourselves.

In the two highly gendered and racialized spaces that Sukha refers to, the building site and the street, in the *quartier* (neighborhood) they inhabit, young Panjabi migrants hold a subservient position, because of their smaller number vis-à-vis other immigrant groups, their irregular status and their lack of proficiency in French. The ideal hypermasculine body that Sukha and other Panjabi youth are sculpting in their local gym is therefore layered with multiple meanings pertaining to individual subjectivity, restoration of self-esteem and collective identification.

Much has been said about the role played by the turban as the prime embodiment of Sikh masculinity as well as Sikh ethno-religious identity. Panjabi/Sikh visual culture is indeed saturated with

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[5] A traditional team sport, very popular in Panjab and among the Diaspora.

representations of the turbaned *Kesdhari* (donning *kesh*, unshorn hair and beard) male body, ranging from Sikh religious art depicting the ten Gurus and other Sikh heroic figures to Khalistani imagery portraying the martyred turbaned body of militants tortured and killed by the police (Axel 2001). The physical appearance of the young undocumented migrants under study presents a sharp contrast and a radical shift from Khalsa orthopraxy, and they are in direct contradiction with some of its mandates, since they shave and dye their hair, trim their beards, pierce their ears, get tattooed, and smoke. Their acute aesthetic concern for hair styling and dyeing as well as beard trimming reflects the importance these bodily markers occupy in current Panjabi popular culture, particularly in films and Bhangra videos, that are major trendsetters among the Panjabi youth worldwide. It also partakes in a globalized male aesthetics, where facial hair enjoys a new popularity, since the hipster bearded look has gone mainstream. These bodily practices and aesthetic concerns produce specific forms of male sociability enacted in the several hair dresser shops located in Paris and its eastern suburbs, specifically catering to a South Asian male clientele.

Popularized by Panjabi models, actors and singers (a *bhangra* song titled *Tattoo* praises the waist tattoo of the female protagonist of the singer), tattooing has also become quite common among some sections of the Panjabi youth in India and abroad, particularly in Paris, where a couple of tattooing and piercing salons are owned by Panjabis. The designs range from religious themes (*Ek-Onkar* and the *khanda*[6] being amongst the most popular ones) to secular ones (the lion as a symbol of Panjabi masculinity and Sikh male identity) and may also include the expression of romantic or filial love ("luv u mum"). This practice of indelibly inking the body has a very long history. In the West, before becoming mainstream, it was a social marker for marginalized or deviant groups, such as convicts, sailors, soldiers and the working classes, while in India it is still widely used among tribal populations.

These practices of cultivation and transformation of one's body by young undocumented migrants from Panjab need further investigation: at this stage of my research, they seem to indicate personal aesthetic choices as well as generational ones; they take part both in an emerging immigrant sub-culture and a sense of belonging to a more dominant version of male aesthetics and manhood.

The reappraisal of the concept of hegemonic masculinity by Connell and his co-author Messerschmidt can be useful to make sense of these multiple and dynamic cultures of manhood fashioned by young Panjabi migrants in Parisian suburbs (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The authors advocate for an ethnographic multi-scalar (at the local, regional/national and global levels) and comparatist analysis of hegemonic masculinities. Of particular relevance to this case-study is their discussion of the localized dimension of gender hierarchies and cultures of masculinity. My ethnographic data suggest that within the global Sikh/Panjabi diaspora, very different and localized versions of the Sikh male coexist and interact with one another. According to academic research among British Sikhs, who form a predominant section of the Sikh Diaspora, a collective understanding exists of what an authentic British Sikh masculine identity should consist of (see in particular S. S. Gill 2014). This localized form of hegemonic masculinity is heavily influenced by notions of Khalsa identity and its visible symbols (particularly the turban and the beard). With the creation of the Khalsa in 1699, a hyper-masculine and martial ethos became central to Sikh doctrine and identity and found a counterpart in the nineteenth century in the imperial culture of masculinity fostered by the British, casting some Indian groups as martial races and others as effeminate and weak (Dirks 2001; Jakobsh 2003). The Sikhs, categorized as a martial race, were lauded as closely matching British representations of themselves, and hence benefited from preferential recruitment in the colonial army. This construct was further promoted in post-colonial Britain, by public policies and by Sikh immigrants themselves mobilizing for the right to wear the turban (S. S. Gill 2014). In an article pertinently entitled 'So people know I'm a Sikh', S.S. Gill discusses young British Sikh men's narratives and praxis concerning the turban,

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[6] The Sikh emblem *Ek-Onkar* is the combination of the figure "one" and of the letter "o" and forms the opening words of the Adi Granth. It symbolizes the unity of God. The *khanda*, the modern insignia of the Khalsa, comprises a vertical double-edged sword over a quoit with two swords on each side, representing both spiritual and temporal authority.

the turban having become such a potent symbol of collective belonging and the prime marker of British Sikh separate ethno-religious identity (S. S. Gill 2014).

In the very different local configuration of France, Khalsa identity is far from being hegemonic, at least for the undocumented Sikhs I have interviewed. If they don't wear the turban, it is precisely because it makes them visible and hence more vulnerable to identity checks by the police, risks of deportation and job discriminations. But besides this practical reason, my contention is that the Khalsa ideal seems much less relevant in local configurations of hegemonic masculinity, as embodied by the first generation of well-settled, documented migrants. There, hard work, material wealth and success (no matter at what moral costs it is achieved, including the brutal exploitation of undocumented migrants) and its display both in France and in Panjab, such as starting one's own business and building one's network of co-ethnics. The respectability and notability thus derived are no small achievements and are the true measure of a man, a *mard*. In that sense the external symbols have become irrelevant; what truly matters is residency status.

## 7. Ethics, Moral Values and the Practice of *seva*

This final section will discuss the ethical, moral and socio-religious universe to which Panjabi undocumented migrants belong, a universe deeply influenced by the Sikh religious tradition. It will do so within the institutional setting of the gurdwara, where these undocumented migrants occupy a subordinated position, as well as at its margins. The doctrine and practice of *seva* (voluntary service) will be focused upon.

As already highlighted in the case of Italy (Gallo 2012) and France (Moliner 2016), the gurdwara plays a crucial role in the recent Sikh settlements of continental Europe. Gallo argues that the gurdwara is "ascribed shifting meanings according to the biographical time of migrant experiences" (Gallo 2012). The evolution of the community from very precarious conditions to institutionalization and increased visibility within the host society impacts on the way different groups among Sikhs relate to the gurdwara. For the pioneers in the 1980s and for the successive waves of undocumented migrants, it has continuously operated as a service hub, where survival strategies pertaining to work and housing were dealt with. But with the emergence of a second generation, it has significantly become a space of cultural and religious transmission and of increased interactions with the local authorities, while remaining a space of male hierarchical sociability—the main one in the Parisian context, other than the construction sites, as discussed earlier. Competing dynamics are at play regarding the meanings ascribed to the gurdwara: while undocumented migrants strive for social invisibility vis-à-vis the host society and its institutions (for obvious reasons pertaining to their irregular status and fear of deportation), the leadership and the French Sikh youth seek legitimacy and recognition from mainstream society and local authorities.

As undocumented migrants, youth and *Mone* (clean shaven), they occupy a marginalized position in the gurdwara, which functions as a deeply hierarchical space, despite the egalitarian rhetoric at the core of the Sikh doctrine. First generation *Keshdhari* men occupy all the leadership positions and embody the visible and respectable face of the community in its dealings with French authorities, despite the fact that, as discussed earlier, all the pioneers experienced irregular status themselves when they arrived in Europe, an embarrassing reality over which they conveniently prefer to draw a veil in their quest for respectability.

*Seva* is usually translated as selfless service and as a theological concept and a social practice, it takes various forms, both material and immaterial, within the gurdwara and outside of it. Myrvold argues that, in its institutionalized forms, *seva* exemplifies "the various ways in which doctrines of egalitarianism and philanthropy ( … ) are embodied in social institutions and practical work" (Myrvold 2007). Through the practice of *seva*, the *sevadar* (one who performs *seva*) is able to cultivate inner qualities such as humility, compassion, peace of mind, and remembrance of God, among others.

Purewal in the British context (Purewal 2009) and Bertolani in the Italian one (Bertolani 2020) have highlighted the highly gendered dimension of *seva*, with men involved in the more publicly

visible and prestigious forms of *seva* and women confined to the more hidden and unrewarding types. Interestingly, a similar analysis can be applied to undocumented migrants who engage in *seva* on a regularly basis in the Singh Sabha gurdwara. The *langar* (community kitchen) heavily relies on them both to cook the daily vegetarian meals and to serve the *sangat* (congregation). Actually, undocumented young migrants are much more numerous there than regularized Sikhs, who mostly attend the gurdwara on Sunday, and are less involved in this particular form of material *seva*.

Surjit, a young man in his mid-twenties, is one of the most regular *sevadar* at the Singh Sabha gurdwara:

> I have practiced *seva* since childhood. I come from a small village near Sultanpur Lodi, my house is next door to the village gurdwara, so I grew up listening to the prayers from early morning till evening. I used to do *seva* on a regular basis in my local gurdwara. And for the *gurpurab* (anniversary celebrations of the Gurus), I would also go to Sultanpur Lodi with my friends and do all day or all night *seva* in the *langar*, because there was such a rush then ...
>
> So when I arrived in France, the first thing I did was to locate the gurdwara, and I come almost every day. I am working in a nearby Indian restaurant, so I can come during my mid-day break.
>
> Here, I am myself, I am the one I used to be in Panjab. I don't earn much but I contribute to the gurdwara, I am a part of the *sangat*. I also come for the peace of mind, it helps me to put away all my problems and gives me a lot of strength.

As an embodied socio-religious practice, *seva* plays an important role in the sense of selfhood of Surjit; it helps him maintain some continuity with a past rural life that was immersed in the religious and cultural universe of the gurdwara. It also gives him a sense of belonging to a community and a sense of self-worth.

Besides the gurdwara, internet and social networks are alternative spaces to investigate less institutionalized forms of *seva*. Several of my interviewees belong to village based WhatsApp groups, allowing them to remain in contact and nurture strong ties with their village and class mates in Panjab and abroad. Sukhpreet, a twenty-nine year-old man originating from a village near Phagwara, belongs to one such group, that includes migrants (mostly undocumented) in their late twenties settled in California, Australia, Dubai, Italy, Germany, Portugal and France. All regularly remit small amounts of money to finance village projects. So far, besides remittances sent to their family, they have funded four scholarships for impoverished local girls wishing to study in college. They have also contributed a lump sum to the renovation and enlargement of the village gurdwara and to the improvement of the village water pipes network.

Two Facebook groups have been created by Panjabi migrants in Paris, Shahid Bhagat Singh Paris Group and Help group Eiffel Tower—both comprised mostly of Labanas, and the latter, as its name indicates, of migrants working at the major tourist hotspot of the French capital, selling wine and beer to visitors. Group members regularly meet in different locations in the city to shoot short videos, where about twenty of them appeal for financial help to support causes in Panjab, usually poor villagers with a medical condition, needing urgent medical care and hospital treatment.

Sukha, the twenty-two year-old electrician and bodybuilder quoted earlier, is a member of the Shahid Bhagat Singh Paris Facebook Group:

> We all donate money to the *golak* (donation box) in the gurdwara, but we don't trust the management committee members ... And we know so many needy people in Panjab, so we decided to create this group.
>
> In my village, a lot of money is sent from abroad for the collectivity. So, despite our problems with papers, despite our limitations, we want to contribute. We are not as successful as the older migrants, but we are as good human beings and we care for *Sarbat da Bhalla* (welfare of all).

## 8. Conclusions

The coming of age of the Panjabi undocumented migrants that occupy the center stage of this paper and the subsequent construction of their gender identity are deeply shaped by their irregular status and the resulting administrative and socio-economic precariousness. Their life experience in France is tragically remote from the fantasies about migration to Europe that Panjabi popular culture nurtures. Their subordinate position within the labor regime of the host society as well within their own community makes it very difficult for them to uphold values and aspirations on a daily basis, that are regarded as essential components of Panjabi masculinity—autonomy, self-reliance, *izzat*, power, and providing for one's family. Nonetheless, with a great deal of creativity and resilience, they strive to circumvent the unprecedented set of constraints they face and to recoup some form of respectable manhood: this includes specific forms of all-male sociability, the value placed on manual labor and work ethics, the cultivation of their bodies and the solace they seek in an ethical and religious horizon grounded in Sikh teachings and religious institutions.

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