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Diaspora Philanthropy in Punjab: The State, Conflicting Interests and Contested Collaborations

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Abstract

Taking the case of Indian Punjab, this paper complicates the idea of diasporic philanthropy as essentially progressive, demotic and monophonic, in an attempt to underscore it as a field of diverse players, interests and signifiers. Drawing upon ethnographic observations of philanthropic networks in Punjab undertaken by the authors between 2009 to 2017, and augmented by analysis of policy and media reports from Punjab from the last two decades, the paper makes three inter-linked arguments. First, it challenges the notion of diasporic exchanges as a one-to-one direct connection un-mediated by none, by demonstrating how the state of Punjab is deeply implicated in the homeland ties of the diaspora, by formalizing otherwise informal transnational philanthropic exchanges through new institutions and discourses, albeit with the often paradoxical consequence of curbing diaspora interest. Second, the paper argues that far from singular in their orientation towards and aspirations for the homeland, diaspora philanthropy reflects conflicting visions of development and futures for home. Third, the paper foregrounds the waning enthusiasm of diaspora for philanthropic investments in the face of the intractable problems of reception and questions of sustainability, and the increasing involvement of local people in diaspora philanthropic endeavors, making such projects transnational collaborations for local development rather than singular diasporic initiatives of philanthropy.

Keywords:

Punjabi diaspora, philanthropy, homeland ties, transnationalism, migration, development

Introduction

As distinguished from remittances, diaspora philanthropy is understood as transfer of financial resources by the diaspora with altruistic intentions, with an aim of contributing to the welfare at their homeland across multiple arenas (Newland et al., 2010; Sidel, 2008). As a result, in the general literature on transnationalism, diasporic philanthropy has been celebrated as an embodiment of the diaspora's continuing engagement and connectedness with their homeland. It is seen as a social field of intense cross-border exchanges involving individuals and civil society organisations, despite and beyond the nation states. Such exchanges, and the practices and

identities of the participating denizens of the diaspora are deemed as counter-narratives to nations, with the potential to unsettle totalizing nationalist boundaries, visions and subjectivities (Appadurai, 1997). Transnationalism from below, as a field created and maintained by the bi/multi-focal transnational subjects, has not only been appreciated for exceeding the imposing and restricting structures of nation state system, but also seen as a site of dense nostalgia, love for homeland and intense networks that crisscross the world into innumerable micro-territorialities (Upadhyia, Rutten & Koskimaki, 2018).

Taking the case of Indian Punjab, this paper complicates the idea of diasporic philanthropy as essentially progressive, demotic and monophonic, in an attempt to underscore it as a field of diverse players, interests and signifiers. The paper draws upon ethnographic observations from a village with very substantial diaspora philanthropic investments – hence representing a mature case in this regard – undertaken by the authors between 2009 to 2017. This is augmented by analysis of policy and media reports from Punjab from the last two decades. The paper makes three inter-linked arguments. First, it challenges the notion of diasporic exchanges as a one-to-one direct connection un-mediated by none, by demonstrating how the state of Punjab is deeply implicated in the homeland ties of the diaspora. Attempts are made to formalize otherwise informal transnational philanthropic exchanges through new institutions and discourses, albeit with the often paradoxical consequence of curbing diaspora interest. Second, it argues that far from singular in their orientation towards and aspirations for the homeland, diaspora philanthropy reflects conflicting visions of development and futures for home. Third, it foregrounds the waning enthusiasm of diaspora for philanthropic investments in the face of the intractable problems of reception and questions of sustainability, and the increasing involvement of local people in diaspora philanthropic endeavors, making such projects transnational collaborations for local development rather than singular diasporic initiatives of philanthropy.

Historical Context to Diaspora Philanthropy in Punjab

Punjab is one of the most out-migratory states in India. Dating back to the colonial period, Britain, Canada and the United States have been the major destinations of migrants from Punjab to the extent that these three destinations together account for three-quarters of Punjabi emigrants (Tatla, 1999: 40-45). The bulk of out-migration was from the *doaba* region – the land lying

between the rivers Sutlej and Beas - with the rural *doaba* being swept by a “migration fever” from the early 1960s onwards (Ballard, 1994; Tatla, 1999). The region, often referred to as the migration belt of Punjab, is known for the presence of philanthropic investments by its diaspora, particularly in the rural parts of the *doaba*. Though such spending has a long history, it began to receive scholarly attention only recently, in association with to the recent discourse of “migration and development” (Raghuram, 2009). Writing on the Punjabi experience celebrates the “private spending on public good” by the diaspora, and foregrounds it as a testimony of their bifocal living and the deep connection maintained with the homeland (Dusenbery & Tatla 2009).

Dusenbery (2009) analyses Sikh diaspora philosophy as a practice underpinned by religious traditions urging *daan* (selfless giving) and *seva* (service), blended with Punjabi traditions of *sardari* (patronage) and *izzat* (honor/prestige - display of wealth) such that it comes to be difficult to disentangle altruism from self-interest. There is a near agreement in the literature that diaspora investments have contributed to the socio-economic development of Punjab in significant ways, including its contribution to the green revolution in Punjab (Tatla, 1999). It is also true that the spontaneous, non-planned, and largely unorganized contributions that characterized the earlier diaspora philanthropy in Punjab has taken an increasingly organized form in recent decades through hometown/village and *biraderi* associations in the host locations, and religious-based organizations and village/town welfare associations back home (Lacroix, 2011, Varghese & Rajan, 2010). Also, the earlier tendencies of contributing predominantly to religious places, erecting memorial gates and spending on spectacular events such as festivals and sporting competitions are eventually giving way to investments in human development and village amenities, through setting up or supporting educational institutions, dispensaries, hospitals, crematoriums, sport stadiums, street lighting, sanitation and clean drinking water projects. The urge for improving their places of origin and making them model villages/towns stand out in diaspora narratives as the moving spirit behind these contributions. However, with the exception of a few studies (Taylor & Singh, 2013; Walton-Roberts, 2005), attempts to look at the politics of such spending, mediating structures, discontents and anxieties it engenders among the diaspora and local society, diverse purposes it serves and diverse constituencies it addresses, local participation/initiatives and anxieties about sustainability have been very limited.

The State and Diaspora Philanthropy

Though a distinction has been drawn between “transnationalism from above”, namely that of states and corporations and “transnationalism from below”, namely that of people (Smith & Eduardo, 2006), as a concept and as a field of research, transnationalism privileges people-to-people contact across national borders as its distinctive component, calling for explorations on multi-sited lives and ethnoscaapes. However, in the case of Punjab, the sub-national state is an important player since it not only creates institutions to formalize the otherwise informal philanthropic investments, but also engenders discourses to reinforce the homeland ties of diaspora in new ways.¹

As the resources being invested in rural Punjab for philanthropy and rural infrastructure development by diasporic Punjabis became significant, the Government of Punjab (GoP) instituted the “NRI-GoP Rural Infrastructure Development Fund” in the early years of twenty-first century, with an aim of incentivizing and strengthening such flows into the state. The “Plan Scheme NRI 2.35” was the result of this initiative, which created a model of contributing 50 percent of matching grants by the GoP for all village development programmes initiated by the Non-Resident Indians (NRIs, as the diaspora is often referred to in Punjab) and their NGOs. The Department of NRI Affairs of Punjab expanded the scheme in 2008 by renaming it “Plan Scheme NRI-1”, with a stated intention of providing an “enabling and facilitating platform” for overseas Punjabi contribution for development of their villages, by stipulating 75 percent matching grants by the GoP for all rural, as well as urban development programmes initiated by the NRIs or NRI-NGOs.² The scheme, under the rubric of the “Mera Pind Mera Shehar” programme (meaning my village, my town), sought to “ensure full participation of the NRIs and NRI NGOs into the village infrastructure development activities.”³ The scheme has been quickly institutionalized, and a High Level Committee called the Punjab NRI Committee for Development (PUNRICD), headed by the Chief Secretary of Punjab, was constituted in 2005, so as to promote and implement the scheme. In due course, the undertakings under the ambit of the scheme have also been expanded - not restricted

¹ For a discussion of the role of state at the national level in formalizing the relationship of the diaspora with their motherland, and in creating new governmental categories of diaspora, see Edwards, 2008; Rajan & Varghese 2012.

² See the “Plan Scheme NRI-1” document issued by the GoP here:

<https://www.punjabpolice.gov.in/PDFViewer.aspx?pdfFileName=~/writereaddata/UploadFiles/NRI/NRI%20Data/infrastructure%20Development%20funds.pdf> (Accessed on 30 June 2022).

³ <http://nripunjab.gov.in/plan-scheme-pind.htm> (Accessed on 15 Oct 2022).

just to hospitals, libraries, drinking water, sewerage disposal, public latrines, street lights and sport stadiums, but it could now include all projects that would be beneficial to the people, with an aim of providing to the “overall benefit of the general masses and overall community development of the area.”⁴ The scheme also ensures ownership of public property by the respective villages, and a Village Development Committee (VDC) formed in individual villages is made responsible, not only for the implementation of the project, but also for the maintenance of the built infrastructure.

The modalities set by the GoP for the “Plan Scheme NRI 2.35” not only governmentalized philanthropic flows from the diaspora, but also gave the GoP control over the village development schemes initiated by the NRIs. All projects coming under the scheme are required to get prior approval from the Higher Power Committee (PUNRICD).⁵ Every project application should come through the District NRI Committee for Development (DINRICD) headed by the Deputy Commissioner of the concerned district who with the help of specifically empanelled civil/public health/construction engineers assess the viability of the project and examine the detailed estimates of it. On clearance of the project by PUNRICD, the Commissioner of NRI Affairs will transfer the funds, that is the government share, to the respective Deputy Commissioner. It is also decided that in order to ensure full ownership and subsequent responsibility of maintenance of the infrastructure, the implementation of the projects should be carried out by the NRIs or NRI-NGOs through the Village Development Committees. A panel of certified engineers, maintained by the concerned Deputy Commissioner, will have to be constituted to provide technical assistance to the PUNRICD and DINRICD wherever required. Subsequently, the government share has been brought back to a maximum of 50% of the total estimated cost; and PUNRICD is given the power to decide the quantum of the matching grant to

⁴ See NRI Plan and Scheme, on the website of NRI Affairs Department, <http://nrpunjab.gov.in/plan-scheme-pind.htm> (Accessed on 15 Oct 2022). The Government of Punjab has published a suggestive list of projects which include projects of water management services covering the entire water circle, various village infrastructure projects, village renewable energy infrastructure, village health care and education infrastructure, establishment of Citizen Service Centres with broadband connectivity for providing government and other services, creating common infrastructure for running special programmes like controlling female foeticide, adult literacy programmes, old age homes, schools for physically and mentally challenged, AIDS Control, vocational training centres etc., provision of infrastructure for specialized job oriented training courses like textile and garment manufacturing, agricultural related skills and technical skills of various kinds (Plan Scheme NRI 2.35 document, Government of Punjab).

⁵ Principal Secretary Finance, Secretary Planning, Secretary Rural Development, a representative of an NRI/NGOs to be nominated by CNRI, Deputy Commissioner of the concerned District, MD NRI Sabha and Commissioner NRIs (Member Secretary) are the other members of the Committee.

be given to any given project. As per the set modality, NRI/NGO/VDC has to start spending for the project; only after NRI/NGO/VDC spent 25% of the total cost first out of their share, they can apply for 25% of the government share to be released. The former is required to spend the rest of their share in the third stage for getting the remaining share of the government released.⁶ The Department of NRI Affairs also retains its prerogative to inspect the standard, quality and progress of any ongoing project and its accounts, as and when the Department feels so, apart from levying a 3% of the total cost of the project as administrative charges.⁷

Apart from attempts to maximize diaspora Punjabi contribution to philanthropy driven development and formalize it through the framework of “Plan Scheme NRI 2.35”, the GoP has of late come up with many services specifically aimed at overseas Punjabis to promote and strengthen their bonds with the home state. Apart from establishing the Department of NRI Affairs in 2002, which is in charge of matters related to overseas Punjabis, the government has also established NRI police stations, fast track courts for adjudicating NRI cases and supported NRI Sabha. NRI police stations were opened initially in six places (Jalandhar, SBS Nargar-Nawanshahr, Hoshiarpur, Kapurthala, Ludhiana and Moga) with its jurisdiction over the concerned districts to address the grievances of the overseas Punjabis, particularly their disputes with relatives and neighbors relating to the property disputes which are widespread (Varghese and Thakur 2015). Today, Punjab has as many as 15 dedicated NRI police stations, the new additions being Ludhiana Rural, Amritsar, Jalandhar Rural, SAS Nagar, Gurdaspur, Ferozepur, Bathinda, Sangrur and Patiala. The Punjab Police Department has a dedicated NRI Wing headed by a senior police officer in the ADGP rank. A fast-track NRI court has been set up in Jalandhar for the speedy adjudication of cases pertaining to overseas Punjabis, and the new government in Punjab is proposing to establish five more such courts in Bathinda, Nawanshahr, Patiala, Hoshiarpur and Moga.⁸ The NRI Sabha, an NGO of Non Resident Punjabis (NRPs), established in 1998 with more than twenty thousand registered members, has been supported by the government of Punjab in redressing their grievances and ensuring their welfare.⁹ The GoP also

⁶ <http://nripunjab.gov.in/plan-scheme-pind.htm> (Accessed on 15 Oct 2022)

⁷ <http://nripunjab.gov.in/plan-scheme-pind.htm> (Accessed on 15 Oct 2022)

⁸ “Punjab to have 5 more NRI-designated courts,” *The Tribune*, 25 May 2022.

⁹ The NRI Sabha has 23000 NRPs as its members. It takes up various issues of the NRPs with the GoP and seek solutions to them, particularly cases of property disputes, frauds and marital deceptions. The Sabha is also been

constituted the “Punjab State Commission for NRIs”, “with a view to protect and safeguard the interests of NRIs in the state of Punjab, and to recommend remedial measures for their welfare” through the Punjab State Commission for Non-Resident Indians Act, of 2011.¹⁰

Such attempts by the state of Punjab fundamentally leverage the sub-national identity and ethnic solidarity of Punjabis across the world. The sentimental and emotional affinity of Punjabis with their homeland, and their enthusiasm for its progress is invoked and employed to garner resources for development of their ancestral places and keep them deeply attached to the state. Added to this is making use of the religious bonds of the Sikhs with Punjab as the spiritual homeland of Sikhism. It is also important to note that it was after the separatist Khalistan movement, which was expressively supported economically and ideologically by the sections of Punjabi diaspora (Tatla, 1999), it became also imperative for the state to discourage diaspora financing for subversive activities and channel it in ways it found more productive: for the developmental needs of the state. By articulating and reinforcing a distinct Punjabi cultural identity beyond the territorial confines of the sub-nation into a global Punjabi identity, the attempt of the GoP was to encourage more and more philanthropic investments in their ancestral locations. The state has been visibly looking to diaspora resources for its own legitimacy in the context of growing demands for development.

Launched in 2004, the “Plan Scheme NRI 1” did not make any spectacular progress, however. The attempts on the part of the sub-national state to formalize and governmentalise the otherwise private initiatives of the diaspora in the guise of encouraging it, though initially received by the diaspora with enthusiasm, soon lost its momentum. The NRIs, on their part - notwithstanding the generational changes being undergone by the diaspora and the resultant decline of emotional bonds and interest of the new generation to their ancestral land - squarely transfer the blame onto the government, stating that schemes like “Plan Scheme NRI 1” did not work, and only dissuaded the NRIs from investing in philanthropic projects by creating governmental technicalities, approvals, and hurdles on their way. The Village Life Improvement Foundation (VLIF) and Indo-Canadian Village Improvement Trust (ICVIT), two prominent NRI NGOs in Punjab that have taken up many village development projects, have either cut down their

significantly controlled by the GoP, with the Chief Minister of Punjab as its Chief patron and a senior administrative official appointed by the GoP as its Chairman. The President of the Sabha is being elected by the NRI members.

¹⁰ Punjab State Commission for NRIs - <http://nricommissionpunjab.com/> (Accessed on 15 Oct 2022).

involvement or even given up announced projects. Neither has taken up any new projects since 2014.¹¹ The projects being run under the scheme are mostly initiated by the VDCs, which seek financial help from the diaspora for and implement such projects, saving the latter from the red tape of getting approvals, meeting technical requirements and gaining the matching grants.

Contrary to the expectation of the sub-national state, the NRP interest seems to have declined to such an extent that in 2015 the GoP conceded that efforts to promote diaspora investment and partnership in development projects had not translated into the anticipated success.¹²

The attempt to bring diaspora philanthropy to areas untouched or marginally affected areas by such philanthropic flows has also been so far unimpressive. Nonetheless, the GoP is attempting to diversify its efforts to attract diaspora investment for development by initiating new programmes – a rural development scheme that creates space for NRIs to help their native village, and “Friends of Punjab Mukhmantri Garima Gram Yogna” have recently been launched, and a new scheme enabling the diaspora to contribute to the public health system of Punjab.¹³

Factionalism and Conflicting Visions in Diaspora Philanthropy

A closer look at many of the philanthropic investments that the diaspora has made in rural Punjab reveals multiple political commitments at work, much beyond the often projected unmediated and resolute love for their respective ancestral villages. The philanthropic aid flows along the tracks laid down by religion and caste, to the extent of fuelling competition between different *pattis* (colonies) in the villages, and a large share of it is being spent on constructing religious structures like gurudwaras (Taylor et al., 2007; Rajan & Varghese, 2012; Singh & Singh, 2019). Diaspora philanthropy has been seen as an exemplary case of what Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004) have called “long-distance particularism”, as diaspora networks generate a

¹¹ The diaspora investment under the aegis of Village Life Improvement Foundation (VLIF) has converted Kharoudi into a “model village” by creating infrastructure for clean water, sanitation and modern drainage, education, clean environment and recreational and community activities. VLIF strives to promote model village concept by enabling the villages with clean water “for sustaining life”, sanitation “for health life”, appropriate education “for productive life” and clean environment “for enhanced life.” See, <http://www.vlif.in/mission.htm>. For details of ICVIT, <http://www.icvit.com/>

¹² “NRIs not investing in Punjab, admits CM,” Times of India, 17 January 2015 http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/article/show/45918382.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst (Accessed on 15 Oct 2022).

¹³ <http://nrpunjab.gov.in/mera-pind.htm> (Accessed on 15 Oct 2022).

multiplicity of “imagined communities,” organized along different, often conflicting principles. The contingency of such investments and its outcomes also depend significantly on factionalism within the diaspora. This factionalism has its roots in political divisions in Punjab and in the diaspora, with politics in the homeland and overseas in constant and deep interplay, developments in one site influencing what happens in the other (Bentz and Guyot 2021). Case studies of four philanthropic projects in a single village is used here to demonstrate this point.

Bilga, located to the south of Jalandar city, is one of biggest administrative villages in Punjab and it has grown now to a small town, largely as a result of the investments its diaspora have made in their ancestral village. The village assumes importance in Sikh history as a place visited by Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Guru and the first Sikh Guru to be martyred, who stayed for two days during the time of his wedding in the neighboring village of Mau Sahib in the late 16th century. The Mata Gangaji *gurdwara*, named after Guru Arjan Dev’s wife, located at the centre of the village, preserves the clothes and other articles left by the Guru during his sojourn in the village, attracting Sikh devotees from across the world. Bilga is also considered a village of freedom fighters, having produced nearly ninety freedom fighters including the Ghadarite revolutionary Baba Bhagat Singh, who breathed his last in 2009 in England. Bilga’s overseas connections through migration thus date back to colonial times, if not earlier, and is one of the villages in the *doab* region boasting the highest number of families with members living abroad.

The accomplishments of the village/town in diaspora philanthropy are well known among the Punjabi diaspora. This comprises a wide range of investments ranging from memorial gates and sports activities to a general hospital, established with an approximate investment of Rs. 500 million. Its history of participation in the Ghadar movement, progressive thinking, commitment to leftist politics and a secular orientation has arguably influenced a lot of philanthropic efforts of the diaspora in Bilga, especially educational and healthcare ventures in the village. However, the Ghadari Sikh emigrants were not the first to establish a school in the village. Rather, it was the Hindu diaspora of Bilga who established the first school through philanthropy.

The Sheela Rani Tangri DAV Public School was established in 1995 following the death of Sheela Rani Tangri, to realise her dream of seeing the area developed as a centre of education. The core of this philanthropic faction was the seven sons of Sheela Tangri, an influential family

in which all but one had emigrated to England or Canada. On the initiative of Mr. Ashwani Tangri, an NRI based in Canada, and his wife Neena, one of the policy makers of the Conservative party of Canada, the school was established in a rented house and four rooms in the Sri Pipli Sahib gurudwara. The brothers purchased two acres of land, at a cost of Rs. 1.5 million shared equally among them, on which to erect a purpose-built school building, which was completed in 1998. A further Rs. 200-300 thousands were raised from the overseas diaspora, for the basic school infrastructure, but significantly, they also managed to mobilise substantial local donations from within the Hindu colony of Bilga. They affiliated the school with the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic (DAV) Public Schools System to gain respect and achieve greater standards. The now late Mr. Asok Tangri, the brother who remained in India and acted as local lynch person for the school trust, explained that the family did not want to run the school privately because “there would have been no gesture of charity then. It was not a business for us”. The school has around 50 teachers and more than 1300 students, running from nursery to Plus Two in more than 40 sections, and is in the process of buying more land in view of its expansion plans.

The DAV Public Schools System, to which they affiliated their school, is a renowned non-governmental educational organization in India and is based on the ideals of the religious and social reformer, Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1884-1883), a scholar of the Vedas who is best known for establishing the Arya Samaj Hindu reform movement. The DAV Public Schools System, which dates back to 1886, manages more than 700 schools across India, with overseas branches in Nepal, Fiji, Mauritius and Pakistan. The Sheela Rani Tangri DAV School accordingly retains aspects of this Hindu religious orientation. The academic sessions are begun with a *havan* (home) ceremony, the Sanskritic ritual of making offerings into a consecrated fire. However, in our conversation with the school management, they insisted that the defining characteristic of the school was that they provide secular modern education. While the Tangri Hindu faction shared Congress (Indian National Congress) leanings, in 1997 a rival school, the Akal Academy, was established with the support of the Jat Sikh emigrants of the village, particularly those affiliated with the Shiromani Akali Dal party and Sikh ethno-nationalist movement. Mr. Asok Tangri confessed that the Akal Academy gave “tough competition” to them in their efforts at fundraising. Indeed, he explained that it was the Akal Academy which made them expand the school beyond its modest beginnings in a rented house. He and the

principal of the school had planned to go abroad to raise funds for the school, but changed their mind as the Akal Academy has done such widespread collection among the Bilga diaspora.

Like the DAV school, the Akal Academy is part of a chain. There are 129 Akal Academies across Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. The Akal Academies were established under the authority of Sant Baba Attar Singh Ji Mastuanawale (1866-1927) and his follower Sant Baba Teja Singh Ji (1877-1965). The story recounted in school publications is that Sant Attar Singh wished for 101 such academies to be established – the figure of 101 being an auspicious number. The Akal Academies are now managed under the auspices of the Kaldighar Society, a charitable trust that administer a number of other projects including a university, hospitals, old age homes, a home for widows and destitute women.

The Bilga Akal Academy had 58 teachers and over 1100 students, and imparts education from Kindergarten to Plus Two. In 1997, Sardar Gian Singh, a prominent NRI from Bilga, in Australia, donated 17 acres of land and mobilized Rs. 10 million for the purpose of building the Akal Academy. Like the DAV School, the school management stressed to us the high quality of the modern English-medium education that they provide; they too are recognized by the Central Board of Secondary Education. The Akal Academy provides a more rigorous religious education than the DAV School, with a gurudwara on the campus and daily religious instruction covering three-times daily prayers and Sikh history along with standard modern subjects.

The two schools vie for students in Bilga and its environs and espouse radically different visions for social reform. Whilst Mrs. Kaur, the principal of the Akal Academy, spelt out that “supporting rural education” was one of the aims of the Academy at Bilga, she quickly added that “preserving Sikhism” was the prime motive, as she saw Sikhism declining in the context of “increasing westernization” and “loss of religious values”. Meanwhile, the principal of the DAV school insisted on the properly secularist credentials of the school, unlike the Akal Academy which was “interested only in Sikhism.” He also underlined the high quality of the English-medium education provided at the DAV school, for which the DAV system is acclaimed.

The Ghadari emigrants, with their non-religious orientation and Communist affiliations, are another philanthropic faction extending from Bilga. Mr. Paramjit Singh (pseudonym), a founding life-member of the Bilga Hospital Trust, asserted that the Akal Academy was being run by “Sikh

fundamentalists”. Clearly distancing himself from the initiative, he reported that those among the diaspora who are contributing to the Academy are “fanatic Sikhs”. To him, it was an essential backward consciousness among the NRIs that allowed them to fund such institutions, which put religion ahead of education and generate rivalry among communities. As he explained,

Last week I fought with [my friend], he is in favour of Akal Academies. I said to him that “you force children to wear religious dress, you force the girls to wear turbans, you are imposing fundamentalism on them”. I argued with him. I said “if you keep the education at the back and you keep the religion in front, they will surely be lagging behind in education”.

By contrast, Mr. Paramjit Singh appreciated the secular credentials of the DAV Public Schools:

[The DAV schools] are Hindus basically. But I still prefer them in matter of secularism in comparison to Akal Academies. There is a person who is opening these types of fanatic institutions in Punjab and in reaping profits from them. He is exploiting the ignorance of Jat Sikhs. He is the head of Akal Academies in Delhi. He is fooling us...NRIs are becoming fools as they have only worked abroad, they didn't get the education, they are still backward.

His non-religious orientation is also attested by the charitable hospital established in Bilga with diaspora resources in which he played a major role. The Bilga General Hospital was opened in 2005 in a five acre campus with eleven thousand square meters of buildings, 50 staff and over fifty beds, to cater to the healthcare needs of the village. It offers a wide range of facilities and medical specialties, including round the clock accident and emergency care, orthopedics, optometry, ophthalmology, dentistry, obstetrics and gynecology, physiotherapy, general medicine, surgery and community & preventative medicine. Health Camps were regularly organized in the surrounding poorer villages, with possible follow-up. Amongst these were regular specialist eye camps, where simple eye operations, mainly cataract surgery, were performed free of charge and were sponsored by the diaspora from Bilga mainly in the UK.

The hospital was constructed by the Bilga General Hospital Charitable Trust UK, under the leadership of Mr. Gian Singh and Mr. Pyra Singh, both of them located in Birmingham and who contributed the lions' share. The Trust introduced a system of “life membership” to mobilise money for the proposed hospital, and contacted members of the village's diaspora in the UK for taking life membership for a donation of £2000, while the organizing team under Mr. Gian Singh Sanghera has contributed £10,000 each. The hospital instituted exchange programmes with the Universities of Birmingham and Leicester, with medical and nursing students regularly coming

down to the hospital in order to have a firsthand experience of healthcare in rural India under its programme “Birmingham comes to Bilga”. The hospital has been expanding since the time of its establishment, with new buildings and staff residencies on the campus completed; and new departments, space and infrastructure were proposed in 2014.

The Bilga General Hospital gets strong endorsement by its proponents through a language of their commitment to poor and downtrodden people. The hospital was established on a five acre land donated by a Trust after Comrade Kartar Singh, a committed local Communist who was also a close friend of the UK based founding life-members of the hospital, who wanted to devote the bulk of his land for a true social cause. The plaque on the memorial of Kartar Singh in the hospital premises reads, “Comrade Kartar Singh Memorial Trust, BP, fulfilled his duty by donating this land to Bilga General Charitable Hospital Trust (UK) according to the wishes to Comrade Kartar Singh...for the service of the oppressed classes of the society. Serving the *poor and downtrodden was the ideal of Comrade Kartar Singh*”.



Figure:1 (Pictures by the first author)

In line with the Communist commitments of the Hospital’s proponents, human welfare above caste, creed and religion are emphasized, and diaspora investments with divisive intentions and

directed towards particular communities are resented. Such a sense of universalism is evident in the writing inscribed in a plaque in the front courtyard of the hospital which reads: “Bilga General Hospital built *by the Global Community, for the Global Community, inaugurated by the Global Community* on the 31st March 2005” (see Figure-1). The Medical Officer of the hospital explained it eloquently: “[a]ctually, ‘Global’ means it doesn’t belong to any religion or sect. It’s for everybody. The hospital has no religion. It’s beyond anybody’s religion.”

Local Initiatives, Transnational Collaborations and their Discontents

It should be noted that it is not only the diaspora’s eulogized love of the homeland that makes such projects possible; considerable *local* interest, initiative and involvement is attached with most philanthropic ventures. It was the promise of land donation by the Comrade Kartar Singh Trust that set the idea of Bilga General Hospital in motion. There are significant number of local population in the Trust as its life-members; initially the fee for the local members was Rs.10,000, substantially lesser to a diaspora life member arguably to attract more local participation. The amount has now been increased to Rs.160,000, arguably due to scores of local interest.

The “Desh Bhagat Yaadgaari Committee” of Bilga annually organizes commemoration of the patriots and freedom fighters from the village, with the support from the diaspora. The local society conducts annual sports events and constructed a stadium in Bilga in this manner by reaching out to the diaspora and making them to contribute to their ancestral village. Recently, the sons of Baba Bhagat Singh, living in the UK, have turned his ancestral house into a library and reading room in memory of their father, wherein too the initiative for the same was taken by the local Desh Bhagat Yaadgaari Committee. With the involvement of political parties and local politicians in such initiatives, money from the diaspora is generated without much difficulty. As the district president of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) party told us: “NRIs are being motivated; even they are allowed to start schools, hospitals in the name of their late fathers and late parents with their funds.” Needing political and social support for getting their things done back home, the diaspora rely upon people on the ground. The SAD local secretary from another village reflected candidly, “they cannot get their things done without our support; they contribute to our programmes and in turn we support them whenever they want it.” What is apparent here is a mutually beneficial relationship between the diaspora and sections of the local society. Of late,

with the coming of quality high-speed internet and new communication technologies, village WhatsApp groups have been formed, putting the village community in constant touch with its diaspora. In many villages, with the support of the diaspora, essential rural infrastructures like sewage systems are being built under the initiative of Village Development Committees without government involvement by prompting funds from the diaspora.¹⁴

As well as these elements of mutualism, there are also rifts at multiple levels among the diaspora and between diaspora and local society over the running and the success of philanthropic undertakings. The Bilga General Hospital is a typical case in point. One of the founding local life members of the Trust expressed his disappointment unequivocally: “[I] am also one of the founder members. I visited UK three times for the meetings. I have attended their meetings. [But] our dream is not fulfilled yet.” He critiqued the diaspora domination over the decision making without having an intimate understanding of the ground realities:

There is a problem in the management. The main fund came from the NRIs. They dominate. But they can't run this hospital by sitting there. They can't understand the social status, economic status or the culture of the people like us. They can't solve their problems. They ignore us as they have given more money. They think that they will run the hospital.

The displeasure of being ignored and sidelined stands out in his narrative.¹⁵ The decision to appoint Professor Robert Arnott of the Birmingham Medical School as the Chairman of the Board of Governors did not go well with even a section within the core contributing diaspora. Though he appreciates Gian Singh as “good man with noble intentions”, the decision to hand over the hospital administration “to Board of Governors consisting of only doctors led by the Birmingham Professor” did not make much sense to Paramjit Singh either. The visit of medical students and junior doctors from Birmingham and Leicester, under the “Birmingham comes to Bilga” initiative, were not felt, by such detractors, to have produced any positive outcomes.

¹⁴ “Punjab: Transforming villages with WhatsApp, NRIs,” Indian Express, 7 July 2022; <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/punjab-transforming-villages-with-whatsapp-nris-5819012/> (Accessed on 30 June 2022).

¹⁵ Such disenchantment exists among the new generation migrants from the village, particularly among those who migrated through informal channels. Jaswant Singh (pseudonym), the father of another NRI who has emigrated to the UK illegally, on the other hand, for instance, expresses they are not part of such elite bio-political network of the Bilga diaspora: “[Y]es, there is not much output... they have *selected the NRIs* [for building the hospital]; there are different wings and layers among NRIs” (emphasis added).

They select doctors from there to come here. Now two English lady doctors have come here. Have you seen them? They are here for six months or one year... The first issue is the language problem. The patient will not be able to tell his problem, so there will not be proper diagnosis.

This founding NRI life member was also very suspicious about this move, and lack of trust reverberates in his talk. He confesses that hospital has gone into the hands of “money-minded people” and their investment meant for the health of the poor has gone in vain. He also feels that noble gesture of Comrade Kartar Singh of donating land has gone vain.

I have even heard things about this doctor who is going to give this hospital to Birmingham University. He is our family doctor also. He said to me one day “brother, we will open old age homes in Jalandhar, Ludhiana. We will open educational institutions. They get money, money for what? We have done this in the hospital; we have done that in the hospital. In this way they exploited everything. Our money has gone in vain”.

What is apparently at the root of the problem is a policy change adopted by the Trust in 2010, which was indicated to us by the then Medical Officer of the Bilga General Hospital who is the subject of Paramjit Singh’s ire. He shared his conviction that “the hospital is on loss; a hospital cannot be run for long on charity, it has to generate at least its running cost. Whenever there is expansion or installing of new infrastructure, we can look for funds from the NRIs”. The hospital was apparently making an annual “loss” of almost half a million rupees in the initial years, as reported by the Medical Officer, which has been brought down to Rs. 400,000 when we met him in 2009. It was in such a context that the new Board of Governors “composed of a group of experienced UK and Indian doctors” has taken over with a specified task of making the hospital “financially self-sufficient by the end of 2011,” by using the hospital “more effectively,” so that future fundraising could be “confined to development and the purchase of new equipment, vehicles and operations.”¹⁶ It has been reported, in a subsequent visit in 2013 that the hospital has started generating profits by then, though marginally, or “at least the running cost is recovered.” However, this capitalist management principle of fee-payment angers the Socialist block in the Trust to the extent that they have increasingly disassociated themselves from the hospital.

¹⁶ See the web site of Bilga General Hospital Charitable Trust, <https://www.bilgahosp.org.uk/BGHCT.php> (Accessed on 30 June 2022).

Sustainability remained a major issue that worried Paramjit Singh: he was uncertain about what would happen to the hospital in the future. In our meeting with him, Pyara Singh, who was pivotal in establishing the hospital along with Gian Singh Sanghera, also conceded this uncertainty. He was taking more interest in the affairs of the hospital after the death of Gian Singh, visiting Bilga at regular intervals, irrespective of his old age and declining health. He hoped that the new arrangement and the overall supervision from the UK, now mainly by the second generation of the founding life-members, would keep it going. He saw economic self-sufficiency to be necessary, for which enterprises like starting a nursing college attached to the hospital had been initiated. At the same time, he conceded difficulties in the running of the hospital, which he cryptically summarized as a “caste problem” in the village and too much “political interference.” Such issues apparently disheartened him and punctured his dream of contributing back to his ancestral village and its poor people. Paramjit Singh was angered by the fact that instead of being appreciated, the proponents are abused: “I want appreciation at least; but they abuse us. Everybody feels happy when somebody appreciates his efforts... But now they say this hospital is a white elephant.” The anxiety of the first- and second-generation diaspora involved was also about the diminishing interest among the subsequent generations in the affairs of the far away hospital.¹⁷ It was all these tensions, practical difficulties of managing the hospital from the Midlands and the need of a strong local professional management that eventually led to the decision of handing over the day-to-day running and management of the hospital to the renowned Christian Medical College (CMC) Ludhiana in 2015.¹⁸ In some ways, bringing an institution like CMC to serve a village like Bilga and its surroundings is seen as a major achievement, as it brought a campus of a major Indian medical school into the village and thereby left the hospital in safe hands. The CMC management reportedly intends to expand the hospital to serve the local population and with

¹⁷ At the same time as these worries regarding the diminishing interest among subsequent generations in the diaspora, new emigration from Punjab continues apace, building upon the existing networks and expanding it to newer locations and groups, re-creating first generation in every period cohort. Also, as recently pointed out by Bentz and Guyot (2021), the transnational political sphere not only witnesses considerable overlaps between diaspora politics and immigrant politics; notwithstanding the diaspora as hetero-generational stock, certain critical events unite the diaspora in reinventing and reifying their homeland ties and emotional bonds – the Operation Bluestar in 1984 (Tatla 1999) and the recent farmers movement in India (Bainiwal 2022) are examples to be cited.

¹⁸ Christian Medical College (CMC) Ludhiana, originally known as the ‘North Indian School of Medicine for Christian Women’ was founded in 1894 by Dr. Edith Mary Brown and a group of Scottish evangelist sisters. Assuming its present name in 1952, CMC is one of the most reputed medical colleges in India.

<https://www.cmcludhiana.in/our-story/>

specialized departments, while charity will remain in accordance with the funds being provided by a “league of friends” of the hospital through a joint managing committee.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that diaspora philanthropy is not just a field of people-to-people affirmative contact alone, and driven by nostalgia and unwavering love for homeland.

The state is an active player in the field, and the Government of Punjab has attempted not only to bag diasporic transnational resources for local development through a powerful invocation of the sub-national identity and ethnic solidarity, but also to formalize and governmentalize informal philanthropic flows. Paradoxically however, such statist interventions appear to often have resulted in slowing down the enthusiasm in the diaspora for philanthropic investments for home, and jeopardized the status of diaspora philanthropy as an informal parallel network of welfare.

Moreover, the attributed singularity of diaspora needs to be complicated by its particularities, factionalism, marginalities, ideologies and radically different visions of social reform and futuristic aspirations. At the same time, it is seen that diasporic initiatives are giving way to transnational collaborations, with the local society taking the lead in mobilizing philanthropic contributions for what the former thought as necessary rural development infrastructures.

Existing literature on diaspora philanthropy has explored the conflicts that arise in projects due to the unequal nature of the relationship between the diaspora and the beneficiary communities, the problem of diaspora proponents setting the priorities without due consultation with local communities, and refusing to relinquish control (Walton-Roberts, 2004; Dusenbery & Tatla, 2009; Dekkers & Rutten, 2011). Our material here emphasizes further complexity due to the political, caste and religious commitments of the rival philanthropic factions and the contextualities of the sub-national and the local. These experiences also point to the dampening of enthusiasm for philanthropic investments by the diaspora, whilst diasporic commitment to Punjab waxes and wanes, and foregrounds the historical contingencies and specific socio-political circumstances in which diasporic philanthropy is reproduced in Punjab today. Policies aimed at garnering more diaspora philanthropic investments should be informed by the ground

reality that increasing formalization and bureaucratization has hardly served the purpose even when the government offers partnership in planning, cost sharing and implementation.

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