Problematizing *Punjabiyat*: A Case Study of Brahmanical Patriarchy

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Questioning the notion of Punjabiyat as a unifying perspective that acknowledges commonalities in culture, lived practice and language across east and west Punjab and the diaspora, this article argues that unities are superficial unless they address supremacies head on. This is explored here through a recounting of the life of a (my) Hindu Punjabi brahmin grandmother, in a Punjabi village, in Delhi and in Britain. The narrative is presented as a case study of brahmanical patriarchy – highlighting the ways in which Brahmanism and internalised patriarchy played out in her life, countering erasures of brahmanical supremacy in Punjab along with the notion of a unified 'feminist' perspective, through a highlighting of the contours of an often normalised and invisiblised dominant perspective.

In academic and activist circles, as well as in the nostalgic memories of some Punjabi elders, I often hear about the idea of '*Punjabiyat*' as something that has been lost, as something that should be revived. This is meant to represent a unifying perspective, an acknowledgment of commonalities in culture and lived practices (music, food, language, literature) across the borders of East and West Punjab, divided by the Radcliffe Line in 1947, as well as across the Punjabi diaspora. It's a seductive perspective, suggesting a way of bringing a separated and often, as they define themselves through national identities, antagonistic people, together. Above all, Punjabiyat is seen to articulate the messiness of identity and practice which doesn't fit easily into religious or national frameworks, a messiness that many of us recognise and often embody. The idea of Punjabiyat suggests that this messiness might be captured through a regional identity. In recent years however, I have been thinking about the ways in which this perspective, articulated from a place of privilege, might be romantic, even problematic. The unity of Punjabiyat is superficial, brushing over supremacies, invisiblising dominations; I've seen patriarchy, casteism and anti-Muslim sentiment flourish in this space of 'Punjabiyat'. And then, it is questionable how a regional identity can exist independently of religion, particularly when a community is attacked and targeted on the basis of religion, whether Sikh or Muslim. The notion of Punjabiyat can, therefore, become like any attempt at unity that doesn't confront the hierarchies within, an oppressive idea.

For a while, this idea of Punjabiyat spoke to me. I grew up in South East London, with little concept of my family being Hindu. There was a mandir at home, with pictures of Mata Rani, Guru Nanak, Jesus, and the gurus that my family followed. Visits to the gurdwara in Woolwich were frequent, (at one of these, for some time, I tried to learn kirtan, although I made little progress, not

having a musical ear), while visits to the mandir were rare. Even today, I feel more comfortable in a gurdwara than a mandir. My family also went to, still go to, deras which seemed to embody an idea of Punjabiyat, especially in a Sufi form, drawing on the bhakti movement. We spoke Punjabi at home, never Hindi. (Both my grandfathers read and wrote Urdu, although I didn't grow up around either of them). Meanwhile, connected to the separation in the colonial period, of language and religion: (Hindi for Hindus, Punjabi for Sikhs and Urdu for Muslims) I briefly attended Saturday classes to learn to read and write Hindi. The music I grew up with, alongside Hindi film songs, included kirtan, bhangra, Punjabi folk and qawwali. I remember watching Hindi films, Punjabi films such as *Nanak Naam Jahaj*, *Ucha Dar Babe Nanak Da*, mythologicals such as Sai Baba, Pralad, Jai Santoshi Ma, Ramayan and Mahabharat, and Pakistani serials such as *Tanhaiyan* and *Dhoop Kinaray*. We sewed Punjabi suits at home - by the age of thirteen I could sew my own suits. We lay down newspapers on the floor, and the whole family would sit down on them to eat. We practiced at home what I later recognised as an adapted north Indian rural folk culture; the *boliyan* that were sung before weddings, rituals such as hoi mata; making what would have been wall paintings on paper with watercolours; sticking them to the wallpaper using flour and water, as well as talk of *jadoo toona* (black magic).

A mixed-up Punjabiyat was the dominant aspect of our home life. Its influence in our family seemed to originate above all, from my grandmother, my mother's mother. I'm interested in unpacking the Punjabiyat that she represented, unpacking her life and perspective, seeing this as representative of larger histories and influences – in order to explore what Punjabiyat might actually consist of behind the nostalgia.

It feels important to write about my grandmother's version of her life, stories, and experiences. Not out of pride, nor a sense that lived histories, in particular those of our ancestors, need to be preserved in some way, commemorated or celebrated for their own sake, but because they are important for understanding our present. I have made little effort to 'verify' my grandmother's interpretation of her life – it doesn't really matter to me what the 'truth' is, I am more interested in what she thought and presented as her past – and what this revealed about her. As Alessandro Portelli writes in his essay, 'What Makes Oral History Different,' 'oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.' (Portelli, 1988, p.67) This is an argument for the need to record and interpret the stories that we are told – to engage with the subjectivity, location, ideology and perhaps supremacies within oral histories as well as within us, as 'receivers' of oral histories.

In this way, my approach differs somewhat from Urvashi Butalia who, in *The Other Side of Silence*, her analysis of women's and children's narratives and testimonies of Partition, makes a case for oral history as an empowering tool for feminist historians:

> Looking at women's narratives and testimonies, and placing them alongside, or indeed against, the official discourses of

> history, has offered feminist historians a new and different way of looking at history. How does 'history' evolve, in narratives and testimonies, when women talk to women?....It is as a feminist, someone to whom the tools of historiography are important, that I approach this work. (Butalia, 1998, pp.21-22).

However, a female, it is argued here, does not simply present a 'female' perspective; she will, to a greater or lesser extent, have internalised patriarchy. And then, there are the intersections – she is not simply a woman – and this can make a feminist framework problematic. She is located in other ways too, in terms of class, caste, sexuality, and this colours both her life and experiences as well as her interpretations of these.

Meanwhile, it is marginal locations that tend to be identified, labelled, analysed, while dominant positionalities and perspectives take on an apparent universality that make them invisible and normalised. Brahmanism can be an example of this. Braj Ranjan Mani articulates the need to centre Brahmanism:

> It is astonishing that Brahminism does not figure in 'serious' debates on inequality, caste, Hinduism, and communalism. As an exploitative ideology and practice, Brahminism has been kept hidden in modern India under a cleverly designed 'cultural' or natural discourse. (Mani, 2005, p.34).

An examination of my grandmother's version of her life might help to unpack ongoing, normalised structures, such as Brahmanical Patriarchy, which can be understood, not simply as the ways in which upper caste women are victims, oppressed by Brahmanical Patriarchy (Chakravarty, 1993) but as a deeper reckoning of the complicity also, of brahmin women in caste and gender structures.

How, it might be asked, can an individual be analysed as representative of an entire caste gender intersection, whether as victim or perpetrator? It is important here to remember that individuals from the margins (and in many ways my grandmother is a marginal figure) have always been held up as representatives of marginal categories and identities. For example, in Butalia's book there is a chapter titled 'Margins' which draws on the narration of just one woman, Maya Rani. From this one account, Butalia draws generalisations and conclusions about 'the' dalit experience of partition. However, such generalisations when drawing conclusions about dominant identities can seem objectionable – another example of how these identities become universal and normalised.

My grandmother was of course an individual - aspects of her life, the stories she told about it, were intertwined with her personality and individual circumstances; for example, the fact that, after ten years in Britain, when she was barely forty years old, she lost her husband in a car accident. However, even this was experienced through the brahmanical structure, contributing to her insecurity; since she was not in India, she didn't have to live out the full extent

of erasure, denial, vulnerability, humiliation that Brahmanism can impose on widows. However a degree of all of these were a part of her life in the years that followed – including there being no question that she would ever marry again; Ambedkar writes about the prohibition on exogamy in preserving the caste system, which is threatened when any partner dies, leaving behind a 'surplus' woman who 'constitute(s) a menace to the Caste if not taken care of, for not finding suitable partners inside their prescribed circle (and left to themselves they cannot find any, for if the matter be not regulated there can only be just enough pairs to go round) very likely they will transgress the boundary, marry outside and import offspring that is foreign to the Caste.' After sati, he writes, 'the second remedy is to enforce widowhood on her for the rest of her life.' (Ambedkar, 1917).

My grandmother was a product of specific circumstances as well as structures, and an exploration and presentation of her life and its trickling impact over the next generations might help to see and articulate historical and continuing Brahmanical patriarchy and the role that Brahmin women perhaps play, in the context of Punjab, in upholding caste and patriarchy.

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My mother's father (*nana*) died three days after my father arrived in London from Ludhiana to marry my mother, two years before I was born. My *nani* was therefore the only grandparent I grew up with; the last surviving member of that generation of my immediate family who made the journey to England as an adult, whose early and middle adult life was rooted in India. She was a powerful, influential presence.

In 2019, aged 85, after battling with cancer for nearly two years, my grandmother passed away. I started writing this piece through her illness, as I faced her impending death; the first time I have faced the death of a family member I had been so close to. This was all the more difficult due to the fact that I had a complicated relationship with my grandmother. She was a strong, outspoken, often even manipulative woman who was also a gifted story-teller - I can't deny the impact that she had on me.

My grandmother brought me up. Along with her grandsons, I was always one of her favourites. (This overt favouritism was one of my grandmother's many troubling traits.) My status as a 'favourite' may have been something to do with being joint eldest grandchild - but my twin sister was never treated in the same way, perhaps because she was slightly darker skinned. Growing up, she was always ignored or even demonised, with baseless suggestions that she was sly or dishonest. This was traumatic for her. Meanwhile, I was given presents, food was cooked for me to take to university – while my sister was given nothing. There was a story, frequently retold, about how, when we were babies, my grandmother and uncles would come to our house every evening to take me, and only me, home for the night. One day, my grandmother would tell me with great pleasure, my mother tricked them, bundling up my sister and passing her on instead. After arriving home and seeing that they had the 'wrong'

twin, my grandmother and uncles 'returned' her and demanded the 'right' one. There is a possibility, since my mother has no recollection of this incident, that the story is another of my grandmother's fictions, but even then, its very existence as a story is disturbing.

My grandmother always told me stories, retelling them so often that they became imprinted in my mind. These stories often turned out to be fictional, even when she claimed that they were true – often serving the purpose of making a point or teaching a lesson. One of these, an anecdote about the 'crazy' man in her village who was too 'educated' and asked too many questions, so local children threw stones at him, was intended to discourage me from 'too much learning.' Another was a story about my grandmother's cousin's wife, who was 'addicted' to reading, like I apparently was. I was excited to hear about her, I didn't know anyone in the extended family, especially female, who loved to read. But this woman's story was not a happy one. According to my grandmother, her 'addiction' to reading magazines made her a terrible wife who never did the housework; the cooking and cleaning; the family's unwashed clothes and dishes piled up, since she was always reading. She neglected her children, so after they moved to Britain her husband apparently had to send them back to his parents in India. Connected somehow to her reading addiction, she started to drink alcohol and become an alcoholic. Eventually her husband left her to marry another woman. According to my grandmother, at that point, his first wife's parents expressed their sympathy for him; that he had tolerated their daughter for so long. And then one day, the woman was found by her son, dead, alone in her flat, days after she had actually died. The moral of the story, as far as my grandmother was concerned, and this seemed to be real reason behind telling me the story, was that a woman should not read too much. I later discovered the extent to which this story was fictionalised by my grandmother, which exonerated her cousin brother of his mistreatment and eventual abandonment of his first wife, in order to marry a younger, lighter-skinned woman. This was just another example of my grandmother identifying with a man rather than a woman.

In their early days in England, my grandfather did most of the cooking, since my grandmother worked all day (my grandfather worked night shifts), and also because she didn't particularly enjoy cooking. (When my mother was nine, her father taught her to cook so she could take over). However, my grandmother always advocated that her sons and grandsons should not do any work in the house. She placed all her expectations, in regard to housework, on her daughters-in-law; my aunt often seemed to me, growing up, to be exploited. For some reason however, my grandmother treated me as a boy; seeing me washing dishes she would run over and try to stop me, insisting on washing them herself, saying 'this is not work for you.' She would cook food for me and watch me eat it, waiting for praise. There was a strange dynamic between my grandmother and I, where I often felt like the male beloved, while she was the devoted, ever-suffering female. Something like those troubling mother and son relationships when the son is brought up to replace a husband who is absent or oppressive or has passed away. I have seen this dynamic play out in some mother and daughter

relationships too, a kind of exceptionalising of a daughter who is perhaps educated, who is strong-willed, outspoken, independent etc. She is respected and indulged, to some extent, in the problematic way that a son often is. Sometimes this is simply because, along with having a strong personality, the daughter also demonstrates love, compassion and care for her mother, more than her father perhaps. She can come to almost play the ideal male in her relationship with her mother. Although I was troubled by and resisted this dynamic with my grandmother, I also wonder if I participated in it, allowed it when I was younger. Sometimes I wonder if an almost male entitlement to live my life as I want, on my terms, partly came from the way my grandmother treated me. However, while on the one hand, my grandmother wanted me to have a job, an income, to be independent, on the other hand the message I always received from her was that my studies, independence, work, were all dispensable; my primary goal in life was to get married.

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Along with others in the family, I felt like a kind of repository for my grandmother's stories about her life. Since my days as a child, when I would sleep with her, she recounted them repeatedly; they became like my own memories. Perhaps it is through my grandmother that I was drawn for many years to trying to understand my family's past. During the five years that I lived in India, whenever my grandmother would visit from England, I would make visits with her; to the house she lived in for nine years in Amar colony, Lajpat Nagar, Delhi or to Radha Soami Beas in Punjab, or to her village in Mandi, near Phagwara. It was like seeing her stories come to life. I was surprised to see how tiny the houses she had lived in, in Mandi and Delhi, were – especially considering the number of people who had lived in them. They had been much larger in my imagination. Visiting her village, (as well as living for two years in a Himachali village) I began to understand some aspects of the lives we had been living in Britain – seeing continuities as well as disjunctions. I remember as a child, there was a large Sobha Singh painting of Guru Nanak in the passageway, greeting you as you entered my grandmother's home. 'She has a special connection to Guru Nanak,' everyone would say of my grandmother. She went to the mandir and to deras, but it was with the gurdwara that my grandmother had a special connection. Until the last months of her illness my grandmother went to the gurdwara in Woolwich almost on a daily basis. When I visited her village, I understood the main place of worship in the village was the gurdwara - along with some smaller shrines, for example for sati mata and Khwaja Khizr. This once tiny sufi shrine is now much larger, since villagers who left to go abroad sent money back to maintain it, perhaps seeing Kwajha Khizr as the reason they went abroad. My grandmother's sister attributed her migration to Canada, via her daughter's marriage, to the *mannat* she had made to Khwaja Khizr.

Mandi, the village that my grandmother lived in until the age of twenty, was near Apra and Phagwara in Punjab. According to her, the village was

predominantly Sikh, mostly *Jatt*. There were other castes; *tarkhan*, *lohar*, *jheer*, *nai*, and it is clear that there were *dalits* too in the village. But these other castes were mostly invisiblised in her stories; mentioned only as those who would come to clean the toilet on the roof, those to whom old clothes were passed (since her father owned a cloth business and she said, her father spoilt her, bringing home new suits for her in the latest fashion and style), those who would come to teach the girls in the house how to sew suits, those who would come to put bangles on my grandmother and her sisters/cousins.

According to my grandmother, while her family would occasionally mix, especially on special occasions, with others in the village – they would never eat at the homes of Muslims and dalits. The former, because they ate animals, and the latter because they worked with animals, or human waste, she said. Such treatment of dalits and Muslims was (and continues to be) common in Punjab. Amrita Pritam writes, in her autobiography 'Raseedi Ticket' of her grandmother's kitchen:

> I used to notice three glass tumblers kept away from all other pots and pans on a shelf in the corner of the kitchen. These were for use only when Father's Muslim friends were offered tea or buttermilk when they came to visit him. After these tumblers had served their purpose they were scrubbed and washed and put right back in their ostracised niche. (Pritam, 1994, p.5).

In *Punjabi Century*, a personal history of Punjab, Prakash Tandon also writes of this attitude, enforced in particular by women, towards Muslims, who according to him, were 'presumably untouchable Hindus who had at one time become Muslim to escape their lot, which they apparently did not manage to do.' (Tandon, 2000, p.5).

> Our women, who objected to Muslims eating off our metal utensils, willingly shared china plates, cups and saucers. These were somehow considered uncontaminable…mother never reached the stage of eating cooked food with Muslims. (Tandon, 2000, pp.75-76).

Tandon goes on to write: 'As a child I could never understand how the Muslims swallowed such insults from us and did not retaliate.' (p.76) I had a similar thought when my grandmother told me that all the Muslims in the village left at the time of partition, when she was around thirteen. Why, I couldn't help thinking, questioning the usual nostalgia according to which everyone once lived harmoniously side by side before 1947, wouldn't they leave? Why would anyone want to live in a place where they are treated as inferior? The same applies of course, to dalits, who were offered no such choice.

It is often asserted that caste in Punjab has not been as central, as oppressive force as in many other states in India, perhaps in part due to the influence and power of Sikhism. But caste hierarchies and oppressions have never been erased

– as those at the receiving end would attest. Perhaps it is Brahmanism in particular that is perceived to be weaker in Punjab.

'The problem is of oppression by landowners and the practice of unfree/bonded labour rather than about the hegemony of the brahmin' writes Jhodka (2001). 'Caste in Punjab can perhaps be understood better in the framework of 'agrarianism', rather than through the more popular notion of Brahmanism.' Meanwhile, 'bahmans' are ridiculed in Punjabi culture; for example if someone is particularly stingy, fussy or fastidious, about purity, jooth, about what is theirs, they are told, in a finger up to Brahmin arrogance, not to behave like a 'bahman.' Tandon, a Khatri, writes: 'The Brahmins were an unprivileged class and exercised little or no influence in the community…there were rarely any affluent Brahmins…there was…mild derision towards the Brahmins.' (Tandon, 2000, pp.73-74).

Despite this context, it was clear from my grandmother's stories and general arrogance that Brahmanism remained, especially in the sense of supremacy; my grandmother's family thought they were superior to everyone else in the village. This sense of supremacy, subtle, less overt perhaps, continued down the generations, in India and abroad. It is there in every Brahmin family. Perhaps when you feel that you are not given your 'due', you draw on your entitlement and sense of supremacy all the more.

The narrative that I often heard from my grandmother, and I never tried to verify this since I am more interested in the very existence of the narrative in the first place, is that her ancestors lived in a village called Lasara. Her grandparents were invited to move to the nearby village of Mandi (both were in Phillaur tehsil) by those already living there, because they wanted Brahmins in the village – although her family didn't play any priestly role, they were shopkeepers.

There were three Brahmin families in the village according to my grandmother. But only her family, she would say with pride, were referred to as 'bade bahman' – (big or high brahmins). She stereotyped other castes, her characterisations reflected feudal supremacy. Lohars and Tarkhans, according to her, were educated and polite. (Most of the Tarkhans in the village, she said, left to go to East Africa, many of them were to end up eventually in Britain). The Jatt villagers were nice, they respected her family a lot, and would come to help in the house she would say, while spouting the usual stereotypes around aggression and violence. They drank and ate meat she said, because they needed to, because they worked on the land. Not drinking alcohol and not eating meat was clearly one of the ways in which her family set itself as separate, established itself as superior to others in the village. Another was the concealment and 'protection' of their women.

My grandmother's family's so called status as 'bade bahman,' was tied up, for them, with their daughters being kept 'pure' and hidden until they could be handed over to their new families, their husbands. Ambedkar has written about the ways in which Brahminism, in particular through the Manusmriti, has been founded on the control of savarna women's mobility, sexuality, reproduction (Ambedkar, 1955). Uma Chakravarti writes of Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India:

> The safeguarding of the caste structure is achieved through the highly restricted movement of women or even through female seclusion. Women are regarded as gateways—literally points of entrance into the caste system. The lower caste male whose sexuality is a threat to upper caste purity has to be institutionally prevented from having sexual access to women of the higher castes so women must be carefully guarded. (Chakravarti, 1993, n.p.).

After a certain age, grandmother would tell me, the women in their house rarely stepped outside; about fourteen girls, daughters of six brothers who lived in two houses, virtually next door to each other – were all kept concealed in the house. According to my grandmother, at one point there was a wedding, of one of the brothers' daughters, every year, neighbours would express surprise; 'Where are all these girls coming from? Where have you been keeping them?'

In this way, until her marriage, my grandmother's entire world – and that of her younger sister and female cousins, was the family home. She seemed to have no resentment that they were kept in the house, she didn't express feeling any desire at that time, to leave, to fly. Instead, she always recounted that time as one of comfort, joy, '*ronak*'. 'We had everything we needed,' she said. The girls all kept themselves occupied, doing housework. The rest of the time, they laughed and sang, told stories and jokes, played games and with their dolls, and prepared the trousseau for their dowries; knitting, sewing, crochet, embroidery. They spent a lot of their free time on the roof, where they would watch the other villagers going about their business, working in the fields for example. I don't know if she exaggerated when she said, 'we would look at all these people walking around and wonder how they managed to walk and work without falling over.' It is predominantly Jatts she talked about, when she talked about the villagers that they would watch, and generally, when she talked about the villagers. I got a sense that this Brahmin family saw themselves as protecting their girls from the other villagers – and for this reason too, my grandmother did not seem to question her virtual imprisonment in the house. Taking on her family's narrative; that they were living in a 'crass' 'uncivilised' context in which they had to separate themselves, remain untouched, she also seemed to believe that it was not safe outside of her home – an attitude that was carried over to Britain, affecting how the family engaged with the new context they found themselves in.

For a few years, before she hit puberty, my grandmother went to school in nearby Apra. She was the first female in the family to attend school. Her father argued with his brothers that she be allowed to study, saying that it was important for her to learn enough to be able to send letters home after marriage, to let the family know that she was okay. The condition for my grandmother going to school was that she go directly there, and return directly home, without stopping anywhere during the journey. One day her father spotted her breaking this rule; she and a few other girls from the village, who she walked to and from

school with, stopped on their way home to dip their feet in water, to cool themselves in the heat. She was almost pulled out of school at that point – but her father changed his mind, knowing how much his daughter loved going to school.

My grandmother learnt Hindi at school; according to Prakash Tandon's memoir, whilst men read and wrote in Urdu, 'literacy among our Hindu women…began with Hindi,' which,

> in the Devnagri script…was confined at the beginning to the Brahmins and to our women… this created some amusing situations…many women could not communicate with their husbands when they were away from each other, as they could only write in Hindi and their husbands only in Urdu or English (Tandon, 2000, p.66).

Although I never heard my grandmother speak in Hindi (she spoke Punjabi), she knew how to read and write basic Hindi. After less than five years of schooling, when she was around fifteen years old, with enough Hindi for *khat pattar* (letter-writing), the men of the family said it was enough, and ordered that she be pulled out of school.

After that, according to my grandmother, she rarely left the house except on special occasions such as weddings and religious functions, and when there was 'trouble' in and around the village, such as 'Jatts' demanding Khalistan, a movement that had been brewing since before independence and partition, she said. For those such as my grandmother and her family, there was always a fear of Khalistan being made - ever since the creation of India and Pakistan on the basis of religion. Every now and then there was an active revival of this demand, above all in the 1980s, especially after the events of 1984. It became clear, when she talked about this context, that my grandmother's family did identify themselves as Hindu. She talked of being sent to live with her relatives on her mother's side in Delhi as a teenager, during one of these periods of 'trouble'. And then, again, when she was 20 years old (around 1955), to stay for two months with her aunt and uncle in Ambala *Shoni*. It was during these two months, while she was in Ambala Shoni, that my grandmother's *rishta* was arranged, to a boy known to her relatives in Ambala.

The grooms that were found for the daughters of the house had to be of the same caste of course. When a daughter of the house was considered ready, word was sent out, to find a boy for her. Marriage was a gamble – according to my grandmother, all her cousin sisters and sister had unhappy marriages – she was the only one who was happy after marriage. The bride and groom were not allowed to see each other before the wedding, and one of my grandmother's proposed rishtas was broken off before the marriage because the boy came to the house on some pretence. He stood outside, trying to catch a glimpse of her. At twenty, my grandmother got married at a relatively older age than her contemporaries.

Amidst these stories that my grandmother always told about herself, I discovered, just weeks before my grandmother passed away, another layer, that complicated the cheerful compliance through which she always presented herself, in terms of the caste and gender structure. It demonstrates the fact that while we create stories about our lives through our conscious mind, there are layers and experiences beneath that are erased or suppressed or forgotten - especially when these don't fit the image we want to create about ourselves. This is part of the process of being moulded into a person who is considered fit, acceptable for society; meanwhile those who reveal, without filters, the subconscious layers, might be considered unfit, or 'crazy.'

In the last couple of months of her life, my grandmother seemed to lose the strong self-control she had all her life, over her mind. While she had shown some signs of dementia in recent years, this came through only in her forgetting and losing things; leaving the gas on, losing her bus pass, forgetting her phone, leaving her key inside, and my grandmother was embarrassed and distressed by these instances of 'carelessness', uncharacteristic of her, of her image of herself. However, for most of her life, my grandmother's memory about her past remained incredibly sharp, as she told and retold the same stories about her life. She was predictable – her strong will determined to convince everyone around her to do what she wanted, what she thought was best for them, through her stories. These stories, her complaints, her orders were like recitations that you could mouth along the words to; it is not just written literature that fixes a certain interpretation or narrative, oral narrative does this too.

In her last few months however, my grandmother lost this tight grasp of her mind; the narrative she had always worn, like a shield of armour, fell to the floor, its broken fragments scattering and revealing how surface the layer had been. It is perhaps a strange thing to say, but in those last months of her life, amidst the pain and stress, many of us in the family also felt a sort of delight, that whenever we went to see her, we had no idea of what she might say.

It was during one of my visits, in the weeks before she passed away, that my grandmother gave me a gift; leading me to question the version of her life I had been trying to write over that year of her illness. Although I had grown up hearing the same stories about her childhood, her marriage, her life, it was the first time that she mentioned the names of boys in her village – Joga, Pala, Ajmer. The first time she talked about them, it was as if she had had relationships with them; as if there had been a real question of marrying them. The fact that they were jatt or lohar, she said, meant that her family would not accept the marriage. The second time that she talked about these boys, a few days later, it seemed that they were crushes – she had admired them from afar but had never spoken to them. But she also talked about asking her friend to write a letter to one of the boys when she was sent to Delhi. Some of these 'memories' were perhaps only expressions of her fantasies of that time. Whatever the truth was, it didn't matter to me; it was the first time that my grandmother had expressed desires from her youth.

Girls and boys liked each other, she said in those last days - it happened in the village. They would see each other at school, on the way to school - the boys

walking together and the girls together, there would be glances, jokes, teasing, and crushes. Joga had a nice name and he was nice looking – all the girls liked him. Unlike other girls in the village, my grandmother and her sisters were not allowed to go to the fields. She would sit on the roof and while doing her homework, she would look at boys in the gullies below; eventually she was stopped from going to school at all. The adults watched over the girls carefully: 'While they were keeping an eye on us,' she said, 'we kept our eyes on the boys.' To prevent the boys and girls from looking at each other, so the girls couldn't jump from their roof to another's, the grown-ups built a brick wall around the rooftop. The suppression of those young desires, in the context of a claustrophobic village, with strict family and caste boundaries, weighed down on her still, even after all these years. '*Pita ji* (Father) isn't listening, is he?' she said at one point, as past and present blurred and she was a young girl once again.

But the adults knew best, she also suggested (demonstrating, as she did throughout her life, the complicity of brahmin women, in upholding caste and gender structures); she was 'saved' from getting spoilt, and the man she ended up marrying was better looking than any of those boys she had liked.

To return again to the narrative she had presented of her life – my Nana, who I was to never meet, had lived for some years, while studying, with his aunt and uncle and male cousins in Ambala. Apparently, everyone was full of praise for him; he studied and he worked, giving tuition, and unlike her own sons, he helped his aunt with the housework. He would even give a hand to his aunt's best friend across the road, and she would share her problems with him. She turned out to be my grandmother's aunt – and when my grandmother came to stay with her as a twenty year old, it occurred to her that the boy would make a good groom for my grandmother.

My grandfather worked by then in Gujarat, part of a small team that travelled from village to village trying to control a locust plague. He had given his mother, who lived in the village Brahmwāl, near Beas, the go-ahead to find a wife for him, telling her that he had only two requirements; that his wife should be beautiful and that she should have studied up to tenth class. My grandmother had only studied up to fifth class. His mother reassured my grandmother's parents that she would handle this little hurdle; by lying; in the letter that she wrote to her son she told him that she had found a girl who fulfilled both his requirements. According to my grandmother, her mother couldn't stay quiet for long; the day after the marriage, when the couple visited her parents' home, she immediately told her new son-in-law that her daughter was not so educated. His response was to shrug and say that he was happy, he didn't really need an educated wife after all; he had little choice perhaps.

After marriage, my grandmother lived for some months in Gujarat where her husband worked. She rarely left the home, finding the surrounding environment too different in its language, landscape, culture, from the Punjabi village she had known until then. They made friends with another Punjabi couple and would go to the cinema together sometimes, the first time she had gone to the cinema. They would visit each other's homes for dinner, and my grandmother had

amusing stories about her early disasters with trying to prepare meals, boiling *aubergines* for example, since she didn't know what to do with them, or mice running away with all the *pakoras* she had made. But otherwise, my grandmother spoke to no one but her husband.

After less than a year, the couple and their baby (my mother) moved to Delhi, when her husband got a new job with the Delhi Milk Scheme. Here, he employed young students; Partition refugees, often without any family. These students were constantly visiting their small home, which was already packed, since my grandfather's parents had also left their village to live with their son, and soon there would also be three children.

My grandmother lived in Delhi for nine years, before she left for London. She came to Britain, to Plumstead, where her brother was already living, in 1965, with her children. Her husband had already spent six months living in the same area, with her brother, working in various factories, under the voucher scheme, through which many came to Britain from the subcontinent, invited to fill the country's post WW2 labour shortage. Years later, when I went with my grandmother to her village, I met many people who had relatives in Plumstead, Woolwich, Charlton, the area that we lived in, in southeast London. As has been well documented, entire villages often moved to certain pockets of Britain. A large percentage of Punjabis in Britain are from the *doaba* region.

Whilst in the beginning, it was her husband's curiosity that took him to England, alone the first time, it was on my grandmother's insistence that the whole family moved there, to make money and give the children an English education. The intention was to return to India; before he left Delhi, my grandfather took five years leave from his job.

When she came to Britain, although she had never before worked outside the home in India, my grandmother insisted on working in factories alongside my grandfather so they could save money, buy their own house, establish themselves quickly in the new country. They alternated shifts; every morning they would cross paths on the street, as he would be returning from his night shift and she would be leaving for a day shift. Even then, my grandmother's fear of the world never left her – as her children slept, all in one room downstairs, she would move the wardrobe and other furniture in front of the door and pace up and down, sleepless, all night, listening to the tick tock of heels down the street, as the pubs closed at 11 and men and women made their way home, as the lodger who lived upstairs, like clockwork, at the same time every day, opened the front door and made his drunken way up. Sometimes, as she listened to him walk along the passage, past her door and up the stairs, he would suddenly seem to stop and her heart would be in her mouth all night. In the morning, when she opened her door, she would see that he had collapsed on the stairs.

Despite working side by side with her husband to build their new life in the UK, in so many ways, my grandmother was the personification of a woman who has internalised, negotiated and perpetuated patriarchy. Except in those last months when she had little control of her mind, I never heard her say her husband's name (my mother continues this 'tradition'). She had a kind of reverence for men, alongside mistrust, as if knowing that you can't depend on a

man, you have to fight your way through the world. Men were seen as enablers; it is through men, by trying to control and influence men, that many women of my grandmother's and mother's generation got things done. This practical need is perhaps what is behind the idea of the strong Punjabi woman who seems to dominate men (as my grandmother did), including the well-loved Heer, who is so often held up as a feminist icon. My grandmother would always push my mother (not her daughters-in-law) to do a better job of controlling my father. 'Tell your father to come home earlier,' my grandmother's mother would say to her when she was young, 'he listens to you, he never listens to me.' My grandmother saw herself as protecting her mother through the 'influence' she had over her father. These are the ways in which women can become distorted products of patriarchy. She was proud of the power she had over her father and her husband. They were both mindful, she says, that they needed to come home on time every day, or she would be waiting and worrying, standing at the door or looking over the roof.

Fear and 'worry' about everyone in the family, in particular those related to her through blood, those she saw as an extension of herself, were my grandmother's defining feature. Until her last months, I was used to my grandmother's constant telephone calls, no matter where I was in the world, asking me where I was, who I was with, asking to speak to whoever I was with, calling me back repeatedly if I said that I was out or travelling, to 'check' that I had arrived home safely. She was equally paranoid about her sons and grandsons. My uncle has shared stories about my grandmother secretly following him to school and back, even when he was in his teens, and she did the same with my male cousins. When my younger uncle was at university, his mother would land up for weeks at a time, taking me as a baby, to stay in his room in halls. My grandmother was brought up to fear the wider context in which she lived, and she tried to instill in her children and grandchildren, a similar fear of the dangerous context that they were now inhabiting in the new country, the desire for a kind of separation, purity, whatever context the family lived in.

There was love in this all-consuming worry, but there were also darker aspects - insecurity, a fear of being left alone, the desire to nurture dependencies and to isolate everyone around her so she remained the main person in everyone's life. My grandmother's worry, fear and insecurity were real, but they were also closely connected to control and manipulation of the family. In her last months, the family speculated that perhaps my grandmother had some kind of narcissistic personality disorder. Despite a scepticism for labels, there was some relief in the consideration that perhaps she was not fully responsible for the negativity and damage she curated.

Their situation – migration, isolation, losing a father, having a difficult mother, being over-protected and extremely sensitive, left my mother and uncles especially vulnerable. It was from such a place that the family found themselves drawn, in 1985, to a UK based *dera* community, where they found a safe space. They often talk about the *guru* they found, as their second father; who was also taken away from them when he was killed in 1987. Some years earlier, my

grandmother had found another guru and dera – Maharaj Charan Singh from Radhasoami, and she received *naam* from him in 1979. After the grief of losing her husband in 1979, she talked about this as saving her.

Mark Juergensmeyer has written about the Radhasoami dera as an increasingly popular movement, particularly for dalit followers, providing 'spiritual nourishment, new expressions of social change and cultural identity' (Juergensmeyer, 1982, p.209) while drawing on the Sant and bhakti tradition, connecting, for example, to Guru Nanak and Sant Ravi Das. One of the aspects of deras, that drew my family, was perhaps that it embodied the idea of Punjabiyat - drawing from various religious frameworks, immersed in Punjabi language, literature, culture, music. One that reflected something of their life and practice. Most of all, I remember the environment of ecstasy that was created when Sufi qawwalis were sung, with followers clapping along, dancing. It was an escape and release from the hard lives of the Punjabi immigrants, who initially came because of a problem that they faced in their lives: illness, the lack of a child, estrangement in the family, but stayed as their faith grew, as the space, the community, their faith made their lives easier and more beautiful. Being part of a community is especially important for immigrants. More importantly, deras can offer a more equal space than other religious spaces, bringing together those of different castes and religions (mostly Sikh and Hindu); it is rare for anyone to know or ask anyone's caste – the followers are supposed to adopt a common surname. Inter-caste and interreligious marriages are common. Perhaps this influenced my family – they didn't blink an eyelid to my inter-religious and inter-caste marriage.

My grandmother also, raised no objections to my marriage months before she passed away (her primary response perhaps being one of relief that I was getting married at all). Until then she had often declared that I should marry a Brahmin or a Khatri - preferably Hindu. When they first came to Britain from India, my grandmother once told me, the 'lower castes' changed their surnames, hid their caste, and through 'deception' were getting their children married to upper castes in Britain. This was why, she said, the upper castes appealed to the British government to change the UK laws, to allow arranged marriages with spouses from the subcontinent; so you could make enquiries about where the bride or groom came from, so you knew the truth of their family and community before they were sent over to Britain for marriage. The primary intention was to maintain marriage within caste, invoking Ambedkar's well-known statement: 'as long as caste in India does exist, Hindus will hardly intermarry or have any social intercourse with outsiders; and if Hindus migrate to other regions on earth, Indian caste would become a world problem' (Ambedkar, 1917, pp.3-22). If there is any truth in my grandmother's narrative (and its existence is revealing either way) it is the basis on which my parents married; my father was sent over to Britain from Ludhiana to marry my mother after his caste, family background had been investigated. Gurus always come from Brahmin and Khatri castes, she said to me in her last months. Vegetarianism was always a source of superiority for my grandmother, along with a concern with jooth (impurity doesn't quite capture the meaning of this word); these were centred in the gurdwara and the

deras she went to – one of the ways in which my grandmother's Brahmanism was nurtured in these spaces. Supremacies can be harboured, be allowed to flourish in spaces that bring people together in the name of peace and love and equality.

For equality, there needs to be a direct confrontation of power and privilege; this was an aspect of the bhakti tradition, Braj Ranjan Mani argues. Poet-Saints such as Ravidas, Kabir and Nanak were outspoken in their critiques and rejection of Brahmanism:

> The God of people's sant-poets was not the transcendental brahmanic God; their God had an existence within their selves in the form of individual and social conscience…this God was revered not for maintaining the hierarchical order but to change it all by gracing everyone who leads a virtuous life, irrespective of caste and status. (Mani, 2005, p.141).

However, this has not always been the practice of the religions and movements that have built on this legacy. Supremacies, on the basis of caste, race and religion, are not necessarily left behind when you become part of inter-caste, inter-racial, inter-religious organisations, or when you go abroad. Inequalities often remain intact, even in spaces that might be more equalising than others. I remember an incident when a female Hindu follower and a Muslim male follower decided to get married, there was great resistance amongst the *sangat*. Islamophobia, casteism, anti-blackness continue to thrive amongst the followers, as they do in so many South Asian spaces. They remained vehement in my grandmother right up until the end, despite being part of this particular dera community for 33 years of her life, and part of the Radha Soami dera for 40 years. In fact, in the last years of her life, her prejudices and supremacies seemed to be more overt than ever.

As an elderly and, in her final years, an extremely ill woman, a widow, a non-English speaking, barely educated, not wealthy immigrant in Britain, my grandmother embodied vulnerability and insecurity, but also a deep-rooted sense of superiority that seemed caste-based, as well as connected to some pride that she had spent most of her life living in England. When people feel insecure and vulnerable, they perhaps hold all the more tightly onto their supremacies, to the sense of worth they offer. She was out rightly abusive, verbally and physically, to the women, more recent immigrants from Punjab and Nepal, who were employed to care for her, often refusing to pay them their due, treating them with the disrespect, entitlement, lack of boundaries which are pervasive in India's casteist 'servant culture.' And there was her entrenched anti-blackness; she was incredibly rude and racist towards the children my aunt fostered. In her final months, she refused to let black women, sent by the council to take care of her personal needs, touch her; her prejudice was open and ugly.

It's not always easy to articulate or see the practices of our families and communities, especially when they are reflected and normalised in the wider culture and context. Or to do this without adopting another superior external

gaze – a white gaze for example, as many British Asians who have written critically about their families, have adopted. It isn't easy to articulate or share details about family members that you love, perhaps showing them in a negative light.

Of course my own lived experience and relationship to my grandmother, as well as my location, all flavour my interpretation. And I wonder if there is something exploitative about sharing all this about my grandmother. She is no longer alive to know about it, and while she was alive, since she didn't read English, she would never have read or even come across my words; Butalia (1998) writes about this lack of objectivity and the 'equation of power that underlines the collection of oral testimonies.' (p. 21). Although my grandmother held a lot of power over me and the family, the truth in the larger world, is that I have far more power than her. Is writing about her an exercise of this power?

Meanwhile, although it is uncomfortable, it still remains easier to articulate my grandmother's overt prejudices, through a kind of exceptionalising than it is to see, own and name the rest of the family's (and my own) more subtle expressions. Kancha Illiah writes:

> Brahmins regard the…manipulation and exploitation as systemic and not a part of their own individual consciousness. But the reality is that every 'upper caste' person takes part in that exploitation and manipulation and contributes towards the creation and perpetuation of such cultures in the Indian context. (Illiah, 1996, p.72).

All of us who are products of supremacies can never step completely outside of them. We should interrogate them as much as possible, but even then, they continue to play out in subtle and not so subtle ways that include inherited advantages, privileges, entitlement, an assumption that you represent a universal perspective, articulated through notions such as Indianness or Punjabiyat.

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Brahmanism in the Punjabi context is rarely written or talked about. The assumption is that the flourishing of Sikhism in the state, as well as other factors, erased or minimised the impact of Brahmanism in Punjab, an assumption echoed in a great deal of academic work on Punjab (Jodhka, 2001; Ram, 2004). They are seen as 'unprivileged.' (Tandon, 2000). Brahmins have not, perhaps, been the wealthiest in the state, in particular, they have not been the primary landowners, connected to British laws such as the 1901 Punjab Land Alienation Act. However, this perception that they are 'unprivileged' might be a result of internalising what Brahmins are expected or 'supposed' to be – especially amongst Brahmins themselves.

While Brahmins may have less power in Punjab than in other parts of India, the belief that there has been a loosening of Brahmin supremacy in the state, is relative. As a part of India, the state of Punjab does not exist in isolation, it

doesn't determine itself, and it is not as powerful as the central government (which is Hindu and upper caste) or in international power structures. The ways in which the state has been exploited over the years, under the British and then by both the central Indian government and internationally, is undeniable. This has impacted the land, the air, the water – leading the state to being labelled the cancer capital of the country. From the forests that have been destroyed over the centuries, including under the British – erasing Adivasi communities in the area, to the Green Revolution, to ongoing national and international sanctions and policies regarding fertilisers, pesticides and farming practices as well as abusive and exploitative national/international industries operating in the state – the state has been exploited. And of course, there are the attacks against Sikhs in the state, which peaked in the 1980's. There are disproportionate numbers of Hindu upper castes in the bureaucracy, police, army – and there is an arrogance, nepotism and violence (entrenched in supremacy) with which they command these roles. In this way, Hindu upper castes in Punjab, as in the rest of India, are the community who fear the police the least. There is the impact of national media, but state media is also often owned by Hindu upper castes. I have witnessed the role that this media has played in supporting (even creating, by covering attention-seeking protests and campaigns – for many years, long before the present government came to power) the growth of political groups of disgruntled Brahmin men, (such as the Parshuram Sena), who struggle to reconcile their engrained entitlement and supremacy with the growing assertion and demands for equality of other castes, and in some cases with the struggle, unemployment, perhaps even poverty of their lives.

The vulnerability of the state in the national Hindu Brahmanical context has come to the fore again recently with the 2020 agrarian laws introduced by the BJP government, seeking to privatise farming, and impacting Punjab above all. Punjab has come together in an inspiring protest, to resist this exploitation by the Brahmanical centre state. Once again however, this unity, while powerful and important, might also be seen as fragile, prioritising the interests of regional elites. It is more useful therefore, to think of layers of resistance rather than binaries.

A more complex picture of what Punjabiyat represents, rather than a nostalgic, idealised version must engage more overtly with supremacies. Any unity and harmony in which power and supremacies are not directly confronted and challenged is superficial; cracks will soon appear. An idea of Punjabiyat that regrets the creation of Pakistan (perhaps blaming Jinnah as for example Gurinder Chadha's recent film *Viceroy's House* and documentary *India's Partition: The Forgotten Story*, suggesting that everyone lived happily and peacefully side by side), which focusses only on commonalities in language and culture across the borders of East and West Punjab and Punjab in the diaspora, without facing the fact that Muslims were not (and still are not) treated as equals in a dominantly Hindu India, is only fuzzy nostalgia. A Punjabiyat that doesn't look at the ways in which Muslim or Dalits or women or LGBTQ are treated or perceived – the fact that Adivasis are nowhere in the conception of Punjabiyat, the fact that casteist slurs are often at the heart of Punjabi *boliyan*, the fact that

only a certain expression of being Muslim or Dalit or Sikh, for example what is perceived to be a harmless, non-assertive, non-violent Sufi form, can find a place in this idea of Punjabiyat, reveals only conditional acceptance that can end up being more about maintaining the status quo. Mani writes:

> The world over the dominant classes have invoked harmony without snapping their ties with the oppressive structures of class, caste, and gender hierarchies. Hollow, hypocritical advocacy of justice becomes necessary for power elites…those who aspire to build a more humane, more inclusive society have perforce to take off the elitist mask of generosity and solidarity in the name of seamless cultural unity or nationalism. (Mani, 2005, p.17).

It is of course true that a great deal connects Punjabis everywhere, culturally, linguistically etc. But what is highlighted as common, or universal, is usually defined from a place of power. And it is not the commonalities that divide and separate people in the first place. Nor the differences. It is the supremacies.

[Acknowledgement: The author would like to acknowledge the support of a Leverhulme ECR Fellowship for preparing and writing this paper]

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