A community in passing?
The Case of Sikhs in Lisbon

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Introduction

The Sikh community in Lisbon, although small in population figures, presents an opportunity to reflect on the existence of migrant groups that may be almost negligible in statistical terms (at its peak in 2010 it had a maximum of 10,000 people) but that make up, cumulatively, what can be conceptualised as a context of ‘super-diversity’ (Vertovec 2007). This can be summarised as the existence of various ‘new’ migrant groups in post-imperial cities such as London – or, in this case, Lisbon – which have entered and settled after the previous postcolonial migration channels and arrangements. In Lisbon, particularly since the 1990s, increasing diversity can be illustrated by the migration of Ukrainians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis or Moldavians, among others, who have migrated in significant part as low-skilled labour (even if education levels are relatively high, as is true with Ukrainians) and added a layer to the previous economic and political migration flows from Portuguese-speaking African countries (PALOPs) and Brazil (Pires et al. 2010; Pereira 2013). Lately, these historical trends have been complicated with significant return migration, re-migration and Portuguese emigration (Fernandes and Castro 2013; Kvamme 2012).

Vertovec (2007) points out that what is different within a super-diversity context is that the ethnic and historical elements are no longer the only variables to make sense of urban diversity. Instead, the ‘conditions and processes affecting immigrants in contemporary society’ (idem: 1050) are multidimensional and must be thought of as the complex interplay between factors such as country of origin, migration channel, legal status, migrants’ human capital and education, access to employment, locality, transnationalism and responses by local authorities, service providers and local residents.

This paper attempts to capture the transversality of the above mentioned factors within the heterogeneity of a distinct community. First, we will begin by contextualising the Sikh community as part of new migration fluxes and ask to what extent super-diversity creates an easier urban and social environment to settle into or if instead new migrant groups, because they are small and outside more established arrangements, are simply more isolated; that is, whether Sikhs are now, in Lisbon in 2014, as Sikhs were in Southhall in the 1960s (Singh and Tatla 2006; Nesbitt 2011). Second, we will explore the role that Portugal plays in the overall migration project of Sikhs, who often have aspirations to re-migrate after acquiring citizenship to other more ‘traditional’ destinations that comprise the Sikh global ‘ethnoscape’. Third, we will reflect on the interplay between labour and residence as the two key dimensions of insertion (Musterd and de Vos 2007; Özüekren and van Kempen 2002) crosscut by

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1 This article is based on research carried out within the project ‘Socio-spatial integration of Lisbon’s religious minorities: residential patterns, choice and neighbourhood dynamics’, developed at the Centro de Estudos Geográficos, University of Lisbon and funded by the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, Grant reference PTCD/CS-GEO/113680/2009.
other factors such as legal status and education. We flesh out the dynamics of clustering and dispersal as seen by individual trajectories, pointing to the specificities of locality (Schiller and Çaglar 2009) – in this case with reference to the neighbourhoods of Olival Basto and Vale do Forno in Odivelas in Lisbon. Fourth, we will show how the Sikh Gurdwara in Lisbon is at the centre of complex intra-community arrangements regarding processes of residential and labour market incorporation. Interaction at the Gurdwara enables a system of insertion between newly-arrived migrants and employers who provide accommodation and employment, in exchange for a *de facto* form of cheap labour. Fifth, we examine how this state of affairs is negotiated via cultural and religious practices, either pertaining to the realm of the normative or to boundary-breaking experimental or transgressive practices. We finish with some concluding remarks.

**The Sikh community in Lisbon**

Tracing the Sikh community in the official statistics of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (LMA) is not a straightforward exercise not only because religious affiliation is an optional category\(^2\) in the census resulting in no-response, but there is no unique Sikh category. In the religion data available, Sikhs are included in the rather broad ‘Other–Non-Christian’ category, which has a national total of 28,596 individuals and a Lisbon Metropolitan Area (from here onwards LMA) total of 14,469. As can be observed in Map 1, its distribution at the Parish Council level shows an incidence in areas commonly associated with the presence of Indians, such as Santo António dos Cavaleiros and Portela in the municipality of Loures to the northeast of the city, Odivelas and Pontinha (municipality of Odivelas), Brandoa (Amadora), or Marvila and a cluster of parish councils around Socorro in Lisbon, the city’s ‘reception area’ for many poor immigrants (Fonseca et al 2012: 19; Fonseca and McGarrigle 2013: 23), including Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims, Indian Hindus and Chinese migrants (e.g. Pires *et al*. 2010; Lourenço and Cachado 2012; Mapril 2011; McGarrigle 2014).

The cross-tabulation between residence (at the Parish Council level) and country of origin (India) shows a national total of 8,129 surveyed individuals whose country of birth is India, 6,160 of whom live in the LMA. Spatial patterns similar to ‘Other non-Christians’ as defined by the census can be observed. However, this category also includes the older individuals of the Luso-Indian and Luso-Mozambican populations, who are part of Portugal’s traditional migration groups, so the figures may be slightly inflated. This leads us to consider the third and final cross-tabulation, between residence and nationality. Here we have a national total of 3,019 Indian nationals, with the LMA at 2,091. The incidence by Parish Councils commonly

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\(^2\) This is a recurrent research difficulty in many European countries (e.g. Ilkjaer [2011, p. 39] for the case of Denmark; Moliner [2011, p. 164] for France).
associated with Indian people repeats itself; but it still fails to distinguish between Hindu and Sikh Indian nationals. Furthermore, relying on researcher’s experience, it can be safely assumed that these figures underestimate both populations, whether due to being undocumented or simply unaccounted for.

Map 1. Other Non-Christians per 1000 inhabitants, population aged over 15, LMA, 2011.

Source: INE, 2011 Census.
Turning to the existing literature, Myrvold (2012; citing Bastos 2010 and Thandi 2012) offers ‘scholarly guesstimates’ placing total figures between 3,000 and 7,000. The latter figure repeats itself in several references, such as a SikhWiki webpage on Portugal from 2008.\(^3\) Our own interviewees’ impressions of population totals range from 5,000 to 10,000. However, at present these are overestimates, as many families, and particularly men, have moved to the UK and other EU countries since 2011 in search for work and higher salaries given Portugal’s persistent economic crisis. In many such cases, male re-migrants send money back to their wives and children who remain in Portugal. Regular visits by low-cost airlines have formed, borrowing Charsley et al.’s (2012: 873) phrase, ‘low-end astronaut families’. Interviews with Sikh community leaders already take this shift into account, and current estimates are around 3,500-4,000 (Interview 1, Jul 2012). In short, we arrive at a corrected estimate of between

3,000-4,500 Sikhs in the LMA – which is higher than the Census count, yet lower than some of previous estimates.

Sikh migration to Lisbon started during the 1990s and the first migrants settled in Mouraria, in the historical centre of the city, often in cheap and low-standard rented rooms. Later, many Sikhs moved to the peripheral areas of Olival Basto and Vale do Forno in the northern municipality of Odivelas. Vale do Forno could be described as an urban ‘blind spot’ that lies between the municipal boundaries of Lisbon and Odivelas in a non-descript area quite typical of rural land that saw the building of informal settlements or illegal expansions during the 1970’s (Ascensão 2013). Successive regularizations mean that, at present, Vale do Forno is classified as an Urban Area of Illegal Genesis (AUGI) and is awaiting a municipality-led regeneration project (Câmara Municipal de Odivelas 2012). The area was where the first Gurdwara in Lisbon was set up, in 1996, and sometimes it is still regarded as the original area of Sikh ethnic clustering: ‘Sikhs are all down there, in Vale do Forno.’ (Interview 42, project S-sI).

Residential choice was based primarily on the low price of accommodation. Punjabi Sikhs in the late 1990s and early 2000s followed the previous groups of Ukrainian and Moldavian migrants to the area and to nearby Serra da Luz. The three cases are arguably examples of ‘group intelligence’ working to find the cheapest possible housing in the LMA, while still being accessible by public transport for the daily commute. From 2004 onwards, the area became closer to the transport system, when the Senhor Roubado metro station, part of the yellow line extension to Odivelas, opened. Olival Basto near the second Gurdwara substituted Vale de Forno as the preferred residential area over the last five years. However, as we will discuss later the migration project of Sikhs in Lisbon seems to revolve, to a large extent, around the desire to re-migrate to the UK and the US and, in a way, individually regroup with the Sikh global community and ‘ethnoscape’ (Pal Sian 2013) which connects cities like London, Vancouver or Singapore with the Punjab.

Methods

To have a better understanding how this broad description works out in reality, there was a need for a more qualitative approach. This option is aligned with, and responds to, calls for qualitative research on the experience of inequalities in the socio-spatial insertion of immigrants in Southern European cities in a situation of austerity (Kandylis et al. 2012: 284, see also Arbaci and Malheiros 2010; and Peck 2012 on ‘austerity urbanism’). During the first stage, ethnographic fieldwork was open-ended and an intermittent presence at the Gurdwara was set out with a view to make initial contacts with community and religious leaders and select interviewees. Then, we increasingly

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4 Monthly rents were approximately €100-120 at current prices
focused on the themes emerging from ‘emic’ accounts, i.e. recurring in interviews. To a large extent, these themes structure the current paper.

We draw on 22 interviews, as well as field notes and numerous informal conversations carried out between June 2013 and May 2014. The interviewees were carefully selected to provide diversified accounts of the community, albeit it was difficult to achieve gender balance. Concerning recruitment, we relied on a snowball method at the Gurdwara and used our own serendipitous encounters across the Lisbon Metropolitan Area to get at residential dispersal in outside municipalities such as Almada (the area of Costa da Caparica), Oeiras (Oeiras and Paço de Arcos) and Sintra (Portela). The latter cases involved accommodation near the workplace, mostly in Indian restaurants and ‘cornershops’, often provided by employers concurrent with a very isolated social life.

We were able to encompass different perspectives, reflecting the caste structure in the country of origin, from working class individuals, and community leaders, to those with upper class family histories in Punjab. Finally, the information gathered from interviews and informal conversations was triangulated with other qualitative data from the project ‘Socio-spatial integration of Lisbon’s religious minorities’ (S-sI) in which this study is comprised (McGarrigle 2014).

Migration, Re-migration and Sikh ethnoscapes

Entrance, permanence and security in the EU space

The motivating drive for many migrants coming to Portugal over the last decade has been to access the EU space in conditions of relative permanence and security. In other words, with a smaller risk of expulsion or forced repatriation and a higher probability of entering the labour market without official documents than in other Northern European countries or, indeed, in Southern European countries such as Italy or Greece. Throughout Sikh gathering places in various European cities, it is common knowledge that ‘in Portugal immigration is open’ (Interview 14) or that it is ‘easy to get papers’ (Interview 10). Movement to Lisbon has thus become a recognised route for Punjabi migrants who arrive with a tourist visa in Athens, Rome, Paris or Munich and encounter difficulties finding a job.

Indeed, on paper Portuguese integration policies are well designed and accommodative. The country has impressive comparative scores on policies regarding labour market mobility, family reunion, anti-discrimination and, crucially, access to nationality (Migration Policy Group 2011: 158-163). Word gets around for poor

5 Some topics could only be broached off the record, namely those related to income well below the minimum wage, arranged marriages and caste relations. With due guarantee of strict anonymity, respondents were keen to expand on these issues, which shape their everyday life. We thus have no ethical doubts in using such information. However, we do it sparingly and only when it is essential to the argument at hand.
migrants too. On the other hand, work opportunities are likely to take the form of menial jobs with very low salaries. This situation has further deteriorated since 2011 given the austerity policies implemented as part of the Structural Adjustment Program signed between the Portuguese Republic and the International Monetary Fund, the European Union Commission and the European Central Bank. Within this context, monthly salaries ranging from €200 to €500 (the latter just above the national minimum wage of €485) have become common among many individuals in the Sikh community. Low wage levels such as these leave little room for economic stability and serve to accentuate the initial desire to migrate to a country with better economic opportunities, in particular to the US and the UK, the two magnets of Sikh migration.

**Global circulation before Portugal**

Migration to Portugal via other countries is a pattern which Punjabi Sikhs share with other nationalities, for instance Bangladeshi migrants (Mapril 2011: 291). The three following empirical vignettes are illustrative of different trajectories within this common pattern, and they allow us to discuss how the migration project entails a desire to re-migrate to join the Sikh global community (Pal Sian 2013). They also, to a certain extent, introduce class as a differentiating factor among migrants.

The first case is of a young male from a village near Karputhala, Punjab, whose family has an agricultural background. He first migrated to Australia to attend an undergraduate university course on agricultural studies near Melbourne. After a year, he returned to India. Three years ago, he travelled to Portugal on a tourist visa to meet a friend of the family, and has remained since. At first he worked in an Indian shop for a monthly salary of €400 and for the past year he has worked as a street sweeper for a sub-contracted company who works for the municipality of Almada, south of the River Tagus, for €650. In the meantime, the family friend who first helped him has moved on to England (from Interview 8).

The second case is of an adult male from Amritsar, the only son of a pilot trainer in the Indian Air Force (a Class One Officer), thus a member of the upper middle class in India. He studied at the Punjab Public School, one of the top schools in the country, and took computer science at Chandigarh University, before deciding to join an uncle who lived Erfurt, in the former East Germany. He worked as a cook and dishwasher for one of his uncle’s restaurants until they had a disagreement after which he left without any money. After staying for seven months in a UN-sponsored migrant shelter, he joined a younger uncle in Hamburg. Upon hearing that he had legally entered into Schengen and was eligible for residency in Portugal, he moved in 2001. With €1,500 he started up a small business re-selling mobile phone equipment with an Indo-Mozambican partner of Gujarati origin and has developed it since into a prosperous company with a pending

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6 Especially the information on the three rounds of regularization of undocumented migrants which took place in 1993, 1996 and 2001 (Mapril 2011: 291), as well as a stricter one in 2011.
contract of €1m with a major mobile phone distributor. In the coming years, he may extend his business to the US, where his father knows a prominent businessman who owns over 6,000 petrol stations and is a member of OPEC. He is divorced from a Portuguese woman and they have a young daughter (from Interview 10).

The third case is of a young male who was born in Bombay but brought up in Eldoret, Kenya after his family migrated there from Khaboor Sahib, Punjab when he was 7-years-old. When his family moved to California after 20 years in Kenya, he decided to stay and finish a BSc in automotive technology. He is a certified automobile technician, but has been unable to find a job in the auto industry in Lisbon, even though the VW Autoeuropa car plant is a major employer in the municipality of Palmela. He has worked in ‘odd jobs’ in various Indian shops. He plans to ‘succeed’ before eventually joining his family in the US (from Interview 22).

All the cases above include a third country in the migration trajectory and a future possibility of movement to another country. These individuals are also among those we interviewed with higher education levels, yet this is only reflected in one of the individual’s working and economic situation. The channels of insertion into the labour market are overwhelmingly into low wage employment, and the impediments to social mobility become one of the main motivations to re-migrate to cities with better job opportunities. This has been especially acute in the past three years, often expressed in sentences such as ‘Portugal now is very weak, there’s no money’ (field notes). In addition, the two first cases allow us to see the way ‘migration incorporation’ (Schiller and Çaglar 2009) results to some extent from the class structure in the country of origin. Opportunities vary according to the power balance in the relationships individuals are able to forge with older migrants, in the two cases as ‘employee’ or ‘business partner’ according to their previous background and education. However, transposing middle class advantages into the host society can be very hard to achieve, as the third case illustrates, thus, lower middle class individuals typically work below their education potential.

A different weight upon migration and early settlement are the specific debts people incurred at the start of their migration journey. A young male interviewee confided how his father, a bank cashier, had been able to loan him €20,000 to pay an ‘agent’ in Jalandhar to get him to Europe. He has paid back this money over the last five years, but he has an ongoing responsibility for the financial needs of his family in Punjab:

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7 This is a similar situation to Indian immigrants in Athens, who are at the bottom of occupational and housing hierarchies (Kandylis et al., p. 274), or Punjabi illegal migrants in France (Moliner 2011, p. 173).
8 Mapril (2011, p. 291) mentions €6000 to acquire Schengen visas in informal markets in Bangladesh, with reference to the period 2003-2008. This case is from 2009.
'I’ve worked here in restaurants since I was 17, and I’ve always sent money back home. (...) For example, for my sister’s wedding, I sent money. When my brother came here, I bought his ticket. That’s the way we are as a family.’ (Interview 15).

**Permanence security and reception in Portugal**

Notwithstanding personal industry and tenacity, migration and re-migration projects remain fundamentally rooted in legal status within the European Union. The above quoted interviewee was learning Portuguese at a migrant association in order to try to pass the language tests necessary for his nationality application. Employment is one of the key elements in these applications; housing status is another, and it can become intertwined with migrants’ legal statuses, to the point of being the centrepiece of clever strategies of high-income migrants to secure residency. This is a pre-2008 story:

‘I wanted to buy a house but I didn’t have the money [for the down payment]. But at the bank they said, “G., not a worry, we’ll give you 100% credit.” The day I bought it I took the keys home and lay them on the table. I told [my girlfriend]: “Here, the Portuguese government just gave me a 25-year visa”. The mortgage was to be paid in that time span, you see?’ (Interview 10)

During the decade leading up to 2008, Southern European economies had unprecedented access to credit, with a particular emphasis on private debt for home ownership. The excerpt gives us a glimpse of the sophisticated strategies of migrants in using commercial banks’ lax policies of access to credit at the time, a sort of macro-level neoliberal zenith, to their advantage. In this case, home ownership was used as an unspoken safeguard against having visa extensions or, indeed, access to nationality, rejected. If Schiller and Çaglar (2009) argue that migration has become part and parcel of localised processes of ‘neoliberal rescaling as a historically embedded and context sensitive process’ (idem, p. 196), here we see ordinary high-income migrants play it to their advantage. This is of course possible because of class identity and business know-how, but these are precisely the qualities that migrant communities’ such as the Sikh community in Lisbon value in their leaders and businessmen, according to the ‘boss’ paradigm (Mapril 2011).

In any case, high-income strategies do not apply to the majority of Sikhs in Lisbon. The first case study on the Sikh community, commissioned by the Portuguese government agency for immigration ACIME/ACIDI/ACM (Correia and Bastos 2006: 179-187), showed a nascent community at an early stage in its process of incorporation into Portugal. At this time, typically unqualified jobs were clustered in construction and cleaning. In under a decade, however, this situation has changed dramatically and the majority of available employment opportunities at present are in mobile phone shops, restaurants and other small businesses owned by the richer members of the
community, Gujarati Indians or Pakistani Muslims. The following trajectory illustrates this well:

G. is a 37 year-old male from Jalandhar, Punjab. His family worked in agriculture and had a dairy shop. He did a BSc in Electronics, after which he migrated to Dubai, where an uncle of his, a construction foreman, already lived. He worked in the construction industry as a mason assistant and a storekeeper and, later, as a driver for a hotel. He lived there between 1994 and 2000. In 1998, he went to India expressly to marry. Afterwards, he returned to India and worked in a tractor (John Deere) and motorcycle (Suzuki) dealerships. In 2005, he travelled to the Netherlands and Spain (Barcelona), from where he continued to Portugal, where he had a distant relative that gave him his first job in a shop. He first lived and worked in the central area of Mouraria, then in Ajuda, later in peripheral Cacém and now in Odivelas. He has a €700 monthly salary and is completing his truck driving license – his plans are to move to the US or Canada (‘where there are many Indians from Punjab, and they are well paid’), either to work as a truck or a cab driver. His wife and two children (aged 14 and 12) remain in Jalandhar (from Interview 14).

Apart from low income, the most common complaint regarding insertion in Lisbon is the misguided ‘turban-taliban’ association. A few interviews relayed stories of Sikhs being mistaken for radical Muslims on the streets. The insult, however, can be discursively turned against itself and some of our interviewees see it as emblematic of two things: the xenophobic character of a part of the Portuguese population, the ‘stupid people’; and specific ignorance in not being able to distinguish very different minorities, which is noted as reprisal. While the presence of Sikhs in the public sphere has had a longer history and acceptance in the US and the UK, we still see a specific backlash against the turban after 9/11 in these countries (e. g. Afridi 2013; Singh 2013), and Portugal was no exception:

‘I wore a turban until I was 12. Because that’s when the thing in America [9/11] happened, and because of Bin Laden when I got to school I would be mocked, ‘There comes Bin Laden’. I ended up in fights twice. It drove me so mad...
– So you stopped using the turban in Portugal because of Bin Laden?
Yes.’ (Interview 4)

A different interviewee related the problems arising from having passport photos with turban and facial hair, which is legally forbidden. The issue led the leaders of the Gurdwara to petition the authorities on the grounds of religious freedom - as the British Sikh community did in 1959 (Pal Sian 2013: 40) – still, it remains unresolved in Portugal. This request also focused on the use of the kirpan on the street. Personal identity is still strongly associated with such religious precepts:
‘When I was in India I wore a turban and very long [facial] hair. Here it was more difficult, I cut my hair because of work, first in construction then in a restaurant, where long hair may fall. So at work it was better to cut it. (...) Sometimes I wonder about wearing the turban and beard again, to have the face of a Sikh again.’ (Interview 3)

**Sikh ethnoscapes, identity reinforced**

Beyond unshorn hair and the turban, the identity construction of the Sikh community in Lisbon revolves around a great deal around the Hindu/Sikh divide in India, and particularly around the 1984 Genocide events as structuring Sikh identity in the diaspora. Martyrdom and martial qualities were persistently introduced when people digressed on Sikh history and cultural traits. Moreover, for instance, on 27 November 2013, at the Lisbon Gurdwara there was a small stand asking for donations and signatures for the United Nations ‘Petition 1503’ on the Sikh Genocide, which is a global rally for 1 million signatures in support of bringing those responsible to justice and to ask for reparations. Furthermore, interviewees mentioned how the Indian embassy in Lisbon replicates the difficult relationship between the Indian state and Sikhs at home. They spoke of a continuation of institutional discrimination abroad, for instance delaying visas for as long as 13 months (Interview 14) when Hindus have them within weeks; or asking the police forces back in India to conduct background checks in order to provide other certifications necessary to authorise a passport photo with a beard and turban (idem).

Sikhs in Lisbon take solace in being an integral part of the global Sikh diaspora, through the fact they are transnationally connected. The idea of a Sikh ethnoscape, as developed by Pal Sian (2013) drawing on Appadurai’s (1990, 2011) concept, applies here. One example is the summoning of different people and resources for a small but truly transnational event in October 2013. The Siri Singh Sahib Remembrance Day, and weekend, at the Lisbon Gurdwara was broadcast live on the UK’s Sikh TV Channel all weekend; musicians from India were brought in to sing all night (their cachets were covered with donations); and important members of the Sikh community in Leicester and Manchester were flown in for the religious service. This was a transnational network in action, and it was made clear for the audience the efforts put in place to produce an event that sought to make Sikhs residing in Portugal less isolated. The final sermon on Sunday ended with the note: ‘You are very lucky for all these people coming from Germany and England and India to join you here in Portugal, they are with you’ (field notes, translation by an English Sikh).
So while everyday diaspora is sustained through a de-territorialized space of communication – online communications, cheap telephone services (Vertovec 2004) and so on – there is also a conscious effort to unify the dispersed points of a global geography through events that gather people together in particular physical locations. This is a proto-political moment of constructing a global community, which is operationalised foremost by those who have the means to travel to the dispersed localities (community leaders, religious figures, academics, musicians) and who in turn accrue power within the network and in their own dispersed location.

**Residence and labour**

**Compatriot network or exploitation?**

To a degree, those who are at the top of transnational networks are also at the top of localised social structures – in this case seen through the specific processes of insertion into the labour and housing markets. Labour relations within the community can be largely characterized as instituting precarity as a business model. The following is a summarized description:
‘You get a shop, spend four or five thousand euros setting it up, but then you sell [working] contracts to whomever is undocumented and needs it [for the residency permit], and you pay little in wages... There are even people who are working for free... That way it is easy to make money. People work for three or four months only [until the temporary residence permit is processed], then another one comes in, more money!’ (Field notes, anonymous).

These contracts are sold for €2,000-3,000 (Interview, anonymized), meaning they can capture a significant part of the savings of newly-arrived migrants, who are left with less choice regarding accommodation and may either join others in a similar situation in a shared house or accept accommodation in houses rented by employers. D.’s particular experience is an example of the former as well as of extremely low salaries:

D. is 34 years-old and was a farmer in India. He arrived two and half years ago from Rome, where he heard it was easy to get visas in Portugal. He works in a shop owned by a fellow Sikh and has a monthly salary of €250, which he divides in the following way: €100 for a room in a shared house; €100 to send to his 28 year-old wife and two daughters who remained in India; and the remaining €50 is for him. He has free meals at work during the day and is very often at the Gurdwara for dinner, where there is food 24/7 if needed. He does not speak Portuguese nor has much contact with Portuguese people (Interview 11).

D.’s situation tallies with other descriptions which portray similar situations. Interpretations of situations like D.’s vary among those interviewed and some contend that such arrangements provide potential for saving, in the words of one interviewee: ‘They have food for free at the Gurdwara, and often live in an apartment owned by their employer, so after a while one can save a good amount of money’ (Interview 21). That is not the case for D. and even if it was, it still casts uncertainty over the role that the Gurdwara plays as the key space for this intra-community system, which at times borders on exploitation. Considering that the free food is provided by donations from rich members of the community, we may regard it as a system that maintains a very precarious labour reserve upon which their commercial successes are predicated.

This state of affairs is not specific to Sikhs in Lisbon. In fact, in the city the Bangladeshi or Pakistani communities share the same burdens of migration, as different Portuguese-speaking African migrants did previously. It also resonates with the precarity other migrant communities in European cities experience (e.g. Anderson 2010), yet, it must not go unnoticed and represents a key concern in community and official terms. We get back to this in the concluding remarks.
The Gurdwara as an enabling/contested site

A Gurdwara in the suburbs: from a place of worship to community centre

The Sikh Gurdwara in Lisbon is on the fringes of the post-industrial city in an old warehouse adapted for religious purposes, reflecting strategies of spatial appropriation of other minorities in different cities (Garbin 2013). The opening of the second Gurdwara in Odivelas, responded to the need for a place of worship with better facilities to accommodate a growing community and closer to transport links. After requests to both the Loures and the Odivelas city councils for a space remained unanswered, community leaders decided to buy a semi-industrial warehouse 200 metres from the Odivelas metro station for €750,000 (Myrvold 2012; Interview 1). Substantial refurbishment works worth around €200,000 were carried out before the space opened in 2010. This was financed through donations and a bank loan with monthly repayments of €6,000. At this time the community was still growing, however, after 2011 donations started to recede: in 2012 average monthly donations were €9,000 when fixed costs, including food, stood at €15,000 (Interview 1). In 2013, there was already an outstanding debt of €60,000 to the bank (field notes).

Such investment and costs sustain more than a site for religious services. The Gurdwara is a ‘home-space’ for community interaction: it houses a shop where imported food can be bought, Punjabi classes for children are provided and TV programs from Punjab are broadcast and discussed (Myrvold 2012: 6). On weekdays on average one hundred people come to pray, but on Sunday almost the entire community gathers, with an average of 2,500 people (Interview 1). It is then that contacts are made, working opportunities talked through or family strategies delineated including marriage.

Conservatism at the Gurdwara and experimentation outside

The most common occurrence is to marry back in India, but often spouse reunion remains a project and families are left behind. This is in contrast with the UK, where marriage-related migration is a substantive phenomenon (see Charsley et al. 2012: 869). Given the marked gender unbalance, the probability of marrying in Portugal is reduced. Still, the ‘aspirations of many Indian parents for their daughters to be married to non-resident Indians (NRIs)’ may in some sense counterbalance this (Walton-Roberts 2010 in Takhar 2012: 119). In addition, class and caste impediments seem to play a part in the relationship between the richer, more settled members of the community whose daughters frequent the Gurdwara and the young single male labour migrants. This, alongside the desire to experiment, leads to social and religious transgression as elaborated by one interviewee:

‘You can’t talk to single women at the Gurdwara, their fathers will get angry at you. (...) So I don’t [talk to girls at the Gurdwara]. (...) I go to bars, I drink alcohol, but at the
Gurdwara no one knows it. (...) I’ve had two Brazilian girlfriends, but all this is top secret!’ (Interview, anonymized)

Youth experimentation with Lisbon’s nightlife and with cross-cultural relationships, however, seems to remain a temporary transgressive option⁹, with the project of marrying a Sikh woman still the norm. The experimental period is for memories:

‘I had a [non-Sikh] girlfriend before I was married. She was African, Guinean. (...) I also had a Brazilian girlfriend. I had a few girlfriends but it’s all in the past now. It’s all to forget. (...) I dated an Ukrainian girl as well. But enough, I’m only talking about it because my uncle is not here.’ (Interview, anonymized)

Verma (2013) discusses the navigation of cultural precepts by Sikh youth in the US, in circumstances with certain similarities to our Lisbon case study. She notes that ‘there is dissonant acculturation when youth quickly adapt to American ways, while parents do not’ (idem: 64), but also that many scenarios play themselves out and compromise is reached. The tensions and negotiations between generations are best seen when it comes to arranged marriages: ‘It’s different than before, parents propose and we meet the potential wife to know whether we like each other, but we are free to say no’ (Interview 22). This often involves using holidays to travel back to India to get better acquainted with their potential brides, who may even be previous neighbours. Financial and emotional investments in such a mission as well as the acknowledgement that marriage arrangements, although flexible on the surface, are still strongly set within a structure of social preferences and obligations (Beck-Gernsheim 2007), lead young Sikh males to justify them comparatively: ‘Weddings in the West and in Africa are about joy, for us Sikhs it’s a serious thing’ (Interview 22).

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⁹ Rarer cases among men whose wives and children remain in India partake in what is considered full-on transgression: ‘He has a wife in India but here he goes to places, drinks and pays for prostitutes’ (field notes, unrecorded conversation).
The summation of these excerpts might suggest a Gurdwara marked by conservatism, which to an extent is corroborated by interviewees who have comparative experiences with other Gurdwaras in Western Europe: ‘Gurdwaras in London are more westernized, here you have the impression you are in a Gurdwara in Punjab’ (Interview 21). Or seen from the eyes of a Portuguese Sikh convert: ‘They are very isolated, it’s like India in here, I’ve been here for three days and I’ve seen they don’t go out.’ (Interview 13). That said, conservatism has the upside of group solidarity, which eases somewhat the conditions of hardship.

4. Long-distance solidarities: death and the family left in Punjab

In the spring of 2014, visibly, yet in a discreet manner, two men stood around a small make-shift stand within the grounds of the Gurdwara petitioning people for donations for the family of a young man who had died suddenly of a heart attack. The deceased migrant’s wife and children, back in Punjab, were dependent on the money he sent every month. This particular situation is just one example of both the necessity and the risks of migration for poor populations worldwide, and of the reach that localised realities have across the world, often in unexpected ways. Migration is integral to processes of global neoliberal rescaling but it is also experienced through micro-scale
events with consequences that criss-cross the globe. There may be no sadder way of underlining how the Sikh community in Lisbon is not a bounded entity and how its constituent parts connect back to India or to other places.

![Image 3. Collecting money for the family of a deceased fellow migrant, May 2014. Photograph by the authors.](image)

**Conclusion**

The Sikh community is one example of the new diversities present in the City of Lisbon. It also demonstrates the role that Portugal has come to play in the migration processes of various new migrant communities as an easier entry point into legality in the EU space, yet, at the same time, a more arduous path to economic integration. This situation tallies with that of other migrant nationalities in the city, such as Bangladeshi and Pakistani migrants (McGarrigle et al. 2014). In this context, the Gurdwara is more than a place to worship; it serves as a ‘home-space’ providing food and bonding capital, in the process of, often temporary, incorporation, and transnational contacts with the broader diaspora. The particular conditions of this community raise questions over its future in the city, urging us to consider whether it may simply be a community in passing. According to the narratives of the interviewees, Sikh re-migration to the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and the US has meant that the size of the community has decreased significantly over the past 3 years – perhaps by as much as 10,000 to 3,500 people.

This situation requires policy responses. If the Portuguese authorities want Portugal to remain an attractive and minimally just destination for all those who choose to settle in the country they need to improve the policy framework to promote the regular insertion of migrants into the labour market. Current policy, in the form of the Golden Visa scheme, is tailored toward attracting the highly skilled and rich. Yet, there is an urgent need to address the persistence of illegal low salaries which vulnerable populations tend to accept. Policy responses to combat low salaries and precariousness need to be universal and steer away from any type of ‘ethnicized’ controls in the workplace, since those invariably turn into repressive instruments for
repatriation and cause the loss of livelihoods. Instead, there is the need re-direct policies towards fairer forms of employment (even when flexible) as part of a national push for higher-income employment related to individual and collective productivity.

**References**


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