



Laura Hirvi, *Identities in Practice: A Trans-Atlantic Ethnography of Sikh Immigrants in Finland and in California*

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Laura Hirvi's comparative (she prefers contrastive) ethnography of Sikh immigrants in Finland and California is an impressive work. She conducted fieldwork at two sites, Helsinki in Finland and Yuba City in California, both the densest Sikh settlements in these countries. Hirvi's study of the Helsinki Sikhs is the first such study, while for Yuba City she builds on several earlier studies. The numbers, timing, and family and

occupational histories are quite different for Sikhs of the two sites, and certainly the contrasts delineated here bring out the global aspects of the recent Sikh diaspora.

Hirvi carried out her research from 2008 to 2012, making frequent visits to Helsinki. She made two trips to Yuba City, one for three months in the fall of 2008 and the second for a week, the week of the annual Sikh parade, during her 2009–2010 year at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She describes her research well, situating herself and her informants carefully. However, the appendices summarizing the interviews (29 in Helsinki, 40 in Yuba City) could be more useful, and include information such as date of migration, education, occupation, marital status, and perhaps the stated reason for migration instead of (or in addition to) the date of the interviews and field notes. She transcribed her interviews and uses them effectively throughout the book.

Hirvi set out to answer three questions: Why and how do Sikhs migrate (to Helsinki and Yuba City)? How do they negotiate their identities through practices carried out in their everyday lives? What impact does the context have on this process of identity negotiation?

Since identities are context-dependent, one would expect different Sikh immigrant identities to have developed in the two sites. The author estimates that there were some six hundred Sikhs in Finland in 2013, and they have migrated there since the early 1980s. In Yuba City, there were some eight to ten thousand Sikhs, and they have been migrating there since the early twentieth century. Most of the Sikhs in Helsinki's metropolitan area seem to work in the restaurant and bar business, while most of the Sikhs in Yuba City are agriculturalists. Hirvi sees the 1984 attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar as a crucial event in Sikh identity formation in both India and the diaspora, and she treats Sikhs in Helsinki and Yuba City as part of a specifically Sikh diaspora. One could argue that the Sikhs in California were part of an earlier Punjabi—not Sikh—diaspora, but that now they self-identify as part of a Sikh diaspora, and that is undoubtedly correct. Other immigrants from India in both sites, probably few, are mentioned in Finland only because a Sikh there founded a Punjabi Cultural Society. She also chose not to probe into caste issues because informants were uncomfortable discussing them.

Chapter 2 describes migration histories, finding that in both sites immigrants stressed positive reasons for migration and that transnational family networks and marriage arrangements played crucial roles in stimulating and facilitating the migrations. Chapter 3 looks at work and its meaning, again focusing on transnational aspects such as the positioning achieved not only in the new country but in India. In Yuba City, Sikhs have achieved significant political positions and are now in a range of occupations, not just farming. In Helsinki, Sikhs mostly worked in restaurants or bars, aiming to become entrepreneurs within the restaurant and nightclub scene. At both sites, Sikhs stressed that they were hardworking people and did not depend on social welfare, self-identifying as “good” immigrants. The longer presence of Sikhs in Yuba City led to more confident claims of being respected members of the wider society. In Yuba City, ambitions for children center on college education and professional goals, while in Helsinki education in English is seen as the way to a national and also an international labor market.

Chapter 4 focuses on dress—on turbans, hair, and clothing of both men and women. Hirvi again sees 1984 as crucial to political and religious identities, increasing male Sikh practices of wearing the turban and keeping the hair and beard long. After 9/11, this practice became somewhat problematic in the U.S. (because of confusion with turbans worn by some Muslim terrorists), but not in Yuba City where Sikhs are well known. In Finland, apparently only a few Sikh men wear turbans and they symbolize difference. Hirvi's anecdotes here nicely illustrate the changing meanings attributed to dress and appearance by members and non-members of the Sikh community.

Chapter 5 looks at religious and cultural sites and events. Helsinki has only one public gurdwara (Sikh temple) and it is not conspicuously marked, nor do the majority of Sikhs in Finland attend it. Conflicts, such as over use of compositions from the *Dasam Granth* (a religious text of Sikhism), have led a few Sikhs there to worship in a private home. In Yuba City there are four gurdwaras, and Hirvi describes a Sikh preschool held at one of them, a school that incorporates cultural practices stemming from the mainstream culture as well as Sikh and Punjabi ones. She also describes birthday parties (and *bhanggrā* performances at them in Helsinki), cultural organizations in both sites, and the annual Sikh parade in Yuba City. She analyzes the Sikh parade as a conscious effort to establish bonds with the non-Sikh community but notes that few non-Sikhs attend it, despite wide awareness of it.

Chapter 6 looks at life cycle rituals and practices, especially marriage, birth, naming practices, and childcare. Most Sikhs in Finland looked to India for spouses, while those in Yuba City looked locally but also in the U.K. and Canada. The other major contrast concerned older people—grandparents might move to be permanently near grandchildren (Yuba City) or just make seasonally-determined short visits (Helsinki), or retired people might stay abroad (Yuba City) or go back and forth frequently (Helsinki and India). Cultural practices in both sites were both hybrid and transnational.

In sum, Laura Hirvi's thorough and theoretically sophisticated work has contributed to the study of transnational migration, emphasizing demographic factors, history, and geography as she contrasts Sikh migrants in Yuba City, California, and Helsinki, Finland. The study of Sikhs in Finland will serve as a baseline in years to come, and one looks forward to updates of Sikh identities at both sites.

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