Harbhajan Maan: The transnational migrant success story of Punjabi cinema

Harjant S. Gill

Chapter 10

From airplane to ‘roadplane’

The advertisement for the Indo-Canadian Bus Company opens with an Air Canada airliner, prominently displaying the red maple leaf across its tail, touching down on the runway. The arrival of the airliner is followed by time-lapse shots of passengers exiting the gates at the New Delhi’s Indira Gandhi International airport. A long queue of cars stretches into the distance, presumably waiting to receive the arriving passengers. Dressed in a pink polo shirt and denim jeans, with a blue cardigan draped over his shoulders, and dark aviator sunglasses covering his eyes, Harbhajan Maan, one of the most celebrated actors of Punjabi cinema, breezes past the awaiting cars making his way towards the camera. ‘Landing at the Delhi airport just to wait for delayed trains or relatives? Leaving an airplane’s comfort to endure the hustle and bustle of public transportation stuck in India’s notorious traffic jams?’ laments Maan (in Punjabi). ‘For every Punjabi settled abroad, wasn’t this the primary impediment keeping them from returning home?’ Maan retorts as he approaches a luxury bus with the words ‘Indo-Canadian’ sprawled across its side. ‘You no longer need to suffer in vain … Indo-Canadian bus is here to change the game,’ Maan continues, shifting from the frustrated traveller persona into his characteristically paternalistic tone of voice. ‘This world-class luxury bus will pick you up directly from the airport arrival gate,’ he informs the audience. ‘As you leave the comfort of your airplane, experience the comfort of this roadplane!’

Indo-Canadian is a privately owned bus company operating across India’s northern state of Punjab that has, over the last decade, successfully capitalized on the rapidly growing demand for transportation between major cities across Punjab to the nearest international airport, which lies 275–300 km south in the nation’s capital city of Delhi. Maan, one of the most successful singers and actors in Punjabi cinema, also rose to prominence over the last decade for his portrayals of diasporic and transnational Punjabi migrants. For Indo-Canadian to feature Maan as its spokes-person is no mere coincidence. This assemblage of the private bus service that specializes in servicing the route that transnational Punjabi migrants take on their journeys to and from the airport, with images of Maan, the poster boy of Punjabi cinema seen peddling services related to transnational mobility, speaks directly to the aspirations of middle-class Punjabi families across the region. For young men growing up in Punjabi countryside, many of whom regard transnational migration as their only path to middle-class mobility and economic success, Maan represents the embodiment of contemporary notions of
successful Punjabi masculinity; a transnational migrant who can effortlessly travel across national boundaries, undergoing the various bodily transformations such movement requires, and claiming citizenship and belonging in diaspora as well as at home in Punjab.

Harbhajan Maan and Punjab cinema

Born in 1965, Harbhajan Maan started his career as a playback-singer in the early 1980s, performing Punjabi folk songs and Bhangra music. He gained mainstream recognition with his 1992 song, ‘Chithiye, Ne Chithiye’ (Letter, Oh Letter), a pain-filled lament of a Punjabi mother writing a letter to her migrant son. Maan went on to star in nine prominent Punjabi films, most of which feature narratives centered on transnational migration and diasporic communities living across North America, Europe and Australia. Compared to his peers, Maan’s tenure as the poster boy of Punjabi cinema has lasted the longest, from 2002 to 2009. Maan’s most notable films released in these eight years include: Jee Aayan Nu (Welcome, Manmohan Singh, 2002); Asa Nu Maan Watna Da (We Are Proud of Our Nation, Manmohan Singh, 2004); Dil Apna Punjabi (Our Heart is Punjabi, Manmohan Singh, 2006); Mitti Wajaan Maardi (The Soil Beckons, Manmohan Singh 2007); Mera Pind (My Village, Manmohan Singh, 2008); Jag Jeondeyan De Mele (To Meet and Celebrate While Alive, Baljit Singh Deo, 2009) and Heer Ranjha (Harjit Singh, 2009) (Figures 10.1, 10.2).

Maan’s career also remained one of the most illustrious as his films ushered a revival within a fledgling cinematic industry at the turn of the century. This revival followed nearly a decade of steady decline in the number and quality of films being produced in Punjabi language, resulting partly from the political and economic turmoil and religious insurgency the region experienced in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Dhillon 2006; Gill 2012; Singh 2006). During this time period Punjab also witnessed a steady increase in emigration from the region as many landed families, fearing the political instability, sent their sons abroad (Chopra 2010). While the insurgency has since ended and the region has stabilized, the trend towards transnational migration continues among Punjabi Sikh families. Even though the inherent distrust among most Punjabi Sikhs of the

![Harbhajan Maan with his wife Harminder Kaur Maan at a publicity event for his 2009 film Heer Ranjha. Author (Harjant Gill)
Indian government makes the decision to leave their homeland easier, current migration trends are largely economically driven. It is motivated by the desire among landed Punjabi families across the state to be part of the growing middle class and participate in the kind of consumerism only made possible by remittances and investments of transnational capital sent back home (Chopra 2010; Mooney 2011; Walton-Roberts 2004).

As the cultural, economic and political shifts enabled by late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries globalization has resulted in an accelerated mobility of images, capital and people across national boundaries, providing increasingly greater prominence to diasporic citizens within nations’ political and cultural apparatuses, the terms of these movements and participation vary from region to region (Appadurai 1996; Clifford 1997; Benhabib and Resnik 2009; Schiller et al. 1995 Singh and Thandi 1999). Given the linguistic diversity of Indian popular culture, the overarching narrative of migration from India that encapsulates varying experiences of transnational migrants and diasporic citizens is often translated and articulated within regional histories to gain a deeper sense of ethnic loyalties, regional affinities and diasporic communities’ relationship with the nation (Benei 2008; Singh 2012). I examine the performances and popularity of Maan as a Punjabi film hero, his rise to stardom in conjunction with the global circulation of Indian films (regional as well as Hindi films) and the growth of a new genre of ‘NRI [Non Resident Indian] films’ that celebrates the experiences of transnational migrants and member of the diasporic communities. In doing so, I explore the ways in which such circulations differ on regional levels, producing varying terms of engagement and meanings around notions of class, gender, citizenship and belonging.

Maan’s on-screen persona and representations of heroic masculinity diverge from prior more traditional archetypes of Punjabi and Sikh manhood popularized by the veteran actors of Punjabi cinema. Films released in the 1980s and the early 1990s celebrate the rural, landowning upper-caste ‘Jat’ farmer, his hyper-masculine physique cultivated through manual work, and his unwavering commitment to his land and the agrarian landscape of the region, as the pinnacles of his achievements (Gill 2012). Contrasting Maan’s popularity and performances against
his predecessors', his arrival signals a shift in the notions of nationhood, belonging and the politics of representation within Punjabi cinema and popular culture to privilege the experiences of transnational migrants over the rural farmer, and privileging diaspora over homeland as the site for cultivating cultural authenticity and influence. The settings and plotlines of Maan's films echo this change as focus shifts from regionally situated narratives set exclusively in Punjabi villages to an increasing move into more urban, transnational and diasporic landscapes. Above all, through discursive practices around the concepts of cultural authenticity and traditions encapsulated within the notions of 'Punjabiyat' (the sense of being Punjabi)1 and 'Punjabi Sabhyachar [culture and traditions]', Maan's film regards the inclusion of Non Resident Indians (NRIs) and diasporic Punjabi Sikh communities as given, providing transnational citizens with a renewed sense of prominence and participation within regional and national imaginaries.

Drawing on Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan's use of the term ‘transnationalism’ to, ‘problematize a purely locational politics of global-local or center-periphery in favor of … the lines cutting across them’ (1994: 13), this chapter also unpacks Maan's performances and cinematic persona to think about how the circulations of Punjabi films challenge the centrality of Bollywood and the Indian nation-state in representations of and processes related to transnational migration, while simultaneously reproducing regional gendered and caste hierarchies within the diasporic milieu. As Purnima Mankekar notes, 'mass media are among the most crucial channels of socialization among diasporic communities, and they play a crucial role in the creating of imaginary homelands for diasporic subjects' (1999: 732). Drawing on familiar tropes of nostalgia and overt paternalism directed at diasporic viewers, Maan's films equate the consumption of Punjabi cinema with servitude to regional culture, privileging the region over the nation as a space to anchor belonging.

Maan's popularity within Punjab can also be credited to his role as the de facto cultural ambassador between regional and diasporic audiences of Punjabi cinema. Maan's films serve as a window into audience interests and experiences, emblematic of greater shifts taking place in gender roles and social life of Punjab as the region's economy and landscape is gradually transformed through processes related to transnationalism, globalization and the neoliberal restructuring of the Indian economy (Brosius 2010; Chopra 2010; Mooney 2011). Maan's onscreen migrant persona solidifies a new archetype of Punjabi transnational manhood that serves as a source of encouragement and affirmation for the growing desire and willingness among Punjabis, especially young unmarried Punjabi men, to leave their homes in search of a better, more financially prosperous future abroad.

**Farmer, soldier, migrant**

Prior to Maan's arrival on the cinematic screen, Punjabi film heroes largely occupied one of two of the following archetypes: the hardworking Punjabi farmer committed to caring for his family, his village and most importantly his land; and

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1Srijana Mitra Das provides a useful definition of *Punjabiyat*. 'It refers to a commonly held, all-encompassing view of Punjabi culture, society and being Punjabi as an individual. The term thus refers to larger structures of social or community organizations (such as kinship networks, caste identities, religious beliefs and practices, understanding of gender roles, etc.) as well as to individual Punjabi values (such as bravery, resilience, honor, heartiness)' (2006: 468–469). Also see Pritam Singh for a detailed discussion on the notion of *Punjabiyat* in a global context (2010).
the loyal Punjabi/Sikh solider or revolutionary committed to defending his nation and his faith. Cultivated through hours of manual work in his fields, as Radhika Chopra notes, practices related to learning masculinity and being a man in rural Punjab have historically been shaped above all through the relationship of a man to his land, and are transcribed on to the body itself (Chopra 2004: 44). A Punjabi farmer’s sculpted physique, his strength, his posture, his adornment in traditional attire such as a paag (a turban), a kurta (a long cotton tunic) and Punjabi jutti (pointed leather slippers), continue to define these historical representations of hegemonic Punjabi manhood.

In addition to borrowing from Hindi cinematic traditions, as regional films often do, popular Punjabi films released in the 1980s and the 1990s often took their aesthetic and stylistic cues from Pakistani and Urdu cinematic traditions (commonly referred to as Lollywood), as well as Urdu stage plays. Produced with low budgets and poor production values, Punjabi films released in the 1980s and the 1990s often relied on crude jokes and featured overtly exaggerated theatrical performances, as Ali Khan and Ali Nobil Ahmed note ‘catering largely to a male audience from the poor and illiterate sections of society’ (2010: 154). In Punjabi films from the 80s and the 90s, the hero’s masculine identity was equally shaped through landownership and his patrilineal descent and his landed caste status as belonging to a Jat (land-owning) family, a group that has historically enjoyed economic and political hegemony in the region (Gill 2012; Mooney 2011). The popularity of the 1981 film, Putt Jattan De (Son’s of Jat Farmers, Jagjit Gill), and the perennial circulation of the title song and references to the film, serve as testaments to the salience of the land-ed-farmer status as the idealized embodiment of heroic masculinity in Punjabi cinema and popular culture.

Putt Jattan De popularized a whole genre of what are colloquially referred to as Jat-themed films or badla (revenge) films (Figure 10.3). Most of these films deploy fairly formulaic cinematic tropes where the annexation of familial land and/or the loss of familial honour resulting from the violation of women’s izzat (sexual propriety), serve as the inciting incidents that challenge the hero’s manhood and his position within his community.

Figure 10.3 Actors Guggu Gill (left) and Yograj Singh (right) faceoff in a revenge-themed Punjabi film Anakh Jattan Di (Ego of Jats) from 1990.
The circumstances of his life compel introspection, ultimately leading him towards realizing his agency. He is duty-bound to rectify the injustice by exacting revenge on the perpetrators, resulting in an action-packed climax and ending where he emerges as victorious with his masculinity unblemished. Popular "fat"-themed and "badla" films featuring veteran actors including Guggu Gill, Yograj Singh, Dara Singh and Veerendra personified familiar tropes in regards to masculinity, borrowing liberally from films being produced in neighbouring regions in places like Lahore (Ahmed 1992: 317), as well as Bombay, where films like Sholay (Embers, Ramesh Sippy, 1975) defined the dominant style and aesthetic popular among Indian audiences in the 1970s and the early 1980s.

A slightly less common, yet equally salient archetype of heroic masculinity in Punjabi cinema remains that of a Sikh fauj (soldier) a turban-wearing soldier fighting on the frontlines of a battlefield along his comrades to defend his nation's honour. Narrated in the form of historical reconstructions, these cinematic representations also privilege the physical achievements and emotional resolve of the film’s hero. Confronted with a series of moral ambiguities and challenges, the hero demonstrates his masculine resilience through unwavering devotion to his nation and faith. His willingness to sacrifice individual comforts and desires by engaging in the religious tradition of shaheedi (martyrdom) serves as a testament to his heroic masculinity. Another equally prolific Punjabi singer-turned-actor, Gurdas Maan, has frequently portrayed these characters on screen.

Both archetypes of the landed-farmer and the Sikh-soldier glorify and celebrate the male body, its physical characteristics and association of masculinity with steadfast doggedness, as the idealization of Punjabi and Sikh masculinities. They attempt to embody the concept of soorma (brave-hearted warrior), a heroic stature rooted in Sikh history, and later in colonial-era practices and policies that strategically privileged Punjabi and Sikh soldiers over their Hindu and Muslim counterparts within the British Army (Cohn 2004; Kalra 2005). Given the hegemony of Punjabi masculinity within the broader landscape of South Asian masculinities (Chopra et al. 2005; Kalra 2009), it is no coincidence that until the 1980s, in addition to farming, joining the Indian armed forces or law enforcement remained the preferred occupation for most men across Punjab. However, the early twenty-first century, following the effects of globalization on the region, birthed new desires for neoliberal consumption and transnational travel. And as the costs associated with agriculture continue to rise, making farming increasingly unsustainable, Nicola Mooney notes, ‘migration is now the singular stuff of Punjabi dreams of family progress’ (2011: 170).

While transnational migration from Punjab, especially of Punjabi Sikh men, has been an ongoing phenomenon that dates back to the colonial period (Axel 2001; Bhachu 1986; Brah 1996; Leonard 1992; Shah 2011), the archetype of the Punjabi migrant remained largely absent from the cinematic screen and popular imagination until Maan’s arrival. Only a handful of Punjabi films made in the 1980s and the 1990s feature transnational migrants as the central characters. Most notable of these include a film titled Long Da Lishkara (Reflection of the Nose Ring, Harpal Tiwana, 1986), about a returning migrant named Raja (starring Raj Babbar). Whereas within Maan’s films the process of migration is presented as an opportunity and actively sought after, in Long Da Lishkara the act of leaving home is equated with voluntary exile necessitated by familial circumstances. Serving as the inciting incident that propels the plot forward, Raja’s return from Canada is also prefaced by the familiar shot of an
airliner touching down on a runway, followed by a celebratory homecoming sequence where Raja steps out of a taxi dressed in a silver jacket, denim jeans, and riding boots as he crosses the threshold of his ancestral home where the entire village has gathered to greet him.

Yet unlike Maan’s seamless arrival at the airport, Raja’s return is fraught with tensions and contradictions. His return to his village in adulthood where his mother resides is presented as an eventuality. Even after having studying abroad in Canadian universities, he is expected to take up farming and devote himself to managing his family’s property. The film ends without offering any indication that Raja would leave again. On the contrary, his gradual physical transformation from looking like a transnational migrant to looking like a landed-farmer, which forms one of the narrative arcs of the film, is accented with a sense of absolution. Tension arises within this process of reincorporation as Raja struggles to negotiate his Progressive outlook on caste and class with the customs of his homeland that remain fixed in the region’s social history. Raja’s attempt to challenge existing caste and gender hierarchies mark him as an outsider. His presence is met with suspicion and mistrust, as villagers increasingly see him as a threat to the social fabric of village life. When he falls in love with a woman of lower social status, the quest that ensues is equally about Raja’s attempts to challenge the norms of village life as well as trying to reincorporate himself into the social space of his ancestral home. While Raja emerges triumphant in carving out a space for himself and his desires, audiences are left with the sense that his acceptance into the landscape surrounding him is far from complete.

Contrasting Long Da Lishkara with more recent films featuring migrant narratives, Maan’s characters are rarely seen transgressing caste and class boundaries, especially in their selection of a prospective lover and partner. Far from challenging or abandoning traditional identity categories and caste hierarchies, the popularity and success of the transnational migrant characters Maan portrays rely on the recuperation and reinforcement of these social boundaries, both at home and in the diaspora. Unlike Raja, Maan’s characters rarely struggle to reincorporate themselves into the social space of their homeland. Instead of resisting regional class and caste privileges and hierarchies, Maan’s characters often draw on his patriarchal descent and his status as a son of a landed Jat farmer to serve as a source of inspiration and celebration to claim what he perceives as his rightful space within the village’s social structure. The transformations from being a transnational migrant to being a Jat farmer and back to transnational migrant are seamlessly achieved with minimal effort.

The ideal migrant

Maan’s films are not the only ones to satiate desires for a glimpse into diasporic life and the experiences of transnational migrants. In fact, as regional filmmakers across India have often done in the past, Punjabi filmmakers follow the contemporary trends within the larger and more resourceful Hindi film industry (also referred to as Bollywood), creating localized representations of narratives and themes popular on a national level. Indian cinemas, led by the Hindi film industry, ‘went global’ in the early 1990s, following the neoliberal restructuring of Indian economy that gave birth to the category of the NRI, an economic and cultural strategy endorsed by the national government to increase diasporic investment, involvement and commitment to the homeland (Brosius 2005; Jolly et al. 2007; Kavoori and Punathambekar 2008). Maan’s films borrow heavily from the aesthetics of Hindi films released in the mid to late 1990s, particularly the
1995 blockbuster hit *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (The Brave Hearted Will Take Away the Bride, Aditya Chopra), *DDLJ* hereafter, a film that is widely credited for having established the 'NRI genre'. Though in Hindi and featuring Bollywood actors and Hindi cinematic sensibilities, *DDLJ* too chronicles the lives of a Punjabi family living in London and their return to their homeland and village set within the agrarian landscape of Punjab. While their journey across national boundaries is the central feature of most NRI films produced in Hindi as well as Punjabi, the nuances within these migrant experiences and how the diaspora is represented differ significantly.

Carefully crafted within NRI films (in Hindi and Punjabi), the journey across national boundaries and the practices related to transnational travel, represent important sites of transition and transformations as a way of reincorporating diasporic subjects within the social milieu of the homeland (Gill 2012; Mankekar 1999; Sharpe 2007). Building on James Clifford’s classification of travel as a, ‘range of material, spatial practices that produce knowledges, stories, traditions, comportments, musics, books, diaries, and other cultural expressions’ (Clifford 1997:35), Mankekar notes that ‘diasporic subjects do not just travel, they also forge identities and communities shaped by particular forms of longing and dwelling’ (1999:749). The popularity of NRI films featuring diasporic narratives underscores the significance of popular cultural forms, including cinema, in reproducing particular types of diasporic subjects for audiences back home.

The emergence of what Jenny Sharpe refers to as the ‘respectable NRI’ in Indian cinemas coincides with the growing urban middle class in India at the turn of the century, financed partially though the transnational circulation of capital, remittances and increased investment in the homeland (2007: 77). In keeping with the formation of the ideal NRI and second-generation diasporic citizen, within Hindi films like *DDLJ*, migrant women often represent the embodiment of traditional South Asian womanhood, what Gayatri Gopinath refers to as the ‘emblems of national traditions and morality’ (Gopinath 2005:18; Sharpe 2007: 77). As we see in *DDLJ*, women’s mobility is carefully surveilled and policed by the family’s patriarchs, and often their only access to transnational migration is mediated by the men in their lives, as daughters and brides of NRI husbands (Mankekar 1999; Mehta 2007; Sharpe 2007). Whereas in Hindi films like *DDLJ*, it is often the female protagonist who represents the site of transformation, as we see Simran (*DDLJ*’s leading character) abandoning her Western clothing and sensibilities in favour of traditional Punjabi attire and obedience to regional customs and rituals (Sharpe 2007: 78), in Punjabi films starring Maan the focus of these transitions and transformations remains fixed entirely on the male body.

Maan’s debut film *Jee Ayaan Nu* also narrates the story of a successful Canada-based Punjabi family with a marriage-aged daughter (named Simar), who during a visit to Punjab falls in love with Inder, a college-aged son of a landed family played by Maan. Despite the two families’ shared caste and class status, Simar’s family calls off the engagement upon Inder’s refusal to emigrate to Canada as a *gharjamai* (live-in-son-in-law or house-husband). In the aftermath of their breakup, Inder resolves to move to Canada on his own merits, proving to Simar’s family that he is capable of accessing transnational migration and being a successful diasporic citizen without his in-laws’ support, and thereby worthy of claiming Simar as his bride without having to endure the humiliation associated with being a *gharjamai*, a status often imbued with a sense of desperation and failure within a culture where matrilocal residence patterns are rare.
Unlike Hindi films such as *DDLJ*, where diasporic women are seen actively choosing to submit to the institution of the patriarchal Indian family, these choices for Punjabi women are rendered further invisible in Maan’s film where the focus remains squarely on the men within their families, and their ability (or inability) to access transnational migration. Far from being monitored or surveilled, Maan’s mobility and ability to migrate is depicted as the ultimate exercise of his patriarchal privilege and an affirmation of his upper-caste *Jat* manhood. As Maan’s characters repeatedly reinforce, in the early twenty-first century, migration from Punjab is no longer a one-way journey out of the country but a ‘circular process’ where visiting and remitting money home is just as important a feature in the narrative of being a successful migrant as the initial act of leaving to seek a secure a more prosperous future elsewhere (Chopra 2010: 113).

Maan’s cinematic personas mark the emergence of a new model of idealized masculinity that is able to claim citizenship and belonging through the types of ‘flexible’ practices necessitate by transnational mobility (Gill 2016; Ong 1999). In doing so, Maan’s characters also repudiate the prior stereotypes of Punjabi migrants as either Sikh refugees in exile who have tumultuous relationship with the nation, or disaffected second-generation youth who have lost their *sanskar* (moral values) and forgotten their *sabhyachar* (culture), whose return might be fraught with the types of tensions and contradictions confronted by Raja in *Long Da Lishkara*. Maan, on the other hand, is shown as navigating the unfamiliar terrain of transnational mobility with the ease of a seasoned globetrotter, effortlessly shifting from his white-collar occupation (as a doctor or engineer) in the USA or Canada to performing manual labour and tilling his own land back in Punjab. In *Mitti Wajaan Maardi*, we witness Maan go from wearing a sports jacket and driving in a convertible through the streets of San Francisco to wearing a white *kurta* (cotton tunic), a colorful turban and cultivating his fields with his tractor upon arriving in Punjab without any significant obstacles. Unlike Raja in *Long the Lishkara*, Maan’s characters remain vested in their caste hierarchies. Being a *Jat* is part of their inheritance that remains dormant until their return to Punjab, where its recovery allows them to fully realize the process of reincorporation.

Punjabi films starring Maan also differ significantly from Hindi films like *DDLJ* featuring transnational migrants largely in the way in which the diaspora is conceived and depicted. Where as in *DDLJ* London is shown to be a place fraught with physical dangers and moral depravity that only intensifies the longing for the comforts and nurturance of the homeland, Maan’s films depict the diaspora as a safe and familiar place; a mere extension of Punjab. Instead of arriving in a cold, unfamiliar, foreign land where newly arriving migrants are usually confronted with different languages and customs, Maan’s films feature idyllic images of diasporic communities residing in the comfort of suburban ethnic enclaves like Surry, Brampton and Yuba City, located in safe proximity from crime-ridden cities like Vancouver, Toronto, and San Francisco, seen as repositories of immorality and corruption.

Even though *Mitti Wajaan Maardi* (The Soil Beckons) opens with the iconic images of San Francisco’s skyline and landmarks like the Golden Gate Bridge and Lombard Street, the camera quickly shifts to lengthy montages of the lush green fields of Yuba City, a predominantly Punjabi suburb in central California. We see shots of Punjabi families enjoying the midday sun in their neighborhood parks while elderly men and women wearing turbans and *shalwar kameez* (a traditional outfit worn by Punjabi women) shuffle in and out of a Sikh temple. Through this careful
reproduction of the landscape of home within the diaspora, Maan’s films promote the sense that the diaspora is merely an extension of the homeland, minimizing the kinds of linguistic and cultural barriers that Hindi films like *DDLJ* often highlight. The inner-city fears of violence, discrimination, exploitation and even moral corruption are replaced with less threatening suburban concerns of being overworked, longing for home and the perennial worries related to the loss of *sabhyachar* (culture, traditions, language).

Representations of the diaspora and homeland within Hindi and Punjabi films also differ in a key manner that is significant. In Punjabi films featuring Maan, the references to *watan* (nation) are often ambiguous defined, the expression ‘mera watan’ (my nation) referring interchangeably from *my pind* (village), to my Punjab, to my India. Despite its refusal to explicitly endorse the separatist Khalistani project following the Sikh struggle for a independent homeland that lasted through the mid 1980s and 1990s (Axel 2001; Mahmood 1996), Maan’s films reinforce regionalist notions of a Punjabi Sikh nation as an imagined spaced that extends beyond the national boundaries to incorporate diasporic communities across the globe. This discursive ambiguity is deliberate, as Maan’s film attempt to simultaneously cater to audiences in Punjab as well as audiences in the diaspora, many of whom remain critical of India’s role as their nation-state, if not still vested in the possibility of a separate Sikh homeland. In doing so, Maan’s films promote what Rajanpreet Nagra notes as, ‘Punjabi nationalism’ over ‘Indian nationalism’, legitimizing ‘diasporic identity as Punjabi identity’ (2011: 167).

The concern with the loss of *sabhyachar* (culture), and the preservation of *Punjabiyyat* are central themes in most of Maan’s films. Moral corruption in the diaspora and greed back in the village where the absence of family members makes illegal seizures of land and property more likely, often operate as the central devices for producing conflict in almost all of Maan’s films. The responsibility and privilege of recovering *sabhyachar* and modelling for the diasporic community how to be a ‘respectful NRI’, rest squarely on Maan’s shoulders. Imbued with overtly paternalistic rhetoric, Maan’s cinematic personas and the characters he portrays narrate the script for successful masculinity that most young Punjabi men, especially unmarried ones, eagerly embrace and aspire to follow, defining to a large extent what it means to be an ideal transnational migrant and diasporic citizen.

### Touring abroad

The cinema-going audiences in Punjab, largely young men and women across the region, approach Punjabi films like *Jee Aayan Nu* and *Mitti Wajaan Maardi* very differently from Hindi films featuring narratives about Punjabi migrants like *DDLJ*, and more recently *Singh is Kinng* (Anees Bazmee 2008), an over the top slapstick comedy about a Sikh migrant who finds himself caught up in the criminal underworld of Sydney. While most of the young men and women I spoke to while conducting fieldwork across Punjab consume Hindi films with the expected sense of scepticism, knowing that these portrayals are exaggerated, fantastical and unrealistic, the same audience members regard Punjabi films, especially Maan’s films, as a far more authentic and believable representation of their own and their community’s experiences.\(^2\) As an audience

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\(^2\)Based on interviews and ethnographic research conducted across Punjab between January and December 2009.
member once instructed me, ‘Singh is Kinng is just another Hindi film cloaked in Punjabi tardka [flavoring];’ he continued, ‘If you want to see the asli [authentic] Punjab and Punjabi sabhyachar you have to watch Maan’s films.’

As we exited the movie theatre in Chandigarh, the capital city of Punjab, after having seen one of Maan’s most recent films, Jag Jeondeyan De Mele, with a young man named Jassi who was just getting ready to move to Canada on a student visa, I asked him about his impressions of the film and Maan’s acting. Jassi replied, ‘theek he si! AC di hava kha li, Canada di ser kari li, hor kee phaldan hai?’ (‘the film was average, but you got to sit in an air-conditioned room for three hours, and he took you on a scenic tour of Canada, what more do you want?’) Jassi’s reply was instructive in the sense that it made me realize that, above all other qualities, Maan’s on screen representations are popular among young Punjabi men because they offer an idealized glimpse into a life in a community they themselves aspire to one day join.

While Maan’s films are instilled with a sense of authenticity and realism rarely afforded to Bollywood or even Hollywood films, Punjabi audience members also realize that for many who cannot afford to finance the kind of travel Maan undertakes (a one-way ticket on Indo-Canadian costs 2200 Rs, around thirty-five American dollars) the possibility of similar mobility remains a distant dream. For many young Punjabi men, Maan’s films allow them to indulge in a fantasy of being transnationally mobile and living in the diaspora, which, unlike the popular Bollywood representations, holds some promise, however bleak, of turning into their reality someday.

The characters that Maan portrays on screen are considered successful for their ability to circumvent the limitations of everyday life at home and in the diaspora while remaining firmly rooted in traditional patriarchal values and caste and gender hierarchies. These unthreatening, idealized and inviting depictions of life in the diaspora further reassure men like Jassi about their decision to emigrate, subduing their fear about the foreign land they will soon arrive in, legally or illegally. Whether he is helping young men like Jassi to navigate the unfamiliar terrain of transnational migration, or helping relieve the travel-related anxieties of migrants returning home, Harbhajan Maan has acquired a unique status in Punjabi cinema and popular culture: that of a tour guide, or a cultural ambassador of sorts, bridging the gulf between diaspora and home.

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