

PUNJABI PIONEERS IN CALIFORNIA: POLITICAL SKILLS ON A NEW FRONTIER

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The early immigrants from India to California have been portrayed as illiterate peasants, farm laborers held in their place by prejudice and discriminatory laws. They began coming at the turn of the century; some 6,800 came between 1899 and 1914. Contemporary accounts emphasized their backwardness even compared to other Asian immigrant groups. The man who was in charge of the 1909 federal Immigration Commission investigation of the East Indian laborers in the Pacific Coast states said that 'the Hindus are regarded as the least desirable, or, better, the most undesirable, of all the the eastern Asiatic races which have come to share in our soil'. He also said, 'The assimilative qualities of the East Indians appear to be the lowest of those of any race in the West ... between one half and three fifths of them are unable to read and write'.¹ The classic statement is from the 1920 report of the California State Board of Control:²

The Hindu is the most undesirable immigrant in the state. His lack of personal cleanliness, his low morals, and his blind adherence to theories and teachings, so entirely repugnant to American principles make him unfit for association with American people.

Sociologists and historians have criticized the bias evident in the records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service and have pointed to characterizations of the Punjabis as 'good workers' in California agriculture. However, scholars have not looked closely at the immigrants to challenge the overall view.³

Historical work at the local level reveals a very different picture, a picture of men who dealt with their new circumstances with skill and

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- 1 H.A. Mills, 'East Indian Immigration to the Pacific Coast', *Survey*, 28:9 (1 June 1912), pp.381, 386.
 - 2 California State Board of Control, *California and Oriental* (Sacramento, 1920), pp.101-2.
 - 3 Harold Jacoby shows the rising rejection rate of applicants for immigration: 'Some Demographic and Social Aspects of Early East Indian Life in the United States', in ed. *Sikh Studies*, p. 162; H. Brett Melendy, *Asians in America* (New York, 1981), part III; Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field* (Salt Lake City, 1978), pp.116-19.

confidence. Much of the material below comes from the Imperial Valley, and I suggest that the Punjabi farmers there owed much of their success to Punjabi experience under British colonial rule. Many of the men who migrated to California had served in the British military and police services, often stationed overseas in China's treaty ports.⁴

The Punjabi setting had prepared the early immigrants well for their experiences on the frontier in rural California. The Punjab was itself a frontier area, with railway and road links and irrigation canals being developed under British rule from the 1860s.⁵ Most of the men who came to California were from the so-called martial races and from landowning, or farming, castes. 85 to 90% of those who came were Sikhs, almost all Jats, although there were a few Chuhras or untouchables. Among the Muslims, there were Rajputs, Arais (market gardeners), and Pathans, Pushtu or Pakhtun speakers from the border area with Afghanistan. The few Hindus who came were Brahmans or Khatris from urban areas of the Punjab.

In the Punjab, British conquest had been comparatively recent. Following the 'Sikh wars', an initial land settlement proceeded from 1839-1848. In the revenue settlements of the 1850s, the actual cultivators were recognized as owners and taxpayers, farmers of small holdings; this was a peasant proprietorship system different from the rest of India. Settlement was with peasants as members of the village community, with few or no intermediaries. Administration by the British of 'customary' law produced increasing litigation from the 1850s onward.⁶ The entire Punjab administration was characterized by a tradition of rugged individualism, of man to man paternalistic rule. This tone was set by the Lawrences, founders of the 'Punjab school' of administration and respecters of Sikh fighting ability.⁷

As Asian Indian immigration became noticeable and prejudice was aroused, it became more difficult to gain admittance to the U.S. Many had come via the Philippines, then a U.S. possession, but in 1913 a federal judge ruled that men who had been admitted to the Philippines could be detained and deported rather than legally admitted to the U.S. This decision, along with increasingly rigorous standards of physical fitness applied by

⁴ Sucha Singh, interviewed by William C. Smith in Venice, California, 8 Aug. 1924 (Survey of Race Relations, box no. 35, outcard no. 255, #46, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford), said 'I was born in the Punjab district of India and served on the police force in Hong Kong, China, for some years. While I was in China several Hindus returned and reported on the ease with which they could make money in America and so I decided to go'. Mola Singh, interviewed in Selma, California, in 1983, named six older relatives who served in China and made trips to British Columbia and California from there, finally persuading him and his father to follow them in 1912 and 1913.

⁵ Tom Kessinger, *Vilvatpur 1848-1968* (Berkeley, 1974), pp. 104-109.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-34, 77-83; and Dolores Domin, 'Some Aspects of British Land Policy in Punjab after its Annexation in 1849', *Punjab Past and Present*, 8 (1974), pp. 19-25.

⁷ Philip Woodruff, *The Men Who Ruled India: Vol. 1, The Founders* (London, 1963), pp.324-43.

Immigration, resulted in fewer and fewer Punjabis being admitted. Legal immigration ended with the 1917 Barred Zone Act.⁸

Punjabi men have many bitter memories of the questions asked and the numbers turned back from Seattle or San Francisco. An early interview conveys one man's critical opinion:⁹

I should like to return to India to secure a position in the immigration office so that I might treat some Americans as they have treated me. I have applied for American citizenship but this has been denied me. Were I in the immigration service in India, when an American would apply for entry I would refer him to his Consul, and that would be of no avail. He would then have to apply to Washington and even to London but it would avail him nothing. Of course this treatment accorded me is only in perfect accord with many other things in America. Justice is quite uneven, for the man with money can kill another and get off.

In the Imperial Valley, inland from San Diego along California's border with Mexico, large numbers of the Punjabis settled after 1915. The Imperial Valley was opened up only in the first decade of the 20th century, when the largest irrigation system in the western hemisphere began operating and farmers and laborers were recruited to develop the land. Many races and ethnic groups were represented among the pioneers. There was some initial ethnic specialization (the Swiss in dairies, the Japanese in intensive cultivation of vegetables and fruits), but these ethnic patterns gradually weakened.

Punjabis were first mentioned in the Imperial Valley as laborers. Almost immediately, however, they appear in local records in a variety of other roles. They sent foreign money orders through the U.S. post office; they began leasing and purchasing land; and they were prominent litigants in the civil and criminal courts. All of these records show their rapidly changing status.

Two early post office books survive in the Imperial Valley, for 1909-10 and 1912-13.¹⁰ Seven Punjabi names appear among the chiefly Swiss and English senders of foreign money orders from Holtville. Foreign money orders were few (Mexico was not treated as a foreign country in these post office books), and Punjabis sent more than a tenth of them. Frequently the

⁸ *New York Times*, 7 Dec. 1913: 'Hindus Fight Exclusion' article; Brett Melendy, *Asians in America*, Part III.

⁹ Inder Singh, 31 May 1924, El Centro, interviewed by William C. Smith for Survey of Race Relations, *op. cit.*, box no. 29, #273.

¹⁰ These are kept in a safe in the Holtville City Hall. Joseph Anderholt, who has done historical work on the Swiss and other early settlers, told me about them.

Punjabis sent the largest money orders on a page.¹¹ The Punjabis sent money not only to India, but also to Glasgow, Scotland, and Shanghai, China; within California, they sent money to Berkeley, Stockton, and Fowler.

Another early source, the 1910 manuscript Census for Imperial County, lists some eighteen men from India. Many names are badly misspelled — that, along with the frequent misrecording of their language as 'Persian' or 'Hindu', shows the census taker's unfamiliarity with this new group.¹² Of the eighteen men from India, two had come to the U.S. in 1903 and the rest between 1906 and 1910. Four names can be identified as Sikhs, four as Hindu, and eight as Muslim; two ('Sende' and 'Joe Bullard') remain mysterious. All were farm labourers. Their ages ranged from 17 to 55, and they all lived in rented quarters, three alone and the rest in groups ranging from two to eight. All lived with other Punjabis, with the exception of three Holtville lodgers with an American family and five laborers who resided with three Japanese laborers. Accordingly to the Census, only three spoke English and only three were able to read and write in any language.¹³

These two early sources indicate, first, that the men were not literate enough to correct misspellings of their names by a census taker or a post office clerk; second, that they were working in agriculture and making enough money to send large amounts back to India or elsewhere. They were recent arrivals, but one man, although designated illiterate by the census taker, had taken out papers for naturalization.¹⁴

There were indications that the Punjabis were moving into the local system. In the early Imperial Valley Directories, Asian Indian 'ranchers' appeared from 1912.¹⁵ The earliest names were those of Muslims: 'Komas Khan' and 'Cain Deen'; they were joined by 'Chiza Singh' in 1915. The 1917-18 Directory listed some fifty-six men from India, and the 1921 one listed one hundred and seventy-nine. At this time of rapid influx, the men from India were conspicuous among early subscribers to telephone service.¹⁶

Land records relating to Punjabis in the County record offices testify to their rapid movement into farming as tenants (both share and cash tenants) and as owners of land. Deeds, leases and crop chattel mortgages in the

¹¹ Punjabis sent 11 foreign money orders in the first book, with 78 numbers assigned for foreign money orders and not all issued; Punjabis sent 28 money orders in the second book, with 236 numbers assigned for foreign money orders and again many of them unissued.

¹² U.S. Bureau of the Census, *13th Census of the United States: Population, 1910* (Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1912-14).

¹³ Six of the seven households were in El Centro, four on Commercial Avenue where the Sikh temple is today.

¹⁴ This man, undoubtedly the Rahmatulla recalled by many, was certainly literate and became one of the leaders of the Punjabis in the Valley and in Phoenix, Arizona.

¹⁵ These directories were consulted in the Imperial Public Library. As the population increased, the Muslim proportion fell from 1/3 to 1/10th.

¹⁶ The first directory I have seen, that for 1918, includes 27 Punjabis: 7 in Brawley, 13 in Holtville, 3 in El Centro, 2 in Imperial, and 1 each in Calexico and Calipatria. Eighteen of them were Sikhs, eight were Muslim, and one was Hindu. Imperial Country Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company, 15 April 1918; Pioneers Museum, Imperial.

Country Recorder's office show considerable activity from 1912 to 1923 on the part of the men from India. From 1914, between 10 and 50 chattel mortgages were recorded per year; from 1916, the numbers of leases recorded by men from India ranged between 10 and 55 per year. About half of the leases were signed by a single man, another quarter by two partners, and the rest by partnerships of three or four men.¹⁷ According to informed estimates, only 5% of all leases made were recorded before World War I, a percentage rising to only 20% by World War II. It seems likely, therefore, that the County records understate the Punjabis' agricultural activities.¹⁸

The Punjabis also used the court system in the Imperial Valley enthusiastically, as the following table shows.

TABLE I: CIVIL CASES INVOLVING PUNJABIS, IMPERIAL COUNTY					
	1914 - 19		1919 - 31		Totals
	No.	%	No.	%	
Punjabi Plaintiff/Defendants	31	53	30	17	61
Punjabi Plaintiff/Other Defendants	14	24	41	23	55
Punjabi Defencant/Other Plaintiff	12	21	83	46	95
Divorces	1	2	25	14	26
Totals:	58	100	179	100	237

Source: Imperial County General Index to Plaintiffs, 1907-31 and Imperial County General Index to Defendants, 1907-1931; surnames checked in the alphabetical indexes included those beginning with A, B, C, K, M, R, and S.

While Punjabis were approximately 0.6% of the County population, cases involving them were 3% of civil cases from 1919-1931.¹⁹ The first civil case involving a Punjabi was in 1914, and from then until 1919, five years,

¹⁷ I did a survey of the indexes in the Recorder's Office and Dr. Sucheng Chan, Director of the Asian American Studies Centre at UC Santa Barbara, sent me copies of her incomplete notes on leases and chattel mortgages for Imperial County.

¹⁸ Interviews with Joe Anderholt, Holtville, 1981; and Jim Bailey, El Centro, 1981; exactly the same estimate was given to Dr. Sucheng Chan by the Recorder of San Joaquin County. Whether illiteracy in English made the Punjabis more or less liable to use only verbal leases is an open question. (The leasing and chattel mortgage records, like the other early sources, show the Sikhs arriving slightly later than the Muslim and Hindus from the Punjab.)

¹⁹ For the 0.6, I am using Ram Chand's count of 268 Punjabis in about 1920 (p. 4 of his interview with W.C. Smith, 1 June 1924, El Centro: Survey of Race Relations, box 28, outcard number 145, folder ID 231-232, #232, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, California) and the 1920 Census Imperial County population total of 43,453 (U.S. bureau of the Census. *Fourteenth Census of the United States: Population*, vol. III, p. 113, Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office, 1922). The case percentages are based on the numbered sequences in the Office of the County Clerk, El Centro: 58/2400 and 179/9300.

Punjabis were involved in 58 cases. Over 50% of these cases pitted Punjabi against Punjabi, and almost all concerned land and labor agreements. In the other 27 cases, they sued and were sued by others in nearly equal proportions; the others ranged from Japanese and Chinese to Anglos. Only one divorce case was filed before August of 1919 (the first local marriage had occurred in late 1916).

From 1919 to 1931, Punjabis were involved in some 179 civil cases, and 30, just under a fifth, were against each other. The proportion of suits against Hindus by others more than doubled.²⁰ This was the decade of increasing prejudice against Asian farmers, of discriminatory laws, and of bankruptcies for cotton farmers. During that same period, 1919-28, some 60 Punjabi bankruptcies were filed with the Los Angeles District Federal Court, and many of the Imperial County civil cases against Punjabis were filed by local banks and creditors in connection with those bankruptcies.

Men from India were growing cotton in the Imperial Valley and went bankrupt along with many other cotton farmers after the first World War. They turned immediately to the courts, filing 64 bankruptcy cases from 1919 through to 1928 (44 individuals and 20 partnerships). The table below summarizes the cases.

TABLE II: PUNJABI BANKRUPTCY CASES IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA					
Filing Date	Cases Filed	Units Filing		Total Debts	% of Total Debts by Years
		Individual	Partnership		
1919	1		1		
1920	5	5		\$271,011	38
1921	23	7	6		
1922	15	8	5	126,845	18
1923	14	8	4	111,732	15
1924	14	10	3	101,069	14
1925	1	2	1	81,693	11
1926	2	2		17,892	2
1927	1	1		5,008	1
1928	1	1		5,829	1
Total	77**	44	20	\$721,079	100

Source: U.S. District Court at Los Angeles, records in the Laguna Niguel Federal Archives: Index 1, 1917-1925; Index 2, 1925-29. Index 1 included 9 counties: Imperial, San Diego,

²⁰ The other big increase, in divorce cases, is discussed in my forthcoming book, *Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi-Mexican-Americans* (Temple University Press, 1990).

Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Ventura: Index 2 included all of those up to 1929, when Imperial and San Diego were split off.

** 77 cases were actually filed, but they turned out to be 20 partnerships and 44 individuals - 64 bankruptcies. The higher number of cases resulted from double-filings (e.g. the first 6 above were one partnership).

The source of credit and the amounts of credit extended to these Punjabi farmers are somewhat surprising. The total amount of these Punjabi debts was \$721,079, with individuals owing an average of \$8,526 and partnerships owing an average of more than double this amount, or \$20,279. All of the local banks had loaned large sums to Punjabi farmers. Half of those with secured notes held loans for \$10,000 or more; most of these were bank loans or a combination of bank and individual loans. Security was furnished by mortgages on farm equipment and chattel mortgages on crops. Over the nine year period of these bankruptcy cases, the trend was from secured loans to unsecured ones. As the loans moved from the secured to unsecured notes, however, the amounts did not decrease: 23% of all unsecured notes were for \$15,000 or more. Most of the unsecured notes were, again, from a combination of sources: local banks, local Anglos and other Punjabis (and more loans were from local Anglos than from other Punjabis).²¹

According to signatures on the bankruptcy petitions, the literacy rate for these Punjabi cotton farmers was higher than the 50% rate shown in immigration statistics²² or the 17% rate recorded in the 1910 Census for Imperial County. Probably this was because the partnerships were represented by the best-educated man. 57% of the petitioners signed in a good English hand; another 30% signed in ragged English or Hindi letters; only 11% signed with an X.

While Punjabis in general gained a bad reputation for filing so many bankruptcies during these hard years, they had both local and absentee supporters. There was a trend with respect to leasing from local to absentee landowners.²³ Most of these bankruptcy cases (86%) were handled by one of two local attorneys, men who specialized in the Punjabi cases. These attorneys were paid with promissory notes, so they clearly expected the Punjabi farmers to recover and prosper again. Their attitude was different from that of a new lawyer who represented a Punjabi in a 1924 case. The new lawyer billed the county for far above the usual fee, justifying it by stating that 'the bankrupt is a Hindoo and very difficult to understand, necessitating extraordinary labor on the part of his attorney'.²⁴

²¹ Laguna Niguel Federal Archives: Bankruptcy records for L.A. District Court, Indexes 1 and 2. After 1929 Imperial and San Diego Counties were split off, and the index for those records is in the San Diego District Court. The loans among Punjabis tended to be very small and local, although in one case, a Muslim had loans from 8 other Muslims ranging from \$120 to \$2,400, including one from Chicago, Illinois: Case 6359.

²² The Immigration Commission. *East Indians on the Pacific Coast* (1909).

²³ Information about local or absentee ownership is available in only 35 of these 58 cases: Bankruptcy records, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Case 5985, *ibid.*

Details from the bankruptcy cases show the development of interesting strategies. At first, the Punjabis did not know how to file, as a partnership or as individuals.²⁵ The cases were straightforward and simple, as 'clothing and a blanket' were the only assets. In later cases, financial strategies became more complicated. Sometimes Punjabis allegedly paid off other Punjabis, their creditors, before filing; they left the bank or Anglo farmer unpaid. Some of the men owned autos and tried to retain them. The car was put in a wife's name, and when challenged the farmer not only argued that she had bought it with her egg money but that she had mortgaged it to a Punjabi friend: the car could not be seized.²⁶ In another case, a challenge regarding Mota Singh's 1919 Dodge Touring Model revealed that the bankrupt man had not turned it in as an asset because he had sold it to a second Punjabi for \$800; that man had taken it to Oxnard for the summer and then had sold it to a third Punjabi for \$800. The third man had sold it back to the second man (his employer) for only \$250. Mota Singh himself worked for the second man, who now leased the land formerly leased by Mota Singh, and the auto was also used by Georgia May, the Anglo wife of yet a fourth Hindu farmer.²⁷

As more Punjabis filed, suspicious creditors began to challenge the claims. In one case, a line of bank credit obtained by a farmer was based on his stated 2/3 interest in a cotton crop; it turned out he had only 1/3 interest, and the bank wanted its advance repaid. In this 1922 case, the Court referee had a difficult time finding a competent trustee, and 'In practically all of these Hindu cases, neither I nor the trustee have been able to uncover any tangible assets ...'; the bank had to accept this farmer's assurance that he would try to repay.²⁸ It was hard to challenge the Punjabis, who kept no books or kept them in 'Hindu', and it was hard to collect as well. In one contested case, the man owing money was said to have gone back to India. An Anglo disputed that, saying 'no Hindu ever leaves this country to go to India — they know they can't get back again'.²⁹ Another frustrated creditor testified, 'In my opinion Moola Singh is very well covered up, I had a judgment against him and chased him all over the country without success'.³⁰

It seems clear that the Punjabis' more elaborate bankruptcy strategies were reactions to increasing discrimination. In the middle of this period of bankruptcy cases, in 1923, the Asian Indian battle for U.S. citizenship was lost. The Supreme Court decided against Bhagat Singh Thind, who had appealed his loss of U.S. citizenship. The judge held that while persons from India were Caucasian, they were not 'white persons' in the popular meaning of the term,³¹ and therefore they, like the Japanese and other Asians, were aliens

²⁵ The first case was filed by a Muslim partnership from Calexico and it dragged on for several years. Mistakenly, all filed as individuals and also as a partnership (these are the first 6 cases in Table II, cases 3740, 4014, 4015, 4016, 4017, and 4018): *Ibid.*

²⁶ Case 6212, *ibid.*

²⁷ Case 4752, *ibid.*

²⁸ Case 4352, *ibid.*

²⁹ Mr. Roberts, in Case 6121, *ibid.*

³⁰ Case 6170, *ibid.*

³¹ See Harold S. Jacoby, 'More Thind Against Than Sinning', *Pacific Historian*, 11 (Nov. 1958), pp.1-2, 8.

ineligible for citizenship. The most significant consequence of this ruling was the application to Asian Indians of California's Alien Land Law, devised to reverse the rapid Japanese progress in agriculture by prohibiting the leasing and owning of agricultural land by aliens ineligible to citizenship.³²

Despite the setback represented by these bankruptcies and the imposition of the Alien Land Law, the persistency rate of the Punjabi farmers was high. There are several reasons for their persistence in agriculture. The one most commonly alleged, their marriages to Mexican-American women who could hold land for them, was the *least* significant. Many of these men were already married by the early 1920s, when the Alien Land Law became applicable to them. Despite their status as husbands and fathers, the bankruptcy petitions show that they seldom claimed possessions deserving of exemptions from seizure or invoked a wife and family in any way. In one of the few bankruptcies where a Punjabi's wife was involved ('a Mexican girl', the Court termed her), the Punjabi stated that he worked for his wife's brother who owned the ranch but worked elsewhere. This was a transparent attempt to retain land by putting it in his brother-in-law's name.³³

Some Punjabi farmers did try to hold land through their Hispanic relatives, although all too often this involved legal or personal risks. One man said defiantly: 'Two years ago I married a Mexican woman and through her I am able to secure land for farming. Your land law can't get rid of me now; I am going to stay'.³⁴ His statement was technically incorrect, since a married woman's legal status was that of her husband. Although persons from Mexico were aliens eligible to become U.S. citizens, a woman marrying an ineligible alien became ineligible herself.³⁵ This legal technicality was sometimes overlooked, however, since in the Imperial County records there are a few instances of a Mexican wife holding land on behalf of a Punjabi farmer. Another reason the strategy involving a wife or her family was seldom utilized lay in the instability of the Punjabi Hispanic marriages and the Punjabi farmers' fear of California's community property law in the event of divorce.³⁶ The possibility that marital conflict could lead to the loss of half one's land was a powerful deterrent to trusting the Hispanic spouses and their families.

The most significant reason for the persistence of the Punjabi farmers was their success in dealing with Anglos. Most Punjabis worked out verbal understandings with Anglo farmers, bankers, and lawyers. Bank directors and

³² See Yuji Ichioka, 'Japanese Immigrant Response to the 1920 California Alien Land Law', *Agricultural History*, vol. 58, no. 2 (April 1984), pp.157-78.

³³ Case 6212, Bankruptcy records, *op. cit.*

³⁴ 1st interview, Ram Chand, 1 June 1924, El Centro, by William C. Smith, box no. 28, #232; 2nd interview, Inder Singh, 31 May 1924, El Centro, by W.C.S., box no. 29, #273, both in the Survey of Race Relations, *op. cit.*

³⁵ The Cable Act of 1922 mandated this change of the wife's status. It may explain why one man's mother-in-law held land for him: Ernestina Zuniga for K. Bishen Singh, 17 June 1925, Grantor, Index to Deeds, Imperial County.

³⁶ See Karen Leonard and Bruce LaBrack, 'Conflict and Compatibility in Punjabi-Mexican Immigrant Families in Rural California: 1915-1965', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 46:3 (Aug. 1984).

lawyers held land in their names for Punjabi clients. The Director of the Holtville Bank did this, earning for his bank the name 'Hindu Bank'; he also became guardian himself to the sons of one of Holtville's biggest Punjabi farmers.³⁷ Anglo companies dealt directly with the Punjabis, and Anglo farmers fronted for them to the extent of handling all checks and banking on their behalf. One Punjabi farmer travelled to Los Angeles to ask a dairy owner to turn over to him the management of the Imperial Valley dairy farm; he got the job.³⁸ Another went there to confront a big cotton company and demand that he, not the man in whose name the lease was written, be given the money directly. When this same man found it necessary to put his Mexican brother-in-law's name on a lease, he gave an Anglo storeowner a second mortgage on the property. Then, when the brother-in-law tried to take over the property, the Anglo ally invoked the second trust deed and prevented it.³⁹ Even the judges in the Valley sometimes held land for Punjabi farmers or leased land for them. Those who helped the Punjabis were rewarded with live chickens at Christmas, deposited in gunny sacks under their Christmas tree. At least once, a judge received a sack of money as well.⁴⁰

These relationships with powerful Anglo patrons were not ones in which the Punjabis considered themselves subordinate. One farmer's account of an El Centro landowner who 'fronted' for him reveals the personal nature of the relationship:⁴¹

He was an honest man, with a cap, a little cap, eyeglasses, a cigar. He was single, still single, and old man. You know what he had? One room, maybe a 50 cent room, with all his checkbooks, two boxes filled up, all his cancelled checks in two boxes. I went to his room lots of times, we sat out there in the 50 cent room he had. He took one glass of beer, that's all. He didn't want to spend money

Once we went together to a cotton gin in Indio through Westmoreland. We stopped in a restaurant, we ate, and they charged me 40 cents for the food we ate there

'Oh my God', he said, 'this is too much'. All the way coming and going from Indio to Brawley, he didn't forget that 40 cents. He said, 'They charge too much. I spend 15 cents, 25 cents, and I eat all I want to, in El Centro'.

I said, 'Parker, that's a highway road, you know, they want to make money'.

'No', he said, 'that's too much'.

³⁷ Interviews with Keith Savage, Joe Anderholt, Bob and Karmen Chell, all in Holtville, 1981.

³⁸ Interview with Pancho (Francisco) Singh, Selma, 1983, about his father, Inder Singh.

³⁹ Interview with Mola Singh, Selma, 1983.

⁴⁰ Interview with Betty Harris and Bob and Karmen Chell, Holtville, 1981.

⁴¹ Interview with Mola Singh, Selma, 1983.

But he was a very good man, honest. Two years we worked together. He liked me, but it was too much trouble, you know.

The Punjabis also borrowed a strategy pioneered by the Japanese all over California and worked as 'foremen' for land companies, corporations of Anglos (often outsiders) who leased the land and arranged for the Punjabis to farm it.⁴² The final strategy, one not employed until a Grand Jury investigation and subsequent indictment by the District Attorney imperiled these corporations, was to put land in the name of one's minor children and manage it as legal guardian through the probate court. Although Imperial County ultimately lost its 1933 case against four Punjabis and five Anglos who had conspired to evade the land law by using a corporation,⁴³ most Punjabis with property in the Valley registered in 1933-34 as guardians of their citizen children. The local court system cooperated by setting a single reporting date for all of the Punjabi probate cases. The reports were delivered by their one or two lawyers for fifteen minutes once a year.⁴⁴

Others who helped the Punjabi farmers ranged from the telephone operators, who became adept at interpreting their broken English during their calls, to the dealers in trucks and farm supplies. Roy Womack of Womack's Chevrolet in El Centro, for example, habitually filled out blank cheques for his Punjabi customers. He admired their linguistic skills: once two Punjabis came in with a Mexican woman, he recounted and 'one of them stood there and spoke Hindu [sic.] to his brother, Mexican to his wife, and English to me -- they learned'. It was not unusual for a Punjabi to give his checkbook to the Electric Company clerk so the clerk could fill in the amount before the Punjabi made his mark. To repay their friends, Punjabi farmers left money with storeowners in the town, with orders to 'tell Mrs. X to buy something pretty for herself or the children'.⁴⁵

Above all, the Punjabis helped themselves by their pride and self-confidence. When their children were relegated to the Mexican schools in the rural, segregated school systems, some Punjabi fathers stormed down and demanded that their Aryan children be admitted to the white schools.⁴⁶ They were subjected to the same prejudices as the Mexicans in many ways, yet the Punjabi farmers walked into the local banks and requested credit lines

⁴² Ichioka, 'Japanese Immigrant Response...', *op. cit.*

⁴³ In 1933, four Punjabis and five Anglos were tried; the Punjabis were sentenced to prison while the Anglos were acquitted or fined. The Punjabis appealed on a technicality, and the verdict was thrown out. See the records in the County Clerk's office, Imperial County, and my article, 'Punjabi Farmers and California's Alien Land Law', *Agricultural History*, 59:4 (Oct. 1985), pp.549-62.

⁴⁴ Interview with former Sheriff Herbert Hughes, Dec. 1981; Probate records, Civil cases, Office of the County Clerk, El Centro.

⁴⁵ Interviews with Roy Womack, Mrs. Wheat, both in El Centro, 1981; Joe and Dorothy Anderholt of Holtville, 1981, and William Ewing, El Centro, 1981.

⁴⁶ Interviews with Mrs. Silveria Chell and Mrs. Lala Garewal, Holtville, 1982; and Fernando S. Sanga, Brawley, 1981.

and loans; their Mexican in-laws were not able to do that.⁴⁷ They hired lawyers and used the court system extensively, as we have seen.

They used both formal institutions and informal networks to secure political resources. When the Mohammedan Club needed someone to type up its Constitution, its President asked the daughter of Holtville's most popular restaurant owner to do it. When the same club needed a place to meet, the President requested and got the Swiss Club premises from his German Swiss farmer friend -- the Italian Swiss were not admitted to those same premises for many more years.⁴⁸ One determined old Sikh, finally denied a driving license because of his failing sight, got in his car with his 13 year old son and drove all the way to Sacramento, stopping in Stockton at the Sikh temple on the way to secure political assistance; he came back with a driving license.⁴⁹ These were men who knew how to get what they wanted from the system, men accustomed to working with British officials back in the Punjab.

Intensely political but barred from U.S. citizenship for over two decades, the Punjabis nevertheless constantly engaged in political battles. Some of these were among themselves and against the British back in India.⁵⁰ They also fought stubbornly for U.S. citizenship, raising money and paying their more educated urban countrymen to lobby on their behalf.⁵¹ When Asian Indians finally secured the right to citizenship by virtue of the Luce-Cellar bill in 1946, even those who had once been citizens and had been stripped of their rights reapplied for U.S. citizenship. In Imperial County, 68 old timers applied then. Their ages ranged from 48 to 84 and their average age was 66. From 1947 to 1953, there were only two Punjabi applications per year, but from 1954 through 1958 41 of the men applied for citizenship.⁵² It is no coincidence that in 1956 the first U.S. Congressman from India was elected from the Imperial Valley, Dalip Singh Saund. An educated man who farmed for his living there, he had been one of the leaders in the Indians' fight for citizenship, and he won re-election twice.⁵³

The picture of the Punjabi pioneers furnished by local records in Imperial County is one of aggressive entry into the agricultural economy.

⁴⁷ Interviews with Keith Savage, past President of the Holtville National Bank, in Holtville, 1981, and Carl Jacobson, past President of the Brawley Bank, in Brawley, 1982.

⁴⁸ Interview with Joe and Dorothy Anderholt, Holtville, 1982.

⁴⁹ Interview with Bob and Karmen Chell, Holtville, 1981.

⁵⁰ See the articles by Emily Brown and Mark Juergensmeyer in *Population Review*, 25:1 and 2 (1982); these give further references.

⁵¹ Interview with Bagga S. Sunga, El Centro, 1981; R. Narayanan, 'Indian Immigration and the India League of America', *Indian Journal of American Studies*, 2 (Hyderabad, May 1972), pp. 1-29.

⁵² Naturalization petitions, 1946-58, Office of the County Clerk, El Centro. Thanks to Mrs. Swingle for seeing to the xeroxing of petitions for me.

⁵³ Saund's Republican opponent was Jacqueline Cochran, the woman pilot; he ran as a local Judge with a strong record of putting down corruption in the northern end of the valley. His autobiography, *Congressman from India* (New York, 1960) gives disappointingly few details of his life and farming operations.

Beginning as laborers, they moved quickly into the leasing and owning of land, using the legal system to secure their rights and resolve conflicts. When the Alien Land Law barred them from direct exercise of these prerogatives, the Punjabis found ways to continue farming. They worked with local and absentee Anglo landlords and with local bankers and lawyers to gain access to land and credit. Most of the men were illiterate, but they built records as dependable customers so that those they patronized helped them keep their records and write their checks. They wanted to become U.S. citizens and when that right was finally secured they exercised it vigorously, electing one of their number to the U.S. Congress.

The descendants of the Punjabi men, most of them half-Hispanic, know little about the Punjab and British India themselves. But they have vivid memories of the way their fathers spoke about that world, spoke about it often and with passion. The men hated being 'slaves'. They wanted freedom and the right to full citizenship, both in India and the U.S. They fought for what they wanted, developing relationships with those who controlled the socio-economic system in rural California. In large measure, they overcame prejudice and legal constraints and gained a place in the local economy. Their descendants speak proudly of their fathers and still claim to be 'Hindu',⁵⁴ and they speculate about how much of the Valley would be theirs today if the Punjabi pioneers had been able to acquire land freely!

⁵⁴ For more about family life and descendants, see my articles 'Pioneer Voices from California: Reflections on Race, Religion, and Ethnicity', in N. Gerald Barrier and Verne A. Dusenbery (eds.), *The Sikh Diaspora: Migration and the Experience beyond Punjab* (New Delhi, Manohar and South Asia Publications, 1989), pp.120-39, and 'Ethnicity Confounded: Punjabi Pioners in California', in Joseph T. O'Connell, Milton Israel, Willard G. Oxtoby, eds., with W.H. McLeod and J.S. Grewal, visiting eds., *Sikh History and Religion in the 20th Century* (Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Toronto, 1988), pp.314-33.