

# **Sikh immigrants in Northern Italy. A case-study: Novellara (RE), Italy**

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## **Abstract**

The paper deals with Indian immigration in Italy, in particular the case-study of Punjabi-Sikh immigrants in Northern Italy, near Reggio Emilia, where in early 2000s the first Gurdwara of Europe was built. The paper is focused on a case-study: the author personal involvement in attending the Vaisakhi 2012 with the Sikh community of Novellara (Reggio Emilia, Italy), in spring 2012. The paper deals with sociological, anthropological and historical perspectives and themes, but also with contemporary Italian policies and mass medias. As far as concerns with Punjabi-Sikh immigrants in Italy, the indological background helps the author to explain the migration phenomena of an Indian community in contemporary Italy. The paper contextualize similarities and differences of social behaviour in motherland and in host country, related to Sikh immigrants. The paper deals with the characteristics of job placement of the Sikh community in Northern Italy: working in farms of the dairy industry, taking care of cows- those cows from whose milk the famous Parmigiano Reggiano is made, a typically Italian cheese. The paper continues on the theme of socialization of the immigrant community abroad: an example of how the Sikh community in Northern Italy socializes and how keeps the religious and social traditions alive is the festival of Vaisakhi, celebrated at Gurudwara and along the street of the city. Lastly, the paper deals with the perception of Sikh immigrants in Italy by Italian mass media and policies, about the turbans and about being a “good” hard-working community. Italy, for long time country of emigration and only recently country of immigration, could give us important insights to understand better

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Indian diaspora. Instead of focusing on countries with long-term history of Indian diaspora, Italy as country of newly migration project is a new field and stimulating context for researching.

## 1. Emigrating from Punjab

Recent statistic numbers say that about one third of the people of greater Punjab, on both sides of the border between India and Pakistan, lives abroad. The greater region of Punjab, united in culture but divided by political borders from 1947, is a flourishing plain, known from centuries as the “granary” of the Indian subcontinent. Nevertheless, since the Green Revolution in the Seventies, Punjab has a high emigration rate, consequence of youth unemployment.

The migration diaspora from Punjab is oriented not only within the Subcontinent, but also abroad, due to a set of push and pull factors. Recently, the Green Revolution of the Seventies and the political crisis of the Eighties were important push factors.

After the Partition of India and Pakistan, and after the division between Punjab and Haryana, Sikh people, the religious majority there, lives scattered by political and administrative borders. The Partition of India and Pakistan on the Western border, similar to what happened to the Eastern border, was a matter of politics, covered by an appearance of religious differentiation, consequence of a politics of divide and rule, “divide et impera” in Latin, by the British Raj.

Haryana was created in 1966 on linguistic basis. According to 2011 Census, Sikhism is the religion of the majority in Punjab, with about 58% of the total population, while Hinduism is the religion of the majority in Haryana, with about 87% of the total population, with Sikhism in the second position, which is about 5% of the total population.

Our research offers a general perspective about emigration from Punjab to Italy, but due to the particularities of the sociological insights of our work, we will limit our dissertation to the Sikh immigrants in Italy, which are the majority of Punjabi immigrants in Emilia-Romagna, the region of our case-study.

During the British Raj, Sikhs were elected, alongside with Maratha and others, as martial race, and recruited in the army. The martial tradition in the Sikhism was a necessarily consequence of a difficult relationship with Mughal emperors. Being part of the British army, Sikhs diaspora began very soon, settled abroad according to British necessities of imperialism and colonialism, in almost all the colonies of the Empire.

From the post-World War II period, Sikh emigration changed and Sikhs immigrants reached developed countries of the world in Northern America and Europe, working in the post-war rebuilding activities: mostly, they reached Canada, U.S.A. and United Kingdom.

With the Green Revolution promoted by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the Seventies, with the consequent modernization of agricultural work, Punjab started suffering from a high rate of unemployment.

Since the Eighties, Mediterranean countries, among them Italy, registered the first Sikh immigrants: the Sikh diaspora of this period is caused mainly by the political crisis of the region and the following civil war. In 1984 the civil massacre took place at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, and a few days later Indira Gandhi was killed by her Sikh security guards. During this period, the political and economic situation of Punjab was tough.

A constant characteristic of Sikh emigration is the strong connection with their birthplace, through newspapers, radios, Internet, festivals and, surely, remittances. Remittance is a strong factor of change in modern Punjab, and is a life-long lasting umbilical cord for the Sikh immigrants. The situation is similar to other region where remittances have a strong influence in the local economy: i.e. relating to Bangladeshi immigrants, Sylhet for Bangladeshi immigrants in U.K. and Shariatpur, Dhaka for Bangladeshi immigrants in Italy.

Regarding the nexus between remittances and local economy, or between remittances and politics, an eloquent example about the Sikh diaspora is the political movement of secession of Punjab from India, in order to create a Sikh country, known as Khalistan: this movement was undoubtedly supported economically and ideologically by Sikh emigrants through their remittances.

## **2. Sikh immigration in Italy: the Padana valley**

Indian immigration in Italy raised rapidly, since the Eighties. The majority of Sikh immigrants in Padana valley are employed in the agricultural sector, working with farm animals, mostly cattle. This occupational specialization is explained by alleged experts as an ethnic vocation, since cows are sacred in India.

The reason is the alleged natural and ethnic vocation to work as *bergamino*; on the contrary, studies demonstrate that the major reason is the absence of an alternative work available. Moreover, that isn't a community strategy, in order to obtain an occupational niche, but is a choice driven by necessity. Currently, the fact that Sikh immigrants working as *bergamino* is the result of two factors: a selection made by entrepreneurs and the inner mechanisms of transmission of knowledges and information among Sikh families.

The original contexts of Sikh immigrants in Padana valley is scarcely characterized by extreme poverty. The way to emigration is a consequence of pull and push factors. Italy, among other European countries, after obtaining a Permit of Stay by the immigrant, offers easily a respectable lifestyle, with social benefits and affordable health-care.

The pioneer Sikh immigrants in Italy came during the Eighties with a tourist visa, when Italy had just finished being an emigration country, becoming an immigration country. For that reason, to enter in Italy was quite easy and the regulation laws of immigration were not totally fixed. Only in the Nineties, Italy got its first complete regulation laws of immigration, with the Turco-Napolitano law.

Nowadays the Sikh community is better organized, with middle-persons who organize visa, work and accommodation: not properly legal, it is a profitable activity, in which elder immigrants offer support to new immigrants or about-immigrants, under payment.

At the beginning of the migration project, that is usually a family project in the case of Sikh immigrants in Italy, there is a young and healthy man, who starts the project. Being a migration family project, the woman comes to Italy through family reunification visa ('Ricongiungimento familiare', in Italian), both for the newly-wed wife and for siblings or parents. In the matrimonial market, a Sikh immigrant living in a European country is a tempting marriage prospect. As one can see from the gender ratio, there

are more men than women Sikh immigrants living in Italy.

The circus activity was the first step in the Italian economy by the Sikh immigrants. In the Eighties, Sikh people were working in the circus, traveling all over the country: here we find single men working for a short-term period. After a more stable settlement of long-term period, the migration became a family migration, usually an extended family migration. Sikh immigrants in Italy try to recreate a family network, not only with blood relatives but also with “social” relatives, as relatives of relatives and neighbours of the birthplace.

Indian immigrants in Italy are not equally distributed within the Italian peninsula: there is a high concentration of Indian immigrants in Lombardia and Emilia-Romagna, in Northern Italy, and in Lazio, in Central Italy. In the latter case, the situation of Sikh immigrants is more uncertain, working in the tomato fields in difficult working situations. However, our research deals with Sikh immigrants in Emilia-Romagna, then the situation in Lombardia is quite similar with local differences.

In the Padana valley, the settlement is characterized by the fragmentation in countryside, and usually by isolation. Living marginalized is typical of the work of *bergamino*, with hard work-shifts and geographical fragmentation of farms. The presence in public life of Sikh immigrants in Padana valley is low: here we can speak of “invisibility” of Sikh immigrants. As we will see later, situation is changing with the so-called second generation of Italians, sons of immigrants.

Sikh immigrants have slowly replaced the local people in the work of *bergamino*. What is exactly the meaning of *bergamino*? *Bergamino* is the traditional term of dialectal origins which stand for breeder or farmer. The word *bergamino* comes from the traditional cattle family, typical of farms of the Padana valley, called “razza bergamina”, i.e. *bergamino* race.

The work of *bergamino* is an unpleasant work for local people, who prefer other occupational sectors. Work-shifts are two, one during the afternoon and one during the night, each of five hours.

Beyond hard work-shifts, this kind of work need a immediate availability, i.e. in the case of birth of calf. Therefore is required to the *bergamino* to live next to the farm, usually in houses arranged by farm owners, in order

to intervene fast inside the farm in case of necessity. Differently from local people, Sikh immigrants are more available to this kind of work. Otherwise, Sikh immigrants work as farm-labourers, truck drivers, etc.

Working as *bergamino* is not a natural or ethnic vocation, as someone has proposed, but is a consequence of lacking a decent alternative work. Actually, working as *bergamino* has some good advantages for an immigrants: i.e. good salary, and living for free in the house arranged by farm-owner next to the farm. In order to obtain a family reunification permit, having a big house is required. Moreover, working as *bergamino* is a intermediate period, during which wealth is collected in order to invest, in a further period, buying shops, restaurants, and estates.

Working as *bergamino* is the consequence of a clear migration project, usually of long-period and run by an extended family. The entrance in the work of *bergamino* is simplified thanks to a communitarian network, which provides a passing of knowledge and information. In closing, working as a *bergamino* today provides the easiest way to enter legally in the Italian labour-market.

About Sikh women immigrants, usually they reach Italy following male family members, by a family reunification permit of stay, called “Permesso di Soggiorno per Ricongiungimento Familiare”. Generally they suffer more than the male counterpart the social isolation of work of *bergamino*: the lack of the typical extended family connections are sharper during pregnancy and child-birth. Female counterpart usually doesn't know Italian language, doesn't have a driving license, and doesn't know local public infrastructures. Because of this lacking, female Sikh immigrants suffer the isolation more.

Both for female and for male members, the relationship with public institutions is a matter of need, i.e. for the renewal of permit of stay. The biggest problem is the language, and for this reason, the municipality of Novellara (RE) provides cultural mediators. Usually, sons who had attended the Italian schools help parents to manage with local institutions, i.e. the hospital and the public offices.

### **3. Sikh immigrants in Emilia-Romagna**

Emilia-Romagna has a high rate of long-term immigrant residents, along

with Lombardia, Veneto and Lazio, due to economic and demographic reasons. Within Emilia-Romagna, the provinces with most immigrant residents are those of Parma, Piacenza, Reggio Emilia and Modena. The province of Reggio Emilia has the highest rate of Indian immigration in Italy. The main reason is the possibilities of labour-market in Emilia Romagna, with a rich and stable economy.

In Emilia-Romagna, Indian immigrants are more than 3% of all foreign immigrants, with an irregular distribution, as Indian immigrants in Romagna, the part of the region next to the Adriatic sea, are almost absent. A different situation there is in Emilia, the Western part of the region, the hearth of Padana valley. Within the provinces which are part of Emilia, we find an irregular distribution too, with a high rate in the province of Reggio Emilia. Therefore, Indian immigrants in Emilia-Romagna are mostly Sikh and living in the municipal territory of Reggio Emilia.

The high rate of concentration is due both to economic reasons and to family reunification and communitarian process. In the local economics, Sikh immigrants work in occupational sectors relate with the dairy industry, producing one of the pride of Italian food industry in the world: the Parmigiano Reggiano. Sikh immigrants usually work in the farms, feeding and taking care of cattle.

#### **4. A case-study: Novellara (RE)**

Novellara is a little township of about 14 thousand inhabitants, in the province of Reggio Emilia, Northern Italy, in the middle of Padana valley. In spite of being a little township, Novellara has a consistent immigration rate, mostly of Indian origins, due to specific economic and geographic reasons. In 2009 the percentage of immigrants was 16%, very high level even for a rich area of Northern Italy: the two production areas involved related to immigrants are the industrial one and the agricultural one. In this last one, we should remember that the traditional economy of Novellara area is the production of a particular good that is, similar to other goods, the Italian pride abroad: Parmigiano Reggiano, a kind of traditional seasoned cheese.

A similar cheese is produced in Lombardia, the Grana Padano: similar to Novellara, there is Pessina Cremonese, in the Padana valley too, but in the province of Cremona, in the region of Lombardia. Pessina Cremonese, similarly to Novellara, has a high concentration of Sikh immigrants.

The municipality of Novellara, as every city with a high immigration rate in Italy, provides to its immigrant inhabitants a set of free services, in order to facilitate the integration with the local people: i.e. free lessons of Italian as second languages, and free help by cultural mediators, usually long-resident immigrants who knows both of the languages required, that can help the new-arrived in their first steps.

About the courses of Italian as the second language, at the end of the term, the municipality provides a proficiency certificate, that could be utilized in order to get the “Permesso di Soggiorno per Soggiornanti di Lungo Periodo”, which literally means a permit of long-period stay.

About the cultural mediators, a professional acknowledged figure, the municipality of Novellara provides mediators for each of the most widespread communities of the area: his task is to facilitate the dialogue between the public institutions and immigrants. About South Asian languages, the municipality of Novellara has different mediators of Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi language.

As far as concerns with the social policies, the municipality of Novellara has several information point and devices in order to promote its services, usually multi-language fliers and internet pages. Moreover, there is a strong collaboration with NGOs of the area, i.e. Pro.Di.Gio and Nessuno Escluso. Within this collaboration, the municipality of Novellara and the NGOs yearly organize the Vaisakhi celebration with the Sikh community, along the streets of Novellara.

During the Vaisakhi parade, which we had the opportunity to join some years ago, the streets of Novellara are closed to traffic, with the help of local police and of Sikh volunteers. The procession, with songs and prayers, by feet, starting from the *gurudwārā*, which is located in the peripheral industrial estate, going through the streets of the historical center of Novellara, made up during the medieval period, then reaches the area of a football field, where are usually celebrated local festivals.

Actually, is quite astonishing the contrast between the township, with a square and building of medieval period, and a multitude of turban-head and long-beard people, usually invisible.

During the way from the *gurudwārā* to the football field, one can finds not

even religious music, but also demonstration of gatka, a kind of Sikh martial art, various exhibitions, offering of chai-biscuits and so on. The *granthī* is seated on the top of a tractor, guiding the prayers and the repetition of mantras, i.e. the famous “Sat Nām Wahe Gurū”. Beyond the religious meaning, the Vaisakhi has an important social function, collecting Sikh people of different townships from the neighborhood. The Vaisakhi is a moment of crucial importance for the reunification of a collectivity of people usually scattered in the countryside, busy with family and work.

5.



In Novellara there is the first *gurdwārā* built in Italy, inaugurated in the year 2000 by the former President of European Union, Mr Romano Prodi, who is originally from a city nearby: this place of worship is the pride of the local Sikh community, being the first *gurdwārā* in Italy. It was built entirely by their economic efforts, with private donations. Actually, the Italian Constitution doesn't recognize the Sikh community as a religious community, a situation that would bring benefits. Currently, there are in Italy several *gurdwārā*, and the biggest one is the one in Pessina Cremonese (CR), inaugurated in 2011 in front of hundreds of Sikh immigrant resident in Northern Italy. The *gurdwārā* of Novellara has a website ([www.sikhismo.com](http://www.sikhismo.com)).

com), where are advertised festivals and news, written also in Italian.

The *gurudwārā* is located in the industrial estate of the township, among several industrial warehouses. It is a place of worship, but even a place of socialization, where the community meets during religious festivals and holidays, usually on Sunday. There is a volunteering association, called Gurudwārā Singh Sabhā, who manages the temple, expenses included. Attached to the gurudwārā, there is also a langar, a canteen where are served vegetarian meals to devotees and visitors.

Any person could enter the gurudwārā, irrespective of religious appurtenance: the only thing needed is to take off the shoes and cover the head with a scarf or bandana. The valour of hospitality is in line with what is written on the doorway of the canteen at the Golden Temple in Amritsar: *The Lord himself is the farm. Himself he is the farmer. Himself he grows and grinds the corn.* We find this statement especially fitting, due to the reference to farm and farmer.

Outwardly, the *gurudwārā* is similar to the other warehouse of the industrial zone, but on the top there is the *khānda*, the traditional Sikh emblem. Due to the organization of working days in Italy, the *gurudwārā* is popular mostly on Sunday and during national holidays.

## 6. How Sikhs are perceived by Italian people

In the Italian press, Sikh immigrants are represented usually as a positive community. Sometimes they are elected as “favourite” immigrants, because of their alleged humble disposition of character. In the press, are characterized as living in a closed community, absorbed in food and cricket only.

Local press pleased the Sikh community, describing them as a hard-working community, focused on the valour of work and family: for these reasons, the Sikh community is elected as “favourite” immigrants by local people. Ironically, they surely don’t know that “Sikh” literally means “Talib”, someone who is studying, term that in the common discourse is associated with Al-Qaeda, due to recent history.

The stereotype of a Sikh by a common Italian is a hard-working, humble and polite person, focused on religious and family issues, invisible in the daily-life, living and working in the countryside. Scarcely found in articles

of crime news, Sikh community is not perceived as responsible of “invasion” of immigrants, a theme that frequently appears in the discourse of politicians of right-wing parties.

In the national press, usually Sikh immigrants are represented as farm workers, equating Sikhs as *bergamino*: this stereotype is reinforced by the idea that the Sikh community has naturally an aptitude to work in the dairy industry, working with cows and milk, given that in India cow is sacred. Sikhs immigrants in Italy are frequently called “turban-head bergamini”: in fact, they work in the industry of Parmigiano Reggiano, a famous Italian seasoned cheese, having replacing the former type of *bergamino*.

Often in the local and national press is come to light how Italian industry of Parmigiano Reggiano and Grana Padano, both traditional seasoned cheese originally from Padana valley, is, despite the economic crisis, flourishing, mostly thanks to Sikh immigrants who still work in that industrial sector.

It works like a refrain in Italian press: a symbol of Italian food industry is surviving to different kind of problematic thanks to Sikh immigrants, who in the past decades had substituted the local workers. In the Padana valley, there is a surname that is growing year by year: Singh.

In the local press, the arrival of Sikh immigrants is acclaimed as providential, where turban-head foreign workers are filling the gap left behind by retired local workers. Their workplace was not occupied by their sons, but by brown-complexion immigrants, coming from a distant country, and with a bizarre hat. Working in the dairy industry means few holidays, because cattle need to be feed on Saturday night too.

Sikh immigrants are usually perceived as nice by Italian people: an explanation can be the doubtless usefulness of Sikh immigrants, working in the agricultural industry, which is a work uncomfortable for Italian people. They are perceived as nice for another reason, that is being harmless, regarding law and order. The local press has elected them as “ideal” immigrants.

Here a portion of an article:

<<La manodopera delle nostre stalle e dei nostri caseifici viene da lontano. Dalla regione del Punjab, la terra dei cinque fiumi, simile alle pianure di qui. Degli indiani che mandano avanti la fil-

iera del grana ci accorgiamo adesso, adesso che i loro bambini arrivano sui banchi di scuola. Il loro è stato un insediamento silenzioso fatto di una vita appartata nelle fattorie, di matrimoni tra conterranei, sempre estranei ai fatti di cronaca nera. La loro quotidianità è fatta di sveglie all'alba, della mungitura delle quattro, tutti i giorni, di vitelli che vengono al mondo, di macchine succhia latte e di forme rotonde che vanno messe a stagionare. [...] La fattoria di fronte è gestita da un sardo. Prima di loro il mungitore era siciliano. Singh è felice di farmi vedere la stalla, si aggiusta il turbante blu per le foto, si lamenta solo delle tante volte che ha dovuto portare documenti e documenti per i permessi di soggiorno. [...] Tutti e due i matrimoni sono stati «combinati» e durano da più di vent'anni. I fidanzati, spesso, si vedono la prima volta in internet, le famiglie fanno il «contratto», e si uniscono grazie ad un volo aereo appena l'alloggio lo consente.>>

(In our farms and in our cheese factories, manpower comes from far. Comes from Punjab, the land of five rivers, similar to our valley here. We become aware just now, now because their sons go to our schools, that there are a lot of Indian who work in our cheese factories. Their settlement was silent, their life is secluded in distant farms, their weddings are among their people, and they are unrelated to crime news. Their daily-life is to wake up at dawn, to milk cows at 4 am, every day, to help cows giving birth to calf, to switch on the milking-machine, to keep seasoning rounds of cheese. The farm in front of their one is managed by a Sardinian man. Before of them, the farmer was a Sicilian man. Singh is happy to show me their farm; he fixes his blue turban to snap some photos. He complains only because he had to collect numerous documents in order to get a Permit of Stay. Both the two marriages were arranged marriage, and they last from more than twenty years.)

Local and national press are not really interested in increasing their knowledge of a different culture, but are interested in perpetuating a stereotype. The wrong assertion is that Sikh immigrants choose the Padana valley because it reminds them the environment of Punjab. The second wrong assertion is that they choose to work along with cattle because in India cows are sacred. As we have tried to demonstrate in our paper, the truth is distant.

We cannot underestimate that Sikh immigrants are frequently excluded

and marginalized from the Italian society, and often they are invisible. The situation is changing nowadays with a new generation of Italian of Indian origins, that so-called “second generation”, who are educated in our schools.

Differing from other developed countries, the Italian traffic laws doesn't derogate for Sikh community to wear a helmet while driving a bike. Not wearing a helmet is punishable by laws. Another restriction is about wearing the traditional knife, due to the fear of terrorism that shake Italy and other European country in the last fifteen years.

## 6. Conclusions

Our aim is to demonstrate that Sikh immigrants in Italy are working in the dairy sector not for a natural or ethnic vocation, but for historical and economic factors. Moreover, the stereotype that describes Sikh immigrant as *bergamino* is strong and deeply-rooted in the popular consciousness, as shown by the local press.

The most compelling problem of Sikh immigrants in Northern Italy is their invisibility, due to workplace reason. We cannot speak of a true integration, as much as concerns with the first generation of Sikh immigrants.

We need to remember that Italy is a country of recent immigration, in contrast with a long story of emigration abroad: we urge to resolve our immigration issues with deep and strong social policies, treasuring our experience of emigration abroad. Our biggest and interesting challenge is with the second generation of immigrants, the sons of the pioneers, who attend schools with our sons.

My hope is addressed to reform our citizenship system, converting our *ius sanguinis* model into a *ius soli* model: our history of emigration, as *ius sanguinis* model stands, need to be reformed into a *ius soli* model, to meet the challenges that Italy faces in the III millennium.

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