

Riste and Ristedari:

the significance of marriage in the dynamics of transnational kinship networks

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Abstract

Based on the author's long standing ethnographic experience of developments with Punjabi ethnic colonies in the UK as well as their members' villages of origin in India and Pakistan, together with the additional insight which he has gathered in the course of preparing over 250 expert reports for use in civil, criminal and immigration proceedings in UK courts – the vast majority of which were in some way concerned with issues of kinship and marriage – this chapter seeks to trace the role which marital ties have played in facilitating the process of South Asian migration to Britain. Arguing that affinal ties are at least as significant of those of descent in the construction of transnational networks 'from below', the paper also explores the far reaching impact which variations in marriage rules have had on the evolution of such networks, as well as on the location and character of patterns personal distress which can also be experienced by those involved in transnational marriages. It concludes by suggesting that 'the devil is in the detail', and that when those involved in such marriages find themselves in severe distress, the difficulties they encounter are invariably much better understood as the outcome of the micro-politics of interpersonal relationships within the spouses immediate kinship networks than of the phenomenon of transnational marriage per se.

Kinship reciprocities have played a major facilitating role in almost every large-scale process of transnational migration, as well as in the processes of ethnic colony construction to which these processes regularly give rise. It is not difficult to see why Whilst the very earliest pioneers of such movements usually washed up – sometimes quite literally – at their destination as a result of exposure to unexpected contingencies way beyond their personal control, the vast majority of those who followed in their footsteps had a much better appreciation of just where they were going. Hence most migrants make their way to their chosen destination because they have prior knowledge of the opportunities available there, and because information about the existence of those opportunities and the best way to reach them has been passed back through channels of kinship, friendship and clientship from earlier predecessors who have already begun to establish a toehold in some distant niche. As a result what may seem at first sight to be mass migratory movements invariably turn out, on closer inspection, to be grounded in multitude of kin- and locality-specific processes of chain migration which together have had the effect of delivering large numbers of migrant workers from relatively poverty-stricken areas in the rural periphery into labour-hungry industries in the metropolitan core (Gardner 1995, Helweg 1986, Shaw 1988, Watson 1975, Werbner 1987).

Much of my own work on emigration of Indian and Pakistani Punjab (Ballard 1975, 1982, 1983, 1988, 1990, 1994, 2004) has focused on the dynamics of such processes of chain migration, and as my understanding of the dynamics of these processes has developed, on the far reaching impact which the specific character of the kinship conventions (and most especially of the marriage rules) has had in structuring the differential dynamics of processes

of migration, the precise way in which ethnic colonies and developed, and the distinctive character of transnational networks which members of each set of migrants have constructed around themselves. However having reviewed the arguments and analyses which I and other commentators so far produced, I have grown acutely conscious that I have as yet paid far too little attention to the gendered dimensions of these processes, and in particular to the immense significance of the affinal ties generated by marriage. This article sets out to restore the balance.

That accounts of migration processes – and most especially those focussing on emigration from northern India and Pakistan – should initially have focused primarily on male is hardly surprising. Given the strongly patrilineal and patriarchal character of kinship conventions in this region, the obstacles faced by any woman seeking to engage in spatial entrepreneurship were enormous: with the exception of families drawn from the upper echelons of the urban elite, the prospect of a lone woman taking up employment at some distant destination was viewed regarded as scandalous. Moreover even in regions where it was regarded as more acceptable for women to do as – as for example in Kerala, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines – the demand for female labour at lower end of the international employment market was very limited.

However in recent years opportunities for women to set off as migrant workers in their own right have increased by leaps and bounds. Just like the niches into which their male counterparts initially stepped, these were largely restricted to the menial sector of the labour market, albeit with a feminine twist: hence whilst nursing stood at the top end of the scale of the opportunities available, the rest fell swiftly down the scale through care assistants, maids and cleaners, with sex work right at the bottom. As it happens, however, very few women belonging to the Punjabi communities of which I have direct empirical experience took up the opportunity to become labour migrants in their own right, with the result that I have not attempted to discuss the experiences of women who moved directly into any of the occupations listed above in this paper. Instead I have focussed my concern on the many gendered subtexts which have emerged within – and which in doing so often powerfully qualified – the organisation of a set of transnational networks in which male migrants nominally occupied a position of unchallenged hegemonic dominance.

Marriage, patrilinearity and female agency

In contexts where kinship networks are as strongly patrilineal as they are patriarchal in character, it is all too easy to underestimate the scope for female agency, as well as the significance of processes of affinally- as opposed to agnatically-oriented kinship reciprocity. It easy to see why. In cultural contexts in which gender hierarchies are sharply marked, where the normative subordination of women to men is taken for granted, and where conventions of *sharam* and *purdah* but substantial limits on female participation in public affairs, hence confining them – with greater or lesser degrees of rigour – to the domestic domain, opportunities for female agency appear, at least on the face of things, to be highly restricted. Moreover when marriages are arranged by the elders, such that young women have little or no say in the choosing of their spouse, it is all too easy to conclude that women who find themselves will by definition be almost completely powerless, and regularly reduced to positions in which they become little more than pawns in male power-plays.

But whilst the positions of formal subordination to which Punjabi women are conventionally allocated cannot be gainsaid, to assume on this basis that the terms and conditions of every

aspect of their existence is wholly determined by male hegemony, whose demands they are wholly incapable of resisting, is most misleading. On the contrary close ethnographic inspection of the quotidian processes of everyday life soon reveals that Punjabi women – just like members of all other excluded and subordinated groups – have in fact developed an immense capacity for agency, even if they frequently have no alternative but to deploy what Scott (1985) has graphically described as ‘the weapons of the weak’ to achieve their goals. To cite some brief examples, even if women find themselves circumscribed by male power, it also follows that the more strictly the rules of gender-segregation are enforced by conventions of *purdah*, the more autonomous of male power the occupants of the *zenana* tend to become. Hence within the limits of their own domain the women gain an ever more enhanced capacity to pursue their own ends on their own terms. However, close inspection reveals that this capacity is distinctly double edged. Whilst it does indeed provide extensive scope for the development of what can best be described as solidarities of sister-hood, and most especially for the construction of space within which to mock, circumvent and generally belittle the nominal moral, physical and sexual powers of men, it also provides the occupants of that space with an opportunity to construct internal hierarchies of their own. The almost unlimited power which a mother-in-law is often able to exercise over a newly married daughter-in-law is the classic example of such a relationship.

In domestic arenas as in so many other contexts, a knowledge of the rules of the game is only a starting point for understanding what is going on, since actually playing the game is all a matter of strategy and tactics. Hence whilst everyone acknowledges the importance of the rules, success depends on the skill with which those involved manage to outmanoeuvre their rivals and opponents – most satisfyingly by playing all sorts of dirty tricks whilst staying very carefully within the letter of the law. Hence the moment one distinguishes between the rules of the game and the ways in which the game is actually played, a whole new world opens up. An obvious example is the rules of *izzat*. Whilst these insist that women lose all honour – and hence bargaining power – if public appearances suggest that their personal behaviour is anything other than comprehensively modest, it would be a great mistake to assume that private realities are necessarily congruent with public appearances. Precisely because they have shown their husbands such respect in public, Punjabi women are in an even better position to berate them for their inadequacies in private. Husbands can, of course, respond with violence, but those that do lose face, not least in the eyes of the other women in the household. Moreover in my experience very few Punjabi women are prepared to tolerate being treated as doormats, and as a result have devised all manner of strategies of self-defence with which to counter male pomposity and stupidity. As is to be expected in the case of weapons of the weak, their strategies tend to be much more symbolic than physical. Using the vigour and symbolic resourcefulness of the Punjabi language, women are passed masters in the construction of *thanē* (insulting taunts carefully wrapped up in *double entendre*) which they regularly throw anyone who has the temerity to try to put them down. Of individuals vary in their capacity to deploy such tactics; what is clear however, is that those who can thereby claim the moral high ground often find they have an effective counter to those who seek to rely on the crudeness of brute force to get their way.

However it is not just on the extent and significance of female agency on which I want to focus in this article: rather I want to press the argument on still further to explore the way in which similarly structured (and equally strongly gendered) sub-texts also underpin the complex patterns of affinal reciprocity between extended families to which Punjabi marriages give rise. In doing so I also want to explore the extent to which these countervailing sub-texts to the widespread public perception that South Asian kinship systems are grounded in a

condition of untrammelled male hegemony have been reinforced (and in some cases disastrously undermined) when marriages of this kind are constituted on a transnational basis.

The spatial consequences of marriage

Marriage always has spatial consequences: every new conjugal partnership can usefully be regarded as a seed from which a freestanding domestic group will eventually emerge. Sometimes germination is immediate, especially in contexts where Euro-American conventions of nuclear-family (or to be more precise, nuclear-*household*) construction are the norm. In such cases both spouses promptly move out of their parents' households – if they have not done so already – to set up a new and free-standing household of their own. However in South Asia, as in many other non-European traditions, a very different set of conventions hold. Where multi-generational extended families are the residential norm, a very different pattern holds: the germination of a new domestic group is invariably delayed, and the only spatial development is a transfer of one of the spouses out of one pre-existing domestic group into another of a like kind. Hence when patri-virilocal residence is the order of the day, as it normally is in South Asia, the bride's formal transfer from her natal residence to that of her in-laws a central component marriage rituals. Even if the distance which the bride traverses is no more than a few miles, and sometimes no more than a few yards, each such transfer establishes a relationship of affinal kinship, *ristedari*, between the two families. It follows that all relationships are in principle trans-local in character, in the sense that they establish a web of reciprocities between two spatially separated extended families.

By contrast agnatic relationships (or in other words the ties of reciprocity which bind those linked by relationships of patrilineal descent), not only enjoy a position of nominal dominance over their affinal counterparts, but in principle at least, have no intrinsic spatial dimension. The cooperative co-residence of all its members of all its members under the same roof has always been a symbolically significant component of the Indian joint family ideal. But even though the principle of co-residence is much celebrated, closer inspection soon reveals that so long as family members continue to act *as if* they were still members of a single cooperative household even though they live apart on day to day basis, the underlying unity of the group is not regarded as having been seriously compromised. Hence close inspection of everyday activity within large joint families often reveals that what is publicly represented as a single household also contains a number of 'informal' spatial divisions within it: hence sisters-in-law, dragging their husbands behind them, invariably share domestic resources much less comprehensively than formal ideology suggest they should: indeed they can often be observed to be quietly at war with one another. Similarly if one such unit should hive off spatially – by going off to set up a business in a nearby town, for example, whilst the remainder of the family stays back in the village to cultivate the land – the corporate unity of the extended family is not regarded as having been significantly undermined. The key issue here is whether the commitment to unlimited mutuality amongst joint family members has been sustained; co-residence within a single household is merely a desirable, rather than a necessary, component of the ideal.

In other words whilst affinal relationships have a necessary dimension of translocality in South Asian contexts, nominally entirely parochial relationships of agnatic descent can also readily be translocally extended without seriously threatening the integrity of the family's underlying structures of kinship reciprocity.

Nor is this deviation from the co-residential ideal in any way anomalous, even in South Asia. On the contrary such spatial extensions bring with them two valuable dimensions of strategic

advantage. On the one hand they can act as safety-valves if the tensions precipitated by power-plays between rival members of the extended family become so serious as to threaten the integrity of the group as a whole; meanwhile clear material advantages can also accrue when a spreading of the family's spatial wings also permits them to take greater strategic advantages of a corporate division of labour. Some very clear principles underlie all this. That what holds the family together – regardless of such apparently anomalous spatial extensions – is not just their common moral commitment to the principle of cooperation, but also some hard headed material calculations which lead them to conclude that they are much better off holding together in all their differences than they would be if they fell apart.

If these principles hold good in the relatively parochial confines of the Punjab, there is clearly every prospect that they will continue to do so when such networks go transnational. Insofar as transnational migrants by definition enter territory in which they have no prior foundations of security, building and sustaining structures of reciprocity around themselves. That is just what transnational networks are all about. Hence it should come as no surprise that is precisely the capacity of kinship relationships – both agnatic and affinal, and no less those articulated by women than by men – to generate and support resilient networks of trans-local reciprocity which has led to them playing such a salient role in ordering processes of long-distance migration and settlement.

The growth and character of transnational networks ‘from below’

It goes without saying that networks of this kind stand in sharp contrast to those launched by multi-national corporations operating very firmly above in several crucial senses. Not only are the reciprocities to which they give rise grounded in relationships of kinship, and hence informally rather than bureaucratically constituted, but to the extent that they stretch outwards from some of the most impoverished regions in the developing world and find fertile grounds for expansion in the highly developed economies of the metropolitan world they effectively transgress upon, rather than reinforce, established inequalities in wealth and power. To be sure these countervailing networks emanating from ‘from below’ have as yet attracted far less public attention than their hegemonic counterparts bearing down ‘from above’, but as the twenty first century develops there are good reasons for believing that the multitude of migration-driven transnational networks whose activities are currently expanding so rapidly are set to have as great an impact on the global socio-economic order as did Euro-American multinational in the late-colonial and immediately post-colonial periods. Although networks emanating from below are for the most constituted around kinship reciprocities rather than bureaucratic procedures, and much more transgressive than hegemonic in their impact, their members have displayed just as much ingenuity in devising strategies by means of which to circulate ideas, personnel and financial assets on a global scale, much to the collective advantage of all those involved.

However these networks did not spring into existence out of the blue: most have much deeper historical roots than most Euro-American observers commonly appreciate. And although it is undoubtedly the case they owe their recent rapid growth to Euro-America's chronic shortage of labour power (ironically enough both at the very top of the labour market, as in the case of software engineers, and at the very bottom in terms of cockle-pickers and so forth), two further factors have enabled these networks to become truly transnational. One the one hand migrants' success in utilising the capacities for translocal extension embedded in their kinship networks works to construct and maintain complex relationships of inter-personal reciprocity even when those involved are very rarely in face-to-face contact with one another, and

secondly equally great success in using rapid improvements in communications technology to lessen the significance of those spatial disjunctions. Not only have Jumbo Jets massively reduced the cost of travel and rendered even the most distant of destinations immediately accessible, but satellite television, as well as international dialling and then the internet have had an even more dramatic impact on ease and speed with which information can be transmitted around global networks. Now that communications technology has ceased to be a monopoly of the elite and become readily accessible to all, those operating ‘from below’ have frequently tapped into the resultant opportunities thereby thrown up far more quickly and imaginatively than those still confined by sclerotic parameters of formal systems operating ‘from above’ (Ballard 2004). No wonder there are an increasing number of spheres in which entrepreneurs embedded in global networks pressing upwards ‘from below’ have begun to carry all before them.

Marriage, mobility and household reorganisation

That said, my concern here is not so much with the success of these entrepreneurial networks, but rather with the character of their internal dynamics, and most particularly with the extent to which those dynamics are gendered. Hence the central issues on which I want to focus include:

- i) Given that virtually all these networks are grounded in reciprocities of kinship, in what senses are they gendered, and to what extent does this gendered dimension underpin the long-term viability of each such network?
- ii) If women play at least as significant role as men in processes network construction and maintenance, to what extent have women found that their power has been enhanced (or undermined) as a result of their participation in transnationally extended networks?

As we have already seen, women play a far more active role in South Asian household and family life than is commonly appreciated. Hence whilst transnational networks are invariably assumed to be patriarchal in character, closer inspection soon reveals that women, together with the affinal ties to which their marriages give rise, play a far more active role than is commonly appreciated in developing, maintaining and extending *ristedari*, complex patterns of reciprocity whose smooth operation is the key to the strength and resilience – and hence to the success – of these informal transnational networks. To understand just how and why this is so we must turn our attention to the underlying ethnographic details.

If we start from the perspective of basic building block in the migratory process - the extended family – the whole exercise is best understood as the outcome of a complex and ever-changing admixture of individual and collective considerations. Hence whilst the first pioneering step outwards from any such family is normally made individual male (for in a North Indian cultural context it is regarded being as inappropriate as it is immodest for a woman to act in such an autonomous way), he rarely does so without the active support of his entire extended family. Moreover if his travel expenses (which can often be considerable) are met from the group’s collective resources, it is taken for granted that he will share the benefits accruing from his overseas sojourn with the entire collectivity. But even if his move attracts collective approval, his departure also has immediate personal consequences: not only does it temporarily eliminate the prospect of active conjugal relations between husband and wife, but it also separates fathers from their children. There are only two way in which they necessary downsides of long-distance migration can be remedied: either by taking periodic

furloughs back home, or by taking the more radical step of spatially extending the family through the formation of a more fully-fledged domestic group overseas.

As I have described in some detail elsewhere (Ballard 1994), all the various communities of which Britain's South Asian population is composed have by now long since implemented the second of these alternatives, although the speed with which each group have done so has varied enormously. Whilst such decisions to relocate are invariably multi-causal, almost all of these variations can be traced back in one way or another to differential patterns of interpersonal relationships with the extended family, which are in turn powerfully conditioned by the specific conventions of kinship and gender normatively deployed within each such group. Hence, for example, it was notable that in those groups in with a strong preference for close kin marriage (as in most Pakistani Muslim communities), family reunion took place considerably later than it did amongst Hindus and Sikhs, whose marriage rules are such that virtually all marriages take place amongst non-kin. One reason for this was that whilst the great majority of Muslim brides consequently felt themselves to be a more or less integral part of their in-laws' family, since kinship reciprocities with their in-laws were usually in place before the marriage took place, Hindu and Sikh wives' in-laws were invariably complete strangers. In the absence of prior ties, Hindu and Sikh wives had a much more immediate interest in putting some space between themselves and their in-laws by joining their husbands overseas than did their Muslim counterparts (Ballard 1991).

However this was by no means the only factor that mattered. A further source of differentiation was the strictness with which the conventions of *purdah* – female seclusion – were interpreted as between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, let alone as between the many different communities into which members of these broad religious categories are divided. The greater the strictness with which the conventions were interpreted within any given community, the more nervous their members tended to be of the prospect that their commitment to female modesty might be undermined in a British context, and the more resistant they were to the prospect of women taking waged employment outside the home once they reached the UK. Hence not only did Hindu and Sikh women join their husbands in Britain much more swiftly than their Muslim counterparts, most sought waged employment as a matter of course: amongst other things this greatly enhanced their bargaining power vis-à-vis their husbands. By contrast Muslim women not only joined their husbands considerably later, but very few of those who arrived directly from Punjab took waged employment outside their homes.

Even so, it would be a mistake to assume that Muslims were helpless slaves of the conventions of *purdah*, or that they always waited for their husbands to make the necessary arrangements before setting out to the UK. Not a few arrived unexpectedly, and under their own steam – especially when rumours had reached them which suggested that their husband had become excessively attached to an English girl-friend. In those circumstances scruples about *purdah* were no obstacle: Muslim women were no less active than their Hindu and Sikh counterparts in taking active steps to correct their husbands' errant ways.

But no matter which partner instigated family reunion, and no matter how speedily or tardily the process took place, the arrival of wives and children had a far-reaching impact on the character of the ethnic colonies which sojourners turning settlers had begun to construct around themselves in the UK. Once more fully fledged households were in place there was much less need to take regular furloughs back home: indeed if everyone was to join in, the cost of travel became prohibitive; meanwhile the sharp rise numbers precipitated by family

reunion yet further boosted settlers' commitment to reconstructing all the most salient social, cultural, religious and familial institutions within which they had operated back home. However the resultant ethnic colonies were by no means carbon copies of the original model. Although domestic lifestyles were indeed largely rooted in imported ideas, expectations and behavioural conventions, careful observation soon reveals that they were also the outcome of a careful process of adaptation to the settlers' novel material surroundings. Likewise although each group of settlers consequently made eager efforts to construct a home from home for themselves in the new environment, it would be a great mistake to assume that outcome was merely a whole series of freestanding entities, such that the vigour of their members' contacts with their distant home was destined, of necessity, to pass into free fall.

To be sure some examples of such a cut-off process can be found: the same can be said of all the generalisations I have set out in this chapter. What is clear, however, is that the vast majority of South Asian settlers in the UK pursued precisely the opposite course. By making themselves at home in Britain on their own terms, and thereby constructing their own *Desh Pardesh* (Ballard 1994), settlers may have differentiated themselves spatially from their home base, but this in no way undermined the force networks of kinship reciprocity, both agnatic and affinal, in which they were all still bound. Not only was spatial separation readily overcome by making the maximum use of steady improvements in communications technology, but the increasingly globalised range of opportunities into which settlers were able to tap by virtue of the network membership meant that the material benefits, both actual and potential, of translocal collaboration remained substantial. Nowhere do the prospects of such benefits stand out more clearly than in terms of marriage.

If transnational networks to be anything more than a short term phenomenon, they have to be extended across the generations. If settlers' offspring cannot successfully be plugged into the network of transnational reciprocities in their own right, networks will become increasingly parochial, so much so that when all members of the older generation pass away, the transnational dimension of their network is likely to become extinct. Reciprocities must constantly be renewed if they are to avoid that fate. It is precisely in this context that the role of marriage becomes so vital. Besides binding a further generation into the network itself, network-endogamy provides its members with by far the most effective opportunity to develop and reinforce its spatial dimensions. If that was true back home in the Punjab, it is now becoming apparent that the proposition holds in spades in transnational contexts.

The politics of *rista*

Although the word *rista* can readily be mapped onto the English term 'marriage', it also has a much wider meaning, since it also refers to human relationships of all kinds. Hence in North Indian context the term for kinsfolk is *ristedar* – literally 'those with whom relationships are held'. Given that it is also taken for granted that marriages will normally arranged, and that in doing so they will bring together spouses drawn from two separate but corporately structured extended families, in this context a *rista* does much more than to establish and legitimate the bride and groom's conjugal union. Rather it marks the transfer of the bride out of her natal family and into that of her in-laws, and in doing so sets up a network of affinal relationships between two corporate extended families. The consequent extension of established patterns of *ristedari* provides all those involved with all sorts of opportunities to seek to utilise their participation in this new set of on-going reciprocities to their own advantage. And as we shall see, the benefits (which are by no means necessarily a one-way street) which can accrue from

the skilled manipulation of such affinal linkages are often very considerable, especially in transnational contexts.

In examining the politics of *riste* in this sense, it is worth remembering that the actors who nominally stand at the centre of the whole exercise – the bride and groom – most usually play little or no part in these manoeuvres until their wedding is well behind them. The principal reason for this is that the choice of just who it is that any given *rista* will be conferred is most usually in the hands of the elders on each side, rather than their offspring. Moreover in making their decisions, the factors which most cotemporary western observers assume should be prioritised when it comes to the choice of a spouse – such as the extent to which the couple appear to be personally and psychologically compatible – tend to come way down the list of the elders' priorities. Besides the obvious need to conform to the rules of endogamy and exogamy which are extant within their community, two factors normally loom large in the elders' agenda. Firstly the extent to which any given *rista* can be expected to enhance the material opportunities open to, and above all the status of, the entire extended family; and secondly the extent to which any given choice is likely to enhance the interests, and especially the personal bargaining power, of that particular elder.

Of course elders' priorities have begun to be modified as South Asian kinship networks have moved offshore, but once again careful inspection soon reveals that the extent to which they have changed their priorities have as yet been a great deal less drastic than most outsiders commonly assumed. Where more substantial changes have taken place, however, is in young peoples' priorities, with the result that in overseas contexts the elder's judgements and priorities have begun to be contested – and to be circumvented – ever more actively. However that the choice of *rista* might become a matter of contestation is nothing new at all: rather what has happened is that in transnational contexts the micro-politics of *riste*-construction have gained several additional dimensions.

That said, the shape and character of these manoeuvres are heavily influenced by the marriage rules to which such *riste* have to conform. As noted earlier, one of the central consequences of the rules of exogamy to which Sikhs and Hindus are expected to conform is that further marriages with existing *ristedar* are prohibited, with the result that each new *rista* has to be negotiated from scratch. This can be an extremely tricky business, especially when the family is simultaneously seeking to make a strategically advantageous match, to conceal all the potentially unattractive features of the bride or groom (and indeed any dirty washing which undermines the reputation of the whole family), and to avoid the shame of rejection if they show the hand too early but find themselves rebuffed. On the other hand the need to strike out into the blue each time round – as the rules of exogamy demand – not means that there are few if any intrinsic conflicts of interest between family members on the basis of their prior *ristedari* connections, but also that they are not surrounded by host of existing *ristedar* trying to use those connections to press forward their own interests in the marriage market.

Strategies of *ristedari* when close kin marriage is permissible

Everything works out very differently in those communities where close kin marriage is not only allowed but actively preferred. Before we begin to explore those differences, it is also worth emphasising that it is by no means the case that *all* marriages in such circumstances are necessarily contracted with close kin. On the contrary there all sorts of circumstances in which families decide to strike out into the blue in a similar fashion to the Sikhs and Hindus, particularly when this provides them with an opportunity to cement a

cooperative relationship with a political or business associate by underpinning it with a fully fledged relationship of *ristedari*. Indeed it is also worth noting that the most robust way of achieving that end is through a process of *batta-satta* sister-exchange between the two families. In such circumstances each side holds the other in hostage: hence if one side of the relationship collapses, huge (and usually successful) efforts are likely to be made to collapse the other.

However in most British Pakistani communities – and most especially those whose members ancestral roots lie in Districts Mirpur, Jhelum and Gujrat – marriages with non-kin are much more than exception rather than the rule. It is also worth noting that this is not so much the outcome of an outright *requirement* to marry close kin, but rather because those who set up these marriages have found it strategically advantageous to make such a choice. Why should that be so? The most important reason appears to be sibling solidarity, or more precisely the widespread feeling that siblings should have a right of first refusal in the making of offers of *rista* with respect to each other's children. Hence to refuse such an offer, not so much because one has accepted an alternative offer from some other sibling (which may indeed be disappointing, but is nevertheless regarded as entirely legitimate), but rather on the grounds that an offer has been accepted from someone entirely external to the *biraderi* (descent group) without good reason can easily lead to charges that anyone who so chooses has ignored a fundamental aspect of the obligations of siblingship. In other words it can be taken as an indication of a wish to step right outside the mutual reciprocities of siblingship.

Further rationales are frequently advanced in order to legitimate such choices. Firstly that the Prophet married his favourite daughter Ayesha to his nephew, Hazrat Ali, thus providing the practice with Qur'anic justification; and secondly that such marriages provide a safeguard against property leaking out of the *biraderi*. Although the latter justification may seem to be very reasonable at first sight, it holds very little water in historical terms: although the rules of inheritance set out in the *shari'a* indicate that daughters should also take share in the patrimony, albeit on half the scale of those allocated to their brothers, inheritance practices in this area have always been *de facto* patrilineal. To be sure contemporary developments – which have led to rare (but well publicised) cases of daughters going to court to claim the share of the inheritance laid down in the *shari'a* – may currently give at least some substance to such property-based arguments; however they hold very little water vis-à-vis the past. Hence as far as I can see the exceptional strength of the preference for close-kin marriage in Northern Pakistan is best understood as a well established form of local custom and practice, whose roots are best explained as an outcome of the strategic and emotional impact of sibling solidarity.

Be that as it may, such practices give rise to a rather different set of strategic manoeuvres when it comes to marriage, no less back home in Pakistan than in more transnational contexts. In the first place relatively few *riste* are constructed *de novo*; hence brides can normally expect to arrive in a household in which they already have connections of *ristedari*, such in most cases either their father- or their mother-in law (and sometimes both) is either an uncle or an aunt. It also follows that in these circumstances there is much less scrabbling around to find a 'good' *rista*: there is no great need to consider (or to elaborate) the credentials or status of either bride or groom if the new *rista* simply adds a further dimension to a well established network of reciprocities within the *biraderi*. And whilst considerations of how far the bride and groom have hitherto generally been no greater than in Hindu and Sikh contexts, the probability that the spouses will already be familiar with one another – and that they may even have to suggested to their parents that a *rista* between them would make

sense – is a great deal higher. Given the conventions of *purdah*, if marriages are to be arranged cousin-marriage has a great deal going for it, especially from the perspective of the spouses themselves.

Marriage and the facilitation of migration

As far as movements between Punjab and the UK have been concerned, chain migration has moved through at least three phases. The first phase was one which enabled young adult males could make their way to Britain to access industrial employment, which they could do virtually without hindrance until the mid-1960s. The second was set off when this initial wave of male migrants began to call their wives and children over to the UK to join them: this phase began in the early 1960s for Hindus and Sikhs, and rather later for Muslims, and was more or less complete by the mid 1980s. By then, however, ever more stringent immigration controls had been implemented, and it was widely expected that once this process of family reunion was complete, further immigration from South Asia would drop to a trickle. However those expectations were not fulfilled, largely because of the gradual emergence of a third phase of chain migration, which in this case was facilitated by marriage. By the time the twenty first century opened the first two phases were virtually extinct, and the third had emerged as by far the most effective vehicle through which to facilitate the maintenance of transnational networks in the longer term.

A major causal factor behind this outcome has been the exigencies of English law. While Britain, like most other states, has found it relatively easy to erect border controls designed to exclude pioneer immigrants (i.e. those with no prior ties to the UK), and also to restrict attempts to exercise the right of family reunion solely to their dependent children who are still under the age of eighteen and parents over the age of 60 (always provided that they can demonstrate that there are no other relatives capable of supporting them in the subcontinent, the exclusion of *spouses* of UK citizens has proved very much more difficult task, most especially since the European Convention of Human Rights has gained the force of law. However that has certainly not stopped the authorities making extensive efforts to sidestep the problem, mostly by targeting the cultural specificities of South Asian forms of kinship and marriage. Hence a whole series of steps have been made to prevent the spouses of UK citizens of South Asian descent from entering Britain. They have included:

- Claiming that the marriage is inadequately documented, such that must consequently be deemed invalid.
- Insisting that one or more of the children of the marriage were not sired by the wife's husband, so rendering the application invalid.
- Claiming that the 'primary purpose' of the marriage was simply to gain entry into the UK, so rendering the application invalid.

One by one all these objections have been knocked down, either by the Courts, or by DNA evidence, on straightforward grounds of impracticality, but even so vigorous efforts are still being made to 'plug the gap'. In Britain steps are now being taken to render 'forced marriages' similarly invalid, whilst in Scandinavia all marriages between cousins are now being treated in much the same way. Although the question of whether – and for how long – these measures will withstand legal scrutiny still remains open, all these measures reflect a significant development: the extent to which marriage has become an ever more salient vehicle through which transnational migration can be implemented.

But just why has this occurred? If we were to continue the argument in solely in terms of immigration control – as all too often occurs – the discussion would almost inevitably move

on to consider the ways in which unwanted and unwelcome immigrants have managed to identify all manner of ‘loop-holes’ through which to evade the democratically validated priorities of the vast majority of the indigenous population. Expressed thus, the self serving foundations of such a perspective should also immediately be apparent. Why should *these* spouses coming in from overseas – but not those who have married partners drawn from the indigenous majority – be regarded as ‘unwelcome and unwanted’; and whilst such measures may indeed be supported by most members of the indigenous majority, they are nevertheless patently both racially and ethnically exclusionary in intent. But even if many members of the indigenous majority find these developments disturbing, as they plainly do, just how do they look when viewed from the perspective of those actively involved in these processes?

It would be idle to suggest that in South Asian contexts – no more and no less than in any other – material prospects play a significant role when it comes to choosing a spouse, and having married, on the decision to take up residence. Hence from a South Asian perspective the prospect of making a *rista* with a spouse from Britain, or indeed from anywhere else in the developed world is *ipso facto* an attractive proposition. However this is never the *only* factor which leads so many migrants to seek to arrange marriages for their offspring with a partner from back home: all they are doing is making the same kinds of choices, guided by much the same kinds of priorities as they would have done had they never migrated at all. That is precisely what happened once the second phase of migration was reasonably well under way. Time passed quickly, and it often seemed no more than the blink of an eye before the children of reunited families had left school, and hence the time had come to search out *riste* for them. Parents continued to make their choices with well-established criteria in mind, and from that perspective building further linkages with well-connected families back in Punjab made excellent sense.

Meanwhile from a Punjabi perspective the prospect of arranging a *riste* for one of their offspring with a returnee from the UK was even more attractive. Not only did it offer those families who had missed out on the earlier phases of chain migration an immediate opportunity to plug into a transnational network, but also virtually guaranteed the physical transfer of a family member to the UK. Although post-marital residence had hitherto invariably been patri-virilocal, that convention disappeared almost overnight in the face of the opportunities offered by chain migration. Hence it was not just brides who left to join their husbands and in-laws, as had always been the case, but in such *riste* husbands invariably also set off overseas to join their wives, although in keeping with established conventions I such cases the couple invariably lived separately from their in-laws.

However the marriage market in Punjab was by no means left untouched by these developments. So attractive was the prospect of jumping aboard the transnational bandwagon that overseas-based parents whose children had reached marriageable age found themselves quite literally besieged with offers of *rista*, and to those who had recently left Punjab in comparatively straightened circumstances (why else would have they have left) many of the offers placed before them were extremely attractive. Not only did families of much higher rank than those with which they could have previously have hoped to establish a connection put down tempting offers before them, but they often substantially sweetened those proposals with the addition of a substantial dowry. Such offers were hard to resist.

Problems associated with transnational *riste*

But although the seeking *riste* for ones offspring from back home was consequently the order of the day during the early years of settlement in Britain, it was not long before the resulting marriages began to display an alarming tendency to go wrong. It was not so much that they all went wrong, but the fact that a significant number of such couples clearly found it difficult to reach a satisfactory *modus vivendi*, and that in some case this led to the outright collapse of the union, was enough to set alarm bells ringing, most especially amongst young people themselves.

The most frequent causes of such difficulties were not hard to determine. By the time parents set about arranging their sons' marriages, British-based grooms had often established a more or less illicit relationship with a local girl; if the girl in question was English parents would normally reject the prospect of marriage out of hand, and even if she was a Punjabi woman of the right caste, parents might still object to the prospect of a *rista* out of pig-headedness, feeling that their authority had been impugned and that in any event a better deal could be arranged back in Punjab. Sometimes *riste* back in Punjab did indeed shake errant sons 'back onto the rails' as their parents hoped; but when the brides with whom such brooms were provided turned out to shy and unconfident, and hence unwilling to accompany their new partners in the more 'English' side of their lives, the marriage could all too easily begin to fall apart even when the husband's prior attachments had in fact had very little emotional depth. Ironically enough such brides often found it far easier to establish a working relationship with their mothers-in-law than their husband, even if they frequently found themselves blamed for failing to bring their husband back under control.

British-based brides faced an inverse set of problems. Not only were they disturbed to find that even those grooms who were self-confident and self-sufficient in a Punjabi context could so easily find themselves all at sea in a British context, but also the deep frustration experienced by all those who failed to acclimatise to their new environment with speed could all too easy lead to them growing increasingly jealous of, and hence violent towards, their wives. Such tensions were far from easy to resolve. On the one hand the British-raised bride was indeed much more socially competent, and hence employable, within the context of the surrounding English world stood conventional Punjabi gender-role expectations on their head; and on the other stepping out of such a union had much more serious consequences, most especially in terms of future marriage prospects, for a woman than a man.

The impact of marriage rules

Given that it was Sikh and Hindu settlers, rather than their Muslim counterparts, who first began to reunite their families in the UK, it was British-raised Sikh and Hindu spouses who first began to encounter these problems. As they became more frequent younger sibling began to grow increasingly alarmed by many of their older siblings' marital difficulties, and hence began put pressure on their parents suggesting that it would make much better sense if they looked for a suitable *rista* in the emerging British marriage market rather than doing so back home in the Punjab. Since every *rista* had to be negotiated from scratch, why not start the initial search in the UK, they asked, rather than turning immediately to Punjab? To be sure it might be necessary to turn to Punjab as a last resort, but there were plenty of opportunities to construct attractive *riste* in the UK.

Although many parents remained sceptical about abandoning their long held expectations, and some obstinately dug in their heels, their offspring were in an excellent position to argue that their proposals were no more than common sense. To be sure offers of *rista* might flood in from Punjab, but no-one was under any obligation to accept them. Hence whilst parents might still play close attention to issues which most of their offspring by now regarded as wholly extraneous – such as how many acres of farmland the other family owned back in Punjab – it was nevertheless fairly easy to press parents to pay greater attention to such issues as the level of educational and professional success which the potential spouse had actually achieved. In response to these pressures the frequency of marriages with Indian-resident spouses soon began to decline rapidly. Amongst British-based Sikh and Hindu settlers choosing spouses for their offspring from within the diaspora very quickly became the preferential norm, so much so that India became the option of last resort.

However comparative analysis suggests that the need to arrange each *riste* from scratch, and the lack of any necessary obligation to accept offers from others played a key role in this transformation. Although the general patterns of family organisation and kinship roles found within most South Asian Muslim communities are virtually identical to those deployed by Hindus and Sikhs, there is as we have seen one crucial difference which is particularly salient in those Punjabi Muslim communities whose members have established themselves in the UK: the preference for close-kin marriage, which is in turn rooted in a sense of sibling solidarity which give brothers and sisters rights of first refusal over the *riste* of each others' children. Hence when British-raised Muslims began to articulate similar feelings of alarm about the prospect of being fixed up with a *rista* in Punjab – as they very soon did – they found themselves operating on much more difficult territory than their Sikh and Hindu counterparts. In this case their parents *did* have obligations to their kin back home, and their expected commitment to that form of reciprocity was so strong that to reject all such offers was tantamount to denying their loyalty to the sacred principle of sibling solidarity. Hence very few Muslim families followed the Sikhs and Hindus swift change in marriage strategies.

The strategic use of *ristedari* in transnational arenas

Even so sibling solidarity was not the only issue at stake here. Since close-kin marriage has such a far-reaching impact on patterns of inter-personal relations within extended families, the personal experience of transnational marriage, as well the micro-politics of the whole arrangement differs strikingly from those outlined for Hindus and Sikhs. Hence whilst the stresses and strains arising from differing degrees of cultural competence as between the two spouses tended to be no less significant amongst the Muslims, they were also cushioned by a countervailing factor: in the case of cousin-marriage the incoming spouse was in no sense a stranger, but instead had all sorts of prior connections of *ristedari* with other members of the extended family. Moreover the two spouses will at the very least have known of each others' existence prior to the marriage taking place, and may well also have met face to face in the course of a family visit back home.

Meanwhile what also became apparent in the course of fieldwork is that those responsible for setting up such marriages were often in competition with one another as to which of all the available cousins should be drawn into the *rista*. Marriage choices vis-à-vis their nephews and nieces are far from power-neutral as far as the oldest generation is concerned, and most especially so in transnational context. Hence not only does whoever has been favoured with a *riste* which provided them with entry into the UK have a debt of honour to his or her sponsor (in this case either an uncle and aunt turned father- or mother-in law), but ensuring that

majority of available *riste* draw in one's own nephews and nieces, rather than one's partner's, enhances the bargaining power of either the husband or his wife. Indeed there is frequently a great deal of tension as between wives and their husbands when it comes to selecting *riste* for their offspring, and in my experience wives not infrequently manage to outmanoeuvre their husbands in the course of such battles. Moreover if the husband does indeed eventually win out, the consequences for an incoming spouse, and most especially for an incoming daughter-in-law can be disastrous. She may indeed be her father-in-law's niece, but if the her mother-in-law is still seeking to champion one of her own nieces' overlooked cause, the newly arrive bride may well find that her mother-in-law is busy doing everything she can to make her life hell, and to poison any affection which her husband has developed towards her.

Yet despite the complexity to which all these currents and counter-currents give rise, the broad direction of flow in these circumstances is plain to see: given the high level of mutual commitment between siblings in the UK and their counterparts in Punjab, given the ease with which fulfilling these commitments can be used to transfer additional personnel (of both sexes) into the UK, and the pressure which those still in Punjab routinely place on their siblings in the UK to use their *riste*-bestowing capacities in such a way as to facilitate such transfers, the scale of the inward flow of spouses from Pakistan to the UK has remained dramatically higher than that from India. Indeed close to half of all the rising generation of British Pakistanis still marry spouses recruited from Pakistan.

Whilst it may well be that the frequency of such unions will decline before too long, it is nevertheless quite clear that for the best part of two decades marriage has been a major facilitator of a further inflow of personnel from Pakistan to the UK. However in seeking to comprehend this outcome it is worth remembering that whilst this has in part an outcome of a materially driven 'pressure to migrate' generated by sharp differences in living standards as between Pakistan and the UK, the extent to which those pressures have led to actual physical movements has not only been significantly conditioned by the cultural assumptions and priorities routinely deployed by migrants and their kinsfolk, but also that those assumptions and priorities are themselves been re-worked as a result of the very experience of migration itself. If transnational network building is an entrepreneurial activity we should not only expect that its parameters will vary as between communities, but also the parameters of any given process of network-construction can also be expected to develop and vary over time.

Hence whilst it may well be that positive role of marriage which has played in facilitating transnational entrepreneurship may have increased the frequency of cousin-marriage (Shaw 2001), it would be quite wrong to assume that the use of marital and affinal ties to achieve this end has necessarily been restricted to the Pakistanis. To be sure the initially-high frequency with which Sikh and Hindu settlers sought spouses for their offspring from Punjab dropped off rapidly in the face of critical resistance from their offspring themselves, but this certainly has not meant that the potentialities of marriage as a vehicle for transnational network construction have been entirely abandoned. Rather it has continued apace – albeit in different directions. Hence whilst Pakistani migrants and their offspring have used the affinal linkage to facilitate a substantial transfer of additional personnel from Pakistan to the UK, British-based Hindu and Sikh families have increasingly begun to use similar strategies to facilitate the transfer of personnel from the UK to North America. To understand how and why such a radical difference in outcome has been precipitated we must once again return to a detailed ethnographic consideration of just how *riste* are constructed in those contexts where marriage with close kin is precluded.

Whilst arranging *riste* in contexts where close kin marriage is the norm tends to precipitate conflicts between husbands and their wives over the specific direction in which existing kinship links should be reinforced, Hindus and Sikhs – for whom such options were barred – found themselves facing a far more serious challenge. Since each new *rista* had to be established *ab initio*, they had to track down a suitable partner for each of their offspring amongst families with whom they had no prior relationship. This was not only a difficult task in its own right, but also one which could put their own reputation on the line. If a family was known to have opened negotiations for *rista*, and if those negotiations subsequently turned out to have collapsed, there was a very real prospect that this would set off scandalous gossip which suggested that the potential *ristedar* had uncovered a dark family secret, so causing them to pull out. In the face of such gossip, which most usually suggested that the girl was in some way at fault, each successive attempt to arrange her marriage tends to become progressively more difficult.

It is for this reason that the *bachaula* (an intermediary who introduces the two parties to each other, and in doing so takes on the responsibility of seeking to smooth out any difficulties which might arise between them) plays a central role in most Sikh and Hindu weddings – no less in the UK than back home in the Punjab. However the very existence of these mediating processes also provides a means whereby an appearance of total respectability can be sustained in public even though it has been comprehensively subverted in private reality. The current priority of many British-raised Sikhs and Hindus is not so much to persuade their parents to look automatically back to South Asia in search of *riste* – that argument has long been won – but rather to persuade their parents to accept a *riste* which they themselves have arranged: in other words a ‘love’ as opposed to an ‘arranged’ marriage. In doing so young people know the rules as much as do the *bachaula*: if they suggest a match which contravenes the strict rule of caste endogamy (and very often those of *gotra* exogamy as well) within which their parents routinely operate, they are likely to encounter intense opposition. But if they can find a partner who meets those requirements, and if they can also find a tame *bachaula* to act as an intermediary, most parents can readily be persuaded to agree to proceed ‘as if’ the match was conventionally arranged, such that the whole gamut of customs and practices which have long accompanied marriage can be smoothly wheeled out.

‘Modern’ arrangements and the resultant shift offshore

But as the rising generation have played an ever more active role in ‘arranging’ their own marriages, they, too have run into the same problems of finding an appropriate match. Some follow well such established practices as making eye contact with potential partners at major public events such as weddings, exchanging mobile numbers, and taking it from there; others attend ‘raves’ and ‘singles parties’ from which all but Asian are barred; meanwhile an ever-increasing number are taking advantage of the potentiality of the internet. Not only do most communities, castes and sects maintain their own websites, so providing members with a ready means of getting in touch with one another, but numerous electronic marriage agencies have also sprung up to extend the role of the *bachaula*. Just like their more ‘traditional’ predecessors, such agencies invariably take careful account of their clients’ concerns with such matters of caste and *gotra* affiliation, as well as flagging their clients’ educational achievements, professional status and personal interests.

Moreover precisely because the net is global, it is particularly well suited to provide a search engine for members of transnationally extended networks, since those seeking partners are as likely to be based in British Columbia or Berkeley as in Birmingham, Baroda or Bombay.

Nevertheless most members of the rising generation of young British-born Sikhs and Hindus share a clear hierarchy of geographical preferences when it comes to assessing the attractiveness of potential *riste*. The United States and Canada normally head the list, with Britain not too far behind; however potential *riste* based in India are almost always regarded as an option of last resort.

Such preferences reflect their experience of transnational social universe. To date those who have been born and brought up in one or other of the South Asian diasporas many ethnic colonies, no matter whether these were located in Europe, North America, Australia or the far East, regularly find that they have much more in common with each other than they do with those of their peers from the subcontinent – and most especially with those who were born and brought up in the rural areas from which their parents and grandparents emigrated many decades ago. However the character of the disjunction between such *pardeshis* and their *deshi* counterparts needs to be carefully specified. It is not so much that the *pardeshis* are wholly unfamiliar with ‘traditional’ modes of behaviour practiced in their villages of origin: after all their own parents for the most part continue to organise their lives in terms of a close variant of those conventions. Rather the most salient aspect of the difference home-based *deshis* and their *pardeshi* counterparts is that the former have much more limited skills in cross-cultural navigation, with the result that they display a marked tendency to become flustered, confused and unnerved when introduced to the more ‘Westernised’ socio-cultural arenas in which the *pardeshis* regularly participate, and whose conventions they have also begun to import into their increasingly hybridised domestic and personal lives. Hence when it comes to choosing a spouse, those who have been born and brought up in the diaspora strongly prefer to track down prospective spouses who have had a similar *pardeshi* experience to their own.¹

However such considerations are by no means the end of the story. As the younger generation of Hindus and Sikhs have become steadily more educationally and professionally successful, so they have begun to appreciate the benefits associated with membership of a transnational network, not least because a careful choice of *riste* can enable them to leapfrog many of the obstacles which might otherwise hinder their capacity to make the most of their qualifications in the global labour market. Hence the fact that North America so often stands at the top of the preferential list of *rista* locations is no means solely driven by an awareness that professionals enjoy a substantially greater standard of living on the far side of the Atlantic than they can expect in the UK. Just as importantly, this is further reinforced by an awareness that in the United States and Canada the degree of racial and ethnic exclusionism experienced by professionals of South Asian descent is – or at least was until the events of 9/11 – considerably than that which they encounter in Britain. In such circumstances it makes excellent sense for those with internationally recognised qualifications to seek out *riste* on the far side, not least as a means of advancing their professional careers.

Needless to say, it is quite possible for young British passport-holders with qualifications in Medicine, Accountancy, Software Engineering and so forth to secure jobs on the far side of the Atlantic without tapping into the resources of a transnational network, let alone resorting to marriage to facilitate their objectives. Nevertheless if such resources are indeed available, the whole process of job- and house-hunting is rendered far less problematic than it might

¹¹ The implicit yardstick here is of the *deshi* of rural origins, *pindaan* in Punjabi. However many returnee *pardeshis* find their assumptions wholly up-ended when they encounter young people drawn from the privileged elites in cities such as Delhi, Bombay and Islamabad; to their amazement, they discover that such ‘*deshis*’ are often more ‘westernised’ than they are themselves.

otherwise be. Just as in earlier manifestations of chain migration, the opportunity to tap into ready-made networks of mutual support from the moment of one's arrival greatly facilitates the whole process of transnational entrepreneurship.

Once these processes have become well-established in any given community, there are good reasons for suggesting that the networks of reciprocity in which they are grounded have gone 'offshore', in the sense that they can and do continue to operate smoothly even as connections with their home base in South Asia fall ever more firmly into abeyance. Moreover so long as those involved continue to display a strong proclivity for network-endogamy, there is no reason why these 'offshore' operations should not maintain themselves in this fashion for several generations to come. But in seeking to appreciate the dynamics of these developments it should always be remembered that the reciprocities which underpin these networks are not the outcome of authoritarian directives laid down by the elders, and still less of mindless obedience to the forces of 'tradition': rather their long-term continuity is above all grounded in the strategic choices – not least with respect to marriage – made by members of each successive generation.

Whilst there is a clear tendency for such networks to move 'offshore', most especially when the rising generation of young people begin to achieve ever greater degrees of educational and professional success, none have as yet wholly lost contact with their home bases in South Asia.² Almost all still retain a strong emotional commitment to their roots, which often manifests itself through support for charitable activities in South Asia. Initiatives supported by the Aga Khan's Ismaeli followers provide the most dramatic example of such developments, although many other as yet less dramatic examples of the same tendency in other communities can also be cited. Moreover even in the most determinedly offshore networks, marriages with spouses based in South Asia, through infrequent, have by no means come to a halt. There are at least two reasons for this.

On the one hand South Asia itself is developing very rapidly, such that the size of its professional population is expanding apace: as a result *riste* between members of the diaspora and well-educated spouses from prosperous families based in cities such as Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore are gradually becoming more numerous. Meanwhile at the other end of the marriage market arranging a *rista* back home is still the option of last resort, especially for difficult-to-place daughters. Many potential grooms, and especially their parents, are deeply uneasy about accepting a bride who has been 'spoiled' by having had a previous marriage, most especially if she has retained custody of any children; however in rural Punjab it is comparatively easy to find families who are prepared to overlook any such downside, especially since the resulting *rista* can be expected to give the groom instant access to the economic benefits associated with residence in the UK.

Marriage and employment

Employment – or more precisely the prospects of gaining access to an income substantially larger than that which one previously enjoyed – is a central driving force behind the

² It is well worth noting that Europe's Romany population appear to be an exception to this pattern, even if their roots in the subcontinent are far more ancient than those of the communities with which I am concerned here. Whilst there are strong indications that the Romany tradition also has its roots in North India, direct contact ceased many centuries ago. Nevertheless endogamy, together with a commitment to strictly enforced rules of purity and pollution have provided more or less nomadic Romanies with a highly effective means of sustaining a clear disjunction between themselves and members of the house-dwelling population alongside whom they have lived in close symbiosis for many centuries. (Okely: 198*)

maintenance of transnational networks. Nevertheless in this sphere just as in all the others we have considered, the way in which those prospects are utilised is heavily conditioned by the cultural conventions and priorities deployed within each specific network. Given that Sikhs and Hindus have no reservations about the prospects female employment, the employability of both partners invariably looms large in *riste* negotiations, particularly in diasporic contexts. Hence the academic and professional achievement of the spouse on offer is a central issue when it comes to evaluating the merits of any potential *riste*: in doing so the ideal match is one where the groom is marginally better qualified than the bride. What this also means is that anyone who slips down a well-understood hierarchy of achievement – as a result, for example, of having obtained their degree in an institution which has only recently put its former status as Polytechnic status, rather than one or other of the much longer established Universities belonging to the ‘Russell group’ – will be placed well down the pecking order. However Asian parents are nothing if not pragmatic: such deficiencies can easily be remedied by those who have gained an appointment with a major firm of Lawyers or Accountants. Hence Sikh and Hindu parents’ well-known concern with the educational success of their offspring has strongly instrumental roots: in the absence of qualifications, how on earth are they going to be able to fix them up with decent *riste*? Moreover a similar equation operates as far as young people themselves are concerned. The better greater their qualifications, the greater the role they are likely to be able to play in choosing their own partner.

However these considerations currently play out in a very different way in many Muslim communities, most especially in those communities in which close kin marriage is the order of the day. As we have seen whilst a high frequency of close kin marriage generates exceptionally close knit networks of *ristedari*, the attenuation of the built in built-in dimension of trans-locality precipitated by a commitment to exogamy has in no way undermined their capacity to develop translocal networks, or to circulate personnel and assets around on a transnational scale. Nevertheless the British example suggests that resultant networks are not only much more in-turned than those created by communities in which marriage rules explicitly exogamous, but that those involved also tend to sustain particularly strong dyadic ties with their home base in South Asia. As a result they have as yet displayed very much less of a tendency to drift ‘offshore’. This has also had yet further consequences for Muslim settlers’ relationship to the employment market, as well as the weight put on educational and professional achievements in the process of arranging *riste* have both been further conditioned by the exigencies of successive changes in UK immigration rules.

In sharp contrast to their Hindu and Sikh settlers, whose wives normally began to make a significant contribution to the income of the household by taking up paid employment soon after their arrival in Britain, in most Muslim communities it was considered both shameful and dishonourable for women to take up paid employment outside the immediate household. Hence in addition to the considerations of kinship discussed earlier, this was a further factor militating against swift family reunion, for whilst the arrival of women and children necessarily brought about a sharp increase in household expenditure, in the Muslim case this was not normally accompanied by a parallel increase in household income. However the exigencies of immigration control fairly soon overcame these reservations: as the rules were tightened still further, families were reunited willy-nilly: no-one wanted to see their kinsfolk left trapped behind a closing door. Hence by the mid-1980s, the vast majority of Pakistani settlers had completed process of family reunion in the UK.

But if policy makers hoped that this would reduce further immigration from Pakistan to a trickle, they were to be disappointed. Many of the new arrivals had only just scraped under

the ‘not aged more than sixteen years’ rule for dependent children, and in much the same way as their Hindu and Sikh predecessors they looked back to their villages of origin when they began to look for spouses for their offspring – which they soon began to do on a large scale. Not surprisingly many such *riste* ran into just the same problems as those experienced by their Hindu and Sikh counterparts, especially when there was a large gulf in cultural competence as between a British-raised spouse and a partner whose previous life-experience had been limited to rural Pakistan. But although the problems were just the same, Muslim parents found it far more difficult to make a positive response to pleas that they should look for suitable *riste* for their offspring in the UK. Given Muslim marriage rules, parents were not starting their searches for *riste* from scratch; rather they were honour bound to give their immediate kinsfolk – and especially those who still found themselves stuck back in Pakistan – rights of refusal over the *riste* of their offspring. Moreover whilst it was well understood that not every such offer could possibly be accepted, not least because a range of parallel proposals on behalf of a various different cousins would normally be put forward, it was regarded as quite unacceptable for a couple who had established a foothold in Britain to try to pull up a drawbridge behind them. A refusal of all such offers was regarded as tantamount to a denial of the reciprocities which lie at the heart of *ristedari*. Hence if settlers wished to remain members of the network, and hence keep their transnational linkages alive, they had no alternative but to respond positively to offers of *riste* from their kinsfolk. Such considerations applied no matter how unhappy their sons – and even more so their daughters – may have been about the prospects of making such a match. The consequences of all this have been reaching: above all the switch of from arranging *riste* in the subcontinent in favour of those contracted elsewhere in the diaspora has developed very much more slowly in most groups of Muslim settlers than it has amongst their Sikh and Hindu counterparts: indeed in most *biraderis* of rural origin, over 50% of marriages are still being contracted within spouses drawn from South Asia. Such matches are undoubtedly likely to decline in frequency at some time in the future, but at present the rate of decline cannot be described as swift.

How is this best understood? Looked at from the perspective of individual rights, such choices – especially since they were and are made on behalf of others – may seem oppressively conservative, perhaps even as ‘forced’. However when viewed from the perspective of the corporate moral perspective which underpins the structure of the joint family, such choices can be seen as much more justifiable than such a narrowly Eurocentric perspective might suggest. If a collectivity such as a joint family is to sustain itself, it follows that all its members will indeed sometimes be required to sacrifice a degree of personal sovereignty in order to satisfy the needs and requirements of the group as a whole. Viewed from that perspective, making personal sacrifices is not the issue: that is precisely what family life is all about. Rather the central point of contention is whether someone is being required to make an *unreasonable* sacrifice, bearing in mind those sacrifices which are being or have been made by other family members. In other words it is not the expectation of personal sacrifice which is oppressive, but rather the prospect that necessary burdens are *not being equitably shared* amongst family members, and/or that insufficient efforts have been made to redistribute or to renegotiate those burdens. These are issues to which we will have to return later.

But before doing so it is also worth noting that the combined effect of the priority given to the maintenance of kinship reciprocities whilst also manoeuvring round the exigencies of immigration legislation has had all manner of further implications for the ways in which members of the rising British born generation have set about gaining educational

qualifications in the UK, together with the character of their participation in the labour market.

When the majority of *riste* – whether arranged locally or transnationally – take place between close kin, the level of each of the spouse’s educational achievements, and even their earning potential tends to matter much very much less than is the case in those groups where marriage rules demand exogamy, such that each *rista* is negotiated from scratch. Hence whilst most Muslim parents are in principle keen to see their sons and rather more rarely their daughters reach a high level of educational achievement, in their case the absence of such achievements has relatively little impact on the task of arranging suitable *riste* for their offspring. If most matches are kinship-driven, whilst a high level of educational achievement is undoubtedly welcome, it is certainly not essential to making an acceptable match. Hence the intensity of parental insistence on educational success tends to be somewhat attenuated in Muslim families in comparison with the pressures which can be observed in most Hindu and Sikh families.

However by contrast to all this, the pressures stemming from changes in the immigration rules have had quite the opposite effect, especially for Muslim girls. In an effort to reduce the inflow of spouses from the subcontinent, the Home Office introduced a rule that entry certificates would only be issued to those spouses who were able to show that their sponsors – i.e. their UK-based partners – not only had access to suitable accommodation, but were also in a position to support them without recourse to public funds: in other words their sponsors had to have a job. But if this measure was designed to dissuade Muslim parents from selecting groom from South Asia for their stay-at-home daughters, it promptly back-fired: most parents in that situation promptly began to encourage their daughters from seeking employment. Not that their daughters needed much encouragement to do so: as far as they were concerned not only did employment give them access to a great deal more autonomy than they would previously have enjoyed, but the wages they earned substantially increased their bargaining power within the family. Nor was that all. If daughters were permitted to go out to work, it was much more difficult for parents to object to their daughters continuing their education after the age of sixteen, especially since schools and colleges are routinely viewed as providing a less modesty-challenging environment than the much more open employment market. To be sure gaining advanced educational qualifications often made little difference to their bargaining position in the marriage market, and could even scare off some potential grooms, but this mattered little to the girls themselves: education not only enabled them to postpone their marriages, for most parents agreed that marriage should not take place until their education was complete, but also provided them with a steadily increasing level of bargaining power the higher up the system they managed to penetrate. Hence despite the many additional handicaps they face British Muslim girls have now begun to outperform their male siblings, no less in professional than in educational terms.

The potential downsides of transnational marriage

So processes of kinship-driven transnational networking have been presented in overwhelmingly positive terms. That is right and proper. As far as the vast majority of those who have participated in these processes are concerned, the benefits of having been able to participate in – and in doing so to contribute to the development of – these networks have far outweighed the costs. How else could so many millions of people been in a position to transport themselves moved from positions of severe structural disadvantage way out on the periphery of the global socio-economic order straight into its metropolitan heartlands, so

providing their offspring with a springboard from which to press their way even further forward through the metropolitan social order? But whilst migration invariably brings substantial material benefits, they can only be accessed at considerable personal cost. Not only do those costs tend to become particularly salient when the elders find themselves driven to override the personal priorities of their offspring in order to press forward what they regard as the best interests of their extended families, and most especially the reinforcement of the patterns of transnational reciprocity in which they are bound up, and where their efforts to do so constantly precipitate ever more restrictive interpretations of the immigration rules. Although these matters really deserve to be addressed at length in a separate paper, I have nevertheless decided to close this article with a brief overview of the most salient issues in this sphere, if only because they remain the focus of (often seriously misinformed) public debate.

The experience of *Bilayati* brides married to *Desi* husbands

In historical terms, South Asian parents have long displayed a marked propensity to arrange their daughters' marriages either before or at least soon after they passed puberty. Their principal reason for doing so was to guarantee their family's honour. To the extent that their *izzat*, honour, was crucially dependent on the maintenance of a spotless reputation for *sharam*, modesty, by all its womenfolk, it made good sense to pass that responsibility on to a husband as soon as a daughter reached the point at which she has become potentially sexually active. This was further accompanied by an assumption if two young people of opposite sexes found themselves together in the absence of a suitable chaperone, sexual activity was almost certain to take place. But if that was indeed the case, many British-based Pakistani parents took the view that there was an obvious solution to their worries about their inability to chaperone their self-evidently nubile British-raised daughters: if one exposed them to the prospect of legitimate sexual activity at the age of sixteen there was not only an excellent prospect that they would become emotionally committed to their spouse, but also that pregnancy would tie them yet further into both marriage and motherhood – no matter how great a disjunction there might be between their daughters' *bilayati* (overseas) experiences and expectations and those of their *desi* (home-based) husbands.

But although my experience suggests such expectations have a considerable of substance, some further provisos must also hold. Some are self-evident: hence, for example, the strategy is much less likely to work if the bride is heavily committed (albeit surreptitiously) to a boyfriend back in the UK, and/or if the groom is neither youthful nor reasonably presentable. However further set of factors which can all too easily undermine the effectiveness of this strategy arises from the exigencies of the immigration rules. Only when the marriage ceremony has been completed can husbands submit an application for Entry Clearance into the UK; and whilst queues are now shorter than they once were, applicant in South Asia can expect to wait for at least three months before being called in for an interview. My experience suggests that such applications suggests are subjected to particularly close scrutiny, and that it can easily take as long as two years before the Entry Certificate Officer is satisfied that everything is in order, and a certificate is granted.

However few if any newly married brides stay with their husbands for as long as this. Firstly they cannot afford to, for unless they can show that they are still employed in the UK, their husband will not be issued with an entry certificate. Secondly they may well fall pregnant: in those circumstances they invariably return to the UK, if only because of widespread scepticism about the quality of medical care available in rural Pakistan. But whatever the

grounds on which they may have returned to the UK, their new-found status as married women enables them to claim a significantly greater degree of autonomy than they did before. Just how those who find themselves precipitated into this interstitial position react to the opportunities thereby thrown up varies enormously. To be sure a substantial number take advantage of this period to enhance their educational qualifications, or by building up the financial resources needed to establish a new household; however a far from insignificant number pursue quite the opposite course, and begin to explore the world on their own terms, not infrequently in ways which their parents and their still-distant husbands would strongly disapprove. Two years is a long time in the life of a teenager, and most especially for one who has recently been initiated into all the pleasures and excitement of sexuality, but whose husband's arrival in the UK has to all intents and purposes been indefinitely postponed. Of course it is quite possible for such young women to put their adventures behind them when their husbands eventually arrive; but even if they do the newly arrived spouses frequently finds himself playing on an exceedingly sticky wicket, most especially if his wife formed a strong romantic attachment – as like as not with a locally born and raised young Pakistani – whilst her husband struggled to fulfil the requirements of his ECO.

However this is by no means the only – or even the most significant – challenge with which *desi* husbands regularly find themselves confronted once they reach the UK. As they soon discover, newly arrived *mangeter* ('those who have been asked for') initially find themselves in an extremely uneasy position, even when they have the advantage of prior ties of *ristedari* with either their father- or their mother-in-law. Their central problems lie elsewhere. Although notionally masters of their own households, and hence in a position to claim comprehensive authority over their wives, in the absence of familiarity with the social, cultural and linguistic skills which enable their British-raised peers to navigate with ease through the hybrid Anglo-Asian world which they inhabit, most *mangeter* find it next to impossible to underpin their nominal status with real resources.³ Hence they routinely find themselves restricted to ill-paid jobs right at the bottom of the labour market, as for example instance in restaurants and take-aways where they are also required to work extremely anti-social hours. But whilst their wages do at least give them some bargaining power, many *mangeter* nevertheless feel themselves humiliated by the superior earning-power of their wives.

Mangeter also experience similar forms of perceived role reversal up in all manner of other contexts. By local standards their personal styles are regarded as profoundly un-cool, whilst their English is normally insufficiently fluent to enable them to negotiate the simplest of commercial transactions with any great confidence. Nor do they even have a secure right of residence in the UK. On entry spouses from South Asia are normally only granted a temporary right of abode in the UK, although this can be made permanent if the conjugal partnership is still in place twelve months later. Hence if the marriage should collapse during that period, there is a very real prospect that the *mangeter* will find himself summarily expelled from the UK.

Given the strength of all these contradictions, it should come as no surprise that a significant proportion of matches of this kind do indeed run into difficulties – whether this be a rocky patch which the couple eventually manage to circumnavigate or a maelstrom which sinks their relationship in short order. Moreover when such outcomes precipitate an intense degree

³³ An excellent discussion of the difficulties which newly-arrived *mangeter* experience in the employment market can be found in (Kalra 2000)

of personal damage on one or other of the parties, they or their kinsfolk may very well seek to retaliate in revenge. Hence, for example, a bride may well seek to undermine her groom's (and her parents') interests by insisting to the authorities that her marriage was 'forced'. If, however, her efforts do indeed meet with success, the hurt caused to her husband and his kin can be very substantial. If badly handled this can all too easily set off an escalating spiral mutual abuse between the two parties – which by now will almost certainly have expanded to include their respective extended families – which can have all sorts of consequences. If her parents side with her husband (for after all one or other of them arranged the marriage), the bride can all too easily find that the collapse of her marriage leads to a complete rupture of all the expected reciprocities between herself and her extended family. If on the other hand they support their daughter, their actions may well add yet further to an escalating spiral of hostility between two extended families which can lead, at the extreme, to homicidal violence.

The experience of *Bilayati* husbands married to *Desi* brides

As one might expect outcomes tend to follow a very different pattern the genders are reversed. In the case of British-born grooms, marriage is very much a postponeable event. Hence whilst parents certainly expect that their sons will eventually settle down, get married and produce heirs to extend the family into the future, is not until they have reached their mid-twenties that young men begin to find themselves under serious pressure to do so. However whilst young Sikh and Hindu men are expected to devote themselves to acquiring skills and qualifications during this period, not least because it will be far more difficult to arrange a worthwhile *rista* if they lack them, those belonging to Muslim families – or more precisely, those who belong to families in which marriage with cousins is the norm – normally find themselves under much less pressure to excel: their educational and professional achievements will have much less impact on their marriageability. Hence if young men from such families spend some time as *lifunga*, 'lay-about', they are often treated with considerable indulgence by their parents on 'boys will be boys' grounds.

But if young men are consequently expected to spend some time sowing wild oats before settling down, most parents regard marriage as the sovereign remedy for this condition. This is particularly so when they find themselves confronted with one of the most alarming manifestations of such deviance: their son's over-heavy involvement with an English-girl friend. Hence when parents conclude that their sons' 'peccadilloes' have gone too far, young men frequently find themselves hauled off to Pakistan for a swiftly arranged marriage. Moreover the terms of trade laid down in such circumstances are normally quite clear: do our bidding, or normal kinship reciprocities will come to an end.

To be sure only a minority of grooms taken back to the subcontinent to be fixed up with a *rista* are confronted with such a stark choice, but it is nevertheless worth considering the extreme case because it serves to illuminate the more general argument. In the first place it is quite wrong to assume that a marriage arranged on this basis is inevitably doomed to failure. Not only is the formal pattern of power relations in such a marriage congruent with conventional expectations, but if the young woman to whom he has been married is able to seduce her husband in emotional and psychological as well as physical terms, she may well be able to deploy 'the weapons of the weak' with quite spectacular success. Of course the likelihood of any given bride pulling this off is powerfully contingent on her own personal and psychological strengths, but it is also worth remembering that such strengths are in no sense alien to the *zenana* (the women's quarters in a household where gender segregation is

strongly marked). Hence if British-based grooms are foolish enough to assume that the seemingly shy and modest virgins to whom they have been married will of necessity comprehensively obey their instructions without demur, they are in for a big surprise. To be sure such brides will be extremely cautious at first as they work out the lie of the land. But if their mothers have done their job properly they will soon begin to take every opportunity to turn their chains into weapons, and render the silken bonds by which their husbands are bound to them just as effective as those of steel.

Of course the skill with which wives manage to deploy these tactics varies greatly from individual to individual, as does the capacity of their husbands to resist their wiles. Moreover it may well be, as noted earlier, that a newly-married bride's most immediate task is to reel in her mother-in-law, on the grounds that unless she has got her *sas* on-side, she will never be able to gain full command of her husband's affections. By the same token it is also worth noting that time is on every bride's side: if she can manage to stick out until she herself becomes a *sas*, she herself has every prospect of ruling the roost. It follows that in the light of such micro-political manoeuvres within the household – whose progress is invariably hidden from public view – that the private reality of gender relationships are far less hierarchically ordered than public appearances might suggest.

Even so, it would be idle to suggest that they *always* are. No matter how carefully mothers may instruct their daughters as to the tactics they should deploy, some young women prove to be far more skilled at pulling them off than others. Sometimes brides find they can rely on the strong support of their natal families if their negotiations with their husbands and in-laws turn sour, others find themselves left hanging in the wind. Some find themselves married to sadistic thugs on whom the most sophisticated tactics will not work. Moreover in the long run men are always in a stronger bargaining position than husbands, for whilst divorced husbands stay with their families and can remarry with ease, divorced wives have to rely on the charity of their natal families, and re-marriage is normally a great deal more difficult to arrange. It is also worth remembering that none of these problems have anything specifically to do with migration, although it is undoubtedly the case that these tensions tend both to be more frequent and to be more difficult to contain when the marriage in question has been transnationally arranged. Moreover immigration law has a further twist in its tail for incoming brides whose marriages fail as opposed to those with rights of residence as a result of having been born and brought up in the UK. Whilst the latter can bid for public sympathy by claiming to be the victims of a forced marriage, the former are likely to receive nothing more than a missive from the Home Office indicating that their temporary Right of Abode in the UK is not being extended, and requiring them to remove themselves from the country at the earliest opportunity.

Conclusion

Having presented a broad overview of the role played by marital and affinal ties in the construction and maintenance of transnational networks, several points should by now be quite clear. Firstly that affinal ties are at least as important as agnatic ties in such processes, not least because of the crucial role they play in maintaining such linkages over the generations. Hence if we view transnational migration not just as an entrepreneurial exercise, but also as one which regularly seeks to transgress established patterns of transnational inequality, it follows marriage can also be viewed as a significant 'weapon of the weak' which migrants have as it were tucked their sleeves, and which can be – and indeed is – regularly deployed as an when circumstances render that appropriate.

If, however, we regard current patterns of immigration control as the outcome of constant efforts by the authorities to keep out ‘unwanted’ immigrants (even when jobs are readily available at their destination) in the face of equally constant efforts by transnational entrepreneurs to find their way through chinks in those exclusionary barriers (a process commonly described as ‘exploiting loopholes’), then it is immediately obvious why kinship and marriage should have become such a public battleground. Not only is kinship the principle vehicle facilitating chain migration, but Britain has also signed up to the European Convention of Human Rights which guarantees, amongst other things, a right to family life. So just what are the ‘loopholes’ which transnational migrants are illegitimately exploiting? Nothing less, it would seem, than the rights set out in Article 8 of ECHR.

How, then, can popular demands to bring the inflow of (non-European) migrants to a halt be fulfilled without contravening the principles of ECHR? Two ways of squaring the circle are logically possible. Firstly by adding a further proviso to Article 8, namely ‘... not necessarily in the country of your own choice’; thus far, at least, the authorities in Britain have steered clear of that course. The second option is to suggest that the migrants’ understanding of ‘family’ is erroneous by challenging either the existence or the legitimacy of the kinship relationships on which they relied in order to claim their rights under Article 8. Hence the British immigration authorities have successively relied on arguments that the applicants were not related as claimed, that they had failed to show that the ‘primary purpose’ of the marriage was anything other than gaining entry to the UK. To be sure both those objections have now been cast into abeyance on the grounds that they were unworkable, but now plans appear to be afoot to produce a new ground for rejecting such applications: that the marriage in question was ‘forced’, and hence ineligible as a vehicle for a spouse seeking entry into the UK.⁴

As should by now be quite clear, the use of marriage as (amongst other things) a vehicle for facilitating the expansion and consolidation of transnational networks invariably has both an upside and a downside – although just how these are constituted, and the precise consequences which they may have for the individuals concerned differs enormously from context to context and from case to case.⁵ Yet although it is clearly essential that these downsides should be properly addressed, especially when they severely damage the interests of the individuals concerned, public policy initiatives which focus solely on the downsides, which fail to take sufficient account of the complex processes of inter-personal dynamics within the extended family which invariably lie behind cases of extreme distress can easily do far more harm than good, no matter how well intentioned the motives of the policy formulators may be. However all this becomes yet more disastrous is when a nominal

⁴ *A Choice by Right: Report on the Working Group on Forced Marriage* The Home Office 2004

⁵ Unfortunately there has been no space to incorporate any detailed case studies in this article. However a running record of the homicide cases for which I have prepared expert reports can be found at <http://www.art.man.ac.uk/casas/pdfpapers/homicide.pdf>, which provide an opportunity to consider the precise circumstances in which a whole series of killings within South Asian families actually took place. Amongst other things these accounts serve to show how frequently such events were precipitated by a whole series of personal taunts, thane, between those involved, in an escalating cycle which eventually got wholly out of control. That honour, *izzat*, was an issue in such cycles of insults is quite clear; but very few of the homicides of which I have first-hand experience involve the kind of premeditated retribution which lies at heart of popular understandings of ‘honour killing’; moreover in the small minority of cases which actually conformed to that model, all the victims in my sample were male, not female.

concern for human rights, and most especially for the rights of ‘oppressed women’ is used as a convenient veil behind which to conceal the true objectives of the whole exercise. The introduction of measures designed to exclude immigrants of non-European descent by means of a convenient surrogate: their use of unacceptable – and hence illegitimate – conventions of kinship and marriage to organise their domestic affairs.

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