The fall of NRI: How Covid-19 has altered the image of Punjab’s darling community

Punjabi culture puts the needs of visiting NRIs above those of local residents. But coronavirus pandemic has turned the community into a threat best avoided.

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The non-resident Indian, or NRI, a celebrated figure in Punjabi culture and actively courted by the state government as a partner in development, has now become a source of distress and panic in Punjab. In light of the coronavirus pandemic, the Punjab government initiated a range of measures to track NRIs in order to make sure they are complying with their home quarantine directives. In Doaba villages, overseas Punjabis have become a menace best avoided. This moment marks a rupture in the social imaginary of migration in Punjab, from an aspirational movement to one that is linked to derision and isolation. Will this
Covid-19 moment spur a shift or re-negotiation in the hierarchy between the local and overseas Punjabis?

The state media has been actively covering the threat that faces Punjab as an estimated 97,000 NRIs have returned since January. There have been numerous reports of the government trying to locate “fleeing NRIs” and NRIs violating home quarantine and leaving the hospital without permission. NRIs are also being blamed for hiding at their relatives’ to escape the administration’s gaze. There is increasing concern that NRIs are not cooperating and complying with state directives. As of 27 March, 262 people were arrested for violating curfew and quarantine directions. These reports paint the NRI as irresponsible and a threat to the health of Punjab’s residents.

Migration and Punjabi culture

Migration from Punjab dates back to the colonial period, beginning from 1849. Sikhs were inducted into the Indian Army and taken to different countries under the British empire. The soldiers, when they returned, narrated fascinating stories about foreign lands and encouraged other young men to migrate to British colonies. After the Second World War, in the 1950s, Sikhs from rural Punjab migrated to the UK and Canada. In the mid-1970s, Gulf migration also became a particularly popular avenue of migration for Dalit Punjabis. Today, there are large Punjabi diasporas in Australia, Canada and the UK.

In the contemporary imagination of Punjab, migration is seen as synonymous with Punjabi culture. A celebratory narrative of migration is pervasive in everyday parlance in Punjabi villages and towns. A stroll on the streets of Jalandhar or Phagwara reveals a proliferation of visa agencies and institutes that advertise classes for IELTS — the international English language proficiency test often required for migration.

Popular Punjabi songs tie high-status consumption and wealth with being located in a foreign country and with increased attractiveness. In many of these songs, the young man, invariably a NRI, is able to woo the woman through an explicit display of his wealth and know-how of Western urban mannerisms. Scores of young men commit themselves to this imaginary of migration as mobility and disengage from local educational and employment opportunities and wait for the chance to migrate to the UK, Europe and North America.
The importance of migration is also reflected in the approach adopted by the state government. Since 1996, the Punjab government has been actively creating institutional channels to engage migrants in the development of the state. Measures such as hosting NRI sammelans, launching the NRI Sabha, and protecting urban properties developed by NRI through stipulations inserted in the Punjab Rent Act were also adopted. In 2002, the Department of NRI Affairs was set up by the Amarinder Singh government. This department was meant to incentivise philanthropic capital flows for development of villages, even creating the NRI-GoP Rural Infrastructure Development Fund for the purpose.

**Altered States**

In the context of Covid-19, the government of Chief Minister Amarinder Singh has been forced to shift its approach towards the NRI, who is no longer being treated as a development partner but as a potential hindrance to development. Given the high number of NRIs in their midst who might be infected by the coronavirus, the Punjab government has adopted stricter measures to limit the cases of Covid-19. Punjab was one of the first governments to announce a state-wide lockdown and follow it up with a curfew to prevent people from stepping out.

The case of a 70-year-old man from Nawanshahr, who returned from Germany via Italy and, before succumbing to the virus, partook in a large religious gathering at Anandpur Sahib, sounded alarm bells and spurred the state government to take more stringent measures. About 30,000 NRIs have been asked to quarantine themselves at home and strict action will be taken against those violating the rule. Ironically, Covid-19 has meant restriction and immobility being imposed on the otherwise mobile NRI.

The threat of a visiting NRI spreading Covid-19 has also influenced community-level dynamics, with neighbours and relatives reporting those violating home quarantine and asking authorities to ramp up their measures. In the past, visiting NRIs enjoyed the patronage of neighbours, many of whom would volunteer to clean and cook for them during their stay in the hope of facilitating their own migration. This juncture marks a shift in the construct of the NRI: from an asset to be courted and only privately critiqued, to one that is best avoided and can be publicly reported due to the threat that they pose.

In violating home quarantine, the NRI is also rehearsing an older, pre-Covid-19 script in Punjab, wherein the comfort and mobility of the visiting NRI is placed
above the needs and concerns of those who never left the state. But this time the scenario has changed; the local community seems to be more concerned about protecting its own health rather than cosying up to the NRI. But is this subversion of the NRI’s authority only a passing phase? Given its importance as a source of status of wealth in Punjab, it is unlikely that the palpable culture of migration will be permanently altered by Covid-19. But it may serve as a reminder of the fallibility of the NRI.

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