

*Article*

# **Stuck in India: Punjabi temporary migrants of New Zealand**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Our paper reflects on creating a short documentary in 2021 centred around an online discussion, which the second author recorded with three Punjabi migrants. At the time of being interviewed, these migrants had New Zealand temporary work and study visas and were stuck in Punjab, India, for more than a year since the New Zealand government announced on 19 March 2020 the international border would be closed indefinitely due to Covid-19. The documentary research found that Punjabis stranded in their country of origin were imploring Punjabis in New Zealand to lobby to the New Zealand state to let them return. As a result, Auckland migrant groups were advocating for temporary migrants to be allowed back.

## **KEYWORDS**

Temporary migrants, Punjabi Sikhs, South Auckland, Punjab India

## **Context**

In today's internet-connected world, documentaries have multiplied across online platforms such as social media and film streaming sites to film festivals. Angela Fitzgerald and Magnolia Lowe were in favour of recognising "documentary filmmaking as a legitimate approach to informing the collection and analysis of research data rather than simply being a research output relying on audio-visual methods" (Fitzgerald and Lowe, 2020: 3). With that said, we reflect on creating a short documentary for social media distribution as not singly a process of synthesising ethnographic and documentary methods to present a story about Punjabi migrants on-screen: but rather, as practicing a research process integrating ethics and rigour in the project design.

This paper therefore comprises of two parts. Firstly, we give an account of the research output, a short documentary titled *Allow Us Back* (Mukhtar, 2021), in which we describe the background context, setting, characters, and plot. Secondly, we detail our reflection on the qualitative research approach used to locate and assemble characters and the narrative on-screen. As well, we discuss the background exchange between temporary migrants imploring permanent residents to help them come to New Zealand, and the advocacy by Punjabi Sikhs in Auckland on behalf of temporary migrants held back in India. The documentary research has been written as a reflection paper instead of a conventional essay in the passive voice. By adopting this format, we mean to accentuate the significance of the second author's identity as an ethnic Punjabi for gaining access to temporary migrants and advocacy groups within Auckland's Indian Punjabi community and in Punjab, India.

## Background

We began the background research and planning for [\*Allow Us Back\*](#) (Mukhtar, 2021) in November and December 2020. A short documentary of 13:10 minutes screentime made in the Punjabi language with English subtitles, filming production took place from January to March 2021. Released on the internet on 15 October 2021, the documentary was distributed across the social media pages of Punjabi media and community groups. The film narrative was organised around an online conversation between the second author, Asim Mukhtar, and three Punjabi migrants who at the time held a New Zealand temporary work and study visa, or a post-study visa. They had been stuck in India since the New Zealand government announced the Covid-19 border closure on March 19th, 2020, and their message to allow them back was amplified by inserting dialogue excerpts from four Punjabis living in South Auckland who were permanent residents of New Zealand. The permanent residents were a community leader lobbying for the return of stranded migrants, an immigration lawyer, and two elderly retired men.

Asim found the dual roles of filming, and featuring in, this short documentary to be deeply personal and challenging. A Punjabi Pakistani migrant, he arrived in New Zealand in 2014 on a temporary work and study visa for doctoral study. In 2015, he left the university to work full-time and was able to obtain permanent residency after being employed for five years in the information technology sector. In hindsight, he felt that he could have found himself in the same situation as the Indian Punjabis whom he interviewed if he was still a temporary visa holder. As a middle-age male migrant, Asim's personal circumstances have taken a turn for the better since initially settling in this country. Securing a permanent resident visa enabled him to bring his family from Islamabad to Auckland. Moreover, he returned to PhD study in 2019 to make a full-length documentary about Punjabi migrants in South Auckland of which the first author, Teena, is his doctoral supervisor. His motivation for making this short documentary, *Allow Us Back* (Mukhtar, 2021), was driven by the concerns of his migrant community of Punjabi language speakers. For these migrants from north India and Pakistan settled in South Auckland, the predicament of temporary migrants stranded in the Indian Punjab and the Pakistani Punjab was the burning social issue of 2020 and 2021, which surfaced in public forums and community meetings and on radio talkback.

The characters, including Asim, were experiencing collective anxiety from seeing no clear solution in sight. Firstly, the Punjabis stuck in India could not predict whether they had a definite pathway back, nor could they say if this transient moment in their migrant lives would eventually lead to living overseas permanently. Secondly, Auckland Punjabis who made up New Zealand's largest settlement of Punjabi migrants from India and Pakistan numbering at an estimated fifty thousand people, were burdened with worry. Many Punjabi permanent residents feared the situation would deteriorate for temporary visa holders caught in India and Pakistan. What they had garnered from media reports was that it seemed unlikely migrants would be allowed back when the border reopened in 2022 under an amended government policy seeking to curb immigration (Bonnett, 2021; Patterson, 2021).

The Punjabi immigration predicament revealed a story couched within a fast-changing New Zealand population demographic where the numbers of Punjabis had

grown considerably over the past decade. In fact, their population had quadrupled in size due to international students arriving to study and work as lower skilled migrants in the service and horticulture sectors (Brown Pulu, Singh, and Sarkaria, 2018, p. 138). As we have published elsewhere, “this time in Punjabi migration history incubated a social expectation where it was thought temporary movement for professional employment or postgraduate study would lead to permanent residency” (Brown Pulu and Mukhtar, 2020, p. 8). Outside the scope of this paper existed a certain social reality; one where anxiety had been intensifying over time inside the New Zealand Punjabi community.

To explain, in 2021 the policy shift to reduce the numbers of temporary migrants in anticipation of the international border opening up in 2022 had prompted Punjabis to reflect on a critical question. Had the prospect of emigrating to New Zealand for higher education and upward mobility to professional employment and permanent residency come to an end? (RNZ, 2021; TVNZ, 2021). On Punjabi social media, a topic that frequented discussion forums was that many Punjabis on New Zealand temporary visas were in the throes of switching their long-term immigration prospects to Canada (Radio Spice, 2021). They believed their chances of attaining permanent resident status in Canada were more favourable, which as a result would make them twice migrants (Das Gupta, 2021). Despite the New Zealand government announcement on 30 September 2021 of a “new one-off residence visa” for temporary visa holders, hopes had been dashed by the fact that international students, migrants on short-term visas, and “visa holders outside New Zealand” were ineligible (New Zealand Immigration, 2021).

## Setting

The documentary mode, or the way that the documentary was made, resembled what film theorist Bill Nichols described as expository; meaning the visual style gave emphasis to the spoken narrative of the characters (Nichols, 2017: 179). Woven into an expository mode of Punjabi migrants telling their stories is Asim’s advocacy for his ethnic and language community in South Auckland, making the documentary participatory in the sense that the filmmaker did not separate himself out from the Punjabis who formed

the subject of the film. Rather, the film began with a written description setting the tone of the storytelling. From the onset, Asim's personal account framed the New Zealand Punjabi experience (Mukhtar, 2021).

*More than a year has passed since Covid-19 forced the border to close. Day-by-day my people, the Punjabis, grow weary and restless with worry. Migrant workers and students are anxious to return to jobs and study in New Zealand. Still, we try to get people in power, people who make decisions about our fate, to listen to our story. Please listen.*



*Figure 1. Takanini Gurdwara.*

After stirring the sentiments of Punjabi speaking audiences, the film then shifts from a written description to a non-narrative sequence of still images of temporary migrants protesting outside the New Zealand High Commission to India in Chanakyapuri, New Delhi, on 17 November 2020. On-screen, 'Migrant rights are human rights,' and, 'We spent our golden time to build New Zealand,' can be read on placards clasped by young adults wearing facemasks, some of the men being turbaned Sikhs. A background song plays: performed by Punjabi folk musician Madan Gopal Singh (Singh, 2021), the verses were composed by Baba Bulleh Shah, a seventeenth century Punjabi philosopher and Sufi poet. The words of the song and the mood of the music

communicate a poignant message: 'May the days of pain for those who suffer come to an end.'

A minute into the film, the scene changes to Takanini Gurdwara Sri Kalgidhar Sahib, New Zealand's largest Sikh temple in Takanini, South Auckland. The camera opens on Asim with his camera and tripod in hand walking into the Gurdwara dressed in a white salwar kameez, the traditional dress of Punjabi Pakistanis, and a white *topi*, a Muslim prayer cap worn throughout Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Asim is seen setting up his camera in a small room and waiting for an interviewee. The sequence of moving shots establishes the setting of the Gurdwara campus and leads into the first speaker Daljit Singh, the spokesperson for the Supreme Sikh Society of New Zealand which administers Takanini Gurdwara. From Daljit, the conversation moves online to Kulveer and Jagdeep, a husband and wife in Punjab, and Vipandeep Bibi, a student in Punjab, with the last three discussions of Raj Pardeep, Surjeet, and Rattan being filmed in Papatoetoe, South Auckland. The last minute of the film returns to Takanini Gurdwara and shows Asim ritually washing before prayer, exiting the temple, and walking out the gate.

## Characters



*Figure 2. Daljit Singh.*

Daljit Singh is the spokesperson for the Supreme Sikh Society of New Zealand, the organising body for two Sikh temples in South Auckland, Takanini Gurdwara Sri Kalgidhar Sahib and Otahuhu Gurdwara Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji. He has permanently settled in South Auckland for thirty years. On the directive of the Akal Takht Jathedar, Harpreet Singh, the head of the Akal Takht located at Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) and Sikhs worldwide, Daljit mobilised twenty-one Sikh organisations. They met with Immigration New Zealand officials to request that the government allow temporary migrants to come back. He also garnered support for stranded migrants from South Asian community leaders, non-government organisations, Māori Members of Parliament, and the Anglican church. Daljit stressed that Sikh organisations asked the New Zealand government to grant visa extensions and provide a definite timeline for the return of temporary migrants. The government did not respond to their demands.



*Figure 3. Kulveer Kaur and Jagdeep Singh.*

Kulveer Kaur and Jagdeep Singh are a married couple with a child under two years old born in New Zealand. They are citizens of India with New Zealand temporary post-study work visas valid for three years until September 2021. In 2016, Kulveer's parents borrowed NZD \$35,000 to pay her study fee in New Zealand for two years. Before the Covid-19 border closure they were renting a three-bedroom house in South Auckland for NZD \$530 a week, where Jagdeep was employed as a security guard and Kulveer, a skilled worker. Jagdeep felt that Auckland Punjabis should pay quarantine costs for

returning migrants and assure the New Zealand government that their people would be Covid-19 tested to prevent bringing the virus into the country.



*Figure 4. Vipandeeep Bibi.*

Vipandeeep Bibi is married and a citizen of India with a New Zealand temporary work and study visa, which was valid until August 2021. In 2017, her parents used their land as collateral to borrow NZD \$30,000 to pay her study fee in New Zealand and her husband borrowed money to enable her to migrate. Before the Covid-19 border closure she was renting in South Auckland, studying, and working part-time as a cleaner. Debt collectors are hounding her family for loan repayments, while they are asking them to hold off in the hope that Vipandeeep might return to New Zealand for work. Vipandeeep saw the Punjabi community pressuring the New Zealand government for the return of stranded migrants was unsuccessful because the government was unrelenting about not letting migrants back.





*Figure 5. Raj Pardeep Singh.*

Raj Pardeep Singh is the founder and principal lawyer of Legal Associates Barristers and Solicitors, a private firm specialising in immigration and employment law based in South Auckland. He has permanently settled in South Auckland for more than ten years. Raj was in favour of petitioning the government for a specific number of quarantine places set aside for Punjabi temporary migrants.



*Figure 6. Surjeet Singh and Rattan Singh.*

Surjeet Singh and Rattan Singh are retirees and community elders. They have permanently settled in South Auckland for ten years. Surjeet remarked he communicates with younger migrants stuck in Punjab who are increasingly worried about whether they will be permitted to resume study and work. Rattan stressed that stranded students have

taken out NZD \$30,000 loans to study in New Zealand, and that the Sikh community is making every effort to have their young people return.

## Plot



*Figure 7. Ritual Washing.*

The interview excerpts piece together the film plot, which is visually emphasised by Asim walking into the Gurdwara campus to film Daljit's interview, and walking out of the temple after ritual washing and prayer. In effect, the documentary storyline evolves from the entry scene to the central theme contextualised in the characters' stories to the exit scene. It signifies the collective experience of anxiety, compounded by the uncertainty of not knowing how the future will unfold for Punjabi temporary migrants of New Zealand stuck in India.

For Punjabi speaking audiences, the closing scene of a Muslim wearing a *topi*, a prayer cap, and performing ablution before praying in a Sikh Gurdwara invokes sentimentality due to the fact that this is no longer a familiar sight in the Indian Punjab and the Pakistani Punjab. A simple frame of Asim washing his face triggers nostalgia by giving prominence to a composite culture of the past when religious pluralism was accepted as a Punjabi social norm. Punjabi writers and artists have anguished over the 1947 partition of India cutting up the land of Punjab and herding her people into different countries according to religious affiliation. Resultingly, Sikhs and Hindus were pressured to reside in Punjab, India, and Muslims in Punjab, Pakistan. Collective torment

therefore exists in the social reality that forced separation has weakened this shared culture carried in Punjabi folk songs, poems, and stories of common ancestors throughout history (Bhasin-Malik, 2007). A subtle subtext is visualised on the screen: Punjabi migrants in the diaspora live side-by-side and have postcolonial opportunities to recultivate their collective belief that they are, despite partition, people of communal heritage (Brown Pulu, Mukhtar, and Singh, 2019).

## Process

Asim, who produced and directed *Allow Us Back* (Mukhtar, 2021), diarised the film research process. From pre-production consultations with characters to setting dates and tasks for production filming and post-production editing, he entered proceedings in a journal as they occurred. Clear communication in email exchanges and telephone and Zoom video conversations in which the characters were given adequate time to ask questions and consider the risks and benefits of being filmed for a documentary was critical to acquiring their consent to participate. Two intended characters who engaged in pre-production discussions with Asim about the purpose of the documentary ended up not being filmed for different reasons. It is here that we give a brief account of how the temporary migrants in Punjab were recruited to contextualise Fitzgerald and Lowe's claim that documentary filmmaking is a systematic research process (Fitzgerald and Lowe 2020). Relatedly, the expository form of *Allow Us Back* (Mukhtar, 2021) sought not only to narrate the collective position on a specific migrant issue, but also to advocate that the stance of the characters presents a compelling argument.

On December 28th, 2020, Asim posted a recruitment flyer on his Facebook page calling on Punjabis with temporary visas stuck in Punjab, India, during the Covid-19 border closure. People who fitted the description were asked to contact him by Facebook Messenger, email, or WhatsApp, if they were interested in giving a Zoom video recorded interview for a short documentary to be distributed on social media. On 28-29 December, Jagdeep Singh, Vipandeep Bibi, and Gurjeet Singh individually contacted Asim on Facebook Messenger. He responded by sending each person the film synopsis and

interview questions for consideration, and a release form to sign and send back once an informed decision to participate had been made. These three temporary migrants knew one another and had firstly discussed among themselves, and then with Asim in pre-interview conversation, their preference for conducting a group interview (Gill, 2014). A group interview was organised for January 18th, 2021, but Wi-Fi glitches meant that Jagdeep Singh and his spouse, Kulveer Kaur, and Vipandeep Bibi were able to participate online, while Gurjeet Singh was unable to establish an Internet connection.

During March 2021, Asim made contact with a temporary migrant who had expressed interest in being interviewed on camera about their experience of returning to Auckland, New Zealand, after being stranded in Punjab, India, for eight months during the Covid-19 border closure. An interview date and venue was set for mid-March after the potential participant had received the film synopsis, interview questions, and release form. However, the filmed interview never materialised and Asim stopped contacting the person after they did not return calls or emails. They had changed their mind, that was clear. But the encounter left an impression on Asim: he reflected on how difficult it might have been to speak candidly about temporary migrants being barred from re-entering New Zealand when in this particular case, their employer had successfully brought them back into the country under the essential worker category.

## Discussion

Our discussion examines the overlapping and diverging themes emerging from three selected documentary excerpts. The first matter is prominent and lays emphasis on the collective efforts of Punjabi Sikhs in lobbying the New Zealand government to ease border exclusions for Punjabi temporary migrants to come back from India. The second idea is concealed but informs the underlying apprehension felt among Auckland Punjabis who had an inkling that the New Zealand government would curtail immigration from South Asia with regard to the numbers of temporary migrants entering the country.

*When this situation happened in March 2020, we contacted the New Zealand Prime Minister's Office within two days and requested that if the government can assure us these kids will be brought back, the Sikh community is happy to pay their travel and quarantine costs. The issue drew public attention. Akal Takht, highest order of the Sikhs, appealed to us to look after them. I asked the New Zealand Sikh organisations that we help the stranded. Otherwise, this will tarnish our history if we do not try to help our people.*

*-Daljit Singh.*

Daljit Singh's opening remark stressed that shortly after the public announcement was issued about New Zealand's international border closing for an indefinite period as a measure to limit the spread of Covid-19, "the Sikh community" acted. Concerned for young-adults who were temporary migrants visiting the Punjab and unable to resume their jobs in Auckland, they presented a solution: they would "pay their travel and quarantine costs." The fundamental point he articulated was the offer of financial assistance for travel and quarantine extended to Punjabi temporary migrants through the request made to the New Zealand government to relax border prohibitions. Conversely, the obscured part of the exchange centred around the Akal Takht at Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) in Amritsar, Punjab, petitioning Sikhs in New Zealand to find a solution to the migrant dilemma of being caught in India and wanting to get back to jobs and routines in Auckland.

We have noted a certain part of Daljit's statement was implicit rather than explicit for background reasons that exist beyond the screen, that is, beyond the 13:10 minutes of on-screen storying. To clarify, Harpreet Singh, the Jathedar (Head) of the Akal Takht had publicly appealed to Sikhs globally. He called upon them to assist students from Punjab, India, who were studying overseas during the Covid-19 closure of international borders, and temporary migrants who found that they could not travel from India to host countries for employment. In a social-religious context, the appointed Jathedar is

personified as the leading authority of the Sikhs worldwide and the official spokesperson on matters concerning Sikhs and their spiritual and communal wellbeing.

Hence, this very request mobilised the Sikhs to act with urgency on behalf of stranded temporary migrants in Punjab, who in turn, were calling on New Zealand permanent residents to advocate for them. Auckland Sikh groups would have organised a strategy to communicate directly with the New Zealand government knowing that time was of the essence. Kris Faafoi, who was appointed the New Zealand immigration minister in July 2020, had been signalling an upcoming immigration reset in which the entry criteria for lower skilled temporary migrant workers would be changed. The reset rationale was based on a belief that New Zealand's small and medium enterprise business sector relied heavily on lower skilled workers from overseas. The over-supply of temporary workers employed at the minimum wage level thus drove down productivity. Faafoi's solution was to expressly focus on recruiting highly skilled professional migrants to increase economic growth. Consequently this meant the category of lower skilled temporary migrants would be drastically cut-back, if not culled.

Vipandeep Bibi's impressions, however, gave some insight into background exchanges between temporary migrants in Punjab and Sikh community leaders in Auckland.

*In my eyes, the Sikh organisations are making efforts on our behalf. But the [New Zealand] government is not willing to let us come back, which is why our community advocacy has been unsuccessful. In India, we are organising rallies and meeting with officials. Not one New Zealand MP [Member of Parliament] has helped us. Only Daljit Singh, he is the only community leader who is always available. Daljit responds to our text messages and gives us hope.*

*-Vipandeep Bibi.*

Vipandeep candidly expressed that the Auckland Sikhs, and in particular Daljit Singh who exemplified community leadership during this critical time, were pushing for temporary migrants to be allowed back to New Zealand for work-related purposes. Packed within the statement was a personal observation that seemingly slipped out: from the one-hundred-and-twenty members of the New Zealand parliament, zero had come forward to hear their case or offer support. Reflexively the speaker conveyed the feeling of unease in the exchanges between Punjabis on the topic of temporary migrants stuck offshore. People were sceptical that the New Zealand government had any intention to permit temporary migrants with valid visas to re-enter the country; nor would Immigration New Zealand renew visas for temporary migrants whose travel permits had lapsed while caught overseas.

Jagdeep Singh's closing statement stressed the foreground topic of the documentary narrative. Beseeking Punjabis in New Zealand, he urged them to communicate directly with the New Zealand government to press their case.

*Our [Punjabi] community in New Zealand must put forward a proposal to the New Zealand government that they will pay for our hotel quarantine costs. They have to give assurance to the [New Zealand] government that if they allow us back to New Zealand, we will not cause the community spread of Covid-19. We will provide Covid-19 test results. We will self-isolate for seventy-two hours in Delhi before flying to New Zealand, and we will go into quarantine upon arrival.*

*-Jagdeep Singh.*

Jagdeep's request to the Punjabi community concentrated on Covid-19 circumstances prompting the New Zealand international border closure; a border that did not fully reopen until 31 July 2022, one and a half years after the documentary interviews were filmed and almost two and a half years after it was initially closed in March 2020. Perhaps he was convinced that temporary migrants being kept out of the country was entirely the fault of the global pandemic. In reality, he was probably living

in hope of a chance at returning to Auckland with his family, rather than acknowledging the problematic issue of the New Zealand government indicating changes to immigration policy were to ensue.

## Summary

To conclude, the short documentary *Allow Us Back* (Mukhtar, 2021) was indicative of the time when interviews with seven Punjabis were filmed from January to March 2021, and the evolving context of the New Zealand government's border prohibitions during two and a half years of Covid-19 restrictions on entering the country. Mounting anxiety swelling among the Auckland Punjabi community was triggered by the insecurity of not knowing whether stranded migrants in Punjab, India would be allowed back in the country. Punjabis were also doubtful about the proposed immigration reset, which in their eyes could result in a worst case scenario of excluding temporary migrants from South Asia. Living in vulnerable circumstances impelled Punjabis in India to plead with their community in Auckland to push for their return to Immigration New Zealand. Responding to a call to allow them back, the Sikh organisations in particular advocated for temporary migrants with persistence during New Zealand's Covid-19 period of international border closure.

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Asim Mukhtar Janjua is researching a PhD at Auckland University of Technology. His doctoral project produces a documentary film and exegesis on Pakistani and Indian Punjabis in South Auckland and their composite culture and history.

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