

**THE PRACTICE OF THE PERAKTOWN *PINDH*  
IN COMMUNITY IDENTITY FORMATION  
AND BELONGING IN A  
MALAYSIAN SIKH DIASPORA**

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## Abstract

This research discusses the post-migration lived experience of the Peraktown Sikhs, a diaspora community of visible difference in the specific context of Malaysia. Using a qualitative case study methodology, I juxtaposed oral life history narratives and extensive interviews, memoirs and photographs, to study eighteen members of a total thirty-five Sikh families who lived in the multi-ethnic township I renamed Peraktown. Their narratives offer a loose historical chronology from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 1970s of a diasporic group seeking to find home and a place to belong. Using a postcolonial lens, the research demonstrates the complex negotiation between inherited cultural traditions and the appropriation of colonial knowledge. It explores engagement and interaction with broader societal structures and dominant habitus within the rubric of identity construction, hybridity and the idea of home. My focus is the liminal generation, born prior to Indian and Malaysian independence, between 1915 and 1947. Framed in both the concept of diaspora as bounded space and the diaspora as a societal process, I co-opted a concept native to Sikhs, the *Pindh*, to understand and interrogate their unique understanding of identity, belonging and home. The *Pindh* or village incorporates relationships with the landscape and social structure in the construction of Sikh/Punjabi identification. In contrast to studies on Sikhs elsewhere, in Peraktown, the nostalgic attachment and identification with the physical spaces of their ancestral homeland and the meaning it imbued is accompanied by the appropriation of concepts and practices that sustain the idea of community belonging, bridging the divide of being at home both 'here' and 'there'. This conceptual category is extended further, creating a *Pindh* of the mind, not bounded by geography or time. Their position offers this research a place in continued discussions of the complexity and

fluidity of cultural identity and belonging and how this is constructed. Their lived experiences offer a map to the continued negotiations of diaspora identities in the newly forged linkages and relationships with land, a recreation of place and space in the course of settlement in the new host country.

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## Glossary and key dates

<b>5 Ks (the Kara, Kangha, Kachera, Kirpan and Kesh)</b>	Refers to the 5 outward symbols of the Sikh faith. The Kara is a steel bangle; the Kangha is a wooden comb used to keep hair clean; Kachera are short pants worn as underwear; Kirpan is a short sword and the Kesh refers to the practice of uncut hair.
<b>Amrit</b>	Literally 'nectar' referring to the baptismal act in the Sikh faith.
<b>Asa di vaar</b>	The opening hymn sung at every Sikh service
<b>Bumiputera</b>	Literally 'sons of the soil' used to refer to the ethnic groups who receive privileges from Malaysian social, economic and political policies of positive discrimination.
<b>Ghadr Movement</b>	A party founded by Punjabis within the British Empire to promote the aim of Indian independence and self rule. In Malaya, the Ghadr party attempted to mutiny in Singapore in 1915 prior to Sikh and Indian army forces being sent to the Middle East theatre.
<b>Gotong royong</b>	In Malay, a community-based work party where everyone pitches into help.
<b>Granthi</b>	The person who reads from the Sikh holy book.
<b>Gurdwara</b>	Sikh place of worship

<b>Gurmukhi</b>	The Punjabi alphabet
<b>Guru Granth Sahib or Babaji</b>	The holy book of the Sikh religion
<b>Gyani</b>	Refers to a priest of the Sikh faith
<b>Kirtan</b>	Singing of devotional hymns
<b>Interwar years</b>	In this thesis, referring to the period between World War I and World War II (1915 to 1941)
<b>Izzat</b>	Meaning 'honour' or 'prestige.'
<b>Japanese Occupation</b>	In Malaysia, from 1941 to 1945.
<b>Japji</b>	The first prayer of the Sikh faith
<b>Jhanj</b>	Wedding party from the groom's side.
<b>Juda</b>	The top knot of hair on a male Sikh.
<b>Kampong/Kampung</b>	In Malay, meaning 'village'.
<b>Khalsa</b>	Literally meaning 'the pure ones' and usually used to refer to Sikhs everywhere who adhere to the outward appearances associated with the religion. Originally the brotherhood formed by the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh.
<b>Komagata Maru</b>	Refers to an incident in 1914, where a number of Punjabis, at the time, considered to be British subjects, decided to circumvent Canadian migration laws by hiring a ship to sail there. The Passengers were not allowed to dock and the ship eventually was returned

to India where the British government decided to treat them as agitators. It acted as a rallying call towards Indian self-rule and as a key incident in the history of the Ghadr movement.

<b>Lah</b>	Malaysian expression used to add emphasis to a statement.
<b>Langar Hall</b>	The free kitchen at every Gurdwara where anyone regardless of religion, ethnicity or caste may receive a meal.
<b>Liminal generation</b>	Refers to the research participants, who were born between 1915 and 1947, before either India or Malaysia became independent nation-states.
<b>Majha, Malwa, Doaba</b>	The three regional divisions of the Punjab.
<b>Malaysian Independence</b>	1957
<b>Padang</b>	In Malay, meaning a field.
<b>Panchayat</b>	A village committee of 5 elders who offer advice and make key decisions regarding the welfare of the community.
<b>Panth</b>	Refers to the worldwide community of Sikhs.
<b>Prakash and Smapathi</b>	Prayer services for different times of the day
<b>Ragi</b>	The person who plays the instruments or sings during the Kirtan

## Foreword

When I first moved to Australia, at the age of eighteen, I filled a photo album with family snapshots, a tangible link to home, my family and my past. The photographs moved with me, through different houses, on display in silver frames on hall tables, usually near the front door. It was an unconscious choice of positioning, placing them at the liminal of my home and the outside world.

Looking back, the photographs served as a reminder, to others and to myself, that my home and belonging was not limited to the here and now, but to the fragments of elsewhere. These photographs are my symbols, my own liminality hinted at in the sepia-tinted images, in the tinsel edges of my mother's wedding dress, the crisp turbans and the hopeful faces looking into the future.

Seventeen years later in Malaysia, I am researching belonging and identity in the Sikh diaspora community depicted in some of these photographs. Now I have interviews, life histories and memoirs to link me further with my past as I investigate the continuity and change in customs, beliefs and community norms. The Peraktown Sikh community bridges this divide of being at home both 'here' and 'there' through the unique category of meaning, the Peraktown *Pindh*, with their lived experiences offering a map to the continued negotiations of diasporic identities.

## **1 Introducing the research**

This is a study of home and belonging, the negotiation involved in defining a common identity for a diaspora community of visible difference, whose origins are intrinsically linked to the British colonial project, living now in the post-colonial, multicultural nation of Malaysia. It is a story of a community of Sikhs from a small town enmeshed in the webs of the British Empire located in the state of Perak, in Malaysia, spanning the colonial period to the current day. The research is pieced together from oral history narratives and ethnographic fieldwork, demonstrating their transformation of home, from a fixed place to a mutable, changing place of meaning. The focus within the field of migration or diaspora studies places a certain emphasis on the conceptualisation of home and the constant push and pull between the country or place of origin and the host country, privileging a discourse centred on the dichotomy of integration or alienation. Within this research, I hope to introduce a discussion of the construction of belonging to include the complexity of spaces and places occupied by migrant communities in the process of negotiating their own meaning of home and belonging, through their practice of everyday life, and their relationships with place, space and time. The Sikh community comes from a town I choose to rename Peraktown, highlighting its location within the state of Perak, with its importance in the colonial history of Malaysia, intending to highlight this as a town inhabited by a multiplicity of ethnicities. Peraktown is not merely a town inhabited by Sikhs, but a place where the Sikhs are a visible minority community, living within the larger multicultural context of the colonial space. I appropriated a uniquely Sikh word and concept, the *Pindh*, developing it as a category of meaning to explore their understanding and practice of home and community belonging. I elevated the idea of the *Pindh*, making it something quite different; a space of commonly held values and beliefs,

shared and transmitted, that allowed for their continued common identification, regardless of physical location and regular contact.

*Pindh* is a Punjabi word translating to mean the village of origin, but it incorporates not only the connection to the geographical location, but also the emotional relationship to the land and landscape and the social stratification and symbols of region, caste and class that demarcate identification within the Sikh community in Punjab and in the diaspora. Current practice in research on Sikh communities at home and abroad limits the usage of *Pindh* to a place of origin and as a form of social distinction. I co-opted this to better understand and explain the transformation of home, identification and sense of belonging within the subject group, to become a sense or a feeling, able to be activated at need, linking them to their idea of community, wholly surrounding the practice of being a Peraktown Sikh. My conceptual category of the Peraktown *Pindh* altered to become more than a hometown or place of origin, but also signifying their identity and belonging to one another, creating a space where movements or journeys became distances that could be measured. The Peraktown *Pindh* remained a space where return or going home no longer needed definition in terms of a physical location but simply meant picking up a telephone or retelling an old memory. This transformation of the meaning I assigned to the *Pindh* occurred during a period of social and political flux, with challenges to British rule in India in the 1930s and 1940s, the Japanese Occupation of Malaya from 1941 to 1945 and eventually the independence of both these colonies in 1947 and 1957 respectively, providing a context where belonging was problematic and complicated. In essence, this thesis focuses on a subset of the community that existed in the interstices, born during the colonial period, where Malaysia and India as a single, united entity was not yet conceived. The Sikhs of Peraktown lived through a different form of colonisation during the Japanese Occupation years, the return of the British and the subsequent negotiation of a

social contract that eventually evolved to become independent Malaysia.

The Sikh community was very close. Either it was somebody's cousin and all that who came. One came in those days it was by the steamers, so it was not an easy journey, by sea, it can be rough also. So that's how most of the people here who settled down had families, parents who initially were either in the army and then they joined the government, as police or something like that, or became farmers, sort of thing. (IKaur, 29 September 2012)

The community was so education conscious and those days, everyone, the moment some body's son is going out, they have prayers in the temple, asking God for his blessing, let he be successful in his endeavours to finish the degree. You can see the whole thinking of the community then. I think that's what differs, the people who settled in this part of the world, like Peraktown, they were so focused trying to get the next generation to move the next level up. (TSingh, 7 March 2012)

The Peraktown Sikh community is an example of a little studied migrant origin group, where the migration occurred before the inscribing of national boundaries and identity in the place of origin and in the host society. I chose to focus on the liminal generation, born within this period of flux, where the question of belonging did not relate directly to the notion of place of origin or place of settlement. Claiming a sense of feeling towards a place of origin was impossible, as the community lacked cogent linkages back to Punjab and as they were embedded within the colonial administration, this increasingly distanced them from the social and cultural patterns of the rural tradition of origin. The Sikh community accommodated to the broader forces of Empire in Punjab and in Perak in terms of their engagement with the British superstructure. The Japanese Occupation in 1941 functioned much like a tidal wave, destabilising a foundational pillar of community self-definition. The experience of the front lines of war and conflict, both in the physical hardships of occupation and with the mental and emotional components in questioning and challenging positions of power and

privilege, resulted in a catalytic renegotiation of norms, values and behaviour in the post-war process of re-engaging with the British administration and subsequently with the political elite created in the framework of independent Malaysia. In the Malaysian case, the construction of Indian as an ethnic category comprising the indentured labour, largely Tamil and Hindu population, largely excluded them from politics, while the evolving national narrative increasingly focused on the contextualisation of themselves as migrants, despite two to four generations of settlement in the host country and their holding Malaysian citizenship.

I think we are more Sikh than Indian lah. You know, Indians, when you say Indian, you connect with the Tamils lah. So sometimes you want to identify yourself, so you put Sikh in the forms. (USingh, 17 April 2012)

As a minority within a minority, and a visibly different minority at that, the Sikhs of Peraktown remained minimally engaged with the post-independence definition of Malaysian identity.

Through the lens of the Peraktown *Pindh*, they created a space where it remains possible to be nomads out of necessity, moving in pursuit of a better life, yet still owning a point of home, continuing to belong somewhere and sometime. Within this liminal generation, the Peraktown *Pindh* emerged as a structure of feeling, beginning as a category of meaning during the inter-war years, as their parents settled in Peraktown and created the sense of community in the physical landscape and through their social interactions. It evolved to become dominant during their childhood and youth, covering the time period from the late 1930s to independence in 1957 and touching briefly on the post 1970s Malay-focused national narrative formation, during this period of flux, providing the subject group, a way to still belong, to identify with each other and giving them a place of home. In essence, this research represents a story of a place and an idea that no longer exists in a tangible form, but is a waft of a memory, like the scent of a

crumbled rose petal pressed in the pages of a book, the skeleton of a leaf showing the tracings of what was, yet it is also a history and at the same time a living reality invoked at will in the bodies of its members, who may be ageing, but have stories to share. In part, it is also my story, as my father grew up in this town.

Any work on diaspora communities inevitably engages with the notion of journeying, a dichotomy between the fixity of roots and the transitory of movement. As Ian Chambers described:

To travel implies movement between fixed positions, a site of departure, a point of arrival, the knowledge of an itinerary. It also intimates an eventual return, a potential homecoming. Migrancy, on the contrary, involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation. Always in transit, the promise of a homecoming - completing the story, domesticating the detour - becomes an impossibility. (1994 p.50)



**Figure 1: Peraktown Sikhs around the 1950s**

This thesis offers insight on migrant integration and the performance of difference and diversity, where social and cultural formations remain separate from the national narrative yet connected to local life. Migrant minority groups face choices in balancing their integration to host societies, their nostalgia for their memory of home and the adherence to their own cultural and religious values. The Peraktown Sikhs offer a case study of a community making choices to improve their socio-economic position while maintaining the core tenets of their unique cultural and religious identity, constructing a common, shared sense of belonging to a space of meaning, both physical and emotional. My research illustrates Stuart Hall's idea of 'the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourse of history and culture' (1990 p.226), reflecting a community that struggles with the constant conflict between belonging and alienation in their new home and with each other, negotiating their identity within their own community and mapping into society at large. It addresses continuity and change within this particular community, tracking the norms, beliefs and values they chose to keep, discard and later regain. Key themes in my research include belonging and alienation, acculturation issues across the borders of British, Sikh and Malaysian inheritances over a number of generations, and the concerted use of social and cultural capital to facilitate access to avenues of socio-economic betterment while retaining cultural values and community cohesion in the milieu of the Malaysian migrant experience.

My research describes a community negotiating challenges and differences of their positionalities and identifications to adopt, adapt and eventually become adept (Barry 2002 p.196). The aim of this research is, by using the Peraktown *Pindh* as a category of meaning, to place the journey of the Sikh community 'to see and recognise the different parts and histories of ourselves, to construct those points of identification, those positionalities we call in retrospect our 'cultural identities' (Hall

1990 p.237). This places the emphasis on enunciating a hybridised form of cultural identity, belonging to neither the 'homeland' nor the new home. My research probes evolving gender roles, educational and socio-economic aspirations and retention of cultural norms and values in marriage, religion and social relationships over three generations. The 'Peraktown' Sikhs improved their social and economic standing through a myriad of choices, such as valuing education, offering women opportunities beyond the domestic sphere and sacrificing present material possessions for future gains. The distinctive feeling of belonging is unique to this particular community, and it is through this sense of functioning as a collective unit and continued value for this collective, long after they leave the geographical space of Peraktown that surrounds their pursuit of socio-economic betterment for themselves and the next generation. The concept of the *Pindh* imposed itself on me, during my research, as I sought to understand the unique value in the lived experience of the Peraktown Sikhs. Borrowing a concept from Punjabi culture, my decision to adapt and use the idea of the *Pindh*, framed my understanding of community identification and belonging and their pursuit of shared aspirations.

A study of this particular community is relevant for a number of reasons. Illustrating the experience of a non-indentured origin diaspora groups within the rubric of the Indian diaspora discourse and the inclusion of marginalised minority voices expands discussion of migration as a site of evolving identities, values and norms. My research demonstrates cohesive action in pursuit of collective benefits, to improve the position of their whole community. Catechising the account of a homogeneous Indian experience in Malaysia creates a counter-history of the Sikh community's lived experience in social, economic and political representations of Malaysian Indian diaspora identity, generating a more balanced and variegated description. It offers an alternative to historical convention, where the subject

privileged is of indentured origin, Hindu, Tamil experience by challenging this subsummation of varied subcommunal cultural, ethnic and religious voices. Framed in both the concept of diaspora as bounded space and the diaspora as a societal process, the Peraktown Sikhs demonstrate their belonging to their own unbounded place, unrestricted by space and time, a place I chose to define as the Peraktown *Pindh* in my efforts to better understand their experience. Their position offers this research a place in continued discussions of the complexity and fluidity of cultural identity and belonging and how this is constructed. In exploring this ethnography of diaspora belonging and constructed identities, I address a gap in knowledge of the Indian diaspora through my choice of a Sikh community in a former British colony, with a clear and distinct history to that of the new diasporas and the old, indentured labour tropes highlighted in Section 2.3. As Vijay Mishra states, 'All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way' (1996 p.189). I recognize that this analysis is partial as it focused on one group of Sikh migrants in Malaysia and the context of this research is time and space specific, located between the early 1900s to Malaysian independence in 1957 in one town, thus it is not generally applicable to all Sikh migrants elsewhere. While this represents a weakness in the study, I feel it does not detract from the value as a testimony of unrecorded history of a little-studied community of difference from their own unique perspective. The post-colonial state formation process in Malaysia focused largely on constructions of communalistic definitions of the population and their histories and future interests. This limits the voices and representation of sub-ethnic communities, hidden within the mass sub summation of broader categories of identification, eliminating the nuances of personal and real lived experience that does not mesh neatly within the nation-building project. Constructing alternative histories within the more recent post-colonial nation state formations through the voices of under-represented minority voices provides greater insight in the articulation

and importance of the nation state to communities of difference. In the subsequent chapters, I explore the difference in this particular diaspora through the rubric of identity construction, hybridity and the idea of home.

Using a postcolonial lens, the theories of social and cultural capital based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam, form the theoretical base for studying the methods and choices the Peraktown Sikhs made towards bettering their community position. I apply the specific context of the Malaysian case against this, framing a community that remains distinct to the national narrative but with a corporeal investment in the nation state, their socio-economic future and the survival of their cultural heritage. Finally, my research offers a model to understand other migrant minorities facing dilemmas with resource access, cultural knowledge and loss of identity in navigating approaches to participation and engagement with social, economical and cultural framework of the host society through this group's unique approach to creating a sense of community and belonging, utterly separate to limitations of space and time. The *Pindh* offers interesting potential as an enabling concept through which other diaspora or migrant groups may be better understood. The Peraktown Sikhs engaged in a process of discursive self-identification to resist the dominant discourse that minimises their voice. They emphasised their ethnicity as Sikhs in self-description and their local born origins and affiliation to life in Malaysia through recounting family stories of their ancestors' migratory journey and experience and their own experiences in forming the community in Peraktown. Through these processes, they reinvented their world, reclaiming their identity through regular inscription of their distinctness from the homogeneous depiction of Indian ethnicity and to some extent, from Sikh groups in other parts of the country.

They made choices to maintain, alter, or discard customs and practices. They acclimatised to different social and political situations and ultimately worked towards improving the lives of the next generation in comparison to their own. They banded together in solidarity, to negotiate the different expectations and imposed depiction by the colonial powers and later by an independent Malaysian government, becoming adept in switching cultural codes and using the adapted knowledge to strengthen their identity, to define belonging and improve their socio-economic position without losing their distinctiveness. This hybridisation is sometimes an act of resistance, defying being defined as they perform their cultural identity on their own terms as they are 'caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation' which allows them to be 'free to negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference' (Bhabha 2004 p.38). The boundary of their identity is fluid and they adapt or refashion themselves according to situations or interactions, 'conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism or multiculturalism of the diversity of cultures, but inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity' (Bhabha 2004 p.54). Describing the position of the exile, Edward Said wrote:

Necessarily, then, I speak of exile not as a privilege, but as an alternative to the mass institutions that dominate modern life. Exile is not, after all, a matter of choice: you are born into it, or it happens to you. But, provided that the exile refuses to sit on the side-lines nursing a wound, there are things to be learned: he or she must cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity. (2000 p.184)

He emphasised the subjectivity embedded in the position of an exile, offering a critical positionality, of distance from cultural identities and dominant norms. It offers an idea that the position of an exile, by removing all affiliation to a home, presents new choices and affiliations without the preconceived fixity of place or culture. Identity and belonging become mutable, as you travel further away from the world

you know, carrying the weight of family and community aspirations and the inheritance of their memories and constructed identities. I claim the position of exile for myself and for the Peraktown Sikh community. Crossing borders requires a continuous renegotiation of identity and an acceptance of a position as an exile. This inheritance is a complex one as there is the nostalgia and longing for the culture, society and identity in a place of birth as well as in the imagined homeland of ancestors.

In *Border Country*, Raymond Williams (2006) describes the return home of Matthew, an academic, from a Welsh, working class background. The book details the internal sense of exile that Matthew feels and his disconnectedness from the rhythms of life in the village and from his parents and old friends. The experience of a working class boy who left rural Wales for university in England, echoed my experiences of moving from an Asian to Western cities for university and work, and that of the respondents, who left their small town for large cities and foreign countries, where their culture and appearance marked them distinct. The dispersals, whether for economic, knowledge, or the creation of new familial linkages resulted in changes to perspectives and largely unconscious adaptation to different cultural norms and identities. The experiences described by Williams very much resonated with my own study of the Peraktown Sikhs. I identified with Matthew Price, both in his role as an academic, studying his own people, and the incongruity of claiming these people as my own, when my life diverged along journeys and maps so different to their own lived experiences. As my research progressed, I found that with the metaphorical and physical boundary crossings, the Peraktown Sikhs created a new diaspora, no longer defined by their links to Punjab as a place of origin but with the specific context of their geographies of memory located around the notion I chose to define as the Peraktown *Pindh*. These border crossings generate a fracturing in cultural identities, norms, values and beliefs as they encounter and contrast with other systems. A restructured

hybridised sphere of knowledge and behaviour resulted from attempts to reconcile this fracturing with their own unique community systems.

The idea of putting down roots limits the scope for hybridity and the potential for keeping identity and home a more fluid idea, allowing for continued journeys, both across physical geographies and mental landscapes, providing a freedom to create a new definition of identity as a Sikh diaspora group, unique to themselves. As Salman Rushdie described in *Shame*:

When individuals come unstuck from their native land, they are called migrants, when nations do the same thing (Bangladesh), the act is called secession. What is the best thing about migrant peoples and seceded nation? I think it is their hopefulness.... And what is the worst thing? It is the emptiness of one's luggage. I'm speaking of invisible suitcases, not the physical, perhaps cardboard, variety containing a few meaning-drained mementoes: we have come unstuck from more than land. We have floated upwards from history, from memory, from time. (2008 pp.86-87)

The research highlights the ability of the Peraktown Sikhs to use the *Pindh* to provide a place of belonging and to transmit their own memory or history, unstuck from the past, to become adaptable and mobile, focusing on the betterment of community socio-economic position and social standing. Despite the eventual adeptness at engaging in the interstices of 'here' and 'back there', and unlike William's protagonist, Matthew, the Peraktown Sikh community allowed for a return, without disconnectedness. They and I returned to continued membership within the families and to a community evolved from one fixed in a physical, spatial location to a dispersed one, forming and inscribing the boundaries of membership through imagination and memory. Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities is a key work on identity construction from a postmodernist view and while in the context of nation states, provides a theory for boundary construction in diaspora communities. He explains, 'communities (identity groups) are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but the style in which

they are imagined' (1993 p.7). In studying the continuity and change within the Peraktown Sikh community, it becomes evident that regardless of accommodations made, habits adopted and norms and values compromised on, there yet remains something identifiably Peraktown Sikh about both my own and their experiences. Through the process of researching this community, I found my own place within the *Pindh* and within this category of meaning, we inscribed our sense of identity as a dialectical narrative of belonging between the construct of 'home' and 'not home', creating a new position of 'sometimes home'.

### **1.1 Peraktown and the Peraktown Sikhs**

The Sikhs in British Malaya originated from different locales in Punjab, with the three regional divisions being the *Majha*, the *Malwa* and the *Doaba*. The veracity of regional origins as a means of distinction occurred in a large part due to colonial recruitment preferences from earlier alliances with the rulers of the Malwa region and later, post the Punjab Wars with the Majha region and the empire of Maharajah Ranjit Singh. In the early years of settlement, discrimination based on place of origin frequently occurred, for example in the use of *Gurdwaras* for worship, in the regimental division of the Malay State Guides and marriage arrangements. The Peraktown Sikh community originated predominantly from the *Majha* and *Malwa* regions in Punjab and arrived in Malaya in the late nineteenth century following the British annexation of Punjab in 1849. The Peraktown Sikhs comprised a minority group of approximately thirty-five families. Their forefathers, the initial migrants left Punjab as agriculturalists, to either embed themselves within the colonial administration military and security personnel or for those who followed family or fellow *Pindh* members, finding opportunities for self-employment, eventually moving up the socio-economic ladder in subsequent generations through the civil service and later, white collar professions in both the public and private sectors. Peraktown is the centre of the Perak Sultanate and during the period this thesis

addresses, from 1900 to 1957, it was the site of the British Residency for Perak State, making it a core outpost of the forces of empire. The town hosted in 1897, the first Durbar Conference, the conference of the rulers of the Malay states. The royal town was the first capital of Perak state; it is located at the confluence of two rivers, Perak River and Peraktown River and nestled against the foothills of the main mountain range in Malaysia. The clock tower marks the centre of town, with the shops and the market ranged along the Peraktown Riverside on both banks to the north. Travelling further north, one found the government offices, schools, bus and railway stations and the hospitals, around which areas, most of the Peraktown Sikh population resided. The early years of settlement presented a Sikh community divided along caste and class lines, reflected also in the geographical space of the town. Limited inter-caste interaction occurred in the community despite sharing the same *Gurdwara*, and food preparation and eating at meals, work and marriages remained endogamous during the early years of settlement. As interaction between the different groups of migrants increased, a shared set of norms towards education and socio-economic betterment evolved.

During the initial period of settlement, these changes were limited to the men of the upper castes, however by the third generation, women and the other castes too began to progress socio-economically in their own right. The presence of non-Sikh voices is absent from the text as is any significant discussion of the other ethnic communities living within the geographical confines of Peraktown. Despite the friendly and cordial inter-ethnic group relationships of this period, the members of the Peraktown *Pindh* prioritised their relationships with each other, relegating these non-*Pindh* members to the periphery of their narratives. As USingh described, 'You see as a Sikh, the Sikh in in Peraktown very closely knit you know, they know each other very well. Maybe due to the circumstances of the Second World War. So

everybody knows everybody' (USingh, 11 April 2012). I wish to highlight here my reason for not including a counter-narrative that would incorporate more concrete representations of 'the others' living in the shared space of Peraktown. This thesis specifically aimed at describing and analysing the Peraktown Sikhs lived experience and within their narratives, this does not demonstrate engagement or interactions with the other ethnicities based in the town space.

Mostly we were Sikh community. All the Sikh boys used to get together. In our younger days, we did not have many other nationality children playing with us because we were in the local line; all the Sikhs family was staying there. There were 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 houses and they all had children, about 4 to 5 children. We were already about 15-20 of us in the kampung itself. So all these children from the kampung used to get together (MSingh, 15 March 2012).

Non-Sikh presence in narratives rarely included names, limiting descriptions to ethnic group membership used mainly to emphasize the cordiality that existed then as compared to the increasing racialization and distinctions that are part of the dominant discourse in modern Malaysia now.

There was never a distinction that you are Malay, I am Chinese or I can't come to your house because you are eating non-halal non-halal stuff and all that. I mean in that way anywhere you went, you were welcomed as a child, as a son, no, there was no distinction. Now, the later stages I think after Independence and particularly May 13 night, things changed. Because you see at that time I didn't feel it so much, but going down the line, almost 8 years, then it started surfacing, because you suddenly saw everyone who were duds were overtaking you and you were being side-lined and everything you wanted became difficult. Though you were doing very well, you were not given the opportunity. Others were given the opportunity and a lot of other things as well you know and people were becoming a bit arrogant and I think the politicians, politics of the country has caused what Malaysia is today (NSingh, 12 April 2012).

There is a consciousness to this exclusion, with the community recognizing the presence of other communities and ethnicities yet highlighting the continuous reproduction of boundaries, in a sense,

rewriting history. A non-Sikh interviewed during the course of my research, in contrast, highlighted his family engagement with the Sikh community in the town:

I was born in 1933. My mother is a local. She was born in Peraktown and my grandfather, my mother's father came from India, long time ago and he worked in Peraktown and that time there is no electricity so there are only these kerosene lamps, you know. So he was in charge of these kerosene lamps, lighted up at night in Peraktown. So and there a small house and we were very close to the Sikh community because a lot of Sikhs in Peraktown then. And my mother grew up with the Sikh community and she could speak fluent Punjabi, very fluent, fluent Punjabi. We had a shop near the hospital then behind the old Gurdwara temple and my father built a house next to the Gurdwara in Peraktown, the old Gurdwara by the side, next to it adjacent to it actually (AB, 5 March 2012).

As SSingh explained, 'the main reason for that is there are quite a large number of each community and they can more or less exist by themselves so they have formed blocs' (SSingh, 29 March 2012).

Regardless of the differing starting socio-economic starting points and despite the relatively small size of the community as a whole, the overall picture of the community is one of success, both through socio-economic success and in the retention of a cultural identity. As Manjit Singh Sidhu states in his book, 'Although they are so small a part of the whole, they have contributed to both social and economics of the country out of all proportion to their numbers' (1991 p.7). Socio-economic mobility anticipates a degree of acculturation or integration to the host society. The Peraktown Sikhs selectively acculturated in Malaysian society sufficiently to pursue their progress up the socio-economic ladder, yet continued to retain a distinct community ethos. There is an inevitable incompleteness to any ethnographic research based on the historical. This thesis represents a loose chronology of history as experienced by this particular community, from the turn of the 20th century to Malaysian Independence. I want to stress the

particularity of this piece of work as a specific period experience and therein lies much of its value.

In this thesis, I propose three factors for their upward socio-economic mobility. Firstly, they originate from a diasporic population, developing a community mythos for transplanting their roots when in search of greater prospects and opportunities. This highlights what Avtar Brah described as 'When does a location become home? What is the difference between "feeling at home" and staking claim to a place as one's own?' (1996 p.193). The Peraktown Sikhs used the ideas encapsulated by the notion of the *Pindh* to stake a claim to a place of their own, beyond traditional definitions of home as geographical place. Secondly, the community possessed and understood the value of developing, using and maintaining social and cultural capital, mingling with a diversity of people, of different ethnic, race, religion and cultural backgrounds to allow for pursuit of employment, education and social relationships. The adaptation of community habitus to embrace the value of colonial linkages and education offers them the new ways of being, challenging the limitations placed on them through migration, the local context of discrimination and the ability to challenge norms, values and boundaries. In embracing the value of change to their particular social conditions and tapping into their network of relationships, the Peraktown Sikhs ensure that they continually had access to betterment of their positions. Following the racial riots of 1969, the introduction of the New Economic Policy, aimed at redressing social and economic inequities between ethnic groups that increasingly developed towards the privileging the *Bumiputera* population and the institutionalisation of Malay as the official language in schools and work places, the Peraktown Sikhs continued their focus on education and English language to ensure the continued pursuit search of their dream of a better life, beyond the Malaysian context. This community culture and identification remained solidified and fixed, allowing them to

continue along the tram tracks towards their ultimate goals of socio-economic mobility and retention of key cultural markers common to themselves, without changing direction despite the evolving context of the local nation-building strategies. Where historical events proved relevant, I include brief explanations within each chapter, however by large, the community remained untethered to the idea of Malaysia both through their own choices and also due to steady emphasis within the national narrative on the categories of non-Malay, Chinese, Indian and Other, excluding the intricacies of identification outside these strict communal definitions. As this research relied on the oral history and narratives of the subject group, it is relevant to also note the things they do not say. I do not include a history of modern Malaysia in my work as for the Peraktown Sikhs, the passage of change from a colonial subject state to an independent Malaysia, while relevant in regards to the choices they made regarding the formation of community habitus, they themselves remained largely outside this process of political change.

The community embraced hybridity and chose to subjectively question the inherited norms, beliefs and values of their ancestral and adopted homelands. They possessed the flexibility of constructing and reconstructing identity in a fashion unique to themselves, and through my appropriation of the place of origin concept of the *Pindh* and transformed it to a new category of meaning, making it relevant to the Peraktown Sikhs as a space, place and time of kinship, creating a movable and mutable definition of belonging and home. As Homi Bhabha described:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory – where I have led you – may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-sphere of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of

culture's *hybridity*. To that end, we should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *inbetween* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the 'people'. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves. (2004 p.56)

In appropriating the third space, the Peraktown Sikhs distanced themselves from the fixed constructs of the social and political landscape in the local, focusing instead on providing access and skills needed to better the opportunities available beyond Malaysia for the subsequent generations. The liminal generation recognized the place of as a temporary stop on a continuing journey towards the betterment of family standing and socio-economic position and there is never fixity of home as the physical space inhabited, instead, it remains always a future goal. The liminal generation inhabit the third space, moving for work, further education and different opportunities for their children, yet continuing to reside within the Peraktown *Pindh*. In essence, the Peraktown *Pindh* provides relational, symbolic and embodied belonging to the Peraktown Sikhs.

## **1.2 Thesis chapter outline**

The remainder of this thesis is divided into seven chapters. In Chapter 2, I review the practical considerations involved in studying a diaspora community. I begin with a survey of the literature surrounding the thesis, focusing firstly, on the use of the term 'diaspora' and its relevance in describing the Peraktown Sikh population. Secondly, I address the discourse of identity, space and liminality, placing my work within the framework of diaspora and postcolonial studies with particular attention to conceptualisations of home, culture and belonging. Thirdly, in Section 2.2, I engage with the literature on social and cultural capital and its application and relevance within a diaspora community. In Section 2.3, I provide an overview of Sikh diaspora studies and Sikh studies to offer a context on my own work. Fourthly,

the literature survey addresses my decision to engage with postcolonial theory in the conceptualisation of my research. In Sections 2.5 to 2.10, I discuss the methodological considerations involved in this research, including the issues of my experience as a 'halfie' (Abu-Lughod 1991) ethnographer and considerations of self-reflexivity and distance. I provide a discussion on the choice to use narrative methods, ethnographic engagement with my subjects and oral history collection as the key forms of data collection. In Chapter 3, I provide the historical framework surrounding the history of the Sikhs and Sikhism and the engagement with the British colonial entity and modernity. In Section 3.6, I introduce the migration origins and settlement in Peraktown of my subject group, tracing their journey from places of origin, both mental and physical, in Punjab to their arrival and their entrenchment within the colonial administration in the Malay Peninsula. I describe the transfer of the *Pindh* as a place of origin in Punjab to the formation of a new understanding of home, in Peraktown in Sections 3.6 to 3.8. Finally, I examine the catalytic impact of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya on the liminal generation and the changes to norms, values and behaviour that begin during this period. I highlight the period as a disconnection from the homeland and the destabilisation to their sense of security within the broader forces of Empire, providing the space to transform community self-definition and distinctions. In Section 3.12, I address the expanded position of women in the community resulting from their own agency and the absence of men as decision-makers and providers in the home. I also address the issue of social and cultural capital in the engagement and alignment of the community with the dominant powers of the period.

Chapter 4 addresses the use and meaning of space and the transformation of Peraktown, the geographical location into a place of meaning through the practices of everyday life within the community. In Section 4.1, I explore the demarcation of home within the

community as an interstice, allowing for the cultures and norms of the homeland to mix with, alter and blend with the dominant culture habitus. Secondly, I explore the *Gurdwara*, the Sikh place of worship as a space wholly Sikh, detached from the local. In Sections 4.3 to 4.7, I examine the ways that space is altered, through claiming, adoption and subversion and transformed into a place of meaning. In this chapter, I introduce the extension of my categorical concept, the Peraktown *Pindh*, outside the physical geography of Peraktown, becoming a place of belonging as the community relocated away for education, careers and marriage. In Chapter 5, I explore the formation of the *Pindh* as boundaries, describing the construction and definition of belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh*. In this chapter, I describe a twofold process, using the Sikh life-cycle rituals of naming a new-born and the joining in marriage, in boundary formation surrounding community belonging. In Sections 5.2 and 5.3, I describe the ways by which the Peraktown Sikhs define themselves in terms of family membership and behaviours commensurate with the ideal of the good family, transferring the kinship and behaviours of these blood relationships to a community level. In the next section, I address the implication of the female body in the construction of family and community reputation and the contestation of patriarchal beliefs surrounding behaviour, honour and religious identity. In Sections 5.6 to 5.8, I describe my findings on the definition and enforcement of community norms, values and aspirations through their practice and performance of the Sikh faith and the emphasis on different forms of education as an avenue for socio-economic betterment. In Sections 5.9 to 5.12, I discuss a key Sikh life-cycle event, marriage, the factors involved in arranging marriages and the consequences of challenging community norms. Finally, I address the moments of rupture, the subsequent integration as experienced by the subject group and the eventual adaptation to the boundaries of community membership. In Chapter 6, the final chapter, I summarise my findings, explaining the impact of migration on this particular Sikh

community, their subsequent embedment within the British colonial administration and their lack of significant engagement with the political landscape following Malaysian independence. I present the construction and evolution of belonging and identification, consolidating this through my use of the Peraktown *Pindh* as a uniquely Sikh category of meaning. Beginning as a physical location on a map, a collection of bricks and mortar, the concept explains the evolution of Peraktown as a place of meaning, which transcends physical locations and temporal considerations. I define this as the *Pindh* of the mind, a sense of feeling, altered to incorporate relationships with place, space and time through their practice of everyday life. I conclude that the construction and extension of this category of meaning, provided the means by which through the shared aims, norms and values transmitted and the support and kinship provided, the members of the Peraktown *Pindh* increasingly bettered their socio-economic position and social status both within the Sikh community in Malaysia and in the increasingly globalised world.

## **2 Considering theory and practice in researching diasporas**

This chapter consists of two sections; the first outlines the theoretical foundations for this study and the second examines the methodological considerations. The first section contains four parts, with Section 2.1 outlining the literature of diaspora studies and identity as a social construct and the inherent lived experience of border spaces of belonging within the context of a diaspora community. In this part, I focus on the origin of diaspora as a theoretical concept, highlighting the evolving definitions and applications of the term, with emphasis on the understanding of the concept as exemplified in work by James Clifford and Avtar Brah. I also highlight the work of two theorists, Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau in their considerations of space and place. Section 2.2 addresses the literature on social and cultural capital and its application and functions within diaspora groups. The focus rests on the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam to position my use and definition of these terms, with the introduction of migrant community application by Minh Zhou, Alexander Portes and Lucinda Platt. Section 2.3 examines the literature on Sikh communities in Punjab, the diaspora and in the Malaysian context. I discuss the proliferation of research on Sikh diaspora communities in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States of America, emphasising the contrasts and commonalities with the Malaysian context. I also survey the literature on the formation of the Sikh diaspora in Malaysia and the gap in literature on Sikh lived experience. Finally, in Section 2.4, I address my use of postcolonial theory emphasising the work of Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall and James Clifford in their use of postcolonial as a theory as it relates to diaspora identity and belonging.

## **2.1 Diasporas, liminal spaces and identity construction**

Since the 1980s, the use of 'diaspora' has proliferated, and eventually became interchangeable in usage with terms such as 'migrant', 'minorities' and 'ethnic groups', to describe communities settled in countries other than their land of origin. Roger Brubaker highlights the diffusion of meaning attached to the concept, reducing its relevance (2005). Two narratives drive theorising on 'diaspora'. The first narrative relates the concept to a bounded physical space, the territorial homeland and linking it with ethnicity, where it is a means to describe (Safran 1991, Cohen 1996, Tölölyan 1996). The second narrative assumes a decentred approach incorporating ideas of hybridity, the construction of cultural boundaries and the tension between the dialectic of 'here' and 'back there,' where 'diaspora' is a societal process (Hall 1990, Clifford 1994, Brah 1996).

Robin Cohen focuses on the diasporic condition, reflecting on the evolving meaning of the term from traumatic dispersal from the Jewish homeland towards a theoretical foundation for the movement of people for reasons both diverse and distinct, incorporating a post-modern sensibility to the term and usage. (2008) William Safran's earlier work offers a typology of diasporas, acknowledging 'a collective memory and myth about the homeland', 'an idealization of the supposed ancestral home', 'a return movement or intermittent visits to home', and 'a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time' (1991 pp. 83-84). The Peraktown Sikhs, in their complex negotiations as a diaspora population, move between the dialectic of acculturation/alienation in the host society and the country of origin. Tracking these navigations highlights how, to what extent and when they favour one over the other. Discussing diaspora, regardless of definition or typologies used, brings in the idea of boundaries. Cohen states:

Diasporas are positioned somewhere between nation-states and 'travelling cultures' in that they involve dwelling in a nation-state physical sense, but travelling in an astral or spiritual sense that falls outside that nation-state's space/time zone. (2008 pp. 135-136)

He highlights the fluidity inherent in the idea of a dispersed and diluted community, but *home* and 'state' remained fixed and static.

The expansion of the use of 'diaspora' as a category includes any group that experienced dispersal from a country of ancestral origin, for any reason. However, this creates a homogeneous notion of diasporic groups as transnational, deterritorialised actors, remaining tied in some form to their idea of *home* when in fact, *home* may be where they live now. Cohen explains:

Not everyone is a diaspora because they say they are. Social structures, historical experiences, prior conceptual understandings, and the opinions of other social actors (among other factors) also influence whether we can legitimately label a particular group a diaspora. (2008 pp. 15-16)

The original migration of Peraktown Sikhs is identifiable within Cohen's typologies as an 'imperial diaspora'. Their position however, does not remain static and fixed, as continued reference to their place of origin no longer defines them. Subsequent generations, while retaining an ethnic group identity and awareness, relocate much of their lived experience towards a more globalised identification, culturally, socially and economically, as they move to urban centres and other countries as twice migrants. The result is the development of a Peraktown diaspora as the reference of *home* is no longer Punjab, but instead the Peraktown community, with little or no connection to their ancestral places beyond the cultural and religious inheritances. The identification expands beyond a place, but more in terms of the relationships within the community, their shared memories and shared values and beliefs. The majority of the respondents left Peraktown in the 1950s yet continue to self-identify as a group in relation to this community.

Regardless of time and space, my inherited membership to the Peraktown community was recognised and validated throughout this research process. During my visits, respondents shared stories of life in Peraktown, inscribing my position through the reminiscences that included members of my family and their interactions with them and other members of the community. The recounting of hi(stories) created a shared space while simultaneously demarcating a boundary of belonging to the Peraktown Sikh community. Contesting the inscription of nation/state/place in defining a diaspora, James Clifford states, 'that dwelling here assumes a solidarity and connection there. But there is not necessarily a single place or an exclusivist nation' (1994 p.322). Despite living in scattered geographical locations, within Malaysia or across country borders, the community continued a retained and reinforced feeling of belonging to the Peraktown Sikh community, no longer a single place, but a constructed idea.

Brah explores the notions of contested and evolving identities, connecting the difference and diversity of Indian diasporic experience to issues of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and generational variations. She explores Asian identity, tackling the racialised position within British popular and political culture, with the view that identity is a process and not fixed. Brah defines 'diaspora' as 'an interpretive frame referencing the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of these contemporary forms of migrancy [migrant, immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile]' (1996 p.183). The diaspora disperses from 'home' physically and conceptually crossing borders of national territory as well as social, cultural and psychological demarcations (Brah 1996 p.181). Brah discusses the relation of the diaspora to their idea of 'home', explaining the multiplicity of locating home as simultaneously 'a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination, in the sense that it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical

territory that is seen as the place of origin. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality' (1996 p.192).

Brah's concept of diaspora 'places the discourse of *home* and 'dispersion' in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins' (1996 pp. 192-193). Many of the families in this study had no interest in returning to their place of ancestral origin. Visits to India reinforced this creative tension, with their lack of ability to 'belong' and the clear identification of 'otherness' by the locals, yet the imagined and nostalgic notion of an original home remains, even where no return is possible. Belonging remains a contested feeling, constantly experiencing fluxes between the home of the adopted country, where the Peraktown Sikhs are a minority with little voice in the current national narrative, the performance of Malaysian Sikhness and the families and social circles to which they belong. Clifford remarked:

diasporic identifications reach beyond ethnic status within the composite, liberal state. The phrase 'diasporic community' conveys a stronger sense of difference than, for example, 'ethnic neighbourhood' used in the language of pluralist nationalism. This stronger difference, this sense of being a 'people' with historical roots and destinies outside the time/space of the host nation is not separatist. (1997 p.255)

In the Malaysian context, the idea of indigenusness further problematises the transformation from a diaspora community to an immigrant population, integrated into the national identity. Diaspora communities of more than three generations of residence retain the positionality of 'other' compared to immigrants from similar religious and cultural heritages as the dominant and majority Malay population from more recent migrations.

Brah further discusses how diaspora is 'differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a

common 'we'. It is important, therefore, to be attentive to the nature and type of processes in and through which the collective 'we' is constituted' (1996 p.183). She goes on to describe 'diaspora space' as the location point of these crossings, emphasising the intersectionality of 'a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes' (Brah 1996 p.208). It is the location where 'boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them' are contested' (Brah 1996 p.208). The Peraktown Sikhs continuously negotiate and construct their position within their own community and the larger Sikh population of Malaysia, their sense of being Malaysian and as a minority within the minority racial category of Indian, as well as their relationship to the transnational Sikh *Panth*. My adoption of the concept of the *Pindh* provides the framework to understand and follow the processes implicated in the construction of the 'we' of the Peraktown Sikhs. This negotiation occurs both within themselves and in interrelation with and reaction to their position as 'other' within the colonial administration and in an independent Malaysia. Brah describes the construction and development of the 'diaspora space' as the interaction and dialectical exchanges between the host society and the diasporic community. 'The diaspora space is the site where the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native' (1996 p.209). Hall and Clifford highlight hybridity in discussions of the diaspora and interrogate the reified categories used to characterise diasporas. Hall states:

The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. (1990 p.235)

Clifford references W. E. B. DuBois, and 'double consciousness', highlighting that 'diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and

remembering/desiring another place' (1997 p.255). The Peraktown Sikhs engage in the development of community belonging through the materialisation of memories, symbols and traditions that are a hybridisation of here and there. Hall sums up their identity with his definition of diasporic identities, which 'are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference' (Hall 1990 p.236). The community identity is a work in progress, and the boundary of their identity is fluid as they adapt or refashion themselves according to situations or interactions.

Thinking about the idea of space and place, the works of two theorists are implicated in my conceptualisation of the Peraktown *Pindh* and the investigation of community lived experience. Proposing that space does not merely exist but that it is produced, Henri Lefebvre described three aspects to explain this production of space; spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces. (1991 pp. 38-39) This conceptualisation of space implicates the human body in this process of production, in the ways and means that the individual articulates and shapes the power structures and social relationships as they move through geography and built environments. Lefebvre's work is tangled up in the considerations of Marxist thought, seeking to implicate the concept of space within the hegemonic frameworks of power. In examining the experience of the Peraktown Sikh community, this theoretical conceptualisation meshed well with the encounter with colonialism and imperialism, providing a means to understand the ways and methods used within the community to carve out their own space. This becomes what Lefebvre's terms, 'abstract space', resistant to the homogenising forces inherent in the power play between Empire and their understanding of a place to call home (1991 p.52). Said explained the production of spaces of belonging or non-belonging through his concept of 'imaginative geographies':

This universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs' is a way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary. I use the word 'arbitrary' here because imaginative geography of the 'our land—barbarian land' variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for 'us' to set up these boundaries in our own minds; 'they' become 'they' accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from 'ours.' (1979 p.54)

Said continues to emphasise that the contestation of power over space occurs not merely in geographic locales, but also in texts, narratives and minds (1994 p.7). The clear demarcation of self-identification as a Peraktown Sikh as opposed to categories such as 'Indian', 'Malaysian', or 'Other' combined with the way locations within the town related closely to the use or practice of space by the community, in their methods of claiming and contesting space, discussed further in Chapter 4. While Lefebvre's theoretical considerations of space influenced this thesis, I chose to use the language of Michel de Certeau, as while Lefebvre conceptualises space through its relationships with power and knowledge, de Certeau places emphasis on narratives, stories and memories that 'constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places' (1984 p.118). In the act of story-telling their lived experiences, the Peraktown Sikhs create the place I describe as the *Pindh* of the mind, divorced from physical location but holding meaning and resonance to their sense of identity and feeling of belonging. The use of space is described best in his piece on *Walking in the city*, where he explains:

One can analyse the microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress, but which have outlived its decay; one can follow the swarming activity of these procedures that, far from being regulated and eliminated by panoptic administration, have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy, developed and insinuated themselves into the networks of surveillance, and combined in accord with unreadable but stable tactics to the point of constituting everyday regulations and surreptitious creativities

that are merely concealed by the frantic mechanisms and discourses of the observational organization. (1984 p.96)

de Certeau uses these actions and processes to understand how everyday practices potentially destabilise and challenge the discursive dominant relations of power. The transformation of Peraktown from a multi-ethnically populated, centre of the British administration to a place of meaning for the Sikh community is framed within their everyday movements, their journeys, their use and contestation of spaces and finally in their memories, used to construct a movable, unfixed place of meaning, the *Pindh* of the mind. His approach to the significance of space and place provides the theoretical context for the construction of community identity, the ownership of home and the boundaries of belonging to the *Pindh*.

The notion of a community centres on the very human need to experience a sense of commonality and belonging, focused on shared geographical locations, forms and frequency of social interaction and some definable distinction such as ethnicity, religion or culture. However, the idea of a community is not limited to these tangible forms of identification with a specific group of people and needs to incorporate too the notion of a community as constructed, both practically and symbolically, providing meaning and structure to human interactions. Anthony Cohen explains that 'community is the compass of individual identity; it responds to the need to delimit the bounds of similarity' (1985 p.110). This description highlights the key idea of community as a mental construct that remains flexible and dependent on the need to connect or belong to a greater whole, generating an accepted concept of shared culture. The central point of the concept of community and belonging is the process of ideas that define or that are chosen to be the defining identity of the self or a group of people. I use the term 'identity' frequently through this thesis and as such, there is a need to

highlight the inherent contradictions and problems in this choice. As R. Brubaker and F. Cooper describe:

To criticise the use of 'identity' in social analysis is not to blind ourselves to particularity. It is rather to conceive of the claims and possibilities that arise from particular affinities and affiliations, from particular commonalities and connections, from particular stories and self-understandings from particular problem and predicaments in a more differentiated manner. (2000 p.36)

Using the term 'identity' problematises its use as an analytic or political concept, limiting the definition to a causal function. In contrast, by pairing the term with that of 'belonging', I hope to explore the relationship between 'identity', 'belonging' and the other term highlighted by Brubaker and Cooper, 'identification'. (2000) The research subjects for the study relate to multiple identities; as Sikhs, as Malaysians, as men or women, their various positions within the family and their occupations yet the core of their sense of belonging during the period is their identification as members of the Peraktown *Pindh*. This identification lessens over time, evolving from what Williams describes as the dominant structure of feeling to a more residual, to be accessed at need or desire only.

Williams explains how culture at any given moment in history is a constant tension and interplay between dominant, emergent and residual cultures, where the hegemonic nature of the dominant culture is continually transformed. He describes how structures of feeling:

Do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and exert effective limits on experience and on action. It is the tendency to define how we live as a fully conscious and deliberate decision making process rather than viewing this as 'meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations ... elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity'. (Williams 1977 p.132)

The category of meaning, the Peraktown *Pindh* resonates with the same emotive sense, embodying both identity and belonging for the population, evolving almost unconsciously, to become something clearly recognised and acknowledged, that continues to maintain meaning and feeling within the subject group even as the need for its existence diminished.

Clifford Geertz's idea of culture as 'a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life' (2000 p.89), describes the fixities and fluxes in the meanings applied to symbols of community identity and belonging. The Peraktown Sikh community functions within a hierarchical structure where the significance ascribed to the constituents of community identification and membership expand over time. My research finds that belonging for the Peraktown Sikhs collocates integrally to their sense of place in the world, a linkage of spatiality, relating both to geographical locations and in interactions and relationships with different groups of people. As Geertz stated, 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,' (2000 p.5) and the concept of the Peraktown Sikh community forms its veracity through the meaning they assign to family ties, social status, the language of self-identification with their religion and the shared geography within the township. As the community dispersed from the Peraktown settlement, it evolves into an idea, perpetuated much like a gestalt, where connections may be resuscitated at need, through narratives of shared or inherited memory. It is the multiplicity of real and imagined spaces in the creation of home, where belonging and identity originate from myriad other strands, the earlier homes, their history of self-definition and being defined rather than with arrival in a new land or citizenship papers. As Hall describes, 'identity becomes a 'moveable feast', formed and

transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems that surround us.' (1992 p.277)

Geertz noted:

No one lives in the world in general. Everybody, even the exiled, the drifting, the diasporic, or the perpetually moving, lives in some confined and limited stretch of it – the world around here. (1996 p.262)

In interviewing members of the third generation, I expected to find that belonging involved some identification with the Malaysian national narrative. In contrast, their sense of identity and belonging bore little reconciliation with the Malaysian national narrative instead the period of residence in Peraktown forms the keystone. The community culture exists in a liminal locale, passing between the inherited culture of the pre-migratory homeland, ossified despite the passage of time and space; and their embeddedness within British colonial society in the host country. In discussing liminality, I use the idea of migration and settlement as rites of passage, in the sense of Victor Turner's usage, 'rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age' (2008 p.94-95). The community passed through the first stage of ritual as 'separation', detached from the homeland's geography of place, culture and social structures. They entered the second stage of the 'liminal', where some attributes from the past and from the colonial environment they entered exist, yet they remained 'betwixt and between', not incorporating to the host society and the dominant culture as signified by the national identity of Malaysia, or the state assigned ethnic definition of Indian. The research demonstrates instead, through the constituency of the Peraktown *Pindh*, how the community prioritised kinship, a common geographical position of origin and settlement, the transmission of status, gender, religious practice and a common 'habitus' towards the English language and education and social class betterment.

## **2.2 Social and cultural capital use in diaspora communities**

Social capital provides a tool, to enforce and police norms, through the strengthening of pre-existing social ties and shared cultural values. Pierre Bourdieu stated that capital possesses three forms, which are economic capital, cultural capital and social capital and the value of non-monetary capital is in its ability to be convertible to gain economic rewards. He defined social capital as:

The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possessions of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words to membership of a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various sense of the word. (1986 pp. 248-249)

Alessandro Portes highlighted that this network formation requires investment on the part of the individual, 'requires deliberate investment of both economic and cultural resources' (1998 p.4). Robert Putnam's theory on bonding and bridging social capital makes explicit the value of difference between homogeneous and heterogeneous group linkages. Networks solely comprised of bonding capital may not possess access to opportunities for socio-economic mobility and inclusion (2000 p.23). Diasporic populations need the more diffuse linkages across class, ethnic or cultural boundaries to tap into host society knowledge. For diaspora communities, the variation in cultural capital and habitus between the host culture and home culture potentially obfuscates avenues for successfully navigating the social, political and cultural challenges inherent in migrant experience. These communities want to acculturate to host societies to facilitate access to avenues of socio-economic advancement without losing their cultural and religious identity (Portes 1993 p.82).

Diaspora communities have common ties of ethnic background, cultural heritage, religion and language. The Sikhs in Malaysia shared these

common ties and in addition, they possessed a similar narrative surrounding their dispersal from their homeland, the same social status predetermined by caste and in some cases, kinship or same villages of origin. Access to resources and opportunities in the Malaysian context depended on the volume and quality of social ties possessed. The difficulty occurs in reaching beyond the kin/ethnic/religious networks to widen networks of influence for bridging capital. The combination of bonding and bridging capital, together with cultural capital provided avenues for socio-economic mobility. The lived experiences of the Peraktown Sikhs demonstrated how they maintained and cultivated interactions with a diverse range of people. Bourdieu's work aimed at highlighting the power of social and cultural capital to marginalise and exclude. In the process of building bridging capital, some Peraktown Sikhs demonstrated their positions of privilege, forming connections through their educational experiences, social clubs, shared leisure activities and work. In Peraktown, friendships were formed with the local Sultan, a Japanese spy and three Sikh families through a shared appreciation for hunting. Membership at the local social club, where they played mah-jong, further cemented relationships. They used these connections to gain access to knowledge regarding land sales, educational advantages and during the Japanese Occupation, safety for their families. In contrast to Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) research where privilege begets privilege, the members of the community with better education, higher salaries and social connections of influence used their position to assist other less advantaged members of the community. Putnam states, 'Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging capital provides a sociological WD-40' (2000 p.23).

Putnam views the idea of social capital as the interplay between 'trust, norms and networks' that promotes working together towards a mutual benefit (2000 pp. 18-19). His interest is in system level behaviours, to

explain regional and national level outcomes. Despite this grander scale outlook, Both Putnam and Bourdieu highlight the family as playing a central role in social capital formation and transmission (1993, 2000). The Peraktown Sikhs maintained strong familial bonds, with parents taking an active interest in the activities of their children, enforcing norms towards education and sporting activities. They used their extended familial networks for example, to provide homes and continued enforcement of the norm for education when their children attended schools in the larger towns, as the local school did not progress to sixth form in the post-war years. Putnam frames education as a primary factor. He states that 'well educated people are much more likely to be joiners and trusters' (1996 pp. 4-5). The Peraktown community perceived higher levels of educational attainment as a major factor in the pursuit of a better life. Their focus on education did not exclude their becoming 'joiners' and 'trusters'. Most of the community played sport, participated in activities at the local school and engaged in both social and religious activities at the town *Gurdwara*. I mentioned my interest in Peraktown on fieldwork at a *Gurdwara* in Ampang, attending a distant relative's wedding. Responses to my sharing this included 'That town has the most Sikh graduates' and 'They were very progressive, even the women are doctors'.

Coleman defines social capital as 'a variety of entities with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures and they facilitate certain actions of actors — whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure' (1988 S95). While Bourdieu and Putnam focus on social capital as a resource in itself, Coleman views it as a strategy to acquire resources. In terms of its function and outcomes, he is interested in how social capital in family and community networks can be a resource for exploitation. Coleman introduced the idea of sufficient ties between people in a community or as he terms it, 'inter-generational closure' which allows for enforcement of norms and

trustworthiness. Diaspora communities possess pre-existing ties from their shared lived experience, including shared cultural values (1988 S107). The potential in Coleman's definition is for effective enforcement of norms by the community, not just the family. The Peraktown Sikh community created a space to transmit and police cultural, religious and group values. The local *Gurdwara* evolved as one site. Parents would compare notes regarding the educational achievements of their children and often, major highlights such as acceptance to a foreign university were announced there by inclusion in the daily prayers for thanksgiving. Older members of the Peraktown Sikh community offered friendship and advice to younger members regarding expectations and social mores and behaviours. Transgression, such as drinking too much at the local club received censure from the community as a whole and usually advice from older members on holding your liquor better. Carl Bankston and Min Zhou highlighted the importance of familiarity with the dominant culture capital illustrating the experience of Vietnamese immigrants' mothers who purchased and studied from the same textbooks that their children used in school, to be able to help their children with their school work (1998 p.830). The Peraktown Sikhs focused very early into migrant settlement towards the value of an English education. This opened different social networks as speaking English allowed freer interactions between ethnic groups.

Cultural capital, in contrast, may be formed unconsciously and Bourdieu's discussion of cultural capital was a way to explore what else caused different educational outcomes for children of differing class origins. Our personal taste works as a means to label us as members of a certain class, or in the case of diasporic communities, as alien from local society. Within Bourdieu's perspective, the accent and intonation in a person's speech, the books they have read and the etiquette they learn all provide class identification. His interrelated ideas of field and

habitus describe the inscription of social identity and behaviour. Habitus is:

A system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems, and thanks to the unceasing corrections of the results obtained, dialectically produced by those results. (Bourdieu 1977 pp. 82-83)

Bourdieu used habitus to characterise the dispositions or the customs, traditions and taste of a particular cultural group or social class and are acquired in the home through cultural practices and studies how they are shaped and applied, both consciously and unconsciously in the field.

I define field as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (situs) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.). Each field presupposes and generates by its very functioning, the belief in the values of the stakes it offers. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989 p.39)

Using these concepts, Bourdieu and Passeron highlight how the university education system in France reproduces, reinforces and legitimises the power of the dominant group (1990 pp.149-151). Consequently, cultural reproduction occurs with socio-economic mobility structured by membership to a particular class and/or culture.

Applying Bourdieu's cultural capital to ethnic studies in the United Kingdom, Annette Lareau highlights how children from different ethnic groups may be disadvantaged at school as frequently, schools valued the dominant 'cultural capital' of the white, middle class. This inherited habitus facilitates or impedes a child's progress within the education

system (1987 pp. 79-81). For diaspora groups, different class origins and cultural values add additional obstacles in attaining educational achievement as the cultural inheritance transmitted within these groups differ to that which is valued by the dominant culture and therefore within the school system of the host country. The adoption of dominant culture values in children's upbringing, however, such as being bilingual, sports and social manners provide means by which migrant communities could use cultural capital to their advantage. In Peraktown, during the colonial period, many of the Sikhs participated in athletics, rugby, cricket and hockey. Bourdieu argued that 'it is first necessary to consider the historical and social condition of possibility of a social phenomenon which we too easily take for granted: modern sport' (1978 p.820). Sporting activities modelled on the dominant British culture enabled the Sikh community to interact outside of the position of colonial subordinate, tapping into different networks of power relations. They used sport to demonstrate assimilation when attending university in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, providing a language of similarity through these leisure activities to counteract their distinctly different appearance.

Portes and Zhou explain that children of migrants will assimilate in different ways and the next generation of middle class migrants leverage their class background and higher education access to enter mainstream society. The working class migrant and for those that appear visibly different to mainstream white society due to ethnicity encounter issues of access to opportunities for improving their socio-economic position, despite acculturation. For these migrants, 'a strategy of paced, selective assimilation may prove the best course' (Portes 1993 p.96). According to Lucinda Platt, the experience of migrants of different generations from the same ethnic group may vary in any given country. She states that the migrants experience downward mobility on entry to a new country as they lack the social networks and knowledge

to exploit their pre-migration educational and career achievements (2005 p.1). Platt explains the disparity in occupational status between the migrants and the locals as related to:

Fluency in English, a lack of familiarity with job-search institutions, more limited networks, a lack of translation of human capital across national boundaries or failure of employers to recognise qualifications gained abroad, employer 'preferences' for native workers and discrimination. (2005 p.4)

These arguments reify the dominance of white, Western culture, diminishing the value of other cultures own knowledge and cultural values. Waldinger and Feliciano also discuss this issue. They state:

An oppositional culture is not distinctive to America's rejected 'minorities', but generic to 'negatively privileged' groups pure and simple. Outsiders, whether defined by class or ethnic terms, respond to exclusion through solidarity. (2004 p.380)

Social and cultural capital studies involving diaspora communities or ethnic minorities emphasise this narrative exclusion unless integration or acculturation to the hegemonic position of nation, race and religion occurs. In the context of the Americas, Australia or Europe, the performance of community identity as model minorities and bridge builders often implicates migrant success. In contrast, the Malaysian context promotes the maintenance of distinct ethnic identities, through a quota system for access to education and employment in the public service, the continued promotion of racialised politics and the narrative of a plural society. There is little or no benefit for acculturating to the dominant culture. The Peraktown Sikhs assimilated cultural competencies under British rule, becoming adept at negotiating the globalised world. They retain a strong association with their Sikh faith, family and kinship bonds and their ties with each other.

### **2.3 Indian (Sikhs) in Malaysia and elsewhere**

Studies that focus on Indian communities usually use the diaspora label yet cover a wide range of lived experiences from generations of

settlement to more recent economic migrations. Defining the Indian diaspora as a homogeneous population, sharing similar experiences and a constructed nostalgic homeland disregards the differences in diasporic migrations and settlements. In Malaysia, the literature on the Indian community treats the Indian population largely as a homogeneous group, focusing on the indentured labour diaspora population with occasional mention of the subcommunal ethnicities. A survey of the literature including 'Indians in Malaysia' in the title (Neelakandha Aiyer 1938, Mahajani 1960, Netto 1961, Khan 1963, Sandhu 1969, Stenson 1980, Brown 1981, Ramasamy, Daniel et al. 1984, Sandhu, Mani et al. 1993, Jayasooria and Yayasan Strategik 2008, Tate 2008, Manickam 2009) reduces the Sikh experience to a paragraph or two, if mentioned at all. The discursive process of inscribing the Tamil ethnicity, as the definition of Indian ethnicity, results in the silencing of other subcommunal ethnic positions. The dominant, discursive narrative of Tamil forms of knowledge consistently and continuously subsumes the lived experience of the Sikh community. The deliberate or unconscious inscription of these discursive structures of Indian ethnic identity reifies the position of Tamil indentured labour as the only voice that may speak when representing the Indian experience. The only means available to combat this is through repeated and constant self-identification, the overt expressions of cultural identity and research papers such as this, where the voice of the Sikhs are given a space to self-represent. Pierre Macherey's concept of the 'measuring silences' illustrates why the absence of the Sikhs in the history of Malaysia is important to note (Spivak 1994 p.81). It may not be possible to represent all the Sikh community, but with the authentic voice of the informants, a contribution to their self-representation eventuates.

Four major narratives characterise the work on Sikh communities worldwide. The first narrative addresses issues of religion and debates surrounding Sikh identity in relation to the scriptures (Barrier and

Dusenbery 1989; McLeod 1989; Singh and Barrier 2001). Debates address the complexity of the religion, demarking Sikh identity on maintenance of Sikh traditions. This critical engagement with the textual sources of Sikhism and the more radical reinterpretations of the tenets of Sikh faith remains disengaged by the dominance, in Malaysia, of a more orthodox, *Khalsa*-centric doctrine. Studies on identity formation are limited to the role of the Sikh religion and the negotiation of identity as defined by the *Khalsa*-centric tenets of the Sikh faith. Being Sikh is defined by adherence to the outward trappings of the religion, that include the wearing of the turban, keeping long hair and beards, the wearing of the steel bangle, speaking Punjabi and attending regular services at a *Gurdwara*, the place of Sikh worship. In contrast, the Peraktown Sikhs practise a more secular demarcation of their Sikh identity. They believe in the tenets of the religion, but place less importance on appearances. Faith and belief remain important and prayer represents a private relationship with God rather than a collective performance of ethnic and religious identity. The older generations include regular worship as a component of their religiosity but for the younger generation, attendance at *Gurdwara* services remains limited to family events. The community simply accepts belonging to a family from Peraktown and attendance in the *Gurdwara* on special occasions as sufficient criteria for membership.

The second narrative theme addresses the history of the Sikhs, discussing their origins and social, cultural and religious beginnings as a distinct ethnic group. These include the works of colonial ethnographers (Cunningham and Garrett 1966, McGregor 1970, Prinsep 1970, Steinbach 1976) and more recent works by both Sikh (Grewal 1998, K. Singh 2004) and non-Sikh historians (McLeod 1970, Barrier and Dusenbery 1989, McLeod 1989). Literature directly engaging with the Malaysian Sikh experience tends to focus on narratives of migration and arrival, the experience within the colonial armies and police or a marked

focus on the practice of the Sikh religion. K. S. Sandhu provided the main source of data for existing studies on the Sikhs in Malaysia. His work ranges from a summarised history of Sikh migration (1969) to a more detailed analysis of colonial migration and recruitment in his later work (Sandhu 1969, Sandhu 1970, Mani et al. 1993). Sandhu provided much of the archival and census data on Sikhs in Malaysia; however, his studies offer insight on demographic numbers and a general overview of migration and the early years. S. S. Gill delves into detail, choosing to focus on the role of religious institutions in shaping the cultural identity of the Sikhs in Malaysia. Much of his work concentrates on the community in Sabah and explores the mixed Sikh and indigenous people and their relationship to the Sikh faith (2001, 2003, 2005, 2007). A number of unpublished theses provide discussion on the reasons for migration and their role in the police or military (Surinder 1956, Kaur 1974, Kaur 2003) focusing predominantly on archival sources, of which there are few. Manjit Singh Sidhu studied the population at one *Gurdwara*, interviewing elderly Sikhs from the congregation. He offered a more in-depth narrative on the history of migration with some discussion of attitudes towards cultural change (Sidhu 1991). His findings present a different narrative to the Peraktown experience. Most of his respondents described original migrants as uneducated and illiterate, and migration as a means of escaping poverty. In contrast, the Peraktown Sikhs described school attendance before migration, some basic fluency in English but the ability to read and write Punjabi. Poverty was not a commonly cited reason for migration. They describe the idea of striving for a better life and improved social standing in their villages. Additionally, the data for my study offers subjective insight to the Malaysian Sikh experience.

The third narrative addresses the politicised position of religion in the Sikh diaspora and in Punjab, investigating the notion of Sikhs as a nation. Works focus on the post 1984 agitations for Khalistan and the

extremist depiction of terrorism and growing militant behaviour (Tatla 1999, Axel 2001). In contrast, the Peraktown Sikhs remained divorced from homeland politics and the Golden Temple invasion of 1984 and the assassination of Indira Gandhi had little or no effect. In part, the time and distance displacement between their place of origin and their place of residence contributed to this. The community remains non-politicised preferring to focus on social and economic progress. Additionally, the majority of Sikh diasporic communities studied are from migrations that are more recent and based in the first world, with strong homeland ties.

The final narrative address the migration experience, integration to host societies and identity and cultural change of the Sikh diaspora, with the focus on the diaspora settled in Britain, the United States of America and Canada (Nesbitt 1980, Bhachu 1985, Drury 1991, Hall 1993, Nayar 2004, Singh and Tatla 2006). My research on the Peraktown Sikhs relates best to this particular narrative theme, however, the Peraktown Sikhs differ from these studies of Sikh community and culture in the first world as the community demonstrated a willingness to adapt and to accept the imposition of differing norms and behaviours acquired by the liminal generation that differed from the practice of being Sikh in Punjab. In part, this could be attributed to the lack of significant links back to the Punjab and other sites of the Sikh diaspora, as visits were irregular, marriages tended to be arranged within the country and remittances back to the Punjab ceased. These activities continue in other sites of the Sikh diaspora ensuring the continuity of a common cultural tradition (Ballard, 2003; Barrier & Dusenbery, 1989). I want to further highlight that a significant part of work on Sikh diasporas focuses on lower caste Sikhs, for example the Mexican Sikh diaspora (Leonard, 1992) and as described in Eleanor Nesbitt's extensive work in Britain (Nesbitt, 1997) offering a further distinction between the Peraktown community and existing research. In contrast to the experiences described in other sites of Sikh diaspora studies, in

Peraktown, tradition proved to hold less value and inter-generational conflict was generally resolved as described in Chapter 5. This difference cannot simply be attributed to the difference of cultural environments between Western and Eastern values, as the Peraktown Sikhs accumulated dominant culture habitus during the British administration and engaged with Western cultures while at universities in England, America and Australia. Two key areas of difference include the continued emphasis on gender inequities, where a sense of oppression continues in restricting women to the domestic sphere and subservience (Jakobsh, 2003), restrictions on socializing, especially with members of the opposite sex relating to friendships, dating and marriage (Gobin, 1999). One respondent in Hall's work explained,

I go to school and get Westernized ideas pushed into my brain day and day out. When I get home, I only get it when my mom and dad shout at me or when there's a lecture given to us all when you go to the Gurdwara (temple)... I mean, you get pulled between two ways of life, I mean the thing is that really bugs me, you can't be religious and be Westernized. You have to be religious or be Westernized. You can't have both of two worlds (2002 p.148).

Within this body of work, one consistent theme is the emphasis for education and its value as a vehicle of socio-economic and family izzat improvement. However, there is also simultaneously a concern over 'forgetting one's cultural roots and adopting the disparaged traits of the majority group' (Gibson, 1988 p.162).

My focus is on the colonial migration experience and subsequent integration into a newly independent nation and an ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse environment. Vijay Mishra highlights this distinction:

This narrative of diasporic movement is, however, not continuous or seamless as there is a radical break between the older diasporas of classic capitalism and the mid- to late twentieth-century diasporas of advanced capital to the metropolitan centres of the Empire, the New World, and the former settlers colonies. Since these are two interlinked but historically separated

diasporas, I would want to refer to them as the old ('exclusive') and the new ('border') Indian diasporas. Furthermore, I would want to argue that the old Indian diasporas were diasporas of exclusivism because they created relatively self-contained 'little Indias' in the colonies. The founding writer of the old Indian diaspora is, of course, V.S. Naipaul. The new diaspora of late capital (the diaspora of the border), on the other hand, shared characteristics with many other similar diasporas such as the Chicanos and the Koreans in the US. (1996 pp.421-422)

This research examines an 'old' diaspora community, the questions relating to their motivations for migration, the extent to which they integrated to the host society and the degree to which cultural and religious traditions and beliefs were maintained. Additionally, the *longue durée* offers greater insight into the processes inherent in the diaspora experience. Current research ignores the lived experience of the Sikh community in favour of historical and textual studies. This study takes place within the Malaysian context, highlighting the position of community identity as subsumed within the spaces of the national narrative. Within this framework of Sikh diaspora studies, my research on the Peraktown Sikhs, their construction of a common category of meaning that I defined as the Peraktown *Pindh* and the inclusion of their versions of history allows for the introduction of discussion on belonging and identity within a specific case. One absence in other work focused on Sikh diasporic communities is the consideration of *Pindh* as a conceptual category to understand community constitution. The use of *Pindh*, if discussed, remains restricted to the physical locales of origin in Punjab. This restricts the discussion on Sikh identity formation and community function within the diaspora to the framing of Sikh lived experience within postcolonial diaspora discourse. My co-option of *Pindh* provides a theoretical lens that extends this research beyond Western or postcolonial discourse, allowing for a distinctively Sikh experience and understanding of the meaning of home, belonging and identity in the diaspora.

## 2.4 Using a postcolonial lens

The central argument in postcolonial theory begins with Said's on the recognition of the lack of self-representation or the inequalities inherent within the dichotomy of coloniser/colonised (1979, 1994). Spivak expands these ideas with her engagement with the Gramscian idea of subalternism and the lack of space for the voices of the colonised 'other', who remains absent and suppressed through the hegemonic forms of power within the colonial state (1985, 1994). Abdul JanMohamed highlights that the decolonisation process, assumes colonialism becomes a thing of history and not an on-going negotiation of power, with neo-colonial elites and the neo-colonised continuing to function within the forms of knowledge and construction of the cultural history situated within representations inherited from the colonial past (1985). However, this continues to retain the meaning of postcolonialism as:

The binary logic of imperialism is a development of that tendency of Western thought in general to see the world in terms of binary oppositions that establish a relation of dominance. A simple distinction between centre/margin; colonizer/colonized; metropolis/empire; civilized/primitive represents very efficiently the violent hierarchy on which imperialism is based and which it actively perpetuates. (Ashcroft, Griffiths et al. 2007 p.20)

Hall highlighted how the 'conception of cultural identity played a crucial role in all post-colonial struggles' but suggested a position where identity for the postcolonial subject becomes not 'the rediscovery but the production of identity. Not an identity grounded in the archaeology, but in the re-telling of the past.' (Cited in Ashcroft, Griffiths et al. 2007 p.192) In this context, postcolonial theory offered a useful lens to perceive the multiplicity of histories and lived experiences of communities and individuals living within a former colony. Bhabha too shifts the focus beyond the binary structure of postcolonialism, introducing an in-between space to analyse colonial interpellation and this rediscovery as an opportunity for resistance to the hegemonic

discourse. Here, his narrative analysis functions within a 'third space', where:

Resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the 'content' of another culture, as a difference once perceived. It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and re-implicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power hierarchy, normalization, marginalization, and so forth. (Bhabha 2004 pp. 157-158)

This thesis benefits from these understandings of the postcolonial, as the Sikhs of Peraktown and me, as an insider ethnographer both reside within these in-between spaces. We inherited frames of reference in self-identification from our colonial past and choose to redefine ourselves within these forms of knowledge yet simultaneously constructing new versions of meaning and identity in our understanding of where we belong. Returning this survey on postcolonial theory to the intersection of postcolonialism and diaspora studies and in the context of Malaysia, where the primacy of race is the foundational definition of identity, Paul Gilroy's work offers an important distance between race and nationalism in constructions of identity. It provides a framework for recognition of cultural hybridity and different ways of being in a multicultural nation state, that is a 'useful means to reassess the idea of essential and absolute identity precisely because it is incompatible with that type of nationalist and raciological thinking' (Gilroy 2000 p.125). This research is placed within the space of a decolonized state, yet the political elite remain embedded within constructions of power inherited from colonialism, and communal politics continued to play a salient role in defining membership to the Malaysian national narrative. Within this space of exclusion, the Peraktown Sikhs created their own diaspora, the Peraktown *Pindh*, a site of meaning and movement, where as Clifford described:

There are no postcolonial cultures or places: only moments, tactics, discourses, and so forth. Post- is always shadowed by neo-. Yet postcolonial does describe real, if incomplete, ruptures with past structures of domination, sites of current struggle and imagined futures. Perhaps what is at stake in the historical projection of a geniza world or a black Atlantic is 'the prehistory of postcolonialism.' Viewed in this perspective, the diaspora discourse and history currently in the air would be about recovering non-Western, or not-only-Western, models for cosmopolitan life, nonaligned transnationalities struggling within and against nation-states, global technologies, and markets — resources for a fraught coexistence. (1994 p.328)

I use William's description of the structures of feeling to explain the alteration to forms of knowledge and culture through colonialism for the Peraktown Sikhs. Using this framework, residual culture refers to the inherited traditions and values from Punjab; the culture of the British colonisers represents the dominant and the construction of the Peraktown *Pindh* as the emergent. The Peraktown *Pindh* developed as category of meaning through an ever-shifting melange of the local with the primordialist definitions of Sikh values and cultural beliefs from back there, becoming a place where 'new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships are continually being created' (2010 p.41).

The body of literature surveyed, highlights key themes within this research, providing the context in which I form the basis of my investigation on identity and belonging within the Peraktown Sikh community. My conceptualisation of the Peraktown *Pindh* as a space of meaning and movement draws on work of the diaspora as a definition in movement. Here and there cannot be taken as holding a fixed or given meaning as the community continues to alter the definitions, leaving behind the roots and routes of Sikh diaspora origins to become a new diaspora, the Peraktown *Pindh*. I place emphasis on identity and culture as social constructs as described by Hall and Geertz, explaining in later chapters how the community chooses to adopt and adapt their perception and understanding of commonality and belonging to the

Peraktown *Pindh*. Focusing on the ways through which the community promotes common interests, I demonstrate as well how social and cultural capital become tools to further better the socio-economic status of all members of the community. Situating this study within the context of Sikh diaspora studies, I expand on existing literature to provide an alternative history through the voices of the Peraktown Sikhs, displaying the difference and uniqueness of this particular community. My adaptation of the *Pindh* as a category of meaning through which I view, explain and understand the Peraktown Sikhs offers a potentially new enabling concept in viewing and studying Sikh diasporas and potentially other diasporic groups. Finally, the postcolonial framework offers a lens through which the heavy weight of the colonial gaze and the emergence of a post-colonial state that evolved towards racialised politics of exclusion influenced the necessity for the Peraktown Sikhs to create the Peraktown *Pindh* as a landscape of liminality. The community was better placed to protect and further their own interests as they continued to remain a minority community of visible difference, yet subsumed within the Malaysian narrative under the racial category of being Indian. In Sections 2.5 to 2.9, I focus on the methodological considerations for this research, highlighting the use of narrative methods, oral history and ethnography and my position as an insider researcher and the accompanying issues of self-reflexivity.

## **2.5 The practicalities of diaspora research**

In the previous sections, I provided a survey of literature surrounding the issues of defining a diaspora group, their formation of identity within liminal spaces and the use of social and cultural capital within the community. In addition, I provided a contextual discussion of Sikh and Sikh diaspora studies in Malaysia, Punjab and in the sites of modern migration, Canada, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. In this section, I discuss the choice of qualitative methodology used in my research, highlighting my position as an

insider researcher. The study uses a qualitative approach and is based on Susan E. Chase's discussions of contemporary narrative inquiry. Chase defines narrative inquiry as 'an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytical lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches and both traditional and innovative methods—all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them' (2008 p.651). I chose to employ a narrative ethnography approach in addition to oral history for both data collection and analysis. In planning my qualitative approach to this study and the focus on oral history collection, I started with Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson's description of oral history as 'the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction' (1998 p.xi). I relied heavily on ideas raised by Alan Bryman (2008), Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce and Barbar Laslett's work on personal narratives (2008), Norman Denzin's work on interpretive biography and his discussions surrounding narrative methods as discussed extensively in the SAGE Qualitative Methodology series (Denzin 1989, Denzin and Lincoln 2008a, Denzin and Lincoln 2008b, Denzin and Lincoln 2011) and Charlotte Linde's (1993) work with making coherent the description of subjects' lives. The choice to use oral histories allowed me to explore how the Peraktown Sikhs made sense of their histories in the specific social and cultural context of their lived experience and the meaning and value they assigned to their memory and retelling of their past. I chose to use oral history interviews as my primary data, defined by Alan Bryman as 'largely an unstructured or semi-structured interview in which the respondent is asked to recall events from his or her past and to reflect on them' (2008 p.505). In combining this with an immersive ethnographic approach, I included photographs, written artefacts and observation and involvement in the lives of my research subjects, situating the research within the tradition of biographical or life history ethnographies. I acknowledge the influence of the Chicago School's work on including these methods within sociology studies (Cressey

1972, Thomas, Znaniecki et al. 1996, Wirth 1998) and later more interpretative traditions towards the study of culture, society and lived experiences (Goffman 1959, Adler 1993, Whyte 1993). The strategy used in this study of incorporating multiple voices into the research accounts represents the competing agendas and ideologies of the participants and researcher. Exclusions are an inevitable feature of all qualitative accounts, including narrative analysis and consequently, I aimed to select material and quotations to ensure that a diversity of subjectivities and voices were represented. In addition, I employed the process of critical self-reflexivity to question the complex ethical issues that arose in undertaking the research, and to decentre my own authority and status.

## **2.6 The people and the process**

The research subject group for this project is specific, comprising Sikh families where either the first or the second generation resided in Peraktown. I used the following criteria, which yielded twenty families:

- The original migrant of the family selected arrived in Malaysia pre-World War I, to ensure similar timelines and a cohort generation for comparison.
- The second and/or third generation descendant of the original migrant lived in Peraktown and at least three other subjects referred to them as a Peraktown family.
- As the study encounters the usual graduate student constraints of finance, data collection focused on research subjects residing in Malaysia, but included some written narratives from families residing overseas where onward migration occurred.
- Many of the early Sikh migrants followed family members to Malaysia. To reflect this, at least one family is related to another family within the sample group.

I focused on the group I defined as the liminal generation, to explore lives that spanned the transitional period of history between the colonial rule of British Malaya at the beginning of the twentieth century and the decolonisation process leading to independent Malaysia from the 1950s to the 1970s. This generation represented a potential to study the sense of increasing distance from the British-ruled Punjab as home and the lack of engagement with independence movements either here or back there. The original conception of this research was a broader and much bigger piece of work and the choice to focus on a subsection of the community allowed my narrowing of the project. There is always an inevitable incompleteness in exploring historical narrative, but studying the liminal generation provided a comprehensive snapshot of history, from the turn of the century to independence within the Malaysian context in a loose chronology, based on the significant moments that affected or influenced community belonging. The core data for this research comprised first person memoirs, unstructured interviews and narrative histories with research subjects comprising the cohort generation aged between sixty and ninety forming the core component. Through the interview process, this generation best exemplified the period during which the community shifted from a fixed, geographical definition to a more imagined and constituted one.

In total, I conducted lengthy interviews with eighteen members of the community, with a minimum of two interviews per person. I made a conscious effort where a choice of family members existed, to select female respondents. To some extent, this impacted the lived experience described, biasing it towards the experiences of women in the community. However, I felt this was an important decision when representing the community voice as the Sikhs in Malaysia are a little-studied group and in historical material during this period, the voices of women remain largely outside the historical narrative. The consequence of my choice resulted in narratives from nine women and nine men as

the representative voices from the liminal generation of the Peraktown Sikh community, presenting a gender diversified insight on identity and belonging. The number of families not accessible due to migration overseas or the death of all family members imposed a further limitation on respondent selection. Research subjects initially were sourced through my father acting as a gatekeeper, with an initial session organised over the phone, at which my father or I explained my research and the expectations of being interviewed, including the recording process. On gaining their consent, I scheduled a visit to their home, as I decided the research subjects would be most comfortable in familiar surroundings and this would allow me to observe life details, their surroundings and artefacts including photographs and books. Additional research subjects were sourced through the network of the Peraktown *Pindh*, as they informed each other of my work and my interest. I soon discovered that explanation of my ancestry and the mention of a PhD project opened all doors between the community value for education and their definition of community boundaries and belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh*, offering me a place within this community and open access to their lives and memories. In considering the ethical implications of my research, my main concern was ensuring anonymity for the subjects and allowing them the opportunity to participate or withdraw from the research process. At each initial interview, I provided the research subjects with a detailed consent form, explaining the purpose of my research and the applications of the data collected, obtaining their acceptance of my use of the recordings, video and audio for my thesis research and future use. A copy of the consent form and information sheet is included in Appendix 1. The respondents actively engaged in my research, choosing to allow the use of their real names, their photographs that they shared to illustrate reminiscences, video and audio material as they felt that the information they shared contributed to my educational aspirations and that it would serve as a repository of memories and of a history little

known or recognised. Despite this permission, I chose to maintain their anonymity, using an alphabetical key to signify each person, with the suffix of Kaur to denote a female speaker and Singh for a male speaker.

Each informant participated in one to two sessions for oral history collection, followed by an open-ended unstructured interview, with the theme centred on the participant's life history where my role remained that of an active listener. I explained that I hoped the informants would share with me their life stories, in the same way they would want to share their experiences with their children or grandchildren. I followed up these sessions with the second component of the data, comprised of semi-structured interviews around the themes of community, family relationships, memories of childhood, educational and work experiences and their feelings on identity and belonging. I recorded each interview using a voice recorder and where permitted, video recording and the interviews were transcribed verbatim. This elicited a minimum of seventy-five minutes of video and audio recordings per informant. The subjects were offered the opportunity to sight and comment on transcript accuracy but none chose to do so. The interviews usually commenced or finished with my being served tea or coffee and some food, with conversations about their families, their recent activities and any news they might have about other members of the community. My understanding of the traditions and customs of the Sikh community being limited, I added the dimension of participation and observation to my data collection, through attendance at the *Gurdwara* and family events of the informants. These experiences and insider knowledge generated some rapport with the participants but the inevitable intimacy occurred primarily through the telling and recording of life histories.

## 2.7 Insider or outsider?

Prior to commencing this study, interaction and contact with the informants was rare as I lived for seventeen years in Australia and visits to Malaysia were short and focused on my immediate family and close friends. My position within this research places me in the interesting position of being an insider/outsider ethnographer. My father belongs to the community, yet my knowledge and contact with the community was minimal and at the time of commencing my research, I had lived exactly half my life in Australia. As David Scott described:

This question of the postcolonial intellectual in other—that is to say, postcolonial—places raises the problem of the location of the 'subject' in a distinctive and defamiliarizing way. Because in that crossing of borders that is constitutive of the anthropological endeavour, the postcolonial intellectual stands in an ambiguous place: neither 'inside' nor 'outside,' but occupying a 'between' always open on both sides to contestation. The location of the postcolonial anthropologist in other (subaltern) places turns on an intersection of identity, privilege, and the imaginary of the West. (1989)

I do not speak or understand Punjabi as my mother tongue is English nor do I adhere to any of the outward *Khalsa*-centric appearance markers of being Sikh. My religious knowledge of the Sikh faith remains restricted to English translations of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, an interest in reading academic articles on Sikhs and Sikhism and discussions with my parents, debates with my maternal grandfather over the outward trappings of the Sikh faith and attendance at *Gurdwara* when family members got married or passed away. I grew up in the Klang Valley, in Malaysia, in a suburb fifteen minutes from the centre of the capital, Kuala Lumpur. My social circle comprised a mix of cultures and ethnicities but all my friends belonged to the urban, middle to upper classes. I attended a national school and learnt Malay as part of the curriculum but this changed to the English medium post-secondary and tertiary system of Australia. However, I shared a history with the community and yet, my upbringing disqualified me from the native

anthropologist position. I lived in three different cities in Australia, and each time I moved, my father would ring up a fellow Peraktown Sikh. After a phone call or two, I would be given a name and a phone number of someone from Peraktown or connected to it, to call on should I need anything. Growing up quite disconnectedly from this culture of connectivity, the idea of calling on a stranger seemed awkward and almost rude. However, during a particularly cold and grey winter in Canberra, I made a phone call, introducing myself as my father's daughter, explaining who my grandfather was, and my link to Peraktown and received an invitation to dinner. The first visit, I was instructed to consider myself a daughter of the family and to drop around whenever I wanted a home-cooked meal or just to feel like I was with family. Examining my position both in my interactions and relationships with my research subjects and to the finished thesis as a whole, bears more relations to Lila Abu-Lughod's depiction of positioned truths (Abu-Lughod 1991). This research blurs the boundaries between the other, being the subjects researched and myself, as inheriting a position within the community yet not sharing the cultural patterns such as religious practice, manner of dress, language and customs. Due to this 'halfie' identity within this research, I am forced to acknowledge a need for self-reflexivity and a quest for greater objectivity. As Abu-Lughod explained:

This does not make such studies any less valuable; it merely reminds us that we must constantly attend to the positionality of the anthropological self and its representations of others. (1991 p.469)

Richard Candida Smith stated of oral history interviews, 'memory and history confront each other across the tape recorder' (2002 p.728). My positionality within the community offers the perspective of a 'halfie' as well as an objective exile and using oral history techniques allowed for a more collaborative process, and means to examine the meanings ascribed by the informants to their own lived experience, in the

Malaysian and a wider social, political and cultural context surrounding migrant belonging and identity constitution. This framework makes space for my voice within the text and makes explicit my interpretations and personal experience in Peraktown Sikh his(tories).

## **2.8 Debating methodology and position**

Studying human experience lends itself well to a deconstructive and post-modern sensibility, with researchers often relying on qualitative methods to describe and clarify lived experiences within the context of the social and political discourses that impact both the ways that researchers view themselves and their subjects and the ways the research subjects view themselves. Denzin and Lincoln describe qualitative research as 'a set of interpretive, material practises that make the world visible' (Denzin and Lincoln 2008c p.3). The methods used in qualitative research evolved over the history of the field and are mirrored by the stages of development in social science philosophy. My research draws on a number of traditions in the field of ethnographic methods. Firstly, I was influenced by the traditions formed during the modernist period, specifically the influence of the Chicago School and the turning of the gaze to the underprivileged and working class realities; however, I chose not to focus on positivist and post-positivist discourse that emphasised substantiation of research findings using multi-method approaches incorporating traditional observation, interviews and statistics. The period of blurred genres is illustrated best by Clifford Geertz in his work as the 'old functional, positivist, behavioural, totalizing approaches to the human disciplines were giving way to a more pluralistic, interpretive, open-ended perspective'. (As cited in Denzin and Lincoln 2008c pp. 24-25) The researcher's position ceased to be that of the authoritative and all-knowing observer which offered a space for my position in this research. However, the crisis of representation and subsequent periods of post-modernist and post-structuralist periods of the mid- 1980s and beyond marked the

beginning of philosophical arguments against generalised studies in the field and the end of Meta narratives as the composition of different life experience (Denzin and Lincoln 2008c pp. 24-26). The shift away from an emphasis on discourses of positivism caused researchers to be more sensitive and aware of the context and impacts that social, political and economic discourses have on lived experience. Denzin and Lincoln explain that within the post-modern period, 'there is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity.' (2008c p.29). These filters are the various discourses that form part of human lived experience. The contrast between older modes of positivist thought where the idea of an absolute truth that may be 'studied, captured and understood' (Denzin and Lincoln 2008c p.14) and the move towards post-modern and post-structuralist modes is the core of the debate on objectivity within the social sciences. The continued evolution of qualitative studies present new modes such as action research, narrative methodology, phenomenology, critical ethnography and case study research to better understand these influences and to flesh out the many possible stories of human experience. Richardson argued that 'in the post-experimental period no discourse has a privileged place, no method or theory has a universal and general claim to authoritative knowledge'. (As cited in Denzin 2001) I could apply a number of labels to describe myself as the 'I' within the context of this essay. I am a university student, a female post-graduate researcher and I am a non-traditional student, returning to university after a long hiatus and re-familiarising myself with academic conventions. These labels or descriptions of my various selves lack context should there not be an appreciation of the various discourses that frame and shape my lived experience. Chris Weedon described discourse in Foucaultian terms as the:

Ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere

in such knowledge's and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. (1997 p.105)

Discourses construct and shape lived experience. In order to present a rich and full account of the examination of lived experience, the researcher must recognise the interplay of different discourses simultaneously.

The idea of dialogic exchange is not new in the social sciences. Researchers used diaries, letters, interviews and many other forms of languaged data to examine their subjects. However, the idea of dialogue remains a term without a fixed definition and for the purpose of this thesis, I use a description of Martin Buber's dialogue as discussed by Tineke Abma. Buber's genuine dialogue 'expresses itself in speaking as well as writing, is a kind of dialogue in which every party turns itself completely towards the other as a 'thou' versus 'it'. The other is approached as subject not object.' (Abma 2001 p.156). The dialogue leaves space to create a cooperative field of knowledge exchange and story formation within a post-modernist framework, where different selves may be constructed. It becomes more than a conversation, whether with another person or an interpretation of a text, through the viewpoint and ideological position of the researcher. Dialogue is 'a way of reconciling differences; a means of promoting empathy and understanding for others; a mode of collaborative inquiry; a method of critically comparing and testing alternative hypotheses' (Burberles 2000 p.2-3). My research centres on the lived experience of members of a diaspora group, reflecting on their construction of a common identity and a place they could belong to in their new homeland. Through use of qualitative techniques, I hope to present an understanding of the experience of this particular visible minority and the methods they used to navigate the socio-economic ladder. This is,

in a sense, an ethnographic journey both of a largely unrepresented group of people, lost within homogeneous generalisation and of me, a member of this group and my attempt to frame my own stories in relation to my efforts to define myself within their stories.

## **2.9 Establishing self-reflexivity**

The evolution of social research places emphasis on an aim to present a more faithful perspective of different lived experiences with a greater degree of sensitivity to both the various truths that exist within each lived experience but also to the self-reflexive understanding of the many personal values and discourses that shape our lives as the researcher (Saukko 2003 Pp. 56-58). The notion of objectivity appears to have gone out of fashion in the humanities and some areas of social science. The post-modern view presents a world with many different realities, all socially constructed. This implies that there are no objective facts and all knowledge is subjective. It is no longer sufficient to present an objective 'truth' that proves the ideological stance held by the researcher, that litters the ethnographic studies of the colonial natives or the working class. The aim is to move beyond research that 'silences' or marginalises the subjects of the study, finding instead a method that tells their many stories within the historical context that shaped them and maintains a firm foothold in the present of their lived reality. Michel Foucault's discourse on power best exemplifies the historical debates surrounding these issues. Weedon interprets Foucault's ideas on power as 'a dynamic of control and lack of control between discourses and the subjects, constituted by discourses, who are their agents. Power is exercised within discourses in the ways in which they constitute and govern individual subjects' (Weedon 1997 p.113). The old models of research placed power firmly within the purview of the researcher. Dialogic forms of inquiry could potentially shift this balance of power providing a means to question and contest the position of the subject

and the researcher within these discourses. More importantly, it allows the work to illustrate explicitly the way power is held and used in the telling of stories and address the issues of who is silenced and who is heard.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's deconstructive methods of investigation question the position of the researcher, where by the acts of researching or representing the 'other', providing a means for the 'other' to represent themselves or by hearing the voice of the 'other', we run the risk of becoming deaf to the 'other'. Her works suggest steps needed for a research strategy that is balanced and deconstructive when studying the discourses that shape lived experience. The idea of 'intimately inhabiting' and 'negotiating' the discourse calls for us, as researchers to 'take seriously that with which one is familiar, to acknowledge that one is seduced by it, even as one engages in a persistent critique of it' (Berry 2009 p.640). We need to explicitly recognise our complicity as researchers in the discourses and that we will inevitably privilege our own agendas. We, as researchers, 'reversing the gaze' to critically trace and challenge the history of our position of privilege in relation to the 'other' in what Spivak refers to as a 'transformation of consciousness—a changing mind set' (Berry 2009 p.641), will better place us to represent our subjects as we adjust our representations of ourselves. Additionally, Spivak's idea of 'learning from below' allows a change from the 'other' being an object to be represented to the subject of the research in a more ethical encounter. Early work in the cultural studies field approached lived experience through the concept of 'resistance'. According to Paula Saukko, there were two clear methodologies used to explore this issue. Firstly, the critical contextualised position, that examines the impact of dominant discourses on the system, which tends to be pessimistic regarding the possibility of social change. She cites the example of Paul Willis's study on working class boys at school who perpetuated the reproduction of

their working class position by contesting middle-class conventions. The study examines the resistance of the boys to 'alienating aspects of school and the commodisation of labour'. Ultimately, the boys' resistance is futile as through their resistance, they maintain and reinforce their position within the labour hierarchy (Saukko 2003 pp. 39-41). Willis's study uses neither objectivity nor self-reflexivity as it used the ethnographic study to interpret the lived experience of the boys to enforce and strengthen the Marxist framework within which, Willis worked. Willis's choice of subjects further strengthens his theoretical position by selecting just the working class boys who challenge the system rather than including some of the boys who conform to it (Saukko 2003 p.45). One issue with his approach to lived experience is that it presumes the subjects are ignorant of the discourses that shape their experience and that only the researcher is able to recognise the truth about their reality. The idea of reality as a truth that is discoverable only by the researcher leaves no room for self-reflexivity. Willis choice of subjects and his interpretation appears to strengthen his own ideological position, causing the research to be a presentation of his own choice of theoretical paradigms thereby precluding it from being objective.

Next, Saukko discusses the textual approach that is more optimistic on the potential for resistance to affect social change using John Fiske's work. He implies that symbolic resistance has significance and that it may 'have wide, political—or quite 'real' ... impact' (Saukko 2003 p.48). Analysing an interview with a subject, Lucy, Fiske posits that her liking for Madonna and her attempts to understand the reasons why Madonna's sexuality is appealing, demonstrate her resistance to defining discourses on female sexuality. He does not place the interview within any specific context and like the work by Willis, Fiske uses the study to promote his deconstructive position but does not self-reflexively recognise this. As with Willis, the main criticism of Fiske's

work is his use of his subjects to push his own agenda through Ventriloquism, a methodological trait that assumes the actions of the subjects can only be understood fully by the researcher (Saukko 2003 pp. 49-50). We, as the researchers, are always entrenched within our own ideological viewpoint. However, a judicious application of self-reflexivity ensures that we question our perspective to ensure that analysis of data and the questions of the research study drive the research process itself and not our own agendas. Despite the use of positivist ideals and claims to objectivism, the studies by Willis and Fiske instead end up demonstrating that true objectivity is not possible as the researcher brings his or her own ideological stance and is impacted by the discourses that shape their own lives.

Saukko explains that the importance of attention to discourses when researching lived experience is that they draw attention to the underlying belief systems that we, as researchers hold. Studies done in an objective manner potentially leave out 'problematic cultural diagnoses based on uninterrogated cultural assumptions' (Saukko 2008 p.468). My research focuses on a specific cultural group that I belong to and this precludes any realistic expectation of a true objective or unbiased position. Instead, I hope to use critical self-reflection to ensure the recognition and minimisation of the impact of bias on my study. Additionally, taking a self-reflexive stance towards my research study means explicitly discussing my own ideological position, discourses and my own lived experience that may have an influence. Foucault's later work on technology of the self offers some valuable thoughts on forming research strategies that study the discourses that form lived experience. The idea behind this is that 'people may do a 'critical ontology of the self', which takes stock of the discourses that have constituted one's subjectivity and then aim to reimagine oneself differently'. This idea leads to the potential use of 'a mutual self-reflexive analysis of discourses' (Saukko 2003 p.77) to create a new

model of researcher–subject relationship where both have a place within the narrative of the research project. The changing practices within the ethnographic field with strategies such as critical ethnography, action research and rhizomatic analysis provide potential methods to work within this framework through dialogic means while maintaining a critical self-reflexive position. It is a departure from the 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak 1994 p.93) representations of the 'other' to justify the grand narratives of the colonial hegemonic power inherent in most classic ethnographic studies.

The Peraktown Sikhs may simply be divorced from political engagement but the emergent trend towards a focus of attention on the disenfranchised, the marginalised and the disempowered in turn, generated increased interest in new modes of ethnographic research (Saukko 2008 p.69) and this offered potential options to bring forward the voices of this particular community. The strategies used in these new ethnographies are threefold. They are often collaborative, allowing for different levels of involvement from the subjects and often refers to them as collaborators or consultants. They enjoin the researcher to employ self-reflexivity and thereby illuminating the impact of social discourses and ideologies on the researcher's interpretation of the stories created. Finally, they use polyvocality to present a multitude of potentially contrasting stories and through this contrast ensure that many truths are heard rather than privileging any one lived experience as being more true (Saukko 2008 pp. 54-75). Fieldwork relationships using a post-modern narrative position offer the potential to involve the subject as a collaborator in the creation of the narrative and actively locate both the subject and the researcher in the work. Active pursuance of fieldwork relationships by the researcher creates meaning. It allows a more emphatic understanding, providing the space for a richly detailed account that incorporates emotion and the subjects' own understanding of their discursive position in the social milieu (Mahoney

2007). The active involvement of subjects as research collaborators with involvement ranging from the selection of the research topic, input on research design, commenting and providing feedback on the text and in some instances, co-authoring the text allows for an emphasis on 'emotional and embodied forms of knowledge and understanding, understood to be neglected by rationalistic 'facts'-focused scientific research' (Saukko 2008 p.464). As Douglas Foley and Angela Valenzuela explain, 'the new, more reflexive critical ethnographer explores the intense self-other interaction that usually marks fieldwork and mediates the production of ethnographic narratives ... the road to greater objectivity goes through the ethnographer's critical reflections on her subjectivity and intersubjective relationships' (2008 p.289).

Using a position of emotivist subjectivism, Dan Mahoney describes his adoption of this method using post-modern narrative studies of the ordinary lives of gay men. The voices of the subjects and the researcher interwoven through the text provide a more complete narrative of the stories created by the subjects and the researcher's process for contextualising the stories. Mahoney pursued a collaborative storytelling methodology, using his status as an insider to the community, unstructured, dialogic interview techniques and allowing the subjects to provide feedback and comment on the text. He emphasised the importance of the subjects as co-narrators based on a model of radical empiricism as defined by Jackson (Mahoney 2007 pp. 573-581). Within this position, the interaction between the researcher and subject along with the researcher's practice of self-reflexivity of his own experiences is of major importance. Mahoney aimed for a deconstruction of the traditional ethnographic view of the subject as a passive participant in the research. He emphasises the relationship between himself, the researcher and the subjects of the study, using field notes as part of the methodological records to generate thick descriptions. One study using this methodology examined the lived experience of a gay man who

having being disowned by his parents, came to be adopted legally by Simon, another gay man. Mahoney uses a Bakhtin-style dialogic interviewing method where 'interviewing is viewed as a social setting for the proliferation of polyphonic dialogues, in which there are many voices and discourses that cross each other simultaneously to produce knowledge about personal narratives and social life' (Tanggaard 2009 p.581). He allows Ted to unfold his many narrative selves that tell the stories about familial rejection and through continued delving into personal relationship, the importance of the supportive fatherly relationship that enabled Ted to come to terms with his gay identity. Mahoney comments that by sharing his own emotional response to the narrative by describing his emotions of envy of Ted's experience in contrast to his familial relationships, prompted Ted to focus more intently on the fatherly and supportive relationship with Simon and its role in Ted's reconciliation with his own identity. Through the narrative process, Ted comes to terms with his troubled history and comes to value his father-son relationship with Simon as a positive affirmation of his life. This method allows the reclamation of marginalised viewpoints by storying against dominant discourses that had previously defined both Ted and Mahoney (Mahoney 2007).

A potential drawback with this method is the possibility of the 'talk show dilemma' where the narrative is presented uncritically and as a result, side-lines other social discourses by focusing on the discourse of shame in the stories of dislike of their gay identity by their families and that affirmation of this identity can only come from other gay men (Saukko 2002 pp. 245-248). The use of the post-modern narrative methodology and the emotivist subjectivism potentially enriches my research study. I know, for myself, that being a migrant involves narratives of separation, the forced deconstruction and remodelling of cultural identity and a sense of yearning and nostalgia for the original homeland. My lived experience both mimics and opposes the experience

of my subjects due to my position as the researcher and my generational position. Mahoney's work offered the lesson of ensuring a space in the research to hear the many voices of my subjects and to allow their emotions to form meanings in the narrative while maintaining a critically self-reflexive view of my voice in the research. This results in a thick and rich account of knowledge on the researched lived experience that is contextualised within the discourses that shape it.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari present another research strategy to study these discourses shaping lived experience through dialogic methods through the metaphor of a rhizome as a means to explore thinking and writing methods that allow for a non-linear mode of progression with multiple points of entry and no clear hierarchical structure or order (Deleuze and Guattari 1988 p.21). The use of this research strategy allows for a multitude of stories that address different selves and discourses without the need to form a coherent plot with a beginning, middle and end. The researcher is always present within the text. Saukko uses this strategy in a study of anorexic women. She explains that there exists a dichotomy for the anorexic. The actions of being an anorexic are about total control over themselves and involve 'knowing what one is doing (or being a 'subject') and not knowing what one is doing (or being an 'object')' when diagnosed as anorexic due to the perception of anorexia as an utter lack of control (Saukko 2003 p.89). Saukko sought a methodology that could encompass this due to her own experiences as an anorexic and her disassociation with the scholarly discourses on the subject. She breaks the rhizomatic method down to three research and writing strategies. Like Mahoney, the interviewing technique draws from Bakhtin's work on 'dialogic' characters, using the phenomenological, dialogic principle (Saukko 2003 p.90). This ensures that the research method and text do not reduce subjects to theoretical props for theory but acknowledge their individual

voices and many storied versions of themselves. It allows for the position of the researcher within the interview and in the research text and not as an outside voice, narrating the subjects from a position of authority. In order to explore the social discourses involved in the formation of the stories by the anorexics, Saukko adds a second research strategy. She includes questions on the discourses surrounding anorexia in the interviews, to encourage discussion of the subjects' understanding and views of the impact and meaning of these discourses on their own experience. She states 'the intention was to invite the women to reflect on their experience, and thereby occupy the role of the 'knower' and not only that of 'the known' (Saukko 2003 pp. 90-91). Finally, Saukko used a rhizomatic form in her narration to permit each subject's voice to speak of her differing perspectives and meanings. She chooses to highlight the contradictions of the social discourses rather than working towards creating a consensus within the diverse voices.

Using these strategies, Saukko presents a research text that represents the women's voices while critically interrogating them. For example, while one subject, Jeanne, viewed the discourses on anorexia as pursuing strength and control, another subject, Taru, viewed them as framing women as weak and lacking strength and control. Re-storying the text to include the contradictions between the narratives highlights the 'distinction between being in command or strong and its negative, being victimized, marked by an elusive and profoundly gendered demand of being in full and independent command of one's life' (Saukko 2003 p.256). This may not be an objective truth within a positivist framework but it presents a subjective truth of the experience of anorexia and the understanding of how the discourses about it shape different narrative truths. Saukko's self-reflexivity allows her to question and challenge her own assumptions and prejudices of anorexia and its relevant discourses. Additionally, her self-reflexivity allows the threading through of her feminist ideological position while still

prioritising the meaning given to the discourses and lived experience by the stories of her subjects. The rhizomatic narrative allows readers to form their own dialogue with the text and the discourses that shape it. The text aims to demonstrate that generalised understanding of a subject is impossible within the post-structuralist context. Denzin describes this mode of writing as a messy text, which is a departure from traditional narrative methods that tend to situate the narrative in a chronological time frame and with a clear progression of plot, where difference is emphasised and the reader adds to the research by their understanding of the text. The interviewing technique is similar to Mahoney's study and her inclusion of the discourses that shape and influence the anorexic, giving the subject a role in the analysis, further blurring the division of knowing researcher and known subject.

The difference between the aims of my proposed work and Saukko's work with anorexic women is Saukko's desire to highlight contrast and difference rather than searching for common narrative threads. Researching the Peraktown Sikhs, I hoped to find within the different narratives, some similarities of experience and reactions to the social discourses of culture, religion, identity, language and class. As such, while drawing on these ideas, I preferred Saukko's strategy of agonistic dialogue, where she borrowed the Greek method of political discussion. She referenced Arendt's work in describing the key features of this methodology explaining that all perspectives differ as all individuals approach the social world through different perspectives and that the purpose of the method is to engage these different perspectives in dialogue without privileging any above the other (Saukko 2003 pp. 245-248). This method poses the possibility of a research text that relates varied narrative truths within a framework that is not entirely relativist. In all the strategies used to examine the discourses that shape lived experience, the experiences themselves become evidence. Discussing and questioning issues of authenticity implies that a researcher's self-

reflexivity can make a claim that 'experience can counterproductively preclude a productive dialogue between researchers, readers and ideas; its uses can thwart necessary and critical exploration in the service of being 'right' or 'true' (Berry 2009 p.598). While perfect objectivity may not be possible when researching human experience within the discursive framework, self-reflexive subjectivity too has its drawbacks. The researcher needs to situate self-reflexivity and experience within Foucault's genealogy where the researcher must 'shift from 'this is my experience and is therefore no one else's to critique' to 'this is my experience, and, in the telling, I show how social and political forces are at play with how, why and to what end I tell it' (Saukko 2003 p.464). In the choice of my research topic and the methodology used, I acknowledge my embeddedness within these narratives and position in the text but the underlying foundation of critical and 'hyper-self-reflexivity' can only strengthen the position of knowledge of both the human discourses of the Peraktown Sikhs and my own position when examining their lived experience.

### **2.10 Translation**

The final issue I wish to address in regards to my methodology concerns translation. In commencing my research, I anticipated some practical issues of translation to arise, as I did not speak Punjabi. As I commenced the research process, I soon realised that my research subjects predominantly used English in their conversation with me and between themselves. I attribute this to the value placed on acquiring and using English within this particular community. Although I observed in conversations with each other, some Punjabi phrases interspersed in conversation with other Sikhs, the predominant form of communication remained English. Ethnography itself, however, represents an act of translation, where rather than an exact reproduction or representation of the culture or community, the voice of the ethnographer or the writing of the ethnographic text exists within a framework of power

relations. As Vincent Crapanzo described, 'ethnography is historically determined by the moment of the ethnographer's encounter with whomever he is studying' (2010 p.51). Belonging is a difficult concept to translate, as the nuances of meaning it holds within our understanding of the term in our use of the English language do not easily shift into Punjabi, the mother tongue of my subjects. In looking at the word used to signify this same meaning in Punjabi, it translated back into English as a coming together or sense of togetherness. In essence, my use of the categorical concept of the *Pindh* of the mind signifies the underpinning meaning of the notion of belonging, both in the understanding or knowing of my subjects in either language and in the emotional connections and connotations it inherently enfolds within its boundaries. In representing here, the voices of the Peraktown Sikhs and their experience, I am conscious that their journey towards the construction of the *Pindh* as a place of belonging echoed my efforts to negotiate the landscape of Malaysian life, as a foreigner now, returning to Malaysia after seventeen years of living in Australia. This juxtaposition of narratives of movement and journeying required the recognition described by Kirin Narayan, that factors such as 'education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider outsider status,' and also the need to challenge and question my position in the production of the text (1993 p.672). I share a familiarity of experience with the Peraktown Sikhs, in their journey to find a place to belong and some degree of intrinsic knowledge through our common cultural heritage yet this text cannot escape from being a sort of translation. As Rushdie explained:

Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained. (1991 p.17)

In the subsequent chapters, I explore and describe the formation of the Peraktown *Pindh* from its historical origins, its transformation from a geographical space to a place of meaning and finally as a place of belonging. I do not claim to provide a complete and objective understanding of the entirety of the discourse and meaning of being Sikh in Peraktown and belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh*. I offer instead, an ethnography of the particular, representing and explaining the lived experience of a specific community, at a moment in history and their reaction and accommodation to the cultural context of that place, space and time.

### **3 The *Pindh* as history**

In this chapter, I offer a brief outline of the 'big movements', a précis of the key moments in Sikh history, the colonial interpellation of Sikh identity construction and the self-agency in reaction, both in Punjab and in the diasporic population and the migration narratives of movement to Malaya leading to the construction and consolidation of the Peraktown *Pindh* as both a physical space and a state of mind. This chapter seeks to address the historical processes implicated in the shaping and formation of the Peraktown Sikh community. In studying the Peraktown Sikhs, my aim is to piece together 'what change does to people, change from outside them, the big movements' (Williams 2006 p.286). In discussing a minority community of migrant origins, the location of home problematically straddles the inherited nostalgia for home, generations in the past, the complexity of negotiating an identity in a new home and the diversified debates surrounding core ethnic, cultural and religious beliefs that comprise the notion of being Sikh. Brah describes this as a location where the multiplicity of power and politics of a location intersect with the discourses of diaspora, identity and borders. This 'diaspora space' is where 'the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native' (1996 pp.241-243). Within this theoretical concepts, Brah highlights that when discussing issues of home, belonging and identity within this diaspora space, we cannot allow 'location to easily dissolve out of focus' (1996 p.204). All diaspora groups experience these tangled skeins of identity, community, belonging and the idea of home, weaving together a patchwork constituted of different cultural, societal and national norms, values, expectations and forces in bridging the liminality of 'here' and 'there'. The lived experience of diasporic populations centres on the process of imagining and conceptualising the meaning of home in the context of 'the relationships between home and homeland, the existence of multiple homes, diverse home-making practices, and the intersections

of home, memory, identity and be-longing' (Blunt and Dowling 2006 p.199). The Peraktown Sikhs faced similar challenges and questions in their self-constitution of commonality and shared identity; however, the community demonstrated distinctness unique to their particular diaspora community, through the construction of a new category of meaning, the Peraktown *Pindh*.

The Peraktown Sikh community lives within a diaspora space, yet creates a wholly Sikh space of meaning apart from the intersections with the other populations living in the same physical location; a liminal border space inhabited only by the Peraktown Sikh population. Members of different ethnic groups or other Sikh communities may visit here, marry into the community, work with and form longstanding friendships with them, but they will never be part of the Peraktown *Pindh*. In contrast to other Sikh diasporic groups, in Peraktown, the nostalgic attachment and identification with the physical spaces of their ancestral homeland and the meaning it imbued is accompanied by the appropriation, adaptation and discarding of concepts and practices and normative values concomitant with Sikh identity, in support of bettering socio-economic position while simultaneously sustaining an idea of community, bridging the divide of being at home both 'here' and 'there'. Their lived experiences offer a map to the continued negotiations of diasporic identities in the newly forged linkages and relationships with land, a recreation of place and space in the course of settlement in the new host country. The Peraktown Sikhs interviewed for this research do not use the term *Pindh*, yet they speak often on the meanings encompassed within my encapsulation of the term.

That big fond memory that the house we had is still there but it doesn't belong to us anymore but you still feel that that's where you grew up. (GKaur, 5 April 2012)

I think you just take it for granted the way you are brought up and the way, you don't think about whether it was something special to compare to other cultures. But it's just that I think we

just enjoy it being what we were, you know, we were Sikhs.  
(EKaur, 8 March 2012)

This conceptual category alters in the liminal generation, as they move beyond the boundaries of Peraktown for further education and in pursuit of career opportunities, with the continued validation of *Pindh* relations within the spatial confines of Peraktown, extending to become a *Pindh* of the mind, a connection not bounded by geography or time. Their *Pindh* is simultaneously Peraktown and the physical location where a member of the community settled. In addition, the Peraktown *Pindh* is evoked whenever Peraktown Sikhs meet, make contact whether by letter, phone or email and in memory, through recollections, retelling and sharing of their stories.

The Peraktown Sikh community traces its core normative categories of belonging back to the consolidation of Sikh or Punjabi community identity through the confluence of religious movements, territorial disputes and the eventual encounter with colonial forms of knowledge from the British annexation of Punjab in 1849. Before commencing my research, my identity as a Sikh depended wholly on the cosmic accident of being born to Sikh parents. My research enabled me to explore further my own relationship to being Sikh, through reading, discussions with members of the Peraktown community and within my family, involvement in the day-to-day life of my subjects including numerous religious ceremonies at *Gurdwaras* throughout Malaysia. Early on in the research process, I read Williams' novel, *Border Country* (2006), describing the return 'home' of Matthew, an academic, from a Welsh, working class background. The book details the internal sense of exile that Matthew feels and his disconnectedness from the rhythms of life in the village and from his parents and old friends. On reading the book, it struck me that Matthew's experience and identity closely echoed both my experiences and that of the members of the Peraktown Sikh community.

The Sikhs of Peraktown started in a similar position to the working class Welsh background described by Williams; their lives and identities defined and constrained by others, both of socio-economic class and of culture. Matthew, the Peraktown Sikhs and I challenged this interpellation of ourselves; we pursued educational opportunities, became adept in subverting dominant culture habitus in pursuit of our goals and we moved up the socio-economic ladder, leaving our families and early relationships behind. Identity and belonging become mutable, as you travel further away from the world you know, carrying the weight of family and community aspirations and the inheritance of their memories and constructed identities. Crossing borders requires a continuous renegotiation of identity and an acceptance of a position as an exile. As a great-grandchild of migrants and as a migrant myself, this inheritance is a complex one as there is the nostalgia and longing for the culture, society and identity I hold in my place of birth as well as in the imagined homeland of my ancestors. I inscribe my sense of identity as a dialectical narrative of belonging between the construct of *home* and 'not home', creating a new position of 'sometimes home'. As Rushdie wrote:

As for me: I, too, like all migrants, am a fantasist. I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist. I, too, face the problem of history: what to retain, what to dump, how to hold on what memory insists on relinquishing, how to deal with change. (2008 pp.87-88)

In my research, I have found a place that is 'home', not quite where I started from, but linked to my family history and the stories of my childhood; I discovered a sense of belonging to a community to whom I had no prior interactions. The Peraktown Sikhs, the focus of my research, continue to negotiate belonging and identity fluidly and are always able to return despite years of exile. As a legacy of the community and despite years of living abroad, they welcomed me and actively engaged with my research, offering themselves as subjects and

putting me in contact with others who could help. The Peraktown *Pindh* included me within their complex structure of community belonging, drawing on their social capital resources to participate and engage in my research project. In *Border Country*, Matthew finds his return to be complicated and flawed. This return to a place of origin or familiar but long-past relationships should be problematic due to expectations, and this desire of return to our idea of what *home* was and therefore, to our exiled selves, what it should be.

The Peraktown Sikhs in contrast demonstrated how within the conceptual category of the Peraktown *Pindh*, belonging and identification extends beyond spatial and temporal considerations; it exists at need, on evocation through memories and encounters with fellow members or their descendants. In the following chapters, I explore this construct through its formation and consolidation, both through periods of historical significance and discourses of belonging, transgressions and place making. Researching the Sikh community of Peraktown, like Matthew Price in *Border Country*, I intended to 'write the history of a whole people being changed', and found as I delved further into my data that 'at a certain stage, the figures got up and walked... When they get up and walk they're not people but ghosts' (Williams 2006 pp.352-353). This thesis is in a sense haunted by the earlier selves of the Peraktown Sikhs I interviewed, their remembrance of the community's symbolic and embedded cultural capital and their experiences as a people always on the move, yet still choosing to invest in the materialisation of home. Unlike Matthew Price, I believe that ghosts have stories to tell, and for these ghosts, their stories begin with the history of a people, some places and a few things.

### **3.1 Leaving home to find home**

Reconstructing the history of Peraktown Sikh migration is problematic due to the lack of written documentation, the confusion over the classifications used in official records and the absence of Sikh presence

in Indian Ocean littoral narratives. Consequently, the history of the Sikhs of Peraktown is sourced from oral histories, the memoirs of British colonials and personal documents, demonstrating the lack of diversity in migration narratives and ancestral genera. The migration of the Peraktown Sikhs to the Federated Malay States originates with the British reification of *Khalsa* orthodoxy, martial prowess and *Jat* hegemony following the 1857 mutiny. Caste is a confusing issue within the Sikh communities worldwide. The tenets of the religion support abolishment of caste identity yet it continues to persist. The term *Jat* refers to landowners or *Zaminders* in Punjab. They tend to self-identify as hyper-masculine figures of strength and locate themselves at the top of the caste hierarchy. Marriages are endogamous. The British included them in the Martial Races of India and consequently, initial migration to Malaysia is mainly of Sikhs of the *Jat* caste origin. Other castes include the *Banias* who are the traders, the *Nais* or barber caste, *Chimbas* who are tailors and the *Chamars* who are the Sikh equivalent of the untouchables. For the most part, the first migrants of the Peraktown Sikh families arrived in the Federated Malay States through one of three methods during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century; firstly, as a consequence of the 'martial race' doctrine, enlistment of *Jat* Sikhs into the colonial armies, transporting them to British-ruled places in South-East Asia. The second avenue for migration occurred through direct or chain recruitment also of *Jat* Sikhs, to the Perak State Police. The final process included both *Jat* and other Punjabi castes migrating through kinship and village networks as support personnel within the British administration or as independent businessmen. The Peraktown Sikhs originate from rural areas of Punjab and consequently this rural imaginary of their long departed homeland imparted its own marks in the inscription of identity and belonging for the Peraktown Sikhs. The notion of the *Pindh*, or village carried its own cultural currency, describing social origins, status and kinship ties and generations removed from this almost sacred relationship, the Peraktown Sikhs

constructed a meaningful community of belonging through their attachment to the land and landscape of their hometown.



**Figure 2: An ancestor of a Peraktown Sikh in the Perak Police**

Most migrants arrived in Perak between 1897 and the 1930s, prior to the consolidation of a dominant Sikh rather than variegated normative categories of Punjabi identity following homeland religious reform movements, social and political change during the continued period of British rule. However, the Peraktown Sikhs remained current with different movements and changes in cultural practices, norms and values through the transnational exchange of people, publications and family missives. An analysis of the origins and production of the Peraktown *Pindh* must include the historical antecedents, political and social projects of Sikh identity formation. The choice to engage within competing fields of power and modernist discourse form the foundations of creative agency for both the homeland Punjabis and the diasporic population in self-fashioning and representing themselves as a unitary

community. The diaspora cannot be divorced from Punjab therefore in the following sections I provide some discussion on the religious, political and social changes that influenced community habitus and categories of belonging. Firstly, I offer a brief overview on the origins of the Sikh faith and the changing tenets over the life courses of the ten Gurus. Secondly, I examine the impact of colonisation on the population of Punjab, including the roots of *Jat* Sikh hegemony and culture in the diaspora. Finally, I discuss the evolutionary history of the Peraktown Sikh community as both a physical place and the further dimension of a mental space, comprising the relationships formed, the habitus adopted and the nostalgic longings—in essence, a *Pindh*.

### **3.2 Sikhs or Punjabis: What is in a name?**

The Peraktown community highlighted the religious construction and practice of being Sikh as a key component to their sense of identity. Beginning this research, I chose to describe my work within the framework of Sikh diaspora studies yet it is incomplete to attribute the saliency of religious practice as the sole arbitrator of membership to this community. The late nineteenth century migration represented a large-scale of human movement from Punjab, then under British rule. As W. H. McLeod noted, 'when we talk about Sikh migration, we are choosing to use an imprecise adjective' (As cited in Barrier and Dusenbery 1989 p.32). Most studies use 'Sikh diaspora' as a category of analysis in describing the movement, migration and settlement of members of a minor religion, originating in Punjab. This privileges the category of religion, Sikhism, as the definitive of collective identity, however, as McLeod explained, 'the Punjabi village of the early twentieth century was no place to go looking for clear-cut normative identities' (As cited in Barrier and Dusenbery 1989 p.42). Harjot Oberoi writing on the late nineteenth century explains further that during this period, 'far from there being a single 'Sikh' identity, most Sikhs moved in and out of multiple identities' (1997 p.137). Common identification arose from a

multiplicity of categories all perceived to be more relevant than the concept of a monolithic religious construction of community. Punjabi identity until the late nineteenth century incorporated wide-ranging criteria such as territorial, occupational, linguistics, caste, education, places of residence, forms of worship or religious practice, and these shifted, remaining quite fluid depending on political and social relationships (Dusenbery 2008 pp. 95-97).

In the following chapters, I describe how many of these affiliations remain cogent for the Peraktown Sikh community. However, the roots of the choice to be called Sikhs rather than Punjabis originate with the history of the consolidation of Sikh community identity following the British annexation of Punjab. During the late nineteenth century, the convergence of colonial intervention and self-agency in reaction resulted in a more codified and naturalised understanding and meaning to being Sikh. J. S. Grewal highlighted the shift from the multiplicity of varied Punjabi identities to the more codified vision of the Sikh religion, describing this as 'the shattered mirror of Punjabi consciousness reflects tiny images, which refuse to coalesce into a portrait' (1998 p.52). As discussed in Chapter 1, the members of the Peraktown Sikh community trace their origins in Malaysia back to colonial-period migration, the period when colonial intervention and the *Sabha* reform movements began to privilege *Khalsa* orthodoxy. In the following section, I provide a brief discussion of the tenets of the Sikh faith, the cultural formations and structures altered by the colonial gaze and the self-reflective politics and agency practised by the Sikhs during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to better understand the factors and historical process of being Sikh and specifically being Sikh in Peraktown.

### **3.3 Sikhism: A very brief introduction**

The Sikh religion is a very young faith, originating during the fifteenth century with the teachings of Guru Nanak and his rejection of prevailing religious ideology. His doctrine preached monotheistic faith, focused on

devotional and meditative path towards spiritual realisation, but one that rejected the path of self-renunciation, comprised instead of 'living purely amidst the impurities of attachment' (Grewal 1998 p.40). Key teachings incorporated gender equality, a rejection of caste-discrimination and definition and the omnipresence of God, inspired in part by Sufi tradition, yet distinct in its emphasis on 'collective emancipation'. The central pillars of the Sikh faith are encapsulated in the opening hymn, the *Japji*.

There is but one God whose name is true,  
The Creator, devoid of fear and enmity,  
Immortal, unborn, self-existent by the favour of the Guru.  
Repeat his name.  
The True One was in the beginning;  
The True One was in the primal age.  
The True One is now also, O Nanak;  
The True One also shall be. (Macauliffe 1963)

Over the next two centuries, a succession of Gurus, beginning with a disciple appointed by Nanak before his death in 1539 guided the members of the Sikh faith. The Sikh community began as a small group of disciples, sharing in the ideals of egalitarianism, meditation, pure living and charity to those in need. The subsequent Gurus introduced further demarcations of Sikh identification. These included the *Gurmukhi* script, separate administrative units and the collection of tithes, the construction of places of worship, known as *Gurdwaras*, as sites of pilgrimage and prayer and the institutionalised practice of sharing food in the communal kitchen and dining areas of the *Langar Hall*, reinforcing the renunciation of caste or social distinctions. The compilation of ceremonies for birth, marriage and death together with the teachings of the faith into a Holy Book, known as the *Guru Granth Sahib* completed the consolidation of a community with life-cycle rituals, a central place of worship or pilgrimage and an economic base (Singh and Barrier 2001). Under the first five Gurus, the Sikh

community functioned as an autonomous state within the Mughal Empire.

The transformation from an agrarian and peace-loving community commenced during the early seventeenth century, with the Sikhs choosing to support the right to religious freedom against increasing religious oppression and tyranny. This marked a turning point, as the bucolic, peasant Sikh evolved into a martial, warrior identity in opposition to the violence of the Mughal presence. By the late seventeenth century, a shift occurred, from the egalitarian and meditative faith under the first five Gurus towards the doctrine of *miri-piri*, 'the explicit blending of worldly and spiritual authority' (McLeod 2007 p.91). The Mughal period from Aurangzeb's reign added the normative categories of martyrdom and just war into the canon of the Sikh faith with their defence of Hindus and Sikhs alike against forced conversions to Islam. The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, best articulates this in the qualifications for drawing a sword; 'the first is that the sword may be used only in defence of truth, of righteousness, and of the faith; and the second is that it may be drawn only when all other means of defence have failed' (McLeod 1989 p.6). The culmination of this evolution saw the creation of the *Khalsa Panth* in 1699, a regulated order of select Sikhs initiated in a religious ceremony known as the *Amrit Sanskar* and marked as distinct through their appearance with the inclusion of the turban, the *kirpan* or sword, the comb, a steel bangle and a type of undershorts. They were further distinguished by their flowing hair and beards for the men and their military prowess. It is important to note that the *Khalsa* tradition remained on the periphery of Sikh identity until the nineteenth century, with varied social, cultural and ritual practices that differed by village, clan and caste. The lack of a single authoritative religious tradition meant there were multiple ways of defining Sikh identity (Oberoi 1997 p.419).

### 3.4 Sikhs: The colonial subject

The recruits are at your door step  
Here you eat dried roti  
There you'll eat fruit  
Here you are in tatters  
There you'll wear a suit  
Here you wear worn out shoes  
There you'll wear boot. (Patialewala)

The encounters with the colonial 'other', firstly the Moghuls and later the British prompted adaptation and increasing debate surrounding religious, social and cultural practice. The process of militarisation began in reaction to the increasingly aggressive and tyrannical policies under a succession of Mughal emperors. However, normative categories and meanings of being Punjabi remained varied. The arrival of the East India Company to the colonisation of Punjab following British annexation in 1849 introduced engagement with modernist discourse leading to a structured and fixed concept of identification as Sikh. As a minority group, ruled over and surrounded by other more numerically and politically cogent cultures, the Sikh community inherited a tradition of aligning with the dominant power. The land of the five rivers often experienced new migrations or invaders, ranging from the Aryans, the Greeks, the Huns, the Scythians, the Mughals and finally, the British (Keay 2010). Accommodation with new rulers became a survival strategy. Relationships between the Mughals and the Sikhs proved cordial until the ascension of Jahangir and his execution of the fifth Guru following the Sikh involvement with the son of the emperor during one of the many disputes within the Mughal families (Gordon 1904 p.34).

According to Max Arthur Macauliffe, a Guru predicted the benefit of a relationship between the British and the Sikhs during his time in a Mughal prison.

When it was represented to Guru Gobind Singh that a Muhammadan army would eventually come to overpower his Sikhs, he replied, 'What God willeth shall take place. When the army of the Muhammadans cometh, my Sikhs shall strike steel on steel. The *Khalsa* shall then awake, and know the play of battle. Amid the clash of arms, the *Khalsa* shall be partners in present and future bliss, tranquillity, meditation, and divine knowledge. Then shall the English come, and, joined by the *Khalsa*, rule as well in the East as in the West. The holy Baba Nanak will bestow all wealth on them. The English shall possess great power and by force of arms take possession of many principalities. The combined armies of the English and the Sikhs shall be very powerful as long as they rule with united counsels. (Macauliffe 1963 p.p. xix-xx)

This existing mythology of a common cause provided a framework for the British to promote their own agendas but it also offered a justification to Sikh reformers in engaging with modernity as encountered through the education system and engagement with the British administration. This process of subsuming alternative Punjabi identities occurred conclusively through religious reform movements such as the Singh Sabha and as most Sikh scholars concur, the British centralisation of *Khalsa Panth* orthodoxy as the key-defining category of Sikh tradition (Fox 1985, Barrier and Dusenbery 1989, Oberoi 1997). However, this transformation and ideological dissemination of interpellated Sikhness commenced prior to colonial rule. Interpellation is an idea coined by Louis Althusser whereby the subject is constituted by ideology. As he explained, 'ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: individuals are always-already subjects' (Althusser 1971 p.176). Early encounters with the Sikhs may be found in the works of British ethnographic pieces from the late eighteenth century, written in response to concerns over the increasing opposition to the Mughal forces, with raids into the Doab region and up to Anupshar (Gupta 1978 p.290). These pieces provided the British with an interpretive framework of the Sikhs and their

religion, focusing on the similarity of Sikhism as a similar process of religious reformation to the Protestant reform. In addition, British ethnographers highlighted racial characteristics, contrasting the Sikhs with other populations encountered on the Indian subcontinent, associating them instead with shared Aryan racial origins.

These early writings offered a view of Sikhism as a reformed vision of Hinduism without the polytheism or strict caste hierarchies and a population of superior racial stock defined by masculinity, militancy and meat-eating. These accounts shaped British vision of the Sikhs as a self-contained community defined by a religious system they identified with, possessing 'that kind of relation to the Hindoo religion, which the Protestant does to the Romish' (Singh 1962 p.p. 13-14). Joseph Davey Cunningham (1966) further reinforced this perception, according the Sikh religion superiority to the effeminate teachings of Hinduism and the despotism of Islam. Gerald N. Barrier (1970) highlights how the process of collecting census data following annexation, proved problematic for the administration due to the variations of identities in Punjab proved problematic in their diversity. This reductionism divorced British perception and contextualisation of the Sikh people from existing normative categories of identification and the underlying complexities of kinship relations, social hierarchies, political positions and the diversity of religious practice prevalent during the period (Oberoi 1994). Following annexation, through the recruitment process that focused heavily on the *Jat* caste and subscription to *Khalsa* orthodoxy, resulting in the resurgence in the conformity to this normative category of identification, certain groups of Punjabis gained social prominence under the British, through their enlistment with the British Army in large numbers, receiving in return titles and land. Verne Dusenbery explained that the British chose to privilege 'two identities: occupational genera (which for British purposes becomes reified as 'caste') and worship genera (which for the British becomes 'religion')' (1995 pp. 18-20).

Commencing with this change in social order and the mass migration during this period, collective action within the diaspora over multiple generations developed and sustained the construction of a united and coherent Sikh community.

### **3.5 Modernity, agency and reform**

This depiction of colonial intervention, describing the reimagining and reconstitution of Sikhness (Fox 1985, Omissi 1994, Talbot and Thandi 2004) leaves out the agency of the Sikhs themselves through their engagement with modernity and their questioning of Sikh meanings and practices. The British administration generated an entanglement between state and religious identity, affecting the pattern of Punjabi culture, as the spatial geography of Sikhness extended beyond the boundaries of Punjab through the preferential recruitment and employment of Sikhs, specifically *Jat* Sikhs, throughout the British Empire following the Mutiny of 1857 and the fears of Russian imperialist intentions along the North-west Frontier. During this same period, the colonial administration engaged in education projects throughout the colony. Oberoi highlights that members of the Sikh reform movements comprised the educated, urban elite, influenced by the British ideals of monotheism, rationality and ideals of manliness (Oberoi 1997 pp. 422-424). The foundation of the *Singh Sabha* movements in the late 1870s promoted the construction of decisive distinction between the Hindus and the Sikhs (Dusenbery 1995 p.20).

The British and the Sikh reformers viewed Hinduism and Islam as religions that encouraged degeneration and superstition sharing the common Orientalist view of other Indian populations, perceiving their pervasive indolence and cultural decay to be a corrosive influence on the Sikhs and the Sikh faith. The *Singh Sabhas* including the soon to be the dominant group, the *Tat Khalsa* organisation, campaigned extensively using meetings, pamphlets and preaching to promote the Sikh faith in direct competition with the Hindu Reform movement, the

*Arya Samaj*, an anti-colonial, Hindu revivalist movement that described the Sikhs as an offshoot of Hinduism. A number of economic, social and political changes during the late nineteenth century generated fierce competition for positions within the colonial administration amongst the urban populations. The dispersion of coherent constructions of Sikh religious beliefs and behaviours emphasising its distinctiveness and difference from Hinduism interlocked with the British understanding of congruence between their cultures. Tony Ballantyne emphasises the British Enlightenment and the vernacularisation of Protestantism and drawing parallels with the Sikh religion, likening Hinduism to Sikhism and the distinction between high and low forms of their own religious practice and debates (2006 pp. 41-45). In 1898, a seminal piece of Sikh identity construction was published; *Hum Hindu Nahin*, which translated to mean 'We are not Hindus'. In stressing the rejection of caste practices, the adherence to the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the outward observance of Sikh physical symbols and the egalitarian nature of the religion, this text provided a crucial assertion in support for the *Tat Khalsa* and a clear confirmation for the colonial authorities of perceived commonalities. The reform movements, inspired by this piece, advocated clear life cycle distinctions for Sikhs distinct from the Hindu tradition, leading to uniquely Sikh rituals for birth, marriage and death further delineating the contrast between Sikh rationalism and Hindu superstition (Oberoi 1997).

During the 1870s, Macauliffe began his ethnographic work on the Sikh religion and people. While posted in Punjab, he commenced a series of books, further stressing the Sikh religion as a reform movement comparable to the Protestant, stating, 'the fifteenth century was a period of singular mental and political activity. Both in Europe and India, men shook off the torpor of ages, and their minds awoke to the consciousness of intellectual responsibility' (Macauliffe 1963 p.xxxix). Macauliffe's work earned him recognition and respect from the reformist

*Tat Khalsa* organisation and provided further rationale for the interests of the colonial administration in preserving the distinct orthodox characteristics and religious practice. For the British:

It does not appear rational, much less politic, to allow them to lose their distinctive character, to revert to gross superstition and social deterioration, and to divest themselves of loyalty which in peace as well as in war have made them the mainstay and pride of the British Government in India. (Ballantyne 2006 p.183)

The reform movements consolidated the *Khalsa* identity as dominant in Punjab, evidenced by the various bills passed into legislation, in the early twentieth century. This marked the Sikh religion as 'recognised and protected by the state' and offered the first clear definition of Sikh identity 'I solemnly affirm that I am a Sikh, that I believe in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, that I believe in the Ten Gurus, and that I have no other religion' (Ballantyne 2006 p.60). Within the established diasporic networks, the combination of British interests in preserving *Khalsa* identity, the movement of ideas and preachers and the accessibility of works on the Sikh religion through the expansion of printed material, the transmission of reforms and notions of being Sikh evolved as being a key component in community construction. However, as highlighted by Ballantyne (2006) and Oberoi (1997), the normative categories of regional and caste affiliations remained salient.

A solidified code and meaning of being Sikh developed from the increased persecution under Mughal rule, the congruence of British need for a loyal and obedient security force both in India and the colonies and the constructed delineation of *Jat* Sikh masculinity and martial prowess. This normative vision developed from religious reformation within the British understanding of Sikh scripture and the encounter with the ideology of modernity through education and involvement within the colonial project. The Sikh religious tradition of being in the world yet retaining purity, heavily influenced by Sufism and the rejection of self-renunciation altered irrevocably to include

martyrdom and military prowess. This increasing masculinity within the faith became further entrenched in diasporic Sikh communities of the period, through the gendered process of migration. The early migrants to Perak consequently adhered to the orthodox *Khalsa* meaning of the Sikh faith, a more patriarchal gender discourse and a sense of superiority as compared to the other ethnic groups inhabiting the state. In the next section, I explain the production of the category of meaning I defined as the Peraktown *Pindh* and how the process of settlement in Peraktown, altered these existing normative categories of behaviour as the original migrants encountered new social, cultural and political forms and behaviours, producing a distinct and separate understanding of being Sikh in Peraktown.

### **3.6 Relocating the *Pindh* in Peraktown**

In Sections 3.3 to 3.5, I explained the historical process in the primacy of religious markers in common identification as a group, the interpellation of Sikh identity under the colonial administration and the subsequent institutionalisation of the *Khalsa* as Sikh identity. The diasporic movement to the Federated Malay States traces its origins to this colonial enabled drive for labour migration as the annexed Punjab integrated into the interregional and global networks of empire. This movement produced new collective identities as the migrants came into contact with different landscapes, cultural differences and exclusion from the political and social milieu within host societies. In this section, I consider the impact of migration and the process of forming the Peraktown Sikh community, commencing with a brief overview of Sikh migration to the Straits Settlement and the Federated Malay States, a contextual description of the migratory origins of the Peraktown Sikh community and finally, the origins of the Peraktown *Pindh*. In contrast to official recruitment policies, the first group of Sikhs involved in the security industry arrived in Perak under the aegis of an ex-Indian Army man, Captain Speedy, as the core militia force commissioned by the

Raja of Larut, to control and police the Chinese tin-miners and gangs. This private force received no official sanction from the Government of India or the Straits Settlement Administration (Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Secretary to Government of Bengal et al. 1873 Political-A, October 1873, FO 342-FO 363) but their success at controlling the secret societies within the Chinese tin-mining community began the process of reliance on Punjabi forces in the Federated Malay States. Captain Speedy's forces disbanded following his appointment to a civil position, and without an officer able to communicate in their language, his militia became redundant. His recruits originated from village areas, of varied castes and different social and religious backgrounds and were described as being 'of low caste and bad character' and subsequent recruits were sourced from Punjab, from 'Sikhs of good character who have been discharged from Punjab Regiments' (Metcalf 2008 p.106).



**Figure 3: Soldiers at Aden including a Peraktown Sikh**

One respondent described;

My granduncle was in the First World War. He was an army man. So, he settled in Perak. He became a gymnastic master in the Government English School there because he was very good with all this. So he was a bachelor. So when he was in Perak, after some time he decided to visit India. He went to India and he saw his brother, that's my father's father. I think they were about four or five or six brothers. So, he went to see my brother, and at that time, my grandfather had just lost grandmother. She had passed away and my father had something like nine brothers and two sisters. And my father was only around six years old or so. He was running around. So my granduncle looked at him and told his brother, 'Look, I'd like to take him with me. I'll educate him, I'll look after him.' My grandfather was ever willing. He brought my father to Ipoh and being an army man, he used to drink a lot. He used to drink a lot and after drinking, he used to come back, he used to beat my father. So, my father was having a very miserable life with my granduncle. My grandfather, how he came to Perak was, he was in the army during the First World War. He was in the army and then after the army, his battalion was posted to Malaysia. So, after the war, the British people told them they could settle if they wanted or if they wanted to go back, they could. So, my grandfather decided to have a farm. He was given TOL land, that is, TOL stands for a temporary occupation land, by the government. So he was given enough, two or three acres, to have a big farm with cows and buffaloes. So, I remember my grandfather, that's how my grandfather came in. My mother was born in Perak. My grandmother was in India. She told me that she got married to my grandfather when she was only about thirteen years old. And my grandfather, I think there's something like twelve years difference between them, child marriage sort of thing. There were two of them only, my grandmother and her brother. So, my grandmother got married to grandfather at that age. She was too young. They won't, you know, let her and at the same time my grandfather was in the First World War, you know. So, he was out already. So, after the World War when he decided to settle in Perak, then he called my grandmother. By that time she was already sixteen plus, sort of thing. So that's how she came to Perak. (IKaur 29 September 2012)

Another respondent described an alternative history of migration in her family.

He was born in Perak then he lived here I think till he was a little boy, then his father took him back to India and then after that, I think when his mother died in India, then he and his brother came back, following their father back to Malaysia. So his mother died, in India in childbirth I think. He had two other brothers, after him I believe, so he and his brother were in Malaysia. My grandfather, both my grandparents came with the police. They moved to Malaysia with the police. And my Dada, my dad's father was very tall big-sized man; I remember he lived with us for a little while. But he had had something against girls, didn't like granddaughters, very much. He only liked his grandsons, he was very Indian, very traditional, so, I remember when I used to stand near the door to see him drinking his tea, he would shoo me away. He says, you don't look at me; he only wanted my brother near there, but not me. My mother's parents, my *Nanni*, she died very young, I was about fourteen. My grandfather, died much later, but after some time, there was not much relationship between my mother and her father, because, he had remarried, when my grandmother died, he went to India and he remarried, and my step grandmother was not in favour of the relationship. She was doing all sorts of funny things actually. So we lost touch with my grandfather after some time. (FKaur 26 March 2012)

Moving to the Malay Peninsula, the distance between the remembered home and the new host country seemed insurmountable. The first generation largely sent back remittances to buy more land, increasing their family *izzat*, a term that translates to encompass the Punjabi definitions of 'honour,' in their village. Land cultivation continued, with members of the kinship group who remained in Punjab managing the day-to-day tasks of farming. The money remitted home provided for the increase in landholdings, new technologies and advances in seed types and crop production as well as improvements to the family home, generally a transformation from mud-walled residence to brick buildings. Many Peraktown Sikhs retained some links with their villages or origin through the chain of remittances and in later generations, through social visits. The increase in landholdings and consequently, family *izzat* meant that 'foreign' Sikhs gained popularity as suitable

marriage partners. Travel in the first generation remained restricted to biannual leave or special leave for marriages and as the British government provided marriage allowances, many returned to Punjab to get married, bringing their wives back to Perak with them. As the soldiers or police returned home on leave, they shared information regarding opportunities available in the Malay Peninsula thereby beginning the influx of free migration. By the end of the nineteenth century, the British administrators found sufficient numbers of locally based Sikhs for recruitment to the police and military. Due to the stringent criteria, many Sikhs did not qualify and chose instead to enter other occupations such as the transport industry, as private security, dairy farmers and moneylenders (Sandhu 1970).

The first person to come to Peraktown was my great grandfather. He came to settle down in Peraktown around 1897. And then he bought an estate in Kati state, he stayed there and then he shifted over to Peraktown. He bought a house in Peraktown in the area that time known as MS Kampong after my grandfather. My great grandfather bought that house in the year 1904 and then the whole generation has been staying there till today. My great grandfather came to Malaysia not because he wanted to work and earn money. He came to Malaysia because his children in India after about four, five years, they used to pass away, they did not survive. So, some astrologer told him that he should go overseas. He should not stay; I mean his children in India would not survive. So, that was why he came to Malaysia. He came with a cousin of his, J Singh. Anyhow, he settled down in Peraktown and then he had his son who was four years old when he came from India and a daughter by the name of MSSKaur. They were the only two who survived there. My grandfather's name was MSGFSingh. So, he was educated in Malaysia and he bought plantations in Peraktown. They had an estate on Kati side, quite a number. At that time to have an estate was quite an achievement. (MSingh 15 March 2012)

Describing a slightly different experience, one respondent explained his family origins.

I'm the youngest in the family of ten. I've six brothers and the three sisters. I'm from Peraktown and as far as I can remember my grandfather brought his two sons, that is my dad; L Singh and

his brother, over to Malaysia around 1910 or so. Initially, they were involved in cattle farming and then subsequently my grandfather and my dad got involved in providing transportation facilities for road construction works that were being undertaken in Perak. From the information that my mom gave, he came through Penang and through his extended family friends subsequently he came up to Ipoh and from Ipoh that's where my parents got married. They later moved on to Sungai Siput. My mom is from Gopeng. In 1946, my dad was kidnapped by communists and that was the last we heard about him. From what we know, he was killed by the communists because my dad could identify some of the people who were involved. After that incident, my whole family moved to Peraktown to be near my mother's family. (OSingh 19 April 2012)

The migration experiences sometimes involved chain migration, with family members suggesting the move. One respondent described his family arrival, highlighting his family origins in small business outside the transportation sector.

My dad arrived here I think somewhere around the 1920s. In those days, people got married very young, so he got married and came alone and sort of scouted around, stayed for some time and then went back and brought my mother. So, he actually stayed before we settled down in Peraktown at the house. He moved around. He was in Kuala Lumpur, he was in Kota Bharu, he even went to Triang, Pahang and maybe Teluk Intan also. He was stitching clothes as a tailor, which is how he happened to be in Kota Bharu and Triang as those days the railway line was being laid. There are no uniforms for workers, so he used to go there and cut the cloth, stitch for them in a standard design, just a shirt and short pants. And he sold it to them. You see that's how he sort of started off. Then later he went down to Peraktown and initially he set up business near the polo field. He set up and he also put up a mill for making flour. So, that continued for some time. Just near the temple there he stayed in some houses and around 1936 or '37 or something like that, I think the house that we stayed in was built. (RSingh 25 March 2012)

While many in the first generation returned to Punjab on leave, they made the decision to settle on in the Federated Malay States following service rather than returning to their places of origin (Metcalf 2008 p.219). The few that returned to their home villages to retire left behind their children, already enmeshed within the British administration as the

Sikhs chose to invest in English education for socio-economic advancement (Dusenbery 2008 p.271).

My grandfather was with the Bengal Cavalry. He was already married when he left India, so the first child was born in India, the eldest daughter. The eldest daughter never came to Malaya. He left his daughter there with his parents and he came with his wife and of course that girl, none of us ever saw but her elder son, my grandfather brought him to Malaya and he educated him here and got him to start to work on the land. Let me see if I can find my grandmother and show you a typical matriarch, who controlled the whole family. I believe it is the mother that moulds the child, not the father. My uncles used to tell me, you know, if the child turns out to be good, it's because of all the hard work put in by the mother. She spends most time and therefore she can mould him the way things, what is good and what is right and what is wrong. And I think, it applied to my family. My mother was a very strong driving force with education on the other side we had our cousins all going to Australia, and we had community. The community was so education conscious and those days everyone, the moment somebody's son is going out, they have prayers in the temple, asking God for his blessing, let he be successful in his endeavours to finish the degree. You can see the whole thinking of the community then. Maybe then, I think that's what differs, the people who settled in this part of the world. In Peraktown they were so focused trying to get the next generation to move the next level up. (TSingh 7 March 2012)

By the time the Sikhs settled in Peraktown, the majority of the community comprised either second or third generation in Perak with little or no direct ties with Punjabi homeland. In contrast to other Sikh migrants on the Malay States as described by Arunajeet Kaur (1974) and Sandhu (Sandhu 1969, Sandhu 1970), this community chose to settle rather than return to the homeland. The majority of the Sikh men of the community worked within the British civil service, as teachers at the local school, hospital assistants and land clerks. The other Peraktown Sikh migrants were predominantly self-employed. By the early twentieth century, the civil service for the Federated Malay States was fully integrated and consequently, civil servants could receive job postings to different locations. In addition, the school system in Peraktown ended after the Senior Cambridge examinations. The

community knew that settlement in Peraktown would not be permanent, understanding the value in continued mobility for long-term socio-economic benefit. The dominant power, the British, decided on the physical location for them through work postings in the civil service or for further study. This understanding follows on from the original reasons for migration. The history of colonial migration does not rest solely with the British preference for recruitment from Punjab but involved the agency of the Sikhs themselves, in choosing to move in pursuit of higher and more regular pay to better family position. The land and landscape, both physical and emotional of a home lost through the process of migration represented a key component in the common identity formation and sense of belonging for the Peraktown Sikhs. Charles Taylor described this as:

The ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these images. (1992 p.106)

As discussed in previous sections, the recruitment policy for police and military favoured the *Jat, Khalsa* Sikh identity, however regional, caste and village relationships remained relevant. The notion of the *Pindh* or village incorporated these relationships with the landscape and social structure in the construction of Sikh/Punjabi identification, with positions within this framework defined in terms of ownership or working of land, which in turn denoted caste-relationships. The physical location of the *Pindh* in the geography of the five rivers delineated their regional affiliations and identity as a *Malwa, Majha* or *Doaba* and their kinship and other social relationships. The process of migration severed this rural nostalgia (Williams 1973 p.269) of attachment and identification with the physical spaces of their ancestral homeland and the meanings it imbued.

I feel, whenever I go to India, I feel foreign because I've spent most of my life here. I've got relatives there who I have not visited but I feel I'm more Malaysian than anything else because my father who's here even as a kid. He grew up. My grandfather came through two World Wars, lived, and I grew up here, I was educated here, and you find the Indian people also don't accept you that easily. You know, they sort of view you as a foreigner (NSingh, 12 April 2012).

To move with the world my father always used to say we have to move with the world. In fact, he once uttered to me, it doesn't matter what you eat. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. My father, he's from India, he said, 'When you're in a foreign country, do what the foreigners are doing. You cannot be sticking to reminiscences in India' (USingh, 11 April 2012)

The links had started to break off, just like I mentioned to you earlier, my grandfather did not build property in India because he must have realized that this crowd of kids are not going to go back to India to live because, and environment in India is so different and they came across, they were already working in the civil service. Two of my uncles were working in civil service, my father was in the Health Ministry so it is highly unlikely that they would go back to India (TSingh, 12 March 2012).

The Sikhs of Peraktown ameliorated this loss by forming new linkages and relationships with land, a recreation of place and space in the course of settlement in the new host country. Generations removed from this almost sacred relationship, the Peraktown Sikhs echo this bucolic nostalgia in their description and identification of Peraktown as their hometown in an attempt to reconnect with 'a romantic attachment to a way of life in which the people are merely instrumental' (Williams 1973 p.203). The Peraktown Sikhs do not specifically use this term to explain the relationship, but as GKaur stated, 'it's our old connection. Because we grew up in Peraktown together' (GKaur, 21 March 2012). In moving through the geography of Peraktown, the Sikh community transforms these physical spaces into places of meaning, constructed by their own personal histories and experiences. Their everyday practices and use of space transforms the multicultural milieu of Peraktown,

creating a substructure of place. They made a *Pindh* within the physical and social boundaries of Peraktown, in mapping the local geography in terms of community usage. This is demonstrated by the practice of culture and social relationships within the community, in the private and public spaces of their houses, the subsistence farming of their backyards, the *Gurdwara* as the bulwark of traditional meanings and the formation of inter-cultural networks in public spaces. In this section, I describe two examples; the first is the construction of a physical space and the second is the construction of a social hierarchy to illustrate the early process of *Pindh* formation as practiced by the Peraktown Sikh community. Firstly, I explore the transfer of the local *Gurdwara* from the Police Barracks to a public space within the township as the delineation of the Peraktown Sikh community as separate and distinct from the Sikh police posted at the barracks. Secondly, I explain the constitution of social hierarchy and networks of social capital exchange through informal nomination of the *Panchayat*.

### **3.7 Claiming the *Gurdwara***

The word '*Gurdwara*' means literally 'the door of the Guru' and within Sikh communities, both in the diaspora and the homeland, the *Gurdwara* represents a significant place, where the sense of community is fostered; providing an authentic experience of the Sikh religion and the reproduction and transmission of homeland culture and forms of knowledge. In the diasporic context, the *Gurdwara* offers emotional support, a place to stay and the social capital networks to connect and engage with host society for new migrants. In earlier sections, the colonial project is clearly implicated in the process of reifying *Khalsa* orthodoxy as the most prominent aspect of Sikh identity, in regards to recruitment within the military and security forces throughout the British Empire. Consequently, in Perak, the majority of Sikh men maintained the emblems of the *Khalsa* in the hopes of obtaining positions within the State police, the Malay State Guides and other civil

service positions. David Omissi described the enlistment of Sikh recruits to the Indian army, explaining how all recruits were required to accept the *Amrit Shukor* ceremony, committing themselves to upholding the ideals of *Khalsa* orthodoxy. All Sikh military and police units contained a *Granthi*, or priest and the *Guru Granth Sahib* would be transported in the hands of unit heads when on the march (Omissi 1994 p.95). Fixed camps, including the Malay State Guides headquarters in Taiping and the Police Barracks in Peraktown included a building, purpose-built to serve as a *Gurdwara* for the Sikh recruits, with the British policing the continued adherence to outward aspects of the *Khalsa*, regular attendance of *Gurdwara* services and the selection and hire of the *Gyani*. In Section 4.2, I offer a more in-depth discussion on the relationship between the Peraktown Sikhs and the *Gurdwara* space. In this section, I focus on the construction of the first non-British administered *Gurdwara* in the township. Below is an excerpt from a memoir written by one member of the Peraktown *Panchayat*, SS's father.

At this time December 1913, there was only one *Gurdwara* for the police Sikhs and others in the compound of the Police Barracks. The priest was *Gyani* as well as a teacher in *Gurmukhi* for Sikh children. Children from some other towns in Perak were also studying here. I was elected Secretary of the Sikh *Gurdwara*. To improve our finances, the priest used to take the boys out to some other towns for *Kirtan*. About three acres of rubber land was purchased. I therefore formed a society named Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Peraktown and had it registered under the Societies Enactment. The lands were therefore registered in my name as secretary. There was friction between the Police members and others. The *Granthi*, found it intolerable to stay in the police compound and therefore it was decided to rent a house in the same road to which the boys and the *Gurdwara* was shifted, leaving the Police *Gurdwara*. A boarding school teaching *Gurmukhi* after English school hours and primary for young boys was held in the mornings. Elder boys were trained in the *Kirtan* by a *Ragi* trained in India. This school gained prominence particularly in Perak. The removal from the police compound created very tense friction. The Sikh police reported the matter to higher police authorities. As I was secretary of the Sri Guru Singh Sabha in

charge of all the funds and lands, this burden was all on me to answer all the accusations. The President and other members were not much educated. This went on until early 1914. The lands transferred from my name to the President and the Secretary *Khalsa* Diwan Malaysia and the boarding school removed to Taiping. (SSFSingh)

The Peraktown Sikhs chose to wrest control of the *Gurdwara* space, claiming agency in defining their own religious practice, the composition of the *Gurdwara* Committee and the self-managed and funded means of transmitting cultural values onto the next generation. In relocating the *Gurdwara* to a public, non-British controlled space within the township, they asserted their position to maintaining autonomy and the freedom to choose where, how and with whom they share their faith. Unlike many *Gurdwaras* in the diaspora and other parts of the Malay States, the different regional affiliations and caste groups shared the same *Gurdwara* space, participated in the same prayer sessions, cooked, and ate the same food together in the *Langar Hall*. In Kuala Lumpur for example, the early *Gurdwaras* were divided along occupational lines, for example, the Sentul *Gurdwara* catered for Sikhs in employment with the Railways Department. This altered to divisions along regional lines with the Sentul *Gurdwara* becoming predominantly a *Majha* space while the *Tat Khalsa Gurdwara* in Perkins Road was a *Malwa*-run space. In addition, lower caste Sikhs from the *Chamar* caste were not involved in food preparation and temple committees remained *Jat*-dominated. This difference represents one of the significant ways in which the Peraktown Sikh community differs to other Sikh communities in Malaysia. Not all villages in Punjab construct their own *Gurdwaras*, but places of worship are important for diaspora groups (Clarke, Peach et al. 2010). The Peraktown Sikhs demonstrated their need for a place of their own, yet in contrast to Sikh communities elsewhere in the Federated Malay States and the Straits Settlements, constructed a *Gurdwara* space through common agreement, maintaining a place of meaning for all

Sikhs in the community, rather than using it as a method of emphasising difference.

During ceremonies at the Sikh *Gurdwara*, towards the end of the prayer session, the Punjab *Pindh* of origin of family in the congregation was recited. It connected the places of origin, the 'back there' with the reality of living in Peraktown, the 'here'. This *Gurdwara* represented the centre of the Sikh community, and for the Sikhs of Peraktown, it marked the establishment of their own place of worship, a place where they were able to think, pray and eat, amongst members of their own community who shared similar experiences, beliefs and practices. The act of funding and constructing the new *Gurdwara* highlights the community's' desire for active participation and preservation of their own understanding of Sikh tradition, making it the centre of religion and culture within their reconstruction of a *Pindh* of their own. This building remained the centre of authentic Sikh experience in their new home until 1954, when the current *Gurdwara* was built.

### **3.8 The elders who guide and protect**

The Punjabi *Pindh* or village functioned with a clearly defined system of social hierarchies, with caste, sub caste and kinship roles forming the key elements of social organisation. Leadership within each *Pindh* rested with the *Panchayat* or local council, usually comprised of five male elders in the village, selected for their knowledge, social status and influence. In each of the Sikh spaces in Peraktown, one or two families occupied leading roles within the community providing advice and assistance. These men formed a rural court, equivalent to the *Panchayat* of their ancestral homeland.

We used to have, we called it '*Panchayat*', the Sikhs have the '*Panchayat*'. There would be five elders they used to be called. If there was a problem among the Sikhs that the family couldn't solve, two families couldn't solve. People didn't like going to the courts. They would come to this '*Panchayat*' and this '*Panchayat*'

would be considered the educated people but who also knew the religion very well. (CKaur 6 March 2012)

The *Panchayat* members functioned firstly, along regional lines, providing aid to fellow Sikhs originating from the regions of their ancestral villages. The *Majha* looked to an uncle of TSingh, the *Malwa* focused on SSingh's father or my own grandfather and MSingh's family assisted the *Doaba* Sikhs.

There in those days, when our family ran short of money, we'll go to MSingh's house, borrow some money, you know. Go for immediate use and they would do vice versa also when they run short of things they'll come and borrow. Even food, rice, flour, because those days flour had to come from Australia. There were no local flour mills. So, when you're short, you just go and borrow. When you got your flour, you give back. This sort of things were taking place. That's the benefit of being living close together, in those days, help was based on what region you come from. He was a *Doaba*. I don't know whether you know of this okay. So all the *Doaba* would come to him when they got nothing, and he had a lot this *rumah panjang* you call it now. So anybody wants he'll give them a house to stay. If you want a job, okay, you can go to ... go to his estate and work. (USingh 17 April 2012)

In addition, the members of the *Panchayat* possessed different areas of expertise, with my grandfather offering advice and encouragement concerning education, TSingh's uncle provided information and assistance with court and legal matters while MSingh's grandfather offered work opportunities on his plantations.

Somebody wanted to do medicine in Australia, the father said not necessary to go, why you want to go Australia to study and they will go there and talk to Master KKGFSingh who will then call the father and say 'No, things are changing and you should be open minded and perhaps you should consider sending son across. So there, within the society I was told there were this segregation with the, I wouldn't say the elitist-lah, they were not elitist but they were like the leaders of the community or people who you went to seek advice. From that, typically like if people got themselves into a legal bind, those days, they will come and see my uncles because my uncles were well connected with the courts and any issues with government, they will come to see them, we

got this problem, can you speak on our behalf. (TSingh 30 November 2011)

Within the boundaries of the Sikh community, the homes of the *Panchayat* members formed the nucleus in each of the three spaces. The adult members of the Peraktown Sikh community moved regularly across these different boundaries but the children remained centred in their specific areas. The community negotiated their norms and values in accordance with the practices of the perceived community leaders and transported these into their own home spaces. By assigning meaning to the formation and practice of a *Panchayat*, the Peraktown Sikhs demonstrate both a continued need to retain traditional social structures and their continued adaptation within the new context of home. Their choice of councillors represented a mix between members of the community actively engaged with the British administration and those with reputations as good Sikhs with religious knowledge and highly moral characters. The use of the term *Panchayat* wanes in community usage, substituted for references to the community elders, however, the same people are continuously referenced in this role as seen in Section 3.3 and later in Sections 3.11, 3.12 and 4.6. As highlighted earlier in Section 3.4, the Sikh community has an inherited tradition of alignment with power as represented by the British within the colonial state. This recognition of their limited agency in self-definition indicates the continued conflict between the idea of themselves as part of a larger, united community, and instead they chose to create a pocket universe, populated by a continuously transient population, that is irrevocably considered part of their *Pindh*.

### **3.9 Japanese Occupation memories in the liminal generation**

In the previous sections, I described the translocation by the Peraktown Sikh community, of the many differing Punjabi *Pindhs* of origin, to the physical space of Peraktown. The process of translocating the meaning

continues with the liminal generation of this research and the catalytic impact of Japanese Occupation memory and experience in consolidating this category of meaning, and the changes in interpretation and evolution in the nature, norms and behaviours of the Peraktown *Pindh*. As discussed in Chapter 1, the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, from 1941 to 1945 represented an instance of historical change where external events affected the community significantly. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the Japanese Occupation created a moment, both physically and metaphorically, providing the opportunity for the Peraktown Sikh community to amalgamate, becoming a loosely united entity, with common aims and goals as interaction between its members during the occupation, weakened the prioritisation of caste and regional affiliations. Secondly, I show how the Japanese Occupation accelerated changes for the role and place of women within the community, beyond the strict confines of traditional domesticity. Finally, in examining the period of the Japanese Occupation, I expected to find potential vulnerability in the community due to their embedded position within the British colonial administration. Instead, the Japanese Occupation experience synergised change and adaptability, as the Peraktown Sikh community leveraged social and cultural capital resources to negotiate challenges posed by the departure of the British and the harsh and divisive Japanese administration. The narratives in this chapter illustrate the sense of disruption for the informants as life trajectories temporarily paused, with the cessation of schooling for the younger generation excepting lessons at the *Gurdwaras* and the lack of stable jobs within the Japanese administration for the older generation. Before the war, a large number of the men in the community worked within the colonial civil service and lived in government quarters. The Japanese administration attempted to retain their employment, but required them to temporarily relocate for language training and indoctrination. Women, in this period, rarely worked outside of the family home, remaining restricted to domestic chores, child rearing and

prayer. Most families shared homes with members of their extended family and the occupation compounded this further, with moves to the parental or grandparental home, sharing space with parents, grandparents, siblings, uncles, aunts and cousins. The occupation years also commenced a forced return to farming and physicality in relation to their land, echoing their origins from the rural landowners and workers of the Punjabi countryside. The primary focus for the Peraktown Sikh community was communal survival and they worked together in kinship groups and communities to ensure this, leveraging all their social and familial connections. The experiences during this period shaped perception and understanding, assigning new meaning to the notion of Peraktown as a *Pindh*. This category of meaning was transmitted to the members of the liminal generation, either directly, for members who were old enough to remember the experiences or through the sharing of stories and memories, diffused to the younger members of the group. The end of the Japanese Occupation signified a return to normalcy and a restoration of the way things should be for the Peraktown Sikhs. It marked the beginning of the transformation to the category of meaning, the Peraktown *Pindh*, previously defined by the simple fact of geography and shared cultural beliefs. The Japanese Occupation catalysed an evolution, with the greater focus assigned to the formation and maintenance of relationships and social bonding, the transmission of common norms and values, and through the physical movements of the community, the *Pindh* eventually became embodied in the liminal generation, their memories, stories and as Williams described, a structure of feeling.

### **3.10 The Japanese Occupation of Malaya in historical context**

The Japanese Occupation of Malaya commenced in Kota Bahru on 8 December 1941. The Japanese forces swiftly penetrated the interior and wrested possession of the territory with the official surrender of British

forces in Singapore on 15 February 1942. The Japanese Military Administration controlled the previously British territories of the Federated Malay States and the Straits Settlements and the Japanese regime attempted to cast themselves as the deliverers of freedom for the Malayan people from the yoke of British rule, styling themselves in propaganda material as liberators. Some viewed the Japanese as a means of furthering nationalist visions for Malaya and India initially but the reality of Japanese oppression, economic hardship and military brutality towards the populace, despite their rhetoric of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, soon generated resentment, through the exploitation of raw materials, the labour force and the population at large. As Said commented, the Occupation represented a period where 'the geographical space of the Orient was penetrated, worked over, taken hold of' (Said 1994 p.148). The Japanese intended to use Malaya as a source of raw materials for the war effort and as a military outpost in the region and the rhetoric of early independence for the Malayan people was merely a propagandist fiction to further these aims (Cooper 2001, Cheah 2012). The regime under the Japanese administration pursued a distinctly differential policy towards the different ethnic groups, the Malay, the Chinese and the Indian, treating each group separately. Initially, this policy stance generated the perception of preferential and positive treatment for the Indians and Malays while the Chinese, in contrast, received harsh treatment in reprisal for their pre-war anti-Japanese sentiments and support for the Chinese resistance movement in China (Gullick 1964, Harper 1998, Kratoska 1998).

I present in brief a summary of current literature on the Japanese Occupation, describing the varying interpretations of the effect of the war on the colonial rule in general or the experiences of the Malay, Chinese, Indian and Other communities, as they are described within the Malaysian census classifications. The literature on the Occupation displays a number of gaps I would like to highlight, locating the lived

experience of the Peraktown Sikhs within the context described by the literature. First, there is the absence of discussion regarding the experience of subcommunal groups within the ethnic or racial descriptor of 'Indian'. The Indian population as mentioned in earlier chapters is not heterogeneous and the different communities possessed varying cultural, religious and class identifications so reactions to the Japanese Occupation differed. Secondly, the literature discusses the three ethnic groups commonly used in discussions of Malaya but fails to include the interactions excepting for communal violence arising from reprisals against collaborators. Finally, the treatment in regards to the Indian community suggests that the majority of the community supported the Indian National Army from the start of the Occupation. Historical reconstruction is problematic due to the large-scale destruction of local records during the Occupation. Consequently, much of the research on this period in history in Malaya relies on oral histories and archival materials. Scholars like Akashi Yoji and Paul H. Kratoska rely heavily on archival sources from around the world, anecdotal and oral histories to present quite comprehensive accounts of the historical period. However, sources are limited, and the focus remains on voices of the allied forces, the dominant racial categories of Malay, Chinese and Indian and the minimally represented Japanese voice. Alternative historical perspectives such as that of this minority Sikh population provide hitherto hidden lived experiences. Furthermore, the Malaysian government attitude is to downplay the significance of the period and public commemoration is largely absent. New research on the Japanese Occupation addresses the discourse of politics of memory and violence, with scholars such as Diana Wong (2001) addressing the general lack of official reference to the period in Malaya and Singapore, highlighting the recent use of the occupation memory as a nation building exercise in Singapore, in contrast to a continued absence in Malaysia. Wong mentions that the period remained a critical memory in personal and family recollections and notes that the politics of memory of the

Japanese colonial administration appears to be singularly ineffective. Hardly any traces of the Japanese Occupation can be detected in post-war Malayan public memory or, until very recently, on that of the city-state island of Singapore. The war has not been memorialised; indeed, it would seem that its memory has been deliberately silenced. In part, this is attributable to the impetus for greater economic ties with Japan since the 1950s and a need to avoid raking up memories of inter-ethnic tensions to maintain the tenuous balance between the different races. The narratives on nationalism during this period remain the focus in Malaysia, particularly under the Malaysian Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed with his emphasis on the 'Look East Policy', advocating greater engagement with Japan as both an economic model to emulate and a key foreign market for Malaysian goods. (Latif 2007 p.95).

The literature on the Japanese Occupation varies on the ascription of impact on the social, economic and political discourse in Malaya. To briefly outline, J. M. Gullick (1964), T. N. Harper (1998) and R. O. Winstedt (1943) argue that while the Occupation caused suffering and hardship for the populace and the collapse of the Malayan economy, nationalist tendencies existed before the outbreak of war. Harper and Malcolm Caldwell (2009) agree that the Japanese Occupation was a watershed moment in the history of Malaya as it provided the tools for later mobilisation of nationalist movements. They discussed the militarisation of local populations, access to weaponry from the Japanese and the British forces and the understanding of appropriate style and language in anti-Western propaganda. These developments together with the realisation that the British were fallible contributed to the transformation of the nationalist movements from mere rhetoric to active engagement towards independence. Kratoska writes, 'where the occupation was once viewed as a starting point for nationalistic activity, the roots of nationalism are now traced to local initiatives before and

after the war and the Japanese are now blamed for instigating racial antagonisms' (1998 p.361). Willard H. Elsbree (1953), Akashi and Yoshimura (2008) together with Cheah Boon Keng (2012) proposed that the Occupation generated substantial disruption and social change in Malaya. Elsbree argues that the Occupation 'with the overthrow of the old colonial system and the disruption of life occasioned by the war, were catalytic agents in the dissolution of the old order; they were paving the way for the construction of the modern state' (1953 p.167). Harper, Gullick and Winstedt mentioned the economic collapse of the Malayan economy and attribute this to the closure of mining efforts due to war destruction and the lack of export markets for rubber, and reiterate the brutal social conditions experienced by the local population. Food shortages and disease contributed further to the situation. The initiative of the Peraktown Sikh families during the war included making children drink palm oil for vitamins, they kept their own cows for a steady supply of milk and they grew their own vegetables. None of my informants conveyed impressions of malnourishment or disease.

Kratoska devoted much of his book to the Japanese attempts at colonising practices in the administrative, legal and education systems, the racial policies followed and the economic exploitation and disruption of what was a thriving economy. Kratoska argued that the occupation period was a difficult and grim episode in history for the people of Malaya, but that while it provided some catalyst towards post-war social, economic and political changes, it was less relevant in shaping modern Malaya when contrasted to the Emergency years. In his view, the effects of the Japanese Occupation produced no long-lasting changes to the social, economic and political scenario in the Malay Peninsula (Kratoska 1998). In discussion of collaboration, the literature is limited. Akashi, Yoshimura and Cheah approached the Japanese Occupation relationship with the Malay leaders from opposite ends.

Akashi and Yoshimura (2008) saw the relationship between Malay collaborators and the Japanese as a positive means for their escalated nationalist feeling. They discuss the early relations between the Kesatuan Melayu Muda and the subsequent formation of the KRIS movement as the kindling of the Malay patriotism and sense of unity (Akashi and Yoshimura 2008 pp. 16-18). Conversely, Cheah saw collaboration as a negative and the reason for increased hostility between the Chinese and the Malays that manifested in open reprisals and increased inter-ethnic tension on Japanese surrender (2012). The Indian experience is little discussed although Cheah marks the lack of major hostility despite Indian National Army membership and the Sikh policemen who worked for the Japanese and were 'efficiently ruthless and loyal to the Japanese authorities' (Cheah 2012 p.49). The narratives of the occupation years mention some camaraderie between the different ethnic groups in Peraktown in efforts to ensure sufficient food supplies or to protect family members, rather than as a site of conflict.

Prior to the Occupation years, the Sikh nationalist movements little affected the population in the Malay States, as their position within the British administration offered job security and privilege. The only events of any nationalist sentiment concerned the Komagata Maru incident in 1914 and the Ghadr Mutiny in 1915, resulting in the eventual disbandment of the Malay State Guides post-World War I, following the unit's participation in the Ghadr Party movement in Singapore and their lacklustre participation in the war effort at Aden, due to illness. With little reason to alter the status quo, the Sikhs of Peraktown remained apolitical excepting SSingh and his father, who possessed sufficient economic resources in the pre-occupation years to travel back to Punjab regularly, allowing a continued exchange of ideas. SSingh's father participated in the Ghadr movement marches, and actively engaged

with the nationalist rhetoric of Subash Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army (INA), transmitting this attitude to his eldest son.

Because I had the same feeling as my father, we all were very excited. See it is the propaganda at work. India Mother India Mother India. In Malaya we're just Malaya, nobody at all. There was no citizenship and no nothing. Of course there were some people, Tamils who were hoping to get in and then get to Burma front and *cabut* [flee] Same way with Indian army fellows who joined in. Quite a lot of them wanted to do that. Get into the Indian National Army, get to the front, desert. But we are different; we were not forced, of course. (SSingh 16 December 2011)

The propaganda released in Malaya following Bose's arrival targeted the Sikhs with depictions of Sikh soldiers used as cannon fodder for the British war effort reflecting the reality of Sikh and native regiments at the front in offensive action, with British or other White units in the rear. One pamphlet read, 'Remember Punjab event of 1919? We Indians were forbidden from walking on the sidewalks of our own motherland. The British did this to us.' (Friedman). The focus of propaganda remained the Indian Army units, however, rather than local-born Sikh populations. Many who joined the INA were fresh recruits from India, who were largely untried in combat and had no fixed ties to Malaya (Roy 2009). Additionally as described by one soldier, 'The Indian troops were told to obey the orders of the Japanese in the same way as they had been obeying the orders of the British. The Indians were treated as mere cattle and quite naturally felt deserted by the British for whom they had shed their blood so freely' (Khan). In contrast, the Peraktown community, excepting SSingh and his father elected to remain allied to British colonial rule, prioritising the English language and education system and demonstrating little interaction with nationalist movements beyond the period of the Japanese Occupation. The Peraktown Sikhs make no mention of members working directly for the Japanese or mistreating fellow Sikhs or people of other ethnicities, however, they highlight the role of the community elders or the

*Panchayat* in engaging sufficiently with the Japanese administration in order to ensure the well-being and security of the community as a whole. In conversations, a number of informants mentioned their families joined the Indian Independence League more to avoid persecution by Japanese forces than in support of an independent India. The bonding within the community resulted in greater investment towards moving forward, in Peraktown or beyond, as members of the community moved, for work or educational opportunities. The waves of Sikh migration to Malaysia created a population quite different in outlook and affiliations, and while migrants of latter years held strong views on Sikh nationalism, the Peraktown Sikhs lived wholly in the Peraktown *Pindh*, potentially contributing to their ambivalent position towards the Japanese. The return of the British meant jobs for the Sikhs of Peraktown and they regained their pre-war positions in the schools and hospitals, returning to their homes and pre-war modes of living.

The literature on the occupation years discusses Indians as a heterogeneous group, with little mention of subcommunal ethnicities, privileging the narratives of the Indian National Army membership and political interest in the future of an independent India. Sinnapah Asaratnam (1979) highlights the pre-occupation repatriation of middle class Indians noting that despite the small numbers, Malays and Chinese perceived the Indian community as lacking loyalty. The discussion on repatriation does not specify the subcommunal group although Asaratnam later refers to the Chettiars, a Tamil ethnic community as the middle class (1979 p.103). The focus of the section on the Occupation depicts a population heavily invested in the nationalistic politics of India and membership and involvement with the INA. Kratoska includes a section on the Indian experience during the Occupation and while he mentions the domination of the Indian National Army leadership by North Indians, none of the interview subjects referenced is Sikh (1998 p.105). Additionally, his focus is the nationalist

movement for Indian independence and little is discussed of Indian local born experiences during the period. Usha Mahajani (1960) describes the Japanese Occupation as a pivotal moment in Malaysian history for the Indian population. Like Asaratnam, she attributes later political participation and labour movements to the experiences during this period. Mahajani accentuates the pre-war interest in political activity and Independence for India due to emotional, economical and social ties to the homeland, further fostered by visits from Indian political figures like Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri (1960 pp. 125-127). Before the Occupation, the research on the local Indian population depicts them as retaining strong bonds and a sense of belonging to India despite generations of residence in the Malay Peninsula. The Japanese Occupation reconfigured the trajectory of this nationalist fervour towards activities in Malaya. Sandhu too briefly mentions the Japanese Occupation as a catalyst for the shift from India and her politics to local political participation. P. Ramasamy describes the hardships and suffering of the Indian proletariat as a continuation of lived experiences of maltreatment and exploitation. He forefronts change in the race of the exploiter, whereby the middle class Indian, defined as 'the Malayalees and Ceylonese and being former members of the British colonial bureaucracy' substituted for British plantation owners and managers (2000 p.92). Additionally, he mentions the forced recruitment of Indian labour for the Death Railway project and the participation in membership of the INA as a means of protection from the Japanese. Ramasamy concludes that the end of the Occupation resulted in a reorientation of Indian aspirations towards settling permanently in Malaya and the alignment of their political aspirations with the labour movements and local political parties. He adds that the participation in the INA added to the Indian proletariat's sense of dignity and self-respect thereby granting them agency in their own lives and a stake in upgrading their status through left-wing political movements (Ramasamy 2000 pp. 92-104). In contrast, the Peraktown

Sikhs highlighted membership to the INA as a matter of convenience and safety rather than for nationalist intentions as mentioned in Kratoska's summation (1998 pp. 103-104). While Ramasamy's work exposes the conditions experienced by this group, I would argue that the preponderance of literature covering the Tamil indentured labour population dominates the Indian discourse in social, economic and political fields. Kaur addresses the Sikh experience, yet limits it to the interpellation of their identity as loyal, auxiliary forces to the British or post-war, as traitors, unintelligent and weak, in archival sources (2011 pp. 217-218). The Peraktown community originated mainly from police or military migration. The second generation of migrants demonstrated a change in employment patterns and while the community continued its entrenchment within the British colonial machinery, it shifted to civil service functions as teachers or clerks instead of auxiliary forces. They interacted with the British at work, selectively adopting patterns of dress, social mores and the English language, demonstrating adeptness in maintaining fluid, hybrid identities, successfully transiting to Japanese colonial rule regardless of their position under the British. Consequently, the Sikh community is unrepresented, almost totally absent from the history and their voices rendered mute except where, like the Rani of Sirmur, the Sikh voice 'emerges only when she is needed in the space of imperial production' (Spivak 1985 p.270).

The Peraktown Sikhs demonstrated a clear affiliation to their lives here, and the Occupation, represents a symbol for the liminal generation, as part of the continued settlement process, but with a difference. Unlike traditional views on migration and ideas of putting down roots, I argue that the construction of the Peraktown *Pindh* as a category of meaning is more rhizomatic, like grass roots, linking each member to each other through a multiplicity of connective nodes, and the impact of the Japanese Occupation provided the context and the initial shared memory in this process. In order to demonstrate this, I highlight three

key elements of Japanese Occupation impact on the community, focusing specifically on the subject group. Firstly, I discuss the construction of memory surrounding the banding together of resources and the sharing of space, regardless of caste, occupation or regional affiliations. Secondly, I look at the evolving role of women to include further education and participation in the workforce and finally, I discuss the limited engagement with the new colonial power in the context of this community's practice of aligning with the dominant power.

What I know of the Japanese Occupation are fragments, pieced together from the stories of my childhood. My grandmother told me her histories after she finished her morning prayers, moving around her room, carefully wrapping up and putting away her prayer book and her veil. My grandfather shared his recollections as we sat on his *manja* in the evenings, eating digestive biscuits out of his special tin. I pieced together reminiscences between my father and his brothers, voices and memories lubricated with whiskey, on nights before family weddings and all the places my father would point out as we drove past them, travelling between Kuala Lumpur and Penang to visit my grandparents. My father was born in May 1941, and yet his stories included vignettes of events before he would be old enough to remember, such as living together on SSFSingh's oil palm estate, swimming in irrigation ditches and drinking palm oil for vitamins. He told me how his mother oiled him with coconut oil and left him in the sun to tan as he was too fair, so the Japanese would not take him and kill him, assuming he was a British baby. When I began the interview process, regardless of age during the occupation period, the Peraktown Sikhs referenced sharing living space and communal cooking, as they waited for the Japanese to pass through the town. This experience, for many, is passed down from older siblings, friends or members of the older generation. It is not their memory, but it lays over their lives and this changes them, giving them

something they share, a ghost of a memory, a hand-me-down, used to bond closer to each other and through this, a *Pindh* is constructed. My fragments are of lives replete with experience, both good and bad; of people helping each other, of communal living on an estate, of running to see Japanese planes overhead, of hiding Chinese friends' daughters in the roof space of the house and of learning Japanese. There were the memories of beatings for not making a correct bow, stolen food, of troops whipping friends and of people dying. Bitter or sweet, they all communicated the lived experience of community resilience in the face of adversity. They are not my memories either, but because I hold them, I too have a place in this narrative.

### **3.11 Remembering as the transmission of community memory**

The multiplicity of voices on the Japanese Occupation period from the Peraktown Sikh community offer varied and diversified perspectives of the period, yet they share common discursive threads. The first common narrative describes the relocation of the entire community to avoid confrontation between advancing Japanese soldiers and the defending British forces during the initial stages of the invasion. The memory of this relocation is part of the Peraktown *Pindh* canon, as it represents common history, a moral of the value of banding together and as a reaffirmation of belonging, both for the subjects who lived through the experience but also through the retelling and transmission to younger members of the community. The older respondents provided comprehensive details of the early stage of the Occupation, when the community elders decided, on receiving warning from a social contact, the local photography shop owner, to relocate to the oil palm estate of SSingh's family and later to the MSingh Kampong. As Kratoska mentions, many of these Japanese photographers were in fact, intelligence officers for the Japanese army (Kratoska 1998 p.29).



**Figure 4: MSFSingh outside his home with Suzuki on left**

We had a feeling that the war was coming. Because one of my father's best friend was Suzuki, a Japanese photographer. He had been there for years. And he was not only a photographer but he was a very good hunter. So, he used to go out hunting. There's a local people up towards north Perak. That is Peraktown, Kati, up to Gerik and to the Thai border. Actually, he was an intelligence officer of the Japanese army. All the trips he was making to the jungle was to survey land properly. Which track, which way, so that road from Gerik north Perak, to Peraktown and that area along the side of the main road he had surveyed it very nicely and when the Japanese came, they came by that road. When we realised that war was coming the Sikhs got together, we decided to evacuate, because we were right on the highway and the train also passing next door. If there was a fight, this would be reduced to ashes. So, my father suggested our estate, which was on a side road eight miles from town. That we had young rubber trees, where we could put up sheds so we could move there and there's plenty of fresh water, so there's no problem. The MSingh Kampong people didn't want to but in the end, they also changed their minds and came over there. My father got the Malay fellows to put up long sheds with open sides and they cleared out the undergrowth from below. And then the Sikhs moved in, a few days before, bringing their beds and charpoys, all the food they

required and they were given allotted places. And it was just in time. (SSingh 22 November 2011)

This narrative below echoed the experience.

We were with KKGFSingh, that's my brother-in-law and my sister KKGMKaur, and he came home hurriedly telling us to get ready, we all have to leave the house. There was this rich man, SSFSingh, who had a very large estate. The Sikhs at that time in Peraktown were not so very many but they had the cooperation, as far as I can remember because every Sikh of Peraktown followed SSFSingh and it was some miles out of Peraktown town, and I think the place was called SSEstate. There was a whole area of the squatter kind of houses where the workers of this estate used to live and I suppose he must have got them all evacuated. I don't know about that but when we got into the place they had left the places and we all went and stayed there and all the other Sikhs were also there. (BKaur 7 December 2011)

This episode evolved to become a mythic period in Peraktown *Pindh* history, as the time frame referred to remained unspecified and varied depending on the individual narrating, from a few weeks to many months. However, the key elements of togetherness and communal spirit appear in each instance of narration, including the narratives derived from handed down knowledge of the events.

When I was born, there was quite a large Sikh community for a small town. And quite a number of Sikh boys were born in that particular year, few months up and down lah. So immediately after my birth, the Japanese invaded and the entire community had to move to a rural rubber land along a river, which belongs to SSFSingh. You just mention the name. There they cleared about 10 acres and all of us lived in a community. Immediately after the World War II, people didn't go back to their houses. A few may have gone but the majority came to our kampong, MSingh Kampong including your grandfather and lived in the kampong for couple of months. That's one big community with families so there the relationship really developed very close. (USingh 11 April 2012)

Most of the families in Peraktown came and stayed at our house, about 70-80 people, and they used to cook together, stay together, do everything together like brothers and sisters, and

help each other. I met people now they've become doctors, specialists, all of them, they told me they stayed in our house for three months. So people never thought it would be inconvenient if they were trying to help the community together. So they all stayed together during those times. These things are told by them who stayed here. Some of them even brought their young daughters and they left in our house, and they would be protected because of grandfather. (MSingh 7 February 2012)

The key points highlighted in these narratives are the close and familiar relationships within the community, the idea of the Sikhs as a cohesive unit and the role of the elders in community decision making. The evacuation to SSEstate included all members of the community, and when speaking of the Japanese Occupation years, the Peraktown Sikhs rarely referred to caste distinctions or the *Majha/Malwa* divide that occurred during early years of settlement. Instead, the instances of remembering form the collective construction of a community rooted in both a real and an imagined past, that formed the basis for their future.

In Monica Ali's novel, *Brick Lane*, two characters are discussing the notion of India as home. The dialogue starts with the first character, 'this is another disease that affects us,' said the doctor. 'I call it Going Home Syndrome. Do you know what that means?' In reply, the second character answers, 'They don't ever really leave home. Their bodies are here, but their hearts are back there. And anyways, look how they live: just recreating the villages here.' (2003 p.24). The Japanese Occupation forced a disruption of the networks of contact between Punjab and Peraktown, creating a distinct break between 'back there' and 'here'. This disruption created what Williams described as 'a border defined, a border crossed. It felt like a parting, whatever might actually follow' (Williams 2006 p.317). The break of physical contact and exchange of ideas between Punjab and their new place of settlement provided a space in which the Peraktown Sikhs could redefine their beliefs, norms and values without the continued influence of the rural and religious traditions of their past. In contrast to the social structure and practice

of a village or *Pindh* in Punjab, and other sites of diasporic Sikh populations, where caste and occupation define and distinguish all social relationships (Bhachu, 1985; Dhillon, 1994; Drury, 1991; Nesbitt, 1997), the Japanese Occupation changed this reliance on hierarchical positions and its limits on interaction amongst Peraktown Sikhs. The alterations to community behaviours and practice allowed for a new foundation of identity and definition of being Sikh, being in Peraktown and belonging. The Peraktown Sikhs recreated the *Pindh* in the physical landscape and emotional attachment to the space of Peraktown. The Japanese Occupation represented a birth moment of memory for the liminal generation, in the shape of the changes to the community, the evolution from physical *Pindh* altered, shifting towards the eventual realisation of the *Pindh* of the mind. The category of meaning extended, referring not merely to physical space but embodied in the members of the community, by the stories they tell and the memories they hold.

### **3.12 Letting the women out of the kitchen**

Equality for women is a key tenet in the Sikh faith; however, it is largely a practice in scripture and not in experience. The Peraktown Sikhs demonstrated recognition of the difference in gender roles and the marked division between the world of men and women. The spaces claimed and held by men included the home, the *Gurdwara*, their workplaces, public locations within Peraktown and wherever they travelled. Women, in contrast, were constrained to the domesticity of the kitchen, the daily ritual of reciting prayers and child rearing before the Japanese Occupation. The issue in the Sikh communities is the identification of women as good Sikhs where they fulfil the roles of good daughter, good wife and good mother and the maintaining of family *izzat* through their success in embodying this ideal. Identity of gender in the Sikh community is 'linked to sexuality, honour, chastity; family, community and country must agree on both their acceptability and legitimacy, and their membership within the fold' (Mooney 2011 p.59).

Education for women, even now in Punjab, is a means of contracting a good marriage and fulfilling the notion of the domesticated ideal. Education levels tended to be limited to literacy in Punjabi and the ability to read the Sikh holy book. EKaur described her mother as illiterate before marriage but related how her father taught her mother to read and write. Her grandmother's bedtime stories emphasised this dichotomy between scripture and practice through the bedtime stories she shared.

Our grandmother was an educated lady. She would tell us stories from our history. She would read stories of all the big heroes and our famous people, all the ladies, how brave they were. (EKaur 24 November 2011)

The Japanese Occupation acted as a catalyst in accelerating a change in perception towards the role and abilities of the women in the Peraktown Sikh community. These shared memories describe the first notion of independent, educated and working women as an evolution in habitus of the Peraktown *Pindh*, mainly within the liminal generation. Following the exodus to SSFSingh's rubber estate, the families returned to their homes in Peraktown, and for most of the men, their jobs.

Actually my father came back to hospital earlier because he started going back to hospital, patients were there. How could they go away, so as soon as this happened, my father came back, when he came back he saw the Japanese there, the Japanese doctors were there and they were very happy that he is there, 'you come back, we will look after you, bring back your family'. (CKaur 4 December 2011)

Civil servants retained their positions but were required to attend compulsory language training classes and this included the teachers, hospital assistants and clerks. The women adapted to this situation, taking on new roles and responsibilities.

We had a wonderful time. And when you look back, we had a hard time but good times, because we were family. We were all girls in our family. We had four girls and no boy. Only my cousin was staying with us, and my father and my cousin are the only two

males in the family when we were there. And then my brother came along. When the war was just starting, just a few months before your dad's birthday. He was just around there. They are the same age, both of them. And, he was a baby right through the difficult times. So, we girls had to take over all the work, household chores, outside. That's why we were grazing cows, and milking the cows, and bringing the cows back. And whereas because we didn't have the males, the older ones who were fifteen, sixteen, they were recruited by the Indian National Army those days, so my cousin and a few of the older boys all joined, they were taken away by these people to join the Indian National Army. That means we still had only our girls in the house and my father was sent off for training to Ipoh for the Japanese, to become a teacher. Those who were teachers had to go back to teaching. They didn't give them an option. You go back to teaching. Those who were doctors had to go back to the hospital. So, in that way, that is a responsibility also all on us. (EKaur 24 November 2011)

The INA recruitment process removed all able-bodied men from the community and this meant that all the families, not just the civil servants, made adjustments. This attitude of resilience instilled a sense of independence and self-sufficiency in the women of the liminal generation. They participated or observed women in the community coping with manual labour, financing the household costs, putting food on the table and still managing their traditional domestic chores and roles. The Sikhs of Peraktown relied on their womenfolk to support and provide for the family and the women gained confidence in their abilities as equal to men. The Peraktown *Pindh* habitus evolved, allowing for an expanded role for women, challenging gender stereotypes of the period.

And during that Japanese Occupation, like my mother, she shouldered most of the responsibility. (GKaur 5 April 2012)

Before the war, their role remained largely as the primary caregiver, 'submissive, passive and dependent behaviour was rewarded socially and economically' (Maskiell 1985 pp. 59-60). The war forced them to manage the livestock, growing food and managing the household and their efforts were valued. The Peraktown Sikhs sent their daughters to school before the Japanese Occupation; after the war, they sent them

for tertiary education. The Japanese Occupation memory represents the recognition of gender equity within the community, with the liminal generation recognising the value gained by involving women in decision-making processes and work spaces outside the domestic sphere.

### **3.13 Alignment with the dominant power**

In the Section 3.4, I highlighted the long tradition of accommodating to and aligning with the dominant political power as a survival strategy practiced by the Sikh people, under the Mughal Empire and later, the British annexation of Punjab. The Japanese Occupation marked a change in the dominant power structure, with a new colonial entity. In contrast to the marked embeddedness within the British colonial administration, the Peraktown Sikhs demonstrated a lack of constructive engagement with the Japanese. They engaged with the new power, but to a limit. Through the relationship with Suzuki, the Peraktown elders elicited useful information, allowing early removal to the estate before the Japanese arrived. In addition, their relationship with him provided a degree of interaction with the dominant power, gaining the community a degree of protection.

One day, staff car came in. You know who stepped out? The photographer, Suzuki. In army uniform. He was a colonel. And then he gave us a letter. You know Suzuki, he said this was sort of a Japanese custom. Anybody who had done a good deed they will give a recommendation, any other troops that come in, to see that, then they won't do any harm to them. Every time the Japanese came, my father went, just show the letter. And the troops never bothered us. (SSingh 22 November 2011)

Leveraging this relationship, the community elders extended their protection to the Chinese families in the township.

My grandfather knew the head, Suzuki and he had given a letter to my grandfather. On the letter he told them, 'If any Japanese come, you just show the letter.' They will come, salute and go back. They won't look back. My grandfather saved so many

Chinese at his own risk and at our whole family's risk. I was still young. I can still remember that the one day in the evening, the whole herd of Chinese living around our MSingh Kampong ran to our house. Japanese are coming. All were hidden or hiding on top in the house, double-storey building, they were upstairs, and the Japanese came because they were looking for Chinese girls. Any Chinese girls they will take away and all of them were hiding up there, and my grandmother put up a brave front. At that time, they didn't have that letter yet and if any child had started crying, the Japanese would have slaughtered everybody. So, in that way that is why the Chinese also loved my grandfather very much because a lot of them were saved that time. (MSingh 29 December 2011)

The Japanese ethnic policies ensured preferential treatment for the Indian population early in the Occupation and they recruited Indians (and Sikhs) for civil service positions but this required attendance at indoctrination and language classes as described in the narratives above. These positions not only offered work for the menfolk but also the ability to shield themselves, their families and members of the community, gaining a degree of protection from persecution.

Some of the soldiers would just barge into the house, they take whatever they want, they disturb people, so, my father complained to their doctor, 'this is what's happening and we are very uncomfortable'. He wrote some Japanese letters ... two letters, one for the front door, one for the back door, finish, no more bargaining, so, we were a bit, a bit better off. (EKaur 16 November 2011)

The community describes accommodating to Japanese power yet also expressed a sense of resentment, in contrast to their engagement with the British colonial administration. The community continued, however, to rely on the *Panchayat* and the influence of its members to ensure their protection and aid as circumstances dictated.

LKaur's family came and begged father, 'Masterji please go and do something.' They were whipping him. So then, father had to go and talk to the Japanese Commander. Yah. That was horrible. Cause they would even kill you, they were merciless, the Japanese. But you have to respect them, you had to bow down to them, you know. Even if you're passing by, you have to get off

your bicycle, if you're on a bicycle, you get off your bike and stand there, bow. Bow, not just like that, bow down. (EKaur 24 November 2011)

This attitude was demonstrated in the lack of engagement with the Japanese education system. The English-medium schools closed, replaced by schools teaching a new syllabus designed to promote the Japanese language and the administration's aims. Within the Sikh community in Peraktown, parents, including the schoolteachers themselves, chose not to send their children to school to avoid the Japanese method of education. Instead, the *Gurdwara*, evolved to accommodate the need for basic education, and religious classes expanded during the Occupation to include basic Mathematics as described by CKaur below.

And it was during the Japanese Occupation we continued Punjabi education there. We did, It was very good teachers we had. These teachers instilled a very good discipline. And that education was so good we were taught Mathematics, Arithmetic in Punjabi school, and my Mathematics was pretty good by the time when I was ready to go to school later on, English school was quite ok. (CKaur 4 December 2011)

The Peraktown *Pindh* incorporated English-language use, manners and an affiliation to working within the British colonial administration. These ideas continued, transmitted during the Japanese Occupation through the practice the English curriculum knowledge acquired before the war and the passing it on to other members of the community. The Peraktown Sikhs continued to use a mixture of English and Punjabi in their domestic life and with co-ethnics, holding on to the knowledge and retaining tangible symbols from their English education.

EKaur: We had to hide all things connected with the British, the badges and anything.

CKaur: They didn't like any souvenirs of the British, I still remember digging a hole and father burying some things. (EKaur, CKaur et al. 9 November 2011)

Recollecting the transmission of knowledge within the community, one respondent highlighted learning to write in English.

CKaur: you know, I don't know whether you remember or not but by the roadside whilst the cows are grazing, there was sand. I would write there, you were teaching me. (EKaur, CKaur et al. 9 November 2011)

The end of the occupation in 1945 was a relief for the locals but Gullick states, 'all of the British referred to the 'liberation' of Malaya but the Malaysians quietly persisted in calling it the 'reoccupation' (1964 p.83). In contrast, for the Peraktown *Pindh*, the end of the Japanese Occupation and the return of the British to Malaya represented a restoration of order as social conditions improved, jobs were reinstated and school resumed. The disruption of the Japanese Occupation encouraged the focus on consolidation of intra-ethnic and familial bonds with only a small amount of inter-ethnic interactions. It provided the experience of rural life, as they would have encountered in Punjab with reliance on crops and livestock for the family needs. This potentially contributed to the end of the sentimental, nostalgic longing for 'home'. Throughout this period, their cultural identity remained solid and cohesive. The major change related to the extension of the role of women beyond the domestic sphere. Following the Japanese Occupation period, the Peraktown Sikh community ceased any nationalistic efforts or sentiments towards India as the homeland. The Peraktown Sikh community comprised different socio-economic classes, castes and geographical locales and during the early years in Malaysia, they remained divided along caste lines and by region of origin. The majority of Sikhs living in the centre of Peraktown were of the *Jat* caste, with members of other castes living in the surrounding villages. The references to the MSingh Kampong people reflected the perceived difference in the community based on class. The village, named after MSGFSingh, who owned much of the land in the area, housed the dairy farmers and watchmen or other working class positions. Before the

Occupation, inter-caste interaction was limited and relationships fitted within a strict hierarchical framework. In addition, due to the British administrative policy of focused recruitment of the *Jat* caste, these caste divisions devolved into class divisions with *Jats* predominantly forming the growing middle class, working in British civil services while the others in this period, kept cows for dairy, worked as watchmen and as tailors. Although they shared the same *Gurdwara*, unlike the Sikh communities in Penang, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur and caste distinctions were not explicitly performed, the lowest caste, the *Chamars* did not involve themselves in the shared food preparation in the *Langar Hall* before the Occupation.

### **3.14 Summarising the *Pindh* as history**

In this chapter, I discuss the origins of the Peraktown Sikhs and the historical processes involved in the migration from their homeland to the new host society in Perak. The story of the Peraktown Sikhs is very much framed within the colonial encounter, from the solidification of religion and process of constructing new normative categories of being and becoming Sikh as both a consequence of the colonial gaze and the encounter with modernity opening modes and methods of self-agency. The Sikhs of Peraktown inherit a burden of history that may be distant but weighs heavily enough on them, in the ways they think, feel and believe. Subsequent chapters demonstrate how the Peraktown Sikhs challenged and adapted the vision of Sikhism as construed within the dominant of *Khalsa* orthodoxy and masculine, martial, *Jat* superiority. The Peraktown Sikhs committed to working together to ensure the well-being of the whole community and all the informants include the Japanese Occupation memories in their narratives, implying a pivotal moment in community consolidation. For my informants, inter-ethnic relationships continued to exist, but the concentrated focus was to strengthen bonds within the Peraktown Sikh community. The Japanese Occupation and the impact created by its memorialisation, constructed

the shape of the community relationship to the Peraktown *Pindh* as a category of meaning. Firstly, this period forced a total disconnect from significant engagement with Punjab, both physically by halting any possibility of visiting their ancestral home and mentally with the end of a continued exchange of ideas, norms and beliefs as practised in the homeland. This generated a sense of solidarity, resulting in the removal of hierarchical barriers to social relationships excepting in marriage practices, changes in aspirations, with the webs of Empire figuring significantly in their construction of security and assigning greater meaning to their settlement in the locality. The liminal generation formed an understanding of themselves as belonging to a unique group, regardless of caste or regional affiliations, resulting in the sharing of skills, knowledge and influence, to ensure socio-economic progression for all. This period represents the moment where the germination of the community ethos began to evolve from a physical location to a more loosely structured boundary of belonging, where the relationships are embodied not only physically within the map location of Peraktown but also in the minds and memory of the Sikh community. Secondly, the hardships and challenges of this historical moment in time provided the opportunity for the women in the community to demonstrate their capabilities and resilience, encouraging and fostering a greater sense of gender equality than had previously existed. Women took on non-traditional roles, involving themselves in physical labour, decision-making and gaining confidence in themselves and each other. This community recognition of women as being capable and dependable resulted in the encouragement of further education, with many women of the liminal generation continuing on to tertiary education and having careers in addition to marriage and family. Finally, the emphasis placed on the value of Englishness and the colonial education during the occupation years shaped the habitus of the liminal generation, communicating the prioritisation of English as a means to socio-economic mobility and community success. The community adapted to

the new colonisers, working with the Japanese to ensure community continuity and safety, yet they remained separate and distinct, choosing to forgo formal schooling in favour of religious and basic education at the *Gurdwara*. The period instilled a romantic nostalgia for the British colonial period, with many referring to the end of the Occupation as a time of rejoicing. The Japanese colonisation of Malaysia may have shaped the nationalist project for other ethnic communities, but for the Peraktown Sikhs, this period is the foundation stone in the construction of the Peraktown *Pindh* of the mind. The encounters with their new landscape, their engagement with cultural differences within their own community and the multicultural environments they live in and the continued lack of engagement in the politics of modern Malaysia opens up the definition and constitution of identity and belonging within the Peraktown *Pindh*. The lived experiences of the Peraktown Sikhs offers a rich and highly textured vision of Sikh lived experience within the diaspora; one that is unique as they make meanings and connections, framed within family relationships, friendships and favour exchanges, evolving community habitus and demonstrate the transformation from a Peraktown *Pindh* to a *Pindh* of the mind. At the end of *Border Country*, Matthew reflects, 'only now it seems like the end of exile. Not going back, but the feeling of exile ending.' (Williams 2006 p.436). For the Peraktown Sikhs, exile does not end; the journey from the homeland through both space and time is long yet it has no endpoint. There is always a sense of exile, as the journey needs no fixed point of ending for the Peraktown Sikhs studied, as they are perpetually within their *Pindh*, allowing them a place to belong, regardless of how far they travel. The community studied is not entirely insular and restricted to their own culture and meaning of belonging, but rather, they chose the degree to which they incorporated elements of the local and the extent of involvement with the political and social context of Malaysia. Diaspora groups everywhere face a constant push and pull between a home that is 'here' and the nostalgia and longing for a home that is

'back there'. In contrast, the Peraktown *Pindh* is a home that has no fixed address, and like the Peraktown Sikhs, is continuously in motion, moving between memories, the sharing of their stories and the sense of knowing where and to whom they belong.

#### **4 The Pindh as place**

In Sections 3.6 to 3.8, I explained the historical antecedents of the Peraktown *Pindh* and the origin of a common, shared memory, constituting the meaning ascribed to this categorical concept within the members of the liminal generation. In this chapter, I examine the nuances within the physical location, Peraktown, where the claiming and contestation of space assigns meaning to the interplay of ethnicity, culture and history, in the social construction of a common idea of Peraktown Sikh group identity across the porous boundaries of the imagined and material. The narratives of the Peraktown Sikhs map a cultural landscape through which they construct community identification through the daily rituals, normative actions and routines played out in the social spaces of the Peraktown environment. As Steven Vertovec described:

Each habitat or locality represents a range of identity-conditioning factors: these include histories and stereotypes of local belonging and exclusion, geographies of cultural difference and class/ethnic segregation, racialized socio-economic hierarchies, degree and type of collective mobilization, access to and nature of resources, and perceptions and regulations surrounding rights and duties. (2001 p.578)

Attachment to a place facilitates the construction of community membership, the expression of commonly held beliefs and norms and a sense of recognition of shared history. The Peraktown Sikh community used these place-making behaviours and practices to generate opportunities for access to host society resources and forms of knowledge without loss of unique cultural identity. This offers a contrast to studies on the modern Sikh diaspora where culture remains ossified. In Peraktown, the practices of everyday life actions, movements and behaviour in different social contexts demonstrated how the format of interactions and the network of social relationships transform these

spaces into what de Certeau described as 'a practiced place' (1984 p.117). The community's lived experience played out within the domestic and private space of home, the authentically Sikh environment of the local *Gurdwara*, the melting pot of the local schools and the other shared public spaces. Their use of space strengthened their common conception of group identity in a multicultural environment, constructed and reinforced through spatial practices and stories, reinforcing the boundaries of both the physical, mental and emotional resonance to a location, reinforcing the Peraktown *Pindh*, as a place of meaning, extending the discussion of ethnic identification within diaspora populations beyond primordial categorisations or integration to the dominant host society culture.

The current discourse on diaspora and migration belonging in host societies focuses on migrant assimilation to the dominant host culture. In work on post-migration generations, the discussion centres on cultural conflict between the first generation and their descendants and the complexity of increasing bi-culturalism, the performance of different identifications in public and private spheres in host societies such as the United States of America, Canada and the United Kingdom, the sites of modern waves of migrant settlement (Nesbitt 1980, Bhachu 1985, Drury 1991, Hall 2002, Nayar 2004). In contrast, the Sikhs of Peraktown successfully exemplify adaptation techniques resulting in a complex negotiation of inherited cultural traditions yet modernised to diminish inter-generational conflict. In addition, studies on spatial practices remain restricted to urban areas and the idea of the multicultural city. This chapter expands the discourse, examining a small town environment and allowing the migrant or diaspora voices to articulate their own lived experiences. It highlights place-making behaviour as a process of retained meaning towards their unique cultural inheritance and the adaptation towards a more globalised socio-

economic environment and their continued distinctness from the Malaysian national narrative.

Place making in the Peraktown Sikh community occurred through a series of interactions and movement centred on the performance of family ties, social status, the language of self-identification with their religion and the shared geography of memory. The practice of expected routines and patterns of behaviour, reinforcing shared norms and values, of maintaining family reputations, improving socio-economic status, the importance placed on bettering educational levels, encouragement towards the use of English language and manners, interactions with local elites and more equitable gender roles imbue the spaces with meaning unique to the community. The clear enunciation of identification as Sikhs of Peraktown occurred through this process of active place making both in a very personal sense in their conceptualising a sense of *home* and in their public space behaviours through their movements within the town and acquisition of local resources and dominant culture knowledge or habitus. As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson describe:

The ability of people to confound the established spatial orders, either through physical movement or through their own conceptual and political acts of reimagination, means that space and place can never be 'given' and that the process of their socio-political construction must always be considered. (1992 p.47)

The Peraktown Sikhs performed diverse roles in the differing spaces and social contexts within the township, demonstrating the complexity of identity and belonging in their use of space demonstrating changing gender divides, social status and religious position. Drawing on theoretical foundations from de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life* and more loosely on Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* as discussed in Section 2.1, I explained how different subversions of the purpose of a place may reinforce a collective meaning or offer a subversive alternative. I described my findings, focusing on the enunciation of nine

spaces, material and imagined, through the Peraktown Sikh community's narratives of movements, actions and reminiscences. Finally, I concluded the chapter with a discussion of my findings highlighting the advantages of multi-ethnic settlement areas, engagement with dominant cultural formations and adaptation and negotiation regarding the forms of inherited culture retained. The Peraktown Sikhs built social networks and acquired new cultural knowledge, becoming urban and upwardly mobile yet retaining cohesive group identity and values with decisions regarding continuity and change in custom, tradition and beliefs skewed towards an increasingly globalised socio-economic environment. The *Pindh* alters, from its traditional conception of place and location, defining social position and relations towards an idea, a common, shared conceptualisation of what future skills, knowledge and traditions remain part of collective community norms and values.

We went to Peraktown to attend a continuous reading of the Sikh holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, as part of a memorial for the elders of the Peraktown Sikh community, living or gone. The four passengers in the car were all children of these elders, now elders themselves. The entry into the town had changed with the new highways that crisscross Peninsular Malaysia, linking cities and places in tarmac and high tech concrete, making journeys back, in space and time, faster and easier. As we entered the town, they translated the present, through nostalgic lenses, in litany, like the childhood rhyme of how many miles to Babylon, each place pointed out, a step closer, a step further back in time. The roads were new and the buildings were modern shops, housing estates, seen further back, off the main road, a tollgate, yet my passengers saw a different reality. The exclamations started: 'There's the Latin teacher's house where your father studied.' A little further on, 'Look! That is the polo *padang* we told you about where we graze our cows.' Pointing in another direction, an explanation was offered; 'Over

there is our school where your grandfather was our headmaster.’ These explanations or definitions of space, offered in a mix of present and past tense, simultaneously reinforcing their identity as Peraktown Sikhs through the nostalgia and narratives that turn space into place and my inclusion in the community through my ties to the physical and remembered. For them, the town remained the same, haunted by the ghosts of places, buildings and people, like a fly in amber, its carcass intact and held safe in the confines of their nostalgia. (Field notes, 2 December 2012)

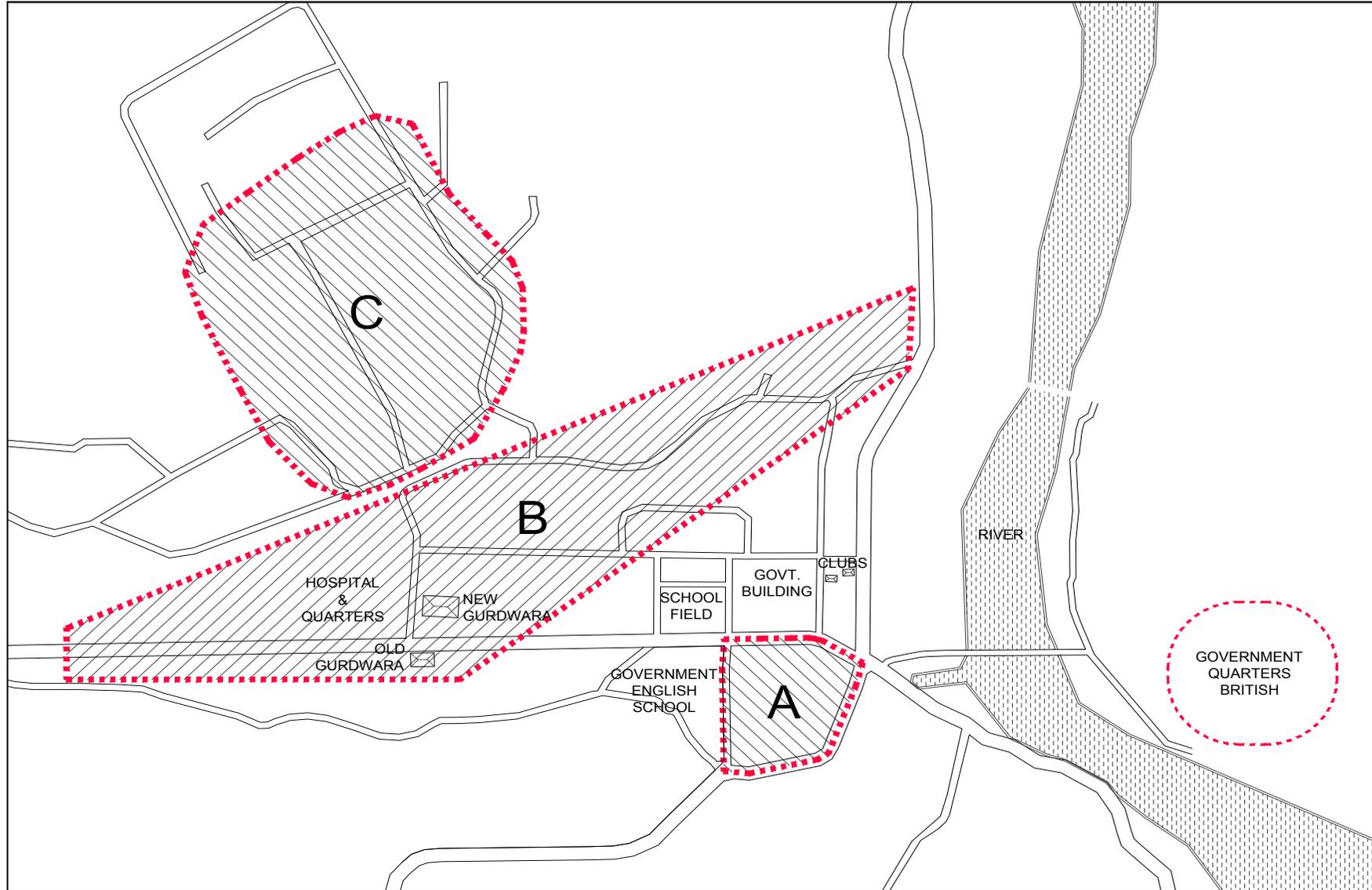
#### **4.1 Locating home: building bricks, culture and family**

In diasporic communities, the idea of home is both a new material location and emotional connection. Traditional ideas of home related to a geographical location, the feeling of belonging in the same static space, an ancestral place of origin, permanently fixed in the past. The understanding and contextualisation of home is problematic, for diasporic communities, between a ‘mythic place of desire’ and ‘the lived experience of a locality’ (Brah 1996 p. 192). In this section, I explore the spatial politics of home, as a location of inclusion and exclusion, bounded by territoriality and emotions. The use and access to the different components of domestic space defined relationships within the family, gender roles and social ties with non-family. Peraktown represented one of the central footholds of the British colonial administration and consequently public institutions occupied a large proportion of the town’s geographical space. A river runs through the town, forming a natural boundary to the east where it joins the Perak River. The government buildings included the railway station, court, various government offices, public hospitals, the police barracks, the government schools and various quarters for public servants including housing for members of the Sikh community working as clerks, teachers and health officials. The public buildings included the rest house, the social clubs and various sporting fields. The local Sultan owned a sizable

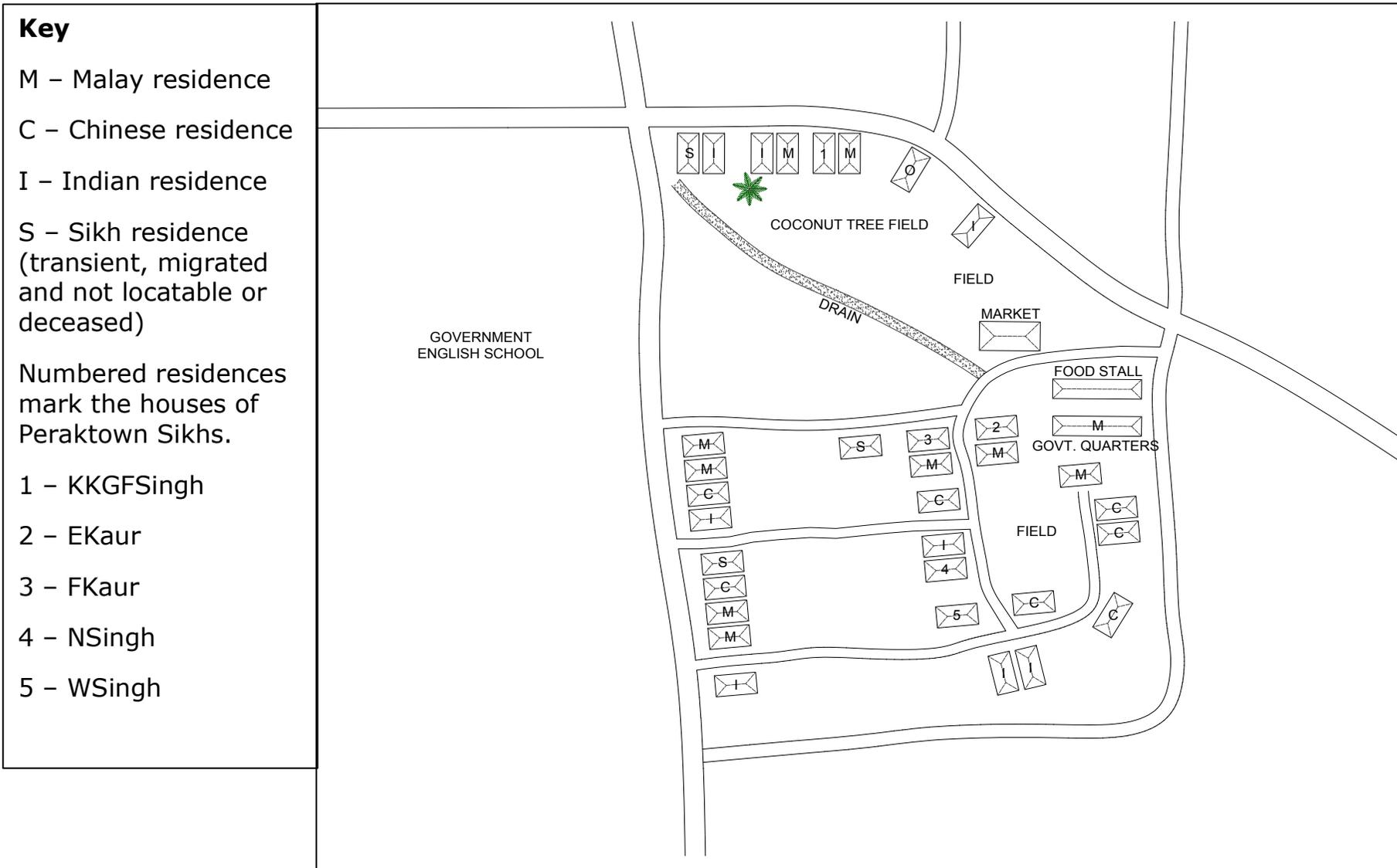
portion of town land and this included private residences for members of the royal family. Commercial areas included shop lots and markets near the river and High Road. The features and key buildings remained relatively unchanged from the early period of colonisation to the independence of Malaya. Map 1 on page 150 illustrates the layout of the town during the end of the 1940s to the early 1950s.

The residences of the Sikh community in Peraktown concentrated around three areas dependent on the professions and socio-economic position. Civil servants including members of the teaching staff at the schools, the court interpreter and the hospital attendants lived in government quarters. The landowners, represented by planters or civil servants with inherited wealth, lived in houses of their own construction on land they owned. Place A comprised the government quarters allocated to the school teachers, Place B comprised the areas in the town centre near the hospital or the courts and Place C comprised of the land owned by MSingh's family. Maps 2, 3 and 4 illustrate the locations of each of these spaces.

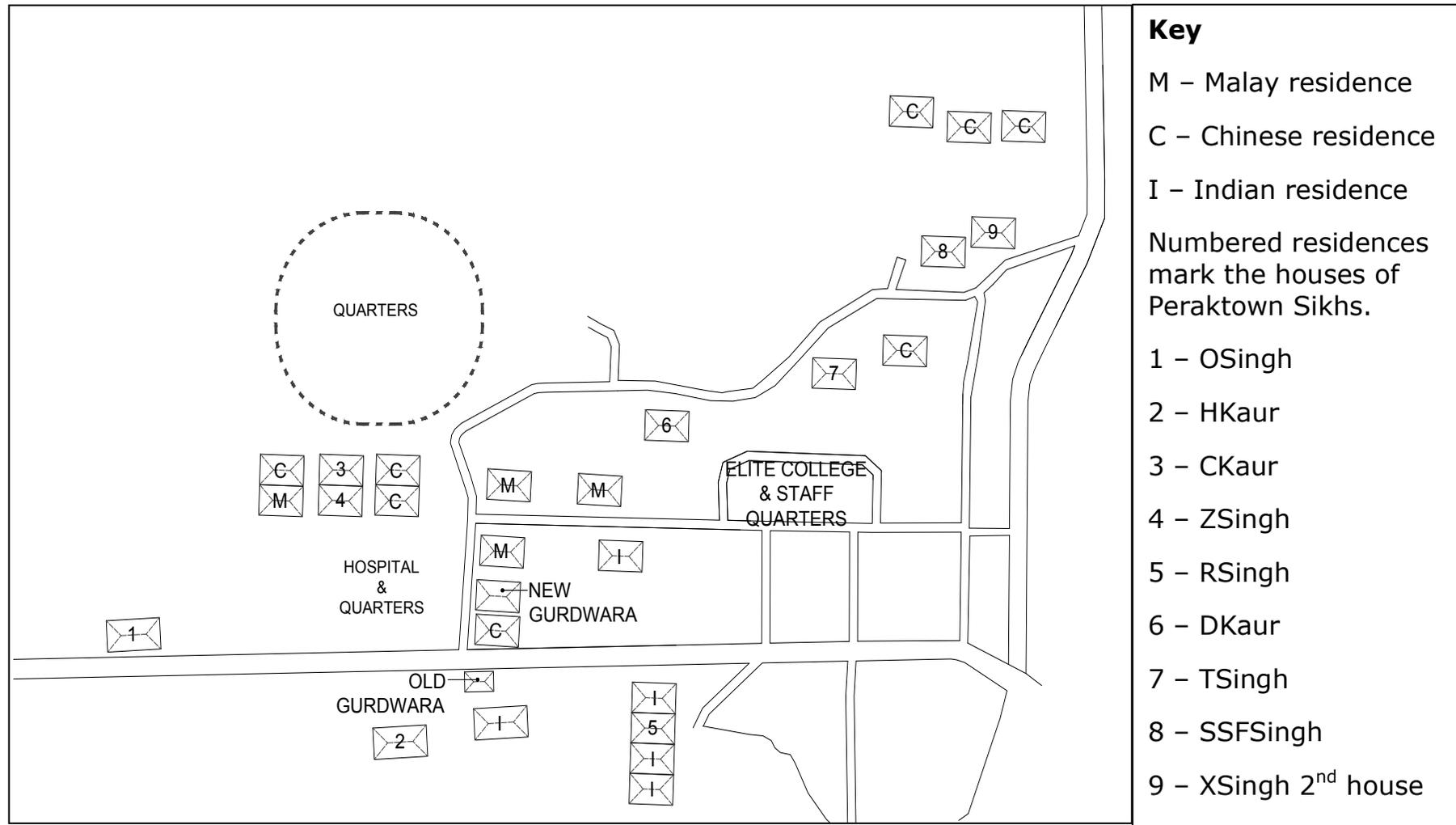
**Map 1: Peraktown**



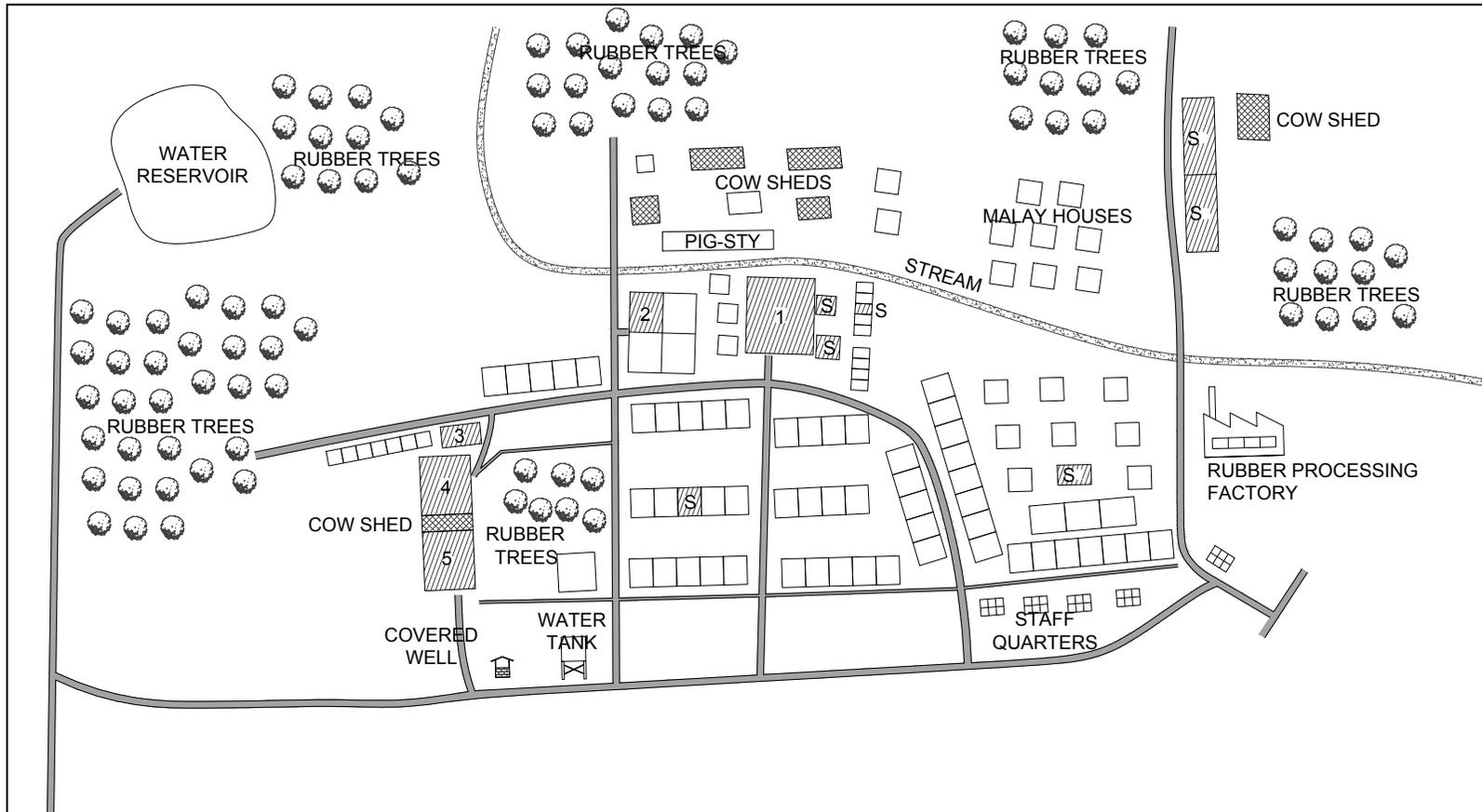
**Map 2: Area A in detail**



**Map 3 : Area B in detail**



**Map 4: Area C in detail**



**Key**

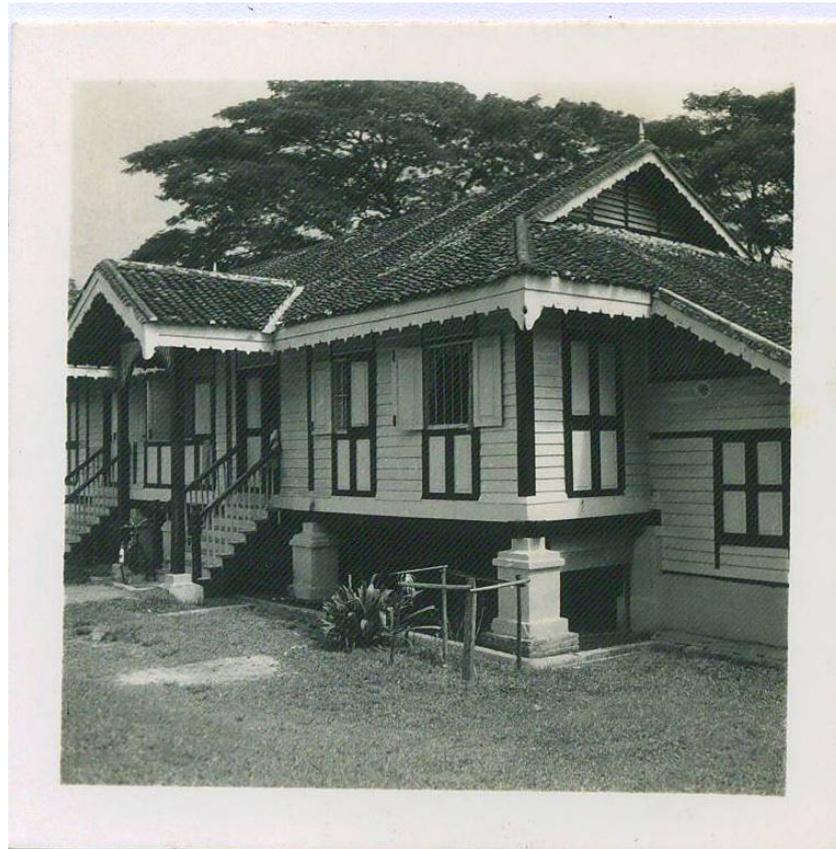
- |                       |  |               |              |
|-----------------------|--|---------------|--------------|
| M – Malay residence   | 1 - MSGFSINGH  | 2 - MSGUSingh |              |
| C – Chinese residence | 3 – XSingh   | 4 – LSingh    | 5 - HKBSingh |
| I – Indian residence  | S – Sikh residence (transient, migrated and not locatable or deceased) |               |              |

The Sikhs of Peraktown described their homes firstly, in terms of the physical space occupied, where the home is bricks and mortar. The domestic space presented as a series of boxes beginning with public areas, where guests, generally men or non-Sikhs would commonly be entertained. For many of the Sikh homes in Peraktown, this meant the veranda or the first room on entering the house via the front door.

When we were free in the evenings, you know, everybody is home and, you know. But I'll tell you, mum and dad were the king and queen or prince and princess, and after evening, after about 5 o'clock, 6 o'clock, sunset time, they would both sit outside enjoy the nice air coming through and all that sort of thing, and the neighbouring Chinese parents also would be outside. Then they would go back about 7 o'clock. We would make chapattis and serve them outside. My father and mother, you know, quite often they would have their meal outside. (CKaur 25 March 2012)

Mr KKGFSingh and my grandfather were very good friends, close friends. They used to visit each other's houses. Evenings they'll come in the olden days, sit down in the compound outside, have tea and they used to chitchat. (MSingh 15 March 2012)

Inside the house, the furniture in the living room or the public spaces such as the dining room or study, if there was one, tended towards more colonial, hybridised forms of furniture and décor, with rattan sofas or wooden chairs and tables. On the walls, family photos hung and in most cases some depiction of the founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak. The contents of bookshelves included classics from English literature, such as Shakespeare, history books from the colonial school curriculum and some publications in the Punjabi language. The selection of books highlighted the *mélange* of traditional Punjabi village habitus and the more Anglicised hallmarks of the preference and promotion of the English language and the literature of the colonial education system. The selection also contained university or post-secondary textbooks or publications related to the professions of the menfolk in the family such as law textbooks. Often, there was a radio playing contemporary music of the period or a gramophone and records if the family was well off.



**Figure 5: A Sikh house in Peraktown**

The description of the home provided physical space for the housing of kinship groups, allowing each member of the family his or her own allocated area. These descriptions of space usage defined the family relationships and each room in the house explained individual positions within the family structure. The important members within the kinship group resided in larger spaces or where houses had more than one level, on the upper floors. Beyond the threshold, the private spaces began, with separate areas demarcated for each family group, shared with extended family or by gender divides in the case of single-family homes.

Well that big house, we have downstairs one big area only, so we make one or two rooms there and upstairs, one, two, three, four rooms were there upstairs. My father's younger sister was staying upstairs, we were downstairs, we stayed downstairs. My father's elder brother also, the family was upstairs. He got two girls and

four boys. He was married earlier from India also the second time. She got two girls and one boy, but then my grandmother was not satisfied with that daughter-in-law, they went and then got married again, second time. The second one got two girls and four boys. They all were staying upstairs. We were downstairs. And one small room by the side, there one my grand aunty, which was from India, her son was staying there. Grandfather also had one room downstairs. All were staying there. Bathroom was the main one, outside and the lavatory behind the house, so far away. (DKaur 14 March 2012)

My dad had a small house. So, in the house there were two rooms and one sort of a hall. Mom and dad occupied one room, and the girls occupied the other room, and the boys, my brother and I, lived in the storeroom. (NSingh 9 April 2012)

In the private areas of bedrooms, the colonial influence on furniture and décor was minimal, and furniture usually included a mix of mattresses and the traditional Punjabi bed called a *manja*, a timber frame with jute or string woven to form the base. Durries or cotton ticks, bed linen, sometimes hand-embroidered and woven fabric blankets covered the beds. Rooms usually contained an *almari* or small wooden wardrobe to store clothes and bed linen. The women kept a chest to store *dupattas*, *sarees* and their jewellery. During the day, extra mattresses were pushed under the bedframes to make space, extending the use of the room as a daytime living room.

CKaur: We had one room, the six of us. During the day, you would only see two beds, one bed under the bed under the other bed. Two bedrooms and downstairs the servant's bedroom. The maid's room was very big and had a taller bed. A smaller bed underneath. Three beds under one. During the day, you will only see one but at night, you have to take them out and then you push them back in the end. It's not the current bed, you know

EKaur: And not one person to a bed. Two people to a bed. One head, tail, head and tail. We all slept two, two in one bed. (EKaur, CKaur et al. 9 November 2011)

A Peraktown Sikh rarely spent time alone with physical space being limited and families generally large. Parents shared a room while the children and grandparents shared other available sleeping areas. This

intimacy within the family circle allowed for the continued reinforcement and transmission of expected behaviours and values. Girls learnt to cook and sew by example and the families shared narratives of the migration journey, the hardships overcome in settling in a new world and the histories of the Sikh people.

This Sikh fellow, his son's name was USGUSingh and he married my father's sister. This USGUSingh got married to my father's sister. Now, USGUSingh was an old man when I was young. And sometimes I would just go and sit down and he would tell me some stories about Taiping, old times, not much la though. He would tell me incidents like you know, when he was in Taiping, in those days, they have the rickshaw fellows you know, not the *becas*, where the man would pull the rickshaws and run. And you are seated there. So this boy will be seated in the rickshaw and when he passes through the town, all the Chinese will just talk to him, fill up his pocket with money. Because he was somebody's, some policeman's son. (USingh 11 April 2012)

Another respondent described her mother's experience.

My father had gone and brought my mother back, the earlier days, that was one story my mother had told me, after he was qualified, he wanted to come and do the preaching in this country and many immigrants were coming at that time so he followed but before he came, he got married to my mother. On the way, they came by ship, and on the way, he told her, she was wearing a lot of jewellery. A lot of decorative things, even the nose ring. Their ears were pierced from top to bottom. He told her to remove all that jewellery and throw it into the sea. He wanted her to be a simple person. Because he himself was simple, she had to follow simple rules, so they could lead the life he wanted to. (HKaur 4 April 2012)

Prayer formed an important component of Peraktown Sikh identity, and the households set aside a space for the daily religious rituals. Some households kept a copy of the Sikh holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib* and held daily prayers. When not in use, they wrapped the *Guru Granth Sahib* in embroidered fabrics and kept it in a cupboard or on a specifically allocated table. In other cases, prayer at home took the form of reading from a *Gotka*, a condensed form of the holy book,

usually read privately in a bedroom and kept wrapped in fabric in the *almari* when not in use.

My father had a *Granth Sahib* in the house which was *prakash* everyday and at night *smapathi*. And if my father doesn't do it, the *smapathi*, we children one of us will do it. We had a room for the *Babaji*. (GKaur 5 April 2012)

The space allocated to prayer required cleanliness and tended to be located in the middle area of the house, separated from food preparation and bathrooms. Before praying or handling the holy book, everyone bathed or at least washed hands and feet.

Father was very strict with our cleanliness in the house, and work and our religion; he was very strict about that. He wanted that we must all have prayers and that belief in our gurus' teachings. He was very religious, my dad so, I think we were a good family. My father was very particular about religion. He always made sure we went to temple every Sunday, five o'clock. All of us had to be up, bath and go to *Gurdwara* and do *asa di vaar*, and we all took part in the *kirtan*. We all joined the group singing, all of us. We'd be home by 8.30. We'd go early but we'd come back early. And then we also had teaching at *Gurdwara*. (EKaur 16 November 2011)

The kitchen and bathrooms tended to be located at the rear of the houses with access to the backyards. The kitchen was the centre of Punjabi or Sikh culture in these households. It remained the domain of mothers and grandmothers in each household, many of who did not speak much English. Punjabi became the language of intimacy, used by children and the menfolk when conversing with the elder women in the family. There was an inevitable sense of loss as cultural forms and language altered within the home space.

We used to eat with fork and spoon, instead of fingers like our culture, especially my father used a fork and a spoon for eating and up to today, we still do that you know. Speaking in English. It's a big thing we did was to switch over to English. Lots of reading in English books. Lots of it. Even as I was growing up as a child, I've read almost all the books in my school library. We spoke in English most of the time and so the children don't speak Punjabi now and I really regret that actually. I wish I had. We

speak English most of the time, 90% of the time. So only now and then we say a few words of Punjabi. It seems like it is so natural. I don't know. It's so difficult to switch over to your own mother tongue. Now we speak in English instead of our own mother tongue. I don't understand why it happens but it is happening. (FKaur, 6 April 2012)

However, in physical appearance and practicality, the kitchen retained a traditional Punjabi appearance and activities in comparison to the more colonial hybrid furniture, décor and use of the public spaces. The kitchen space held cooking implements included rolling pins and wooden boards for making traditional *chapattis*, short-legged wooden stools rested in corners for sitting on, close to the floor, to chop vegetables and stainless steel serving dishes lay on shelves alongside earthenware pots to store drinking water. Family gender roles remained traditional in the kitchen environment with household chores and domestic work falling to the women of the household.

You see the girls did the less manly jobs. You know, labour-intensive jobs like, you know, ironing the clothes. Rinsing and washing done by the boys. The cooking was done by the girls. Well, if there was anything to be done which required labour intensive, the boys did it. (NSingh 12 April 2012)

My mother, my mother's sister and then my elder *Taya*, his wife, they all will cook. I was about 7 or 8 years old when I started making *atta*. And then my sister also will help. One day my sister will make *atta* and I will make breads. One day she will make *atta*, I will make breads. We have to start making our *roti* at 5 o'clock, evening. Evening 5 o'clock we will start making our *chapattis* all, and keep it for everybody to eat. (DKaur 14 March 2012)

Once I was 10 years old, then my mother had another two boys, I am the eldest in the family. I was called upon to look after them, so all this running around, and all playing had to come to stop and I was looking after my two brothers. (FKaur 26 March 2012)

Exiting from the kitchen, the houses opened onto a backyard. Many Peraktown Sikh families kept cows for milk, chickens and ducks for their eggs and meat and practised the subsistence farming of vegetables.

We had more cows. From one we had calves I used to look after the cows. I used to go out and cut the grass and bring and feed the cows, look after the cows. I started a garden. I started growing vegetables, *bayam* and all that, and then I used to feel there's so much of *bayam*, I used to take the *bayam* and go and sell it to the vegetable man. (IKaur 29 September 2012)

My father was able to build his own house and had crops like maize, corn and so on, planted at the back of the house, which had quite big piece of land. In fact, my friend, quite a dear friend, colleague in school, Dr CKaur and family lived just behind our area. So everybody was quite helpful and my father built a small place which was enough to shelter all of us, although it had quite a big land occupancy, but the house wasn't that big, because just enough for the family and then he had to build a cowshed for the cows. (HKaur 21 May 2012)

This control of the land played a dual role, providing additional food sources and income for the families and secondly, this generated a sense of land occupation and use. Through the cultivation, the daily production and consumption of the fruits of their labour on their land linked back to the nostalgia for their rural origins and reinforced the connection, of ownership and of their feeling of belonging.

Alison Blunt describes the idea of home as 'an emotive place and spatial imaginary that encompasses lived experience of everyday, domestic life alongside a wider sense of being and belonging in the world' (2009 p.732). The community incorporated the neighbouring Sikh families in their conceptualisation of their home environment. The Peraktown Sikhs named and located other families in their relationship to their own households and within the physical spaces they lived.

There was quite a large Sikh community in the neighbourhood. We had Mr KKGFSingh, who was a fellow teacher with my dad in Government School, EKFSingh, who lived down the road, and also Mr FKFSingh also down the road, another teacher, and they were around High Road. By the way, our neighbours were a non-teacher, a chap called Mr... I can't remember his name but his children are all in Adelaide now. Singh, the doctor, who passed away, and another Singh, then you had Singh, who was a police

officer here, but he retired and went to Adelaide. So they were our immediate neighbours (NSingh 9 April 2012)

Nearest house was TSingh's house. That was about three, four hundred yards. MSingh's house was about a mile away near the railway station. Other houses were in S Road, graveyard outside what do you call it? On the way to TTown? Some were on the other side, in M Road. (SSingh 29 March 2012)

Non-Sikh families were sometimes included in these narratives but the neighbours most often mentioned were fellow Sikhs.

The home represented a private space but unlike studies of other Sikh diaspora sites, the Peraktown community melded the reinforcement of traditional values and beliefs with efforts to appropriate elements of dominant culture and as a site of communal cooperation and interaction. The process of place making, from house and neighbourhood to become home involved the transposition of the rural idyll and inherited memories of the *Pindh* to Peraktown. The construction of home, through the behaviours and practices demonstrated the continued emphasis of the emotional pressures within this particular social context to forge a balance between traditional norms of gender roles, respect for elders and family *izzat* and dominant culture norms such as speaking English and valuing education, working towards improving family status and cohesiveness. Brah's 'mythic place of desire' is reconciled to the 'lived experience of the locality' (1996 p.192) through the recreation of the village and kinship networks of traditional ties to landscapes of memory.

#### **4.2 The *Gurdwara*: Homeland longing and belonging**

The *Gurdwara* in most Sikh communities in the diaspora or the ancestral homeland functions as the centre of Sikh social life, representing a space where meaning and interactions remain Sikh, without any of the *mélange* of English materials or customs intruding on traditional rituals and practices. Here, despite education levels, socio-economic class or region of origin, the Peraktown Sikh community

created a place where they were free to be wholly Sikh. The *Gurdwara* in Peraktown, as discussed in the previous chapter, began as a small wooden structure in the local Police barracks during the 1890s. The movement from the Police barracks to their own space marked the divergence from the colonial administration defined practice of religion to a more self-defined community space of worship. As the Sikh population increased and entered other professions, the community needed a larger and more accessible space for community gathering and prayer, leading to the construction of the current *Gurdwara*. The Peraktown Sikhs took part in the funding and physical construction of the new *Gurdwara* in the 1950s, expressing the community's active participation and interest in conserving and transmitting Sikh religious identity and culture.

When they were constructing the present temple we were small so a lot of, you know, what we call like *gotong royong* here now. A lot of our men those days in the Sikh families contributed a lot. You know those people with bullock cart, would go to the river, and I think those days the rules regarding, you know, taking sand from the river and all that were not like what they are now. We take the bullock cart there, we all will go together and use spade and put sand on it and then bring back. So, we all had a hand in it. (RSingh 25 March 2012)

For the Sikhs we had a small temple down the road, on the main road and that temple, at a point of time when I was I think in Form 3, had to be shifted, and I did a lot of work, loading sand and unloading sand at the site to build where the present temple is. That was all done by self help and I am very happy, whenever I go back I do go to the place and find that its still there, looks a bit different, smaller but those days it appeared to be very big because we were so small. (NSingh 9 April 2012)

The physical participation in the construction of this space provided the liminal generation with more concrete attachment and a sense of ownership. The new *Gurdwara* represented their own space of prayer, a newly forged link with the physical locale of Peraktown but also a symbolic meaning of ownership and participation in the ritualistic forms of worship throughout the Sikh homeland and diaspora.

Migration transforms the meaning of religious places, forging a sense of rooted belonging within a community in comparison with the homeland with greater participation in the diaspora environment. (Vertovec 1992). The meaning ascribed to the *Gurdwara* as a location of culture and religious identity in Peraktown commenced before entering the physical confines of its built environment. The value placed on regular attendance and participation in the religious and social activities involved the process of getting to the *Gurdwara*. In Peraktown, this meant walking or using a bicycle, making the journey to participate in religious or social practices as de Certeau described, 'a space of enunciation' (1984 p.98).

We had a little temple in Peraktown, Sikh temple. It was small. At that time I think there were how many families? I can count the families. There were Kota Lama, there were about, CKaur, this one, four, five families, and then High Road there was us, NFSingh, and then your dad, EKFSingh, and who else? Yeah, four, eight, and then Old Fort, in Old Fort left there were about another three no, five families that side, you know. So, our community was not that big. And that time we didn't have any buses or anything like that. So you can imagine, from High Road we'd walk right up to the temple. (IKaur 29 September 2012)

Doctor CKaur, their family, when we wanted to go to temple, their house was further up, they'll walk and come, they'll come and call us, we all follow and we all will go to temple. (DKaur 11 April 2012)

The journey reinforces the idea of community belonging as an 'us versus them' proposition. The narratives construct boundaries where membership to the community involves families living nearby but only the families that shared the journey. The experience of moving through the multi-ethnic environment highlights the places of exclusion distinguishing between the known and familiar places they named and the unfamiliar or scary spaces, defining spaces and people that did not belong to the community.

So, I will start 4 o'clock from the house on my bicycle to reach the temple. So dark. Those days where got road lights like now? Seldom you'll see, maybe some house light. At one side houses, the other side, Mr FKFSingh, another teacher from Government English School also, lived halfway. That route I will take to go to the *Gurdwara*. So his house on the left with the other Malay houses, mixed all, and then on the right you'll pass all the rubber estate and nothing. It was like as if anything will come anytime out of that, you know. So I will cycle very fast as if I was running away for my life. I will cycle real fast and I'll only breathe when I reach the *Gurdwara*, you know. So, I used to join in the *Asa-di-var*. (HKaur 21 May 2012)

The first sighting of the physical space of the Sikh *Gurdwara* was the *Nishan Sahib*, a pole flying the Sikh flag situated outside, in front of the *Gurdwara*. It announced ownership of the space, visibly marking it as a Sikh place, belonging to the Sikh community, much like a national flag in front of an embassy. In this context, the Peraktown Sikhs' use of the space as a Sikh place extended beyond religious meaning, incorporating the transmission of culture through language and games, the social connectivity and bonding encouraged by regular social interaction and the transplanted emotional connection to experiences uniquely Punjabi Sikh. In a sense, the *Gurdwara* became a space to freely idealise the idea of religious and cultural practice. I am conscious that the narratives paint a rose-coloured vision, however this serves to emphasise the strong commitment to an idea of community cooperation and interaction, in a space uniquely their own. This connectedness contributed to their sense of belonging, making clear how much they valued and appreciated the memories of this shared experience of being Sikh in Peraktown, reinforcing the Peraktown *Pindh* as a commonly held idea.

The Peraktown *Gurdwara* was set towards the rear of a large piece of land, leaving space for large gatherings or other community activities. The adults lingered here briefly, exchanging news. Children greeted their elders with the traditional *Saat Sri Akaal* before running off to play together.

We had the activities in the *Gurdwara* so we all were very happy to go. There was prayers going on, then you go and put the lights, the candles and all that, and you clean up the place, and you have some games and all. Going to *Gurdwara* was attractive and I think everybody went, all the children went, all the elders went. (CKaur 4 December 2011)

When we were small, one thing was, I mean, I won't say we were going to the temple because we were religious. Maybe because you know that's the most exciting thing to do. When there was a big function, that's the place we can play and run around and uh I don't know whether uh anyone mentioned, you see, when in our temple eh, I think you must have seen the new temple, now the hospital is opposite there. Earlier that place was empty ground you see in those days. And when there is a big function like *Baisakhi* and all those I think, after food, there will be wrestling! You know real Indian wrestling you know. Ah so there was some very good wrestlers, it's like a competition there, so we were all excited to go and see. (RSingh 8 April 2012)

Approaching the front porch of the prayer hall, the congregation removed their shoes and used water taps on both the left and right to wash their hands and feet before entering. The building was a mixture of wood and brick with windows running down both sides, left open to allow air to flow. The pictures on the wall depicted the Gurus, the founders of the religion and the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the centre of the Sikh faith. The space was open, but everyone understood the division of the room, with the centre aisle clear for every faithful Sikh to walk up and make their obeisance before the *Guru Granth Sahib*, located to the rear of the prayer hall on a platform covered by a canopy. They bowed, placed their small offerings of money towards the upkeep of the *Gurdwara* in a box before finding a place to sit on the many durries and woven mats that covered the concrete floor. The prayer space in a *Gurdwara* is segregated by gender, and in Peraktown, the men sat to the right, facing the *Guru Granth Sahib*, while women sat to the left.

The experience varied little from that of their ancestors in Punjab. The sights, sounds and actions the same, as the *Gyani* behind the holy

book, read from the scripture, children moved between the laps of members of their extended family, fabric rustled softly as women adjusted the *dupattas* and the voices of the congregation joined in concert. In between scripture readings, a small group of musicians made up of congregation members seated on the right, sang to the accompaniment of a wailing harmonium and the steady beat of the *tabla*. A man or woman stood behind the *Gyani*, whisking the air above the *Guru Granth Sahib* with a whisk made of horsehair. In this space, everyone was equal and caste or class distinctions did not apply, the Peraktown Sikhs sat together, cross-legged, on the floor.

My dad is an ordinary person. Your grandfather was teaching in the school and all that but when they meet in the temple and all that there is no this thing. No distinction at all you know. I am educated and he is not. So they didn't have I mean among the community here. I think that was the beautiful part lah. (RSingh 8 April 2012)

At the end of the service, two men symbolically imparted strength to the *kara prashad*, a sweet made of semolina, sugar and ghee by placing and removing a *kirpan* into the pot before serving the congregation. This marked the end of the religious service and everyone adjourned to the *Langar Hall*, a separate building on the right, with long tables and benches for sitting and a kitchen area for food preparation. The congregation sat together at communal tables to drink tea and eat a small meal, usually prepared earlier in the day and served by Peraktown Sikhs, on a rotation basis, as part of the tradition of service. In contrast to the gendered division of labour in the home kitchen, food preparation, service and clearing involved both men and women.

Every *pogh*, every *kandh path* and anybody does a function, we all attended. We all would attend. Everybody. The whole town will be gathered there. And we will do the whatever work the boys do lah, the cutting onions and this and that. (USingh 11 April 2012)

We used to go to the *Gurdwara* to help in the preparation of the *langar* so even as youngsters, we used to go and get involved in

this community work. So it was, you help me and I help you and this, it was a normal thing. (OSingh 12 April 2012)

In the Peraktown Sikh community, the practice and use of the space through sharing the *prashad* and food and drink in the *Langar Hall*, imbued community meaning distinct from the divisions played out in the other parts of the town, transmitting the notion of equality espoused in the Sikh faith, regardless of gender, caste or status.

There was plenty of caste differentiation with all the various castes and all that. But they all sat together. There were *Nais* and *Chudais*, they used to sit in India they wouldn't sit like you sit with you. But here they would all sit in the same thing, eat from the same plates, no problem. (SSingh 29 March 2012)

In Peraktown there were a few families that were called the *Chudais* and this was people who were the basic cleaners of the cowsheds and things like that, and there was some resistance about their being allowed into the *Gurdwara* for their holding of functions in the *Gurdwara*, and I remember that when they had their functions also very few people attending. My father fought and, you know, he encouraged us. In fact, the ladies belonging to that caste would come home, my mother would give them the food and give them the best of the clothes and what not and it took time before they were finally comfortable in the *Gurdwara*. (CKaur 6 March 2012)

This differed too from the prevalence of caste-segregated *Gurdwara* in the diaspora and the exclusion of lower castes from food preparation in rural Punjab and indeed in other parts of Malaysia. In addition, the distinction between different regional affiliations did not enter the Peraktown *Gurdwara* space. Speaking about the difference between growing up in Peraktown and later years in Kuala Lumpur, DKaur explained:

I never knew anything about it until quite late, I think until in 1964-65. That time we were staying in Kampong Pandan, our neighbours was *Malwa* and we were *Majha*. And the other neighbours were low caste. From there only I came to know that there is a caste and there is a *Malwa* and there is a *Majha*. In Kuala Lumpur, the temples also, this Sentul Temple is *Majha*, Pudu Temple is *Malwa*. Earlier I didn't know all this. Anywhere,

anybody, any call, we go, come. We didn't know if they were low caste or whatever it is. (DKaur 14 March 2012)

This lack of understanding or knowledge of caste or regional distinctions holding retained meaning was common with many respondents. They indicated knowing the different regional origins or castes but highlighted that the *Gurdwara* remained untouched by these constructions of otherness.

The understanding and reading of Sikh scripture forms a keystone of Sikh identity, in the homeland and the diaspora. In Peraktown, the *Gurdwara* provided a space to transmit language learning and understanding of these religious texts for the Peraktown Sikhs.

I used to go to school and those days when we used to go to class in the temple, actually the priest is the one who used to teach us and in the same class, there will be people who are like Primary One, Punjabi style, you know *Guruji* style, there might be somebody who is in Standard five. All in the same room, you know, so he will be teaching everybody at the different time. (RSingh 25 March 2012)

The language classes at the *Gurdwara* included additional tuition for children taking Punjabi language for a school certificate. Two Sikhs, who worked as teachers at the government school, volunteered their time to provide the classes to the children. During the lessons, they incorporated the teaching of Sikh history and religious knowledge.

We were in a way involved with the *Gurdwara* because we used to have Punjabi classes. Mr EKFSingh was teaching Punjabi free of charge in the temple. He used to teach us, tell us so many stories about our gurus and he taught us Punjabi. We learned Punjabi from him and I did my Form Five Punjabi, and I got through my Punjabi, Form 5, average. All the children used to get together, all the Sikh children used to get together and attend the classes. And he used to make it a point that if the children don't turn up, he will report to the parents, and those days the parents won't ask any other question. The Teacher is right, and they will either get a slap on the face or get a scolding, and we make it a point that we attended the classes. The classes used to be held in the old temple in Peraktown. (MSingh 15 March 2012)

The strength of the *Gurdwara* for the community in Peraktown lay in its ability to make Sikh culture and the religion relevant and comprehensible for the younger generation. The practice of religious rituals, the education of the youth and the social interactions created a space where as Hall described, 'a world filled with the sounds, sights and scents of their parent's homeland' (Hall 2002 p.173). The *Gurdwara* ensured the continuity of the artefacts of cultural, ethnic and religious identity for the community. While the home environment represented a continued negotiation of the norms and values of the local, the *Gurdwara*, in contrast provided a place for the community to be wholly Sikh, without the divergent pull of 'here' against 'back there'. The practice of everyday activities in the *Gurdwara* space ensured the continuity of tradition, illustrating how through the preservation of religious and cultural tradition, the Peraktown Sikhs provided a place to be still and at home, in the face of the many challenges inherent in the migrant or diasporic lived experience.

### **4.3 Public spaces and contesting places**

The diaspora group or migrant minority is not simply a passive observer or user of the physical spaces in their countries of settlement. They actively engage with the spaces in their environment, through their strategies of socialising with different groups of people, their choices in work and education and their movements. Spaces acquired unique meanings for the Peraktown Sikhs in their mapping of and engagement with the local landscape through their lived experiences. They constructed their sense of belonging in the local while simultaneously negotiating between their disparate geographies of their nostalgia for rural Punjab, their physical location in multi-racial, small-town Malaysia and the colonial inheritance of their engagement both historic and current with the British Empire. In contrast to many diaspora groups, the private spheres of the Peraktown Sikhs demonstrated an investment

in their locality and their understanding of the importance in demonstrating familiarity across a range of cultural repertoires. The home inculcated behaviour and knowledge aimed at increasing the life chances of the family unit in the multi-ethnic and complex socio-political environment yet encouraged the retention of key markers of Sikh identity including language, norms and religion. Interaction and relationships for the Peraktown Sikhs took place in distinct domains of social life and in correspondence with the roles they adopted in these different social spaces, place-making and the consequential personal meanings assigned to these spaces generated a multiplicity of self-identification. During the interviews, the more commonly referenced physical spaces in the public domain included the schools, the cinema, the fields they played in and the social club and work environments. In this section I propose to examine the practiced enunciation of behaviour in the public domains, illustrating the methods and meanings the Peraktown Sikhs used and assigned to these spaces to appropriate them as their own and the engagement with this contestation in circumscribing Peraktown Sikh identity.

#### **4.4 The Native Club and Colonials Club**



**Figure 6: Merdeka night at the Native Club**

The Peraktown population included a small number of British expatriates working in the colonial administration and the schools. The social life of these expatriates centred in the Colonials Club, a whites-only social club located in the town. The expatriate life comprised of dances, drinking sessions, games of Bridge and cards and sporting events such as cricket, tennis and football played against other social clubs. A concession to the racially restrictive membership policy, the British Administration set up the Native Club for the lower-ranking colonial officials and native civil servants.

I think the club habit was I think definitely English habit because we used to meet here with your grandfather and all that. I used to come back, go to the Native Club and we used to sit down, your grandfather, B, there's one more chap, I can't remember, and then Doctor A, N, and myself. These were the group. I was the head among them. (SSingh 29 March 2012)

The continued attachment to their own cultural and religious identifications and the divergence between dominant habitus required modification. They spoke English and dressed like Englishmen, apart from the turban and long hair, yet remained markedly 'not white'. The Native Club offered a space to practice acting English. The Peraktown Sikh men learnt the rhetoric, language and manners of Englishness through their interactions on the sporting fields and in the spaces of the club where they played bridge and mah-jong, mixing with other Asians and junior British civil servants. It provided a space for the non-white elite to form friendships and consolidate social networks. This strategy enabled them to get ahead by demonstrating their competency within the structures of the dominant British cultural milieu and allowed them to engage with the local elites.

#### **4.5 The field with the coconut tree**

The daily routine for the younger generation followed a set pattern of chores at home, attendance at religious services at the *Gurdwara* or in their homes, going to school, play after school and homework at the

dining table before bed. In the school environment, the Peraktown Sikhs mixed with their peers regardless of ethnicity or class. In contrast, outside of school, playmates remained restricted to neighbourhoods, largely defined by family socio-economic position within the space of the town. These friendships formed through proximity, with social circles largely made up of other Sikh families but included to a lesser extent, non-Sikhs families in the immediate area of similar status. Family groups played in the backyards of their homes but they appropriated additional spaces for games involving the neighbourhood circle. The spaces mimicked the relationships in the community in the divisions between living areas. The Place A households played in one group, the families living in Place B formed another group and the Place C yet another group.

That was playing in the garden. And then in school, we did play. All these boys and your dad and all of them, they would come over. And we'd play with them. But mostly with just the neighbours, around the neighbours here. All of the neighbours, you know, there were so many Sikh families. We mixed quite freely. We were okay. (EKaur 8 March 2012)

Membership in these social circles required rituals, for Place A, being big enough to jump across a drain, a rite of passage of threshold crossing, from being too little to play outside the family compound to being trusted and considered responsible enough to maintain family and community standards in public. The freedom allowed within the community resulted in part from a certainty that in their movements and actions, the children adhered to community norms, values, and the existence of inter-generational closure and that an adult from the community could intervene at need.

The other Sikhs, they are responsible for you also. They would advise you what to do, what not to do. Like you see the fat man you interviewed [LSingh], their house also was in the same neighbourhood. They were also very helpful just like fatherly figures, you know. So we have to respect them also. Even now I go to Peraktown, I see these old men, I always go and greet

them. Because they are not harmful. They were very nice to us when we were young. They would treat like any other child. (USingh 17 April 2012)

The different spaces of play used by the community reflected the on-going negotiation surrounding differing attitudes towards gender roles. The teachers' families encouraged interaction between all the children regardless of gender and so the Place A set comprised girls and boys. Gender differences between the younger set diminished as girls could join in any of the games, providing they met the requirement of group membership.

We used to play together, boys and girls. Especially since we were in the coed school. So we never separated ourselves. We never felt that we are girls and they are boys, and to feel shy or anything. There was no such thing in the temple also when we used to go. It used to be good. You know, everybody knew each other. (IKaur 29 September 2012)

We played among the natural greenery, as far as about may be two to three kilometres from the house. We will wander away. We were more free, more carefree you know. Like climbing trees. You will be surprised, I had even climbed on a short coconut tree once (HKaur 4 April 2012)

In contrast, the Place B and C groups remained gender segregated, with the girls remaining indoors with the women, learning household chores.

We were big family, all staying together. So there were so many small kids. Look after them. That's all. Look after them and do sewing, and cross-stitch. That was after lunch, must sit down and do that. (DKaur 11 April 2012)

The boys played outside, engaging mostly in sporting activities and games designed to improve physical prowess.

My brothers and my neighbours, we were about the same age, and we used to run around in a big compound. The house was in a big compound, which was about an acre. So there was ample place to run around. We used to run and play a lot. The most important thing was my grandfather was very strict that he wanted his children to be sportsmen. He will make us do running

around in the house compound, he will make us run, he will make us wrestle. (MSingh 15 March 2012)

In the town area, of area B, the majority of the Sikh families had boys so the girls played with the daughters of the non-Sikh neighbours.

We had Chinese neighbours and then there was a *padang*, a playground in front of us. We were very lucky actually. It wasn't a big playground but enough for games and all that. Across the playground were the labourers' quarters. They had their children. So, you know, we would make up and then our temple, *Gurdwara*, was not far, was about two hundred, three hundred yards from our house. Their children also would come join in. So there would be plenty of us. And badminton. We had my neighbours' children, girls, my father, you know. Come every afternoon that was another outlet. We would play. (CKaur 4 December 2011)

The frequency and forms of interaction between the genders meant the spaces such as the field with the coconut tree or the hill they cycled down became shared places for the Place A set. Furthermore, this on-going and daily interaction created close-knit relationships that continued into adulthood without the connotations of sexual relationships. The narratives frequently referred to games played together and the location of these games, linking place and memory intrinsically with the sense of being a Peraktown Sikh. In contrast, the relationships between the younger Sikhs living in Place B and C occurred at the *Gurdwara* and the school during their childhood and consequently these spaces held more meaning. The gender biases altered as the younger set interacted more at school, in the *Gurdwara* and in each other's homes as they crossed the threshold from childhood to adulthood.

#### **4.6 The School: Subverting forms of knowledge**

All the respondents attended public schools, where fellow students originated from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Studies on diaspora groups and schools focus on the school as a bastion of local and therefore a divergent culture to the home environment and the

issues experienced in negotiating westernised versus Sikh traits and identities. Hall described this conflict of belonging to two cultures in the British context, explaining that:

To seem 'too Indian' or 'other' (in dress, language, accent or demeanour) if one is raised in Britain is to display markers the English view as inferior and attribute to lower class status.... To achieve social mobility, to become members of the British middle class, requires that young Sikhs challenge the barriers of 'racialized' class differences and transform themselves from certain signs of 'Asianness'. (2002 p.191)

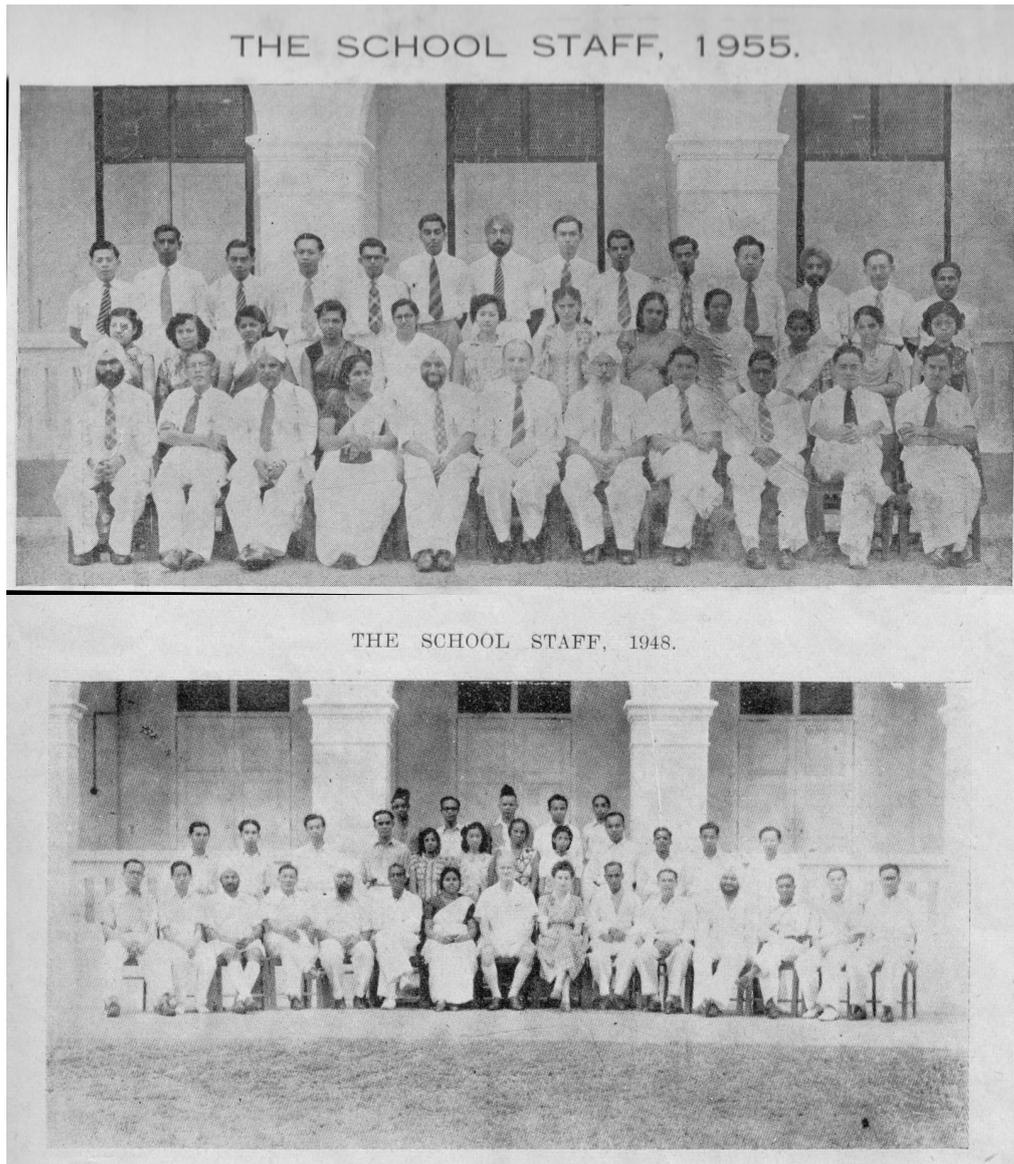
Examining this hybridisation process in the efforts to improve socio-economic status, the Sikhs of Peraktown contested the space of the school as the space of dominant colonial forms of knowledge replete with the expectations of distancing Asianness and becoming British. Bhabha's term of 'projective disincorporation' described the situation in the school environment where the Peraktown Sikhs sought to negotiate a position of identity that functioned in between the colonial interpellation of the Sikh as the fine peasant ready to obey the imperial powers and their own agency, achieved in part through acts of 'sly civility', subverting the relations of power (Bhabha 2004). The teaching staff included a number of the Sikh community. Apart from their turbans, their dress and manner mimicked that of the English headmaster and they played their role as representatives of the colonial curriculum, leading scout packs and introducing cinema nights at the school, showing English films. In contrast to experiences in the Sikh diaspora in Britain, where the traditional values of home and the British norms in the school are often divergent and conflicting (Ghuman, 1991), the Peraktown Sikhs developed a strategy of subverting this division. They used their position to subvert the dominance of Englishness, introducing inter-generational closure in the school environment to ensure retention of home values including respect for elders and family honour and to assist members of the community,

either in the classroom or after graduation to recommend them for temporary teaching positions.

You know I got a grade three only. And my maths was very poor. He was our maths teacher and actually I failed once. So 'All those who failed stand up' so I stood up. 'Hey, why you are standing? Sit down, you have passed.' It was so nice. Your grandfather will be remembered forever. (USingh 11 April 2012)

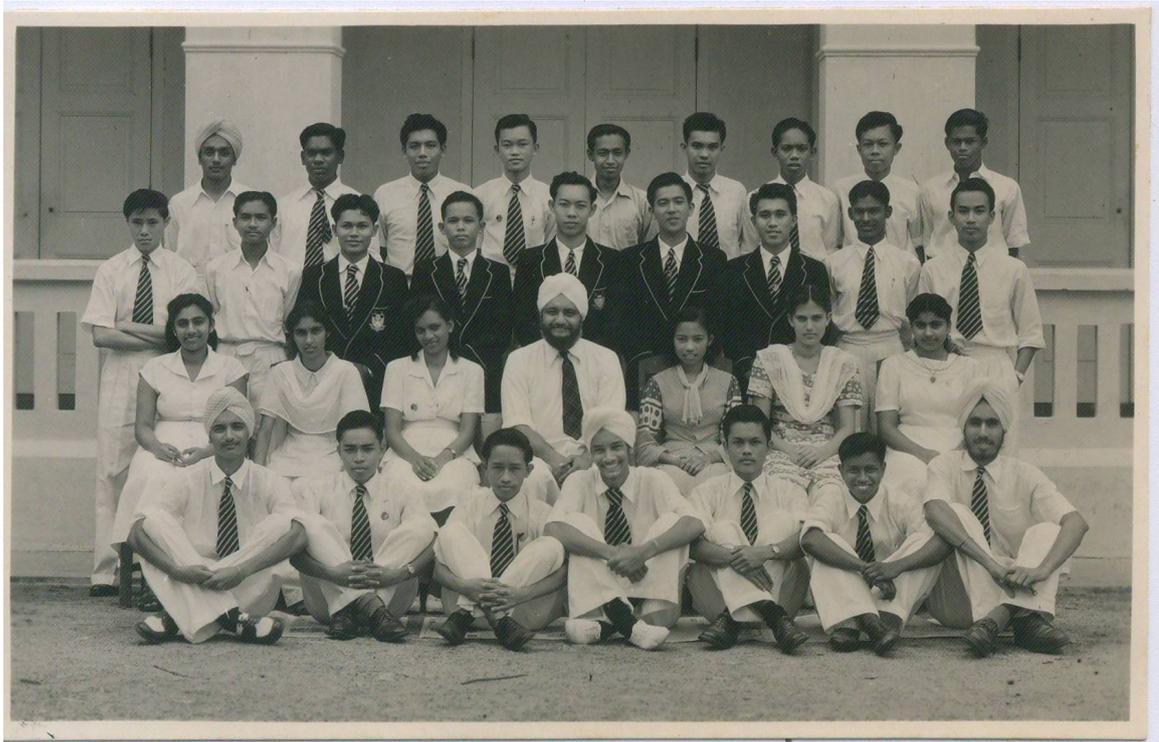
We had very good teachers, Sikh teachers were teaching regular school and right from the principal or the headmaster then we used to call headmaster Mr KKGFSingh, Master NSFSingh, Master JKFSingh, Master EKFSingh, Master LSFSingh, all these teachers took a special interest in the Sikh students and they guided us very well and they were always you know, concern that we do well in our education. (OSingh 12 April 2012)

The Peraktown Sikhs in the teaching faculty demanded the inclusion of Punjabi as a language subject for the school certificate, pre-empting the common challenge faced in Sikh diaspora communities relating to native language retention. The community created ways of being within this multi-ethnic and multicultural space that privileged the values within their own culture they wished to retain and adopted the traits of 'independent thinking, confident and assertive self-presentation, self-direction and individual autonomy ...' (Hall 2002 p.183).



**Figure 7: Government English School staff photos**

The government school system in Peraktown followed the standard British education model of the period, covering a curriculum of English Literature, Geography, History, Science, Latin and Mathematics with emphasis on sport and extra-curricular activities including Prefects, Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, school concerts and a debating society.



**Figure 8: Prefects at Government English School - early 1950s**

The first government school in the town was co-educational at all levels until 1948 when a girls' school opened to cater for primary classes. The Sikh community represented well at the school, with four Sikh teachers in 1948, increasing as students returned after graduating to undertake teacher training and the majority of the children in the community attended.

We had Mr KKGFSingh, who was a fellow teacher with my dad in Government School, EKFSingh, who lived down the road, and also Mr JKFSingh also down the road, another teacher, and they were around High Road. While in school it was a very mixed school, there was no problems among the various racial groups, I took Malay for Senior Cambridge and I passed my Malay. (NSingh 9 April 2012)

I continued to study and the school in which I studied was Government School, Peraktown, very famous till today and some of the teachers I'll never forget. Mr EKFSingh, who taught us Punjabi classes in the afternoons because the school couldn't accommodate our education in the morning plus classes like vernacular classes in between and Mr KKGFSingh, he was my

math's teacher, who always had to knock my head and say, you can do it. You just have to do it but I think I didn't get to do it. Somehow, I always got very low marks in my Mathematics. He tried his best, I can still remember, that's your grandfather and then we were shifted in Form 3, we had to go a girls school. From Government School, we went to Government Girls School and went to study. The Government Girls School I completed up to Form 3, that means one year only we were there, or maybe two years if I'm not mistaken, and then back again to Government School Form 4 and Form 5. So, I remember some of my classmates like KKUSingh, he was one of them, our monitor, very hardworking, and he has done very well in life. And so I was an average student but I passed my Form 5. (HKaur 21 May 2012)

The Sikh teachers at the school monitored the behaviour and performance in studies of the members of the community, providing a clearly defined set of expectations that included working hard at lessons, demonstrating exemplary behaviour and participating in sports and school activities.

My father was in the Government School, my uncle was in the Government School, I was in Government School, my son was in the Government School. So we were three generations, father and uncle the same generation, myself, my son in the same school, Government School, Peraktown. During my time, the headmaster was Mr KKGFSingh. JKFSingh was also my teacher. He used to teach us maths. One thing I remember about Mr KKGFSingh was that if you could not answer the maths questions, he will come to you and give you a pinch. He will pinch you in your stomach and then when you go home, you dare not tell your parents. Because if you will tell them, you will get a beating. (MSingh 15 March 2012)

The Peraktown Sikhs highlighted a lack of ethnic or religious divisions within the school environment. The space of the school allowed for friendships between members from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

I went to school in 1932. My father had also studied in the same school but it was called Government English School. I started in primary one. The students were all mixed. Malays, Chinese, Indians, Sikhs and there was no racial feeling at all. Absolutely no. (SSingh 16 December 2011)

We did our schooling and we used to have a wonderful time with games, you know. At that time, we had no such thing as you are Malay, you are Chinese or anything. We were all one whole group, you know. We would all get together and I remember we used to play hockey, we used to play netball, and then we used to have inter-school sports. (IKaur 29 September 2012)

However there remained a sense of an inner circle surrounding membership to the Sikh community.

We started going to school, the whole group used to go to school together. So, when we used to go together we were about 6 to 7 of us, because we went after the war. Some of them were already above age, but still they were taken in because after the war, the age had already passed, but they were allowed to go to school. And we were about 10 of us in the same school. So, nobody dared disturbed us; we used to be the kings of the school. Then we started playing games. Every event we used to take part, running, athletics, football. (MSingh 15 March 2012)

Despite the small number of the community, the Sikh students represented well, both in scholastic aptitude and in sporting prowess. The school magazines contained photos of sporting teams, the yearly academic prizes and notes on school clubs. Inevitably, a Peraktown Sikh appeared in each section.

I played for the under 15s hockey, played soccer for the school, I was the second eleven captain, once in a while I used to play for the first eleven, but I was permanently the second eleven captain and I was pretty good in soccer. Played rugby for school, combined schools. In athletics, I was a pole-vaulter. I went to Perak Combined Schools for pole vault. I don't know whether I am still holding the javelin record in Government School. I created a javelin record and I used to run the relay for the inter-house relay. H House, which had a green colour as our colour. Because I was a good cricketer as well, I was a right arm bowler and for my bowling achievement, I was given school colours in athletics, soccer, cricket, hockey and rugby. I was made a school prefect, I was the school prefect as well and in '59 when I left school, I became a temporary teacher. (NSingh 9 April 2012)

Girls remained a small minority in contrast to the boys. In 1948, the total number of pupils was seven hundred and forty-nine, which

included one hundred and seventy-four girls (School Magazine 1948). These numbers altered significantly with the opening of the girls school as all girls below Standard Five moved to the new school. In the school space, some gender divisions echoed the expectations placed on the Sikh women in the home environment. The female students attended Girl's Club, at which they received lessons on hygiene, domestic duties, how to manage household budgets and charitable works. In large, this was in response to the social mores of the period and commonly held expectations of women. The community supported the emphasis on gendered roles, allowing their daughters to attend Girls Club but also encouraged participation in non-traditional activities in keeping with their increasingly equitable expectations for women. The Sikhs of Peraktown accepted the participation of their girls in other areas at the school, including school sports and in the debating society quite clearly in contradiction to the experiences of more modern Sikh diaspora populations where the value of education and the degrees of freedom and equality between men and women remain restricted. Drury in her study on Sikh girls in Nottingham concluded that they wanted more 'choice and freedom and fewer restrictions for females with regard to: clothing norms; recreational and social activities; boyfriends and marriage partners and domestic responsibilities' (Drury, 1991 p.398). In Peraktown, the issue of interaction with members of the opposite sex and concerns about dating did not arise despite the entrenched notion of family *izzat* as bound up with the public behaviour, honour and perceived chastity of women, however, certain expectations regarding dress and norms of modest behaviour remained.

Ours was a co-education school. That's where we all were together like your dad and a lot of the boys I know. We were all together but you know, we were kids. We really had a good, like brothers and sisters sort of attitude. (EKaur 8 March 2012)

The community trusted in the values and norms imparted to their children and in combination with the presence of community elders in

roles of authority in the school space, this resulted in greater freedom for the women.

The Peraktown Sikhs inscribed through their presence and their actions, a sense of connectedness and ownership of place in the school environment. Despite their visibly different physical appearance, clearly demarcating them as the 'other' in the school environment, the Sikhs experienced no sense of discrimination. They interacted with other students regardless of socio-economic class, ethnicity or religion, receiving recognition for their achievements, academically and socially. In contrast to the conflict between mainstream society and diasporic values and norms described in other studies (Bhachu, 1985; Drury, 1991; K. Hall, 1993; K. D. Hall, 2002; Nayar, 2004; Nesbitt, 1980; Singh & Tatla, 2006), the Sikhs of Peraktown embraced the opportunities offered in the school environment, tempering this with the reinforcement through the presence of Sikh teachers, the continued veracity of home values. The Peraktown Sikh community participated and engaged with all spaces within the school, subverting the dominant cultural habitus by appropriating the colonial forms of knowledge they deemed necessary for socio-economic mobility, adapted cultural practices to acquire the skills and behaviour best suited to improving family status yet they maintained and enforced the norms and values of their private space. As a result, minimal conflict occurred between the norms and values espoused in the public space of the school environment and those practised in the private spaces of home or the *Gurdwara*.

#### **4.7 Work places, gendered spaces**

In the previous sections, I highlighted the created meaning assigned to the domestic space and the shared spaces within Peraktown, describing the process of transforming the *Pindh* from a physical location to that of a category of meaning, encompassing norms, behaviours and values. An important component of this self-identification within the framework

of the Peraktown *Pindh* relates to the places of work. In Section 2.6, the school represents both a space of subversion for the liminal generation but also the work place and construction of behaviour and practice within the older generation, who worked as teachers. Sikhs in Malaysia at this time viewed teaching as a status-increasing profession or entering temporary teaching as a means of funding their further education goals. In Peraktown, in addition to the choice of entering the teaching profession for family status, the Sikh teaching staff included members of the community perceived to be influential as community elders or what was previously known in Punjab as the *Panchayat*. The distinctive position they held as influencers of community habitus allowed them greater engagement in forming community norms and behaviours. In addition, they felt the responsibility to ensure that members of the liminal generation achieved better educational and professional outcomes than that of their parents' generation. Working in concert with influences in the home, the Sikh teachers played a distinctive role in the Peraktown community. The idea of the workplace is something known and familiar to the community, as a place within the British administrative framework with implicit knowledge of dominant culture behaviours required to successfully function and progress. However, it is important to note that the notion of workplace is a highly gendered definition, with only the men of the community included in this negotiation of power within a social space. Workplaces largely remained defined as the civil service institutions that the fathers of the community worked at and the places to which the liminal generation aspired to enter. This automatically excluded the members of the community working outside this framework, relegating their work to signify a lesser position of power. One of the things the community did not directly address in their narratives was an open acceptance of this distinction of class and privilege. There was an inherent and intrinsic acceptance of class as a position of power, with participation

and engagement with the British colonial administration assigned higher value.

They were already working in the civil service. Two of my uncles were working in civil service; my father was in the Health Ministry in the civil service so it is highly unlikely that they would go back to India. My uncle was in the election commissions and he also got an OBE. He was a Justice of Peace, he was very well known, and very respected guy. (TSingh 30 November 2011)

The deferral of privilege to the consideration of white apportioned social and cultural norms and behaviours implied that to some extent, status and position required a denial of your own heritage.

My own father was a preacher and farmer. He was doing both these things and people in the government service of course were more advanced and doing much better than him. (HKaur 4 April 2012)

The question lies within the discourse of Englishness as perceived to be superior to rural Punjabi traditions, and this placed an emphasis on appropriation as opposed to retention of heritage culture. A large part of this originates from the perception of security and the community's relationship to the state, where working within the British civil service provided a sense of being shielded within the framework and institutions of the colonial state. The civil service therefore became something aspired to for the Peraktown Sikhs. This perception resulted in work or involvement in enterprise or manual labour being less valued or respected, making jobs such as moneylending, transportation services such as bullock carting and small scale farming less of a career aspiration and seen as of lesser status. Larger scale landownership including plantations, however, provided some degree of respectability as land continued to hold social and material currency within the community.

This discourse, however, focused solely on the male-dominated physical locations of places of work, ignoring the female spaces of meaning

during the period. The respondents mentioned the careers of their fathers and grandfathers; yet retained women in their narratives to the domestic space and the roles played there.

My uncles used to tell me, you know, if the child turns out to be good, it's because of all the hard work put in by the mother. She spends most time and therefore she can mould him the way things, what is good and what is right and what is wrong. (TSingh 7 March 2012)

However, stories and narratives open up a space to contest assumptions and ideas, allowing meaning to alter from the preconceived, and as de Certeau described, 'this delinquency begins with the inscription of the body in the order's text' (1984 p.130). Women's spaces are implicated in Peraktown with the continued retention of homeland culture, behaviours and values.

She came to Malaysia in 1934 and she had to settle down in the family, adjust herself in the family. She was quite a smart lady and she picked up English and she picked up even Punjabi, she learned how to read and write Punjabi on her own and she could do a lot of things. When she came to Malaysia, in Peraktown, most of the ladies in Peraktown used to come to our house to learn from my mother how to make sweet *mittai* or sweetmeats, stitching, and printing on the clothes and then they used to do embroidery, my mother used to teach them sewing my mother used to teach them, making *mittai*, *laddu*, all Punjabi sweetmeats used to be taught by her. If you ask HKFSingh, the priest in Peraktown, his daughter is around here, she used to come and learn from my mother. She could also do many other things. Many of the people during the war when the people were staying there, she used to do a lot of work. She was quite young and she used to do quite a lot of work, cooking and all that. She was very good in cooking and she was such a neat person even till her old age she used to keep her things very nicely, orderly manner. My grandfather used to call her the jewel of the house. That's what my grandfather used to tell us that she's the jewel of the house. She was such a smart lady. (MSingh 15 March 2012)

As discussed in previous chapters, women hold an important place within Sikh culture, as the embodiment of *izzat*, holding the responsibility for ensuring the transmission of appropriate cultural

values and behaviours commensurate with the idea of the 'good family'. In Peraktown, as these behaviours and values, considered part of the mythology and symbolism of a 'good family' altered, incorporating the importance of an English education and adaptation to religious practice, so too did the role of women in the home alter to include these new values and norms.

I tell you a story, when I used to go to school, my mother had a little maid, you know, she was about eleven, twelve years old. She was the gardener's daughter. So, she used to come in the morning to help us about the house, to hang out the clothes to dry, to sweep the house. But in the afternoon because after school, she'll send her home to school. So, this is something, which I never questioned her on. Because to her, education was 'the' thing. She says, I am not having opportunity to be educated but all my children will be educated. And she insisted my father did. My father was also on that line of thinking because children must be educated. Girls or boys, no difference. (BKaur 7 December 2011)

My mother had not gone to school but nevertheless she place a lot of importance on good education and she was the one who always insisted, rain or shine that we go to school and she always used to say that with good education you will be able to overcome many of the difficulties that you are currently facing and she always used to say that if you have good education, this is something that nobody can take away from you because what you have with that you can make money and you can have a better quality of life. (OSingh 12 April 2013)

Women became implicated in the production of a new habitus, promoting a feeling towards the English education system as needed for socio-economic benefit and the improvement of family status. In addition, post-Japanese Occupation, the importance on educating both men and women was marked. The idea of resilience and strong beliefs is then obvious, with the descriptions of women in the community incorporating their adaptation and acceptance of new forms of behaviour.

I think the Sikh women were very strong; they were very independent in their own way. Because even mother, she would never ask anybody to do anything. She would get on the bus, she would find out where to go, and she would do everything on her own. No depending on anybody. Otherwise, get on the bicycle. You know, those days the Sikh women used to be cycling around a lot. Mother, smaller towns, like in Peraktown, you could cycle around even though it's a hilly place, you could still cycle. But not as nowadays, not now. And, not really, you know, most of them like mother and all, she had a little bit of money. She was getting from the estate their father had left them. You know, that was the thing that I always admired about my grandpa, my Nanaji, because he had three sons and three daughters. Our people would give everything to the sons and they will say the girls are getting married, they are marrying somebody out of our family, so why should we give our property to an outsider. So they didn't believe in that. And they would give everything to the sons, and the girls were never given anything. And this one, our grandfather, he gave some land to the three sisters, and it wasn't a very big deal but it brought income for years and years. (EKaur 8 March 2012)

As the times changed, the women of the community adapted to incorporate these new behaviours and expectations, ensuring that the women of the liminal generation did not experience the lacks of their own position in society, providing them room of their own to develop and acquire valuable skills towards improving family status. Initially, career choices remained limited, focusing on the potential for jobs that accommodated traditional roles for women.

The father especially will say 'good for a girl to join the teaching profession'. Then I being teacher will also feel that it is good because for a lady when she comes home, she got more time for the family. (HKaur 4 April 2012)

However, the notion of jobs positioning the family towards increasingly improved social and economic status replaced the focus on defining appropriate positions for women.

I think my family, it was not the modern type. In the education side, they were modern, but in the living side, dress and all that, they were traditional. Educationally my father was very broadminded. He gave education to his daughters. When at that

time, girls were stopped from schooling at Standard 5. And then the two girls, sisters of mine, were the first doctors in Perak. (SSingh 29 March 2012)

The respondents mention stories told by their mothers and grandmothers, providing a framework for the change to the status of women, linking it back to the cultural history of the Sikh religion.

Yeah, yeah, there were warrior women and I was going to say about the warrior women, particularly with Guru Gobind Singh's son, they got angry with their husbands because they, during the fight, they got nervous about it and they came back, and they said, 'You sit at home and wear the salwar. We are going out to fight.' (CKaur 25 March 2012)

The women, through their experiences as the heads of the family, during the Japanese Occupation period commenced the process of extending the boundaries of the clear, gendered definition of space within Peraktown to allow for new behaviours and positions for their children in contrast to the 'gendered double standard' described in other studies (Durham, 2004 p.144). The importance of the home sphere continued to hold veracity but gender roles evolved to encompass the performance of roles outside the home hearth, allowing for an alteration to domestic pattern.

I think that I wanted to be educated person. I wanted to be someone if I could. As much as I could do, I will try and do, and I'll really put in effort, you know, and I really did. (HKaur 21 March 2013)

Through these experiences, the liminal generation of women enjoyed the opportunity to make new choices, opting for further study or work that took them away from the traditional role of 'woman' in Sikh culture, as the keeper of the kitchen and the raiser of the children.

Examining further this emphasis on types and places of work considered as higher status positions, the Peraktown *Pindh* habitus changed, allowing for a better understanding of the dominant culture exemplified by the emphasis on an English education to find careers within the

British administration and later, the civil service under an independent Malaysia, that until 1969, remained little altered.

Education was important because most of the Sikhs in Peraktown were government servants and they wanted their children to be educated and join the government service or get jobs, unless of course they can do higher studies like become a doctor or engineer. So there was no other alternative unless plantations, there were few, very few, but mostly were the Chinese and the others. So the Sikhs mostly what they could do was join the civil service. So, they wanted them to get a job and in those days, Sikhs wanted their children to join the government knowing that at least it's a secure job plus at the end of the day, they will be pensionable. And in those days, pensionable was quite a good income. (MSingh 7 February 2012)

This preference towards a career in the government service brought with it the added knowledge and acceptance of movement and relocation, as these positions often meant accepting transfers for promotion or moving to the larger city and towns.

In 1959, when I left school, I became a temporary teacher. By that time, my dad was already the headmaster of Government English School Lenggong, but initially I was a temporary teacher, teaching in a Malay school on the way to Lenggong, a place called Raban, just short of about 30 to 40 minutes short of Lenggong. I taught there for about four months and then dad managed to get me to go to Lenggong because I was the driver, I used to drive the car and so I taught in Lenggong until he got posted as Registrar of Secondary Schools, Selangor, and I left teaching and I went to Australia for this training. (NSingh 9 April 2012)

My whole family moved to Peraktown. My brothers as well as myself attended Government School in Peraktown. But after my lower secondary education, I moved on to study in Anglo Chinese School, Ipoh and after my Higher School Certificate, I went on to study in the University of Malaya. Upon graduation, I applied and I was fortunate to join the administrative and diplomatic service. So, in that administrative and diplomatic service I was fortunate enough to be sent back, one of the very few non-Malays to work and as an assistant district officer in the state of Perak. I serve in the district of Larut and Matang, Taiping. And the district of Kinta that is in Batu Gajah as well as Kampar and then finally I also serve in the district of Peraktown, my own hometown. (OSingh 12 April 2013)

The Peraktown Sikhs comprehended the transient nature of residency in the physical space of Peraktown, leading to the evolution of the *Pindh* as a *Pindh* of the mind. This became a sense of belonging to a community that evolved, as an idea and a category of meaning dependent on evocation of the bond through requests or shared memory on meeting or through phone conversations. The liminal generation used the common bond of belonging to negotiate preferred transfers for work, tapping into the new networks their fellow *Pindh* members formed through marriage or career progression.

So attending a course in the Ministry and after that I think on the last day three of us actually, myself and two other chaps, we went to the Ministry and we wanted to invite one of the deputy directors for a dinner. So, it happened to be one of our countrymen. I think you must have already met them, CKHSingh, Doctor CKHSingh. So, we went to invite him. Then after he turned around and said, 'RSingh, you are going back to Muar as MOH Muar'. (RSingh 8 April 2012)

The power of the Peraktown *Pindh* as a continually valid category of meaning did not require constant maintenance of relationships to remain valid but could be activated at need or at will. Any space is transformable to a place of meaning and to a location of the *Pindh* of the mind, regardless of geography or time. A number of the liminal generation moved to Australia to further their studies and through their narratives, it is clear that the sense of community continued in the new place of residence.

But life in Australia was not easy, in that we were lucky that we had about six people from Peraktown itself studying in Adelaide. So, we had the comradeship there. (CKaur 4 December 2011)

KKUSingh, NonSikhAMale, and my late cousin, EKCSingh, we were all in one group. I don't know, I think we all somehow got together and we decided we wanted to go to Adelaide. I really can't think what made us think about Adelaide. Somebody must have told us about Adelaide and that Adelaide was accepting students from overseas. I think Adelaide was one of the first

places.... So quite a lot of these doctors were there so I cooked. They all known to us from here so we kept up to it. All of them, all the boys, three or four of them were in one house, so weekends, 'Come over, cook curry for us.' So, CKaur and I used to go over, now and then and cook curry, chapattis and all that for these boys. So, they would have a party and all, but we never, ever took a drink. That was one thing we girls never took a drink. (EKaur 8 March 2012)

Regardless of location, the sense of kinship remained constant, as the community members completed their studies and others arrived to commence their degrees. Following the completion of tertiary studies, the respondents returned to Malaysia, to seek work within the civil service, however, the majority did not return to Peraktown, settling instead, wherever their job postings took them, usually sufficiently distant from their family home. The challenges of coping with a distinctly different culture during their university years little affected their relationships within the *Pindh*. The liminal generation commenced their careers predominantly in the civil service, contracted marriages, had children and for the most part, settled into the rituals of daily life within the Malaysian context. For many, they moved family into close proximity or opened up their new households to the extended family, with many sharing their homes with their parents. During the interview process, I posed a question regarding the sense of belonging or their evolving relationships with the older generation following the divergent paths of overseas tertiary education, life in a larger city and a disconnect from living within a township where the social connections remained largely heterogeneous regardless of the multicultural environment.

I didn't find it difficult. I didn't find it difficult. When I came back, you see, I the first two months or three months I stayed with my sister. You know. They were in Ipoh. The one immediately senior to me. And then I got my own house. You know, so when I got my house, my mum and dad came and stayed. So, I did nothing in the house. [laughter] My mum was housekeeping. Father was there. I'm actually, not a party person so I didn't miss anything. I think this was one reason why I didn't fit in with the Australian

youngsters. I was non drinker, non smoker. You know. I wore my Punjabi costume. So, they mistook me to be an ultra religious person. I think. So hard to break through. So, when I came back as I said, those habits I didn't have it I didn't miss it. My mum and dad would be simple. (CKaur 6 March 2012)

Reading *Border Country* and thinking about the experiences of the Welsh working class, entering the dominant culture of grammar schools and elite universities, I anticipated a sense of disconnectedness between the older generation and the liminal generation respondents. Matthew Price returns to his birthplace in rural Wales, encountering a community with little change, where the rhythms of daily life remain concomitant with the memories and experiences of his childhood and youth. His lived experience within the dominant British, elite educational institution culture contrasted markedly with his remembering of his working-class and unionist influenced childhood, within a close-knit society. Matthew lived in a space where casual conversation with neighbours or passers-by is uncommon; where life is composed of a self-centred individualism. Williams described this divergence between the working class origins and the white-collar professional as a vast and untraverseable divide, forcing the acceptance, of new modes of thought being constantly in conflict with home culture and values, as Matthew described (Williams 2006). In contrast, the Peraktown *Pindh* altered to accommodate and accept a divergence from inherited traditions and values, ensuring that the older generation, for the most part, attempted to keep pace with the members of the liminal generation, accompanied by the acknowledgement of the debt owed and the precepts of 'good family' behaviour, in their continued respect and honour towards their elders. The change and movement from the small-town environment of Peraktown, towards the new ways of negotiating life in the bigger cities meant an alteration to the construction and meaning of the Peraktown *Pindh*. As a dominant structure of feeling during their growing up years, the *Pindh* alters to become a residual structure, only evoked on need.

#### 4.8 Summarising the *Pindh* as place

Key findings in this chapter included firstly, the adaptation of homeland traditions, spatial relationships and place meanings to the areas of settlement. The Peraktown Sikhs translated the inherited connection to the land and the inherent romantic nostalgia for Punjabi *Pindh*, recreating the meanings it contained and inscribing these on the physical map of the town. The key elements of the rural tradition, included the vesting of a group of elders as an informal *Panchayat*, situating this in physical spaces defined by regional affiliations, socio-economic position and family status. The community continued to attribute importance in their self-identification to owning and working the land, the communal living spaces and the continued enforcement of inherited norms and values demonstrated the cogency of home as a 'mythic place of desire'. However, in the process of place making in the multi-ethnic and diverse cultural milieu they lived in, the home became a space of confluence, between the traditional and the dominant culture habitus both in physical appearance and in the enunciation of meaning created through daily practice. As described in Section 4.1, the use of the home space incorporated the English language, the value for education and the steady adaptation of gender roles alongside the importance of daily prayer, the kitchen and its traditional food and the intimate use of Punjabi language. The 'lived experience of the locality', becomes home as the community constructed a place within the space of the town through their balancing adaptation to the new and their retention of the old.

Secondly, while the home encapsulated the dichotomy of traditional and modern, the *Gurdwara* remained a space wholly encapsulating Sikh cultural and religious meanings. Additionally, the *Gurdwara* developed as a place of cooperation between all members of the Peraktown Sikh community, with no distinctions of caste, class or gender practiced in the space. In Section 4.2, I described how within the walls, the notion

of family encompassed all the community, through the sharing of food, the participation in the religious service and the pitching into assist in preparations for functions regardless of which family hosted the event. The practice of the religion remained the same and the special links between community history, cultural beliefs and values and the sensory geography of the ancestral home allowed the meaningful transmission of primordial ties relevant and meaningful. It offered a place owned wholly by the Sikh community, a place apart from the push and pull between assimilation and resistance inherent in diasporic life.

Thirdly, in the public spaces of the Peraktown physical environment, the interaction between traditional constructs of Sikh identity and the new cultural competencies demanded by settlement in Malaya, caused a complex process of negotiating between maintaining a balance and the contestation over the practice of these norms and values. The three public spaces described different enunciations of meaning, with the Native Club defined as the source of accumulating the rhetoric of Englishness, the playing fields became the places of community cohesion and the school developed as a contested space through the practice of adopting, adapting and then becoming adept at challenging the English acculturation processes. The Native Club despite its origins as a part of the colonial administration instead, through practice, became a place where forms of knowledge were acquired, then processed and used to strengthen community position. It offered the opportunity to acquire the veneer of Englishness and networks to the local elite, ensuring improved career prospects, inside avenues to public institutions and laws and a familiarity with the hierarchy of the local environment. The playing fields and the appropriation of public space demonstrated the confidence held by the community in their right to claim these spaces and to subsume their original purpose for their own use. The narratives of playing together demonstrated the extent to which these places held meaning for the Peraktown Sikhs and their role

in building closer linkages between the different families and between gender groups. The school space, as discussed in Section 4.6, in contrast demonstrates the complexity of transmitting community expectations, norms and behaviours in opposition to the local habitus of the colonial school environment. The forms of knowledge deemed valuable became part of communal practice yet simultaneously; the Peraktown Sikhs actively contested the domination of other ethnic groups in the classes and staffrooms. Through the use of their positions on the staff, the elders of the Sikh community prioritised community needs and encouraged adaptations to norms such as gender equity while ensuring continued enforcement of key traditions such as a respect for elders and the ethos for hard work, all designed to improve the socio-economic status of the community as a whole.

Fourthly, the Peraktown *Pindh* formations displayed a clear conceptualisation of gendered space, with the early years of liminal generation lived experience demonstrating a clear distinction between the idea of male spaces, which included the places of work and public spaces as contrasted to the intimate and traditional-value dominated female spaces of the home and hearth. The evolution to the role of women, described in Section 4.7, saw a marked change to this black and white distinction of space usage, with women traversing the boundaries to enter the school space and the workforce. However, women remained largely implicated in the reproduction of traditional or homeland culture, with the definition of 'good family' behaviours being transmitted and policed within the home space. However, the traditional definition of the home as a space of women alters, to incorporate the new value towards education and specifically the English language, and this is added to the range of behaviours and norms transmitted within this gendered context, by the womenfolk. These practices altered the meaning assigned to belonging within the Peraktown *Pindh*. They evolved to a Peraktown specific habitus, where the dominant structures

of feeling included value for the reading and practice of Sikh scripture, the retention of Punjabi as a language, the behaviours commensurate with the notion of the 'good family' and the focus and attention on ensuring an English education and tertiary studies. Belonging requires a diversity of actions and behaviours. This chapter examined the manifestation of a common Peraktown Sikh community identity through their movements and actions within the physical space of the township. My results suggest that the use of space played a critical role in community self-definition through the diverse repertoires of social and cultural relationships.

Place making situated the community within the physical environment, transforming or contesting spaces in order to find a way to connect with and belong. In diaspora communities, much of these representations of social behaviour, cultural histories and spatial functions act in concert to adapt nostalgia for places they know through stories and negotiating diverse social contexts of back there and here. Through interactions with other ethnic groups and social classes, the community found the means to tap into localised social networks of power. In the long term, this offered access to career promotions and information on educational and professional opportunities either in Malaya or overseas. The construction and reinforcement of an ethnic group identity as demonstrated by the Peraktown Sikhs extends discourse beyond essentialised or primordial classifications for belonging. The different components within the community made use of spaces, experiences and priorities in unique ways, yet they created a new meaning of cohesiveness. The movements of the Peraktown Sikhs across the map of Peraktown, through their walking, working, interacting and simply being transforms the space into a place of meaning, making it a familiar place, in essence, the Peraktown *Pindh*. As the community dispersed, across the map of Malaysia and the world, this altered, with the *Pindh* relationship becoming of less paramount than new families,

neighbourhoods and place of work. However, the saliency of the Peraktown *Pindh* as a category of meaning continues in a more abstracted fashion, with members understanding and acknowledging their belonging and identification to this category, regardless of how far they journey, socially, economically and geographically. The Peraktown *Pindh* becomes a representation of relationships, connecting its members through a loosely linked web, where it is acknowledged and understood that they continue to belong but the activation of these networks occurred only at need, becoming less a physical representation of their place of origin and more a *Pindh* of the mind.

## **5 The *Pindh* as boundaries**

The previous chapters described the Peraktown *Pindh* in terms of historical origins and meaning within the homeland and the transposition of the framing elements of this uniquely Sikh category of meaning within the diaspora and eventually on to the topography and landscape of the town itself. The Japanese Occupation in the memory of the Peraktown *Pindh* marked the transformation of the community, troubling their relationship to the British Empire as a source of security. During this period of destabilisation caused by the passage of external events, the concept of the Peraktown *Pindh* evolved, from a physical location and the structure of social hierarchies to an affiliation of relationships with its own unique set of norms, values, traditions and beliefs. This chapter examines the significant symbols and rituals and that clearly defined common culture and the boundaries of belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh* and conversely, the transgressions against common self-identification. Sikh culture places great importance on family and kinship, the shared practice of their religious faith and the central life cycle ritual of marriage. In the Peraktown Sikh community, these cultural markers continued, yet as they adapted to their position within the locality, the traditional methods and beliefs associated with

these markers and symbols altered to accommodate the new social, cultural and political landscape where they lived. As Cohen explained, 'people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity' (1985 p.118). In the process of Peraktown *Pindh* boundary construction, I described the naming and definition of common norms and values learnt within the family, enforced, and adapted at the community level in Sections 3.1 to 3.5. In Sections 3.6 to 3.8, I examined the evolution of hierarchical structures social distinctions and the adoption of new behaviours and practices at the community level then enforced in the home. Here, I explored the practice of joining, in the respect and value for English language and education, the religious beliefs and faith expressed through shared moments of prayer and participation in *Gurdwara* activities and the transformation in marriage customs and practice. Finally, I discussed the moments of rupture, focusing on outward appearances of being Sikh in Section 3.7 and on marriage practices in Sections 3.9 to 3.12 and the subsequent adaptation of defined community habitus and rules of behaviour to allow the reintegration of transgressing members within the boundaries of belonging to the *Pindh*. The Peraktown *Pindh* did not rest solely on geographical location, but required subscription to a commonly constituted 'truth'. It functioned as a social construct, inscribed through a discursive practice and everyday lived experience, with social structures originating from the *Pindh* in Punjab, adapted within the geographical constraints of Peraktown and eventually expanding to the world at large, unfixed in space or time for members of the Peraktown Sikh community. It represented the multiplicity of real and imagined spaces in the creation of home, where identity originated from myriad other strands, the earlier homes, their history of self-definition and being defined rather than with arrival in a new land or citizenship papers. The Peraktown *Pindh* is the place where the Peraktown Sikhs live, a place of belonging.

## 5.1 Naming themselves

Within the Sikh community, the naming of a child at birth is a life cycle ritual, offering the child a place within the Sikh faith. When a child is born, representatives from the family, usually including the father, attend a ceremony at their local *Gurdwara*, at which a priest randomly opens the Sikh holy book and reads the first verse on that page. The letter of the alphabet the verse begins with then becomes the first letter of the child's name. The ritual symbolises the welcoming of the child into the Sikh faith and the congregation, giving him or her a place within the world, a primordial identity or loyalty and a place of belonging. During the early data collection process, I asked each respondent to name all members of the Sikh community they remembered living in Peraktown. Their responses included the same families, confirming the boundaries of membership to this category of meaning, limiting it to the Sikh population present during the Japanese Occupation. Naming themselves and naming the other families defines the membership and identification, incorporating these named members of the Sikh community into this particular place of belonging, the Peraktown *Pindh*. Naming defined the boundaries of belonging and assigned a particular meaning, immediately comprehensible to others who belonged in the same unit or group. In the following sections, I describe the naming of familial ties and the sense of kinship, the defining of familial and societal roles, the relaxation of strict social distinctions based on place of origin and caste and the degree to which these categories continued to hold relevance as the category of meaning, the Peraktown *Pindh* evolved. The community developed a new understanding of social positions, reduced the enforcement of hierarchical difference, incorporated dominant culture norms and values and adapted their inherited culture and beliefs in pursuit of maintaining or improving socio-economic status and to provide a space of meaning where all the members of the community found, in the Peraktown *Pindh*, a space of belonging.

## 5.2 Naming the boundaries of family

The Sikh diaspora originates from rural, agrarian origins and the family forms the basic constituent unit social organisation and the foundational site of transmitting norms and social values. In the Peraktown Sikh community, the family unit formed the keystone of identity and respondents defined themselves through familial and kinship ties, as a component part of the family whole rather than as individuals. Through the process of storytelling, respondents situated themselves within his or her own family unit, through the naming of names, the inclusion of parents and grandparents and their stories. In naming themselves within the narrative of family history or community history, the respondents make clear their familial connections.

I was born in Peraktown on 2 October 1939. My family have been staying in Peraktown for six generations, starting from my great grandfather, my grandfather, my father, myself, my son and my granddaughters. The first person to come to Peraktown was my great grandfather. He came to settle down in Peraktown around 1897. And then he bought an estate, he stayed there and then he shifted over to Peraktown. He bought a house in Peraktown in the area that time named after my grandfather. My great grandfather bought that house in the year 1904 and then the whole generation has been staying there till today. He came with a cousin MSGGUSingh, and he settled down in Peraktown and then he had his son who was four years old when he came from India and a daughter. They were only two who survived there. My grandfather's name was MSGFSingh. He was educated in Malaysia and he bought plantations in Peraktown. They owned quite a number of estates. At that time to have an estate was quite an achievement. My grandfather had three children. Their names were MSUSingh, the eldest, who passed away when he was about 20 years old, then MSFSingh, who was my father and another was MSU2Singh who was a lawyer. My father, MSFSingh, continued as a planter, looking after the family estates. He had five sons and two daughters. Their names were MSB1Singh, who was the eldest, MSB2Singh, and MSingh, that's me, and then MSB3Singh, and MSB4Singh, and two daughters, MSS1Kaur and MSS2Kaur. (MSingh 29 December 2011)

The act of naming of family members, grandparents, parents and siblings situated the subjects within the kinship traditions of Sikh

cultural life, reinforcing the meaning and value placed on belonging to the family. In narratives, most respondents included the details of their family's settlement in Peraktown providing a foundational memory as a source of their connection to the *Pindh*. The prominent display of family photographs in the respondents' homes underscored the importance of family, with the visual construction of family history and identity and photos ranged back from original migrants to the present day. Many of the respondents also pulled out old family albums, to provide me a visual connection to the names and family relationships mentioned. Much like my own 'household gods' displayed in my homes, as my talismans of belonging, the photographs are symbols of continuity, an advertisement of social status and a reaffirmation of each respondent's own belonging within their own family. In addition to relationships of blood, the community highlights close relationships with other Sikh families they considered members of the same community.

While all were in Peraktown, we were very close family, as you know all these, EKaur and all, CKaur and then we had another family called MSingh. It was a very very close community and we mixed with all these people. We grew up together. (GKaur 5 April 2012)

The liminal generation limited naming to the select group of families, where the same norms and values held meaning, who formed the sample pool for this research study. These acts of naming and the placing of self within a familial network repeated at the community level, and through the process of naming, the subjects placed themselves in relationships with other Sikhs, defining their position within the community and demonstrating the close-knit bonds. The shared reminiscences and the description of families living in the town space highlighted a clear recognition of the boundaries of belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh*, in the names mentioned, the families described and the description of commonalities.

### 5.3 Naming family behaviours and values

Social hierarchy within a Sikh family places value on age and knowledge, emphasising the importance of knowing one's role and position within the family and the practice of appropriate behaviours to fulfil that role. There is a phrase often used within Sikh communities, *ache logh*, roughly meaning a 'good family', to describe this idea of knowing one's place within the family and practising appropriate behaviours commensurate to maintain and enhance family reputation. The difference between a 'good family' and 'bad family' rested on the perception of family character, usually the character of the women in the family. The concept linked directly to the perceived character and behaviour of the family as a whole. Social behaviour that transgressed the delineation of good family or bad family affected not only the individual but the family and to some extent, the community.

If you have lost the character, it doesn't matter how much money you have, how good health you have, you have lost it all. (CKaur 25 March 2012)

This concept of a good family is the embodied articulation of inherited rural tradition, where the benefit to the family unit subjugates individual position. The family functioned as the site of norm and cultural transmission to perpetuate this, using examples, stories of past experiences and daily interactions. The choice of the norms and values selected demonstrate their importance as symbols. Cohen described that communities develop as individuals 'map out their social identities and find their social orientations among the relationships that are symbolically close to them' (Cohen 1985 p.28). Peraktown Sikh families acted as the vehicle of enculturation with the norms and values signifying a good family enforced in the homes, then validated as the social identity of the community and collectively enforced.

A good family. I think the respected family, the thing that's required, is the value. I think very strongly it used to be said, the ultimate is if you've got your character, nothing else matters, you

know, and that was the strong value. You are cheating people; it was considered one of the worst things. Taking advantage of some of the virtue right in front of you, or womanising. So I think that was considered bad, for a woman to go out and divorce. All these were the character building. If you have lost the character, it doesn't matter how much money you have, how good health you have, you have lost it all. Everyone in the family must be having good character. (CKaur 6 March 2012)

The Peraktown *Pindh* norms and values mirrored those inherent in the notion of the good family. The norms altered from the 'back there' notions of strict definition and emphasis on *izzat*, caste-defined family status and the ownership of landholdings, towards a more local-centric system, incorporating dominant culture habitus, including the value of education, accommodating changes to religious practices and gender equity within the community.

The notion of a good family encapsulated family social position, close-knit and respectful relationships within the kinship bond, maintenance of family reputation underscored by more flexibility towards traditional notions of *izzat* and the pervading solidarity and harmonious action towards bettering family standing within the community at large. As Hildred Geertz stated, 'general social values provide legitimacy and meaning to familial institutions and serve as normative guides for the daily give-and-take among family members' (1961 p.146).

We were quite close, I would say very close. The girls had their chores to do, the boys had their chores to do. The girls did the washing up, we did the drying and then we did the manual job of taking the cows out, going and cutting grass, doing the gardening. Gardening was a house project, like everyone, we had our own cucumbers, own ladies fingers, own drumsticks, you name it, brinjals, chilly, sugarcane, bananas, all the fruits. My brother and I, two of the sisters, one went to Brinsford and the other went to Kirby. They came back as teachers, then my sister, she went to Penang and she was then a dental staff nurse. Another sister went to University and then from University after arts she took up a Dip. Ed. and she was a teacher as well. I suppose they all were influenced by dad's career. The boys, NSBSingh was in the Artillery, I was in the Rangers and then

while we were in the Army, we sent half our pay to the house to help dad to run the family, run the house expenses and let the younger people, you know they didn't have to do what we did. That's the thing. They were bit fortunate because they had us you know helping dad, and of course dad tried to give them the best. (NSingh 9 April 2012)

Respondents described their roles in their homes, based on age and gender divide, recognising their position within the organisation of family life. Within the home space, the respondents received clear definition of their position within the family, the modes of acceptable behaviour within and outside the home and understood that they belong within a specific framework of relationships. By naming their roles and positions within the family, the respondents constructed their membership and identification with both their own family and through the shared symbols, norms and values practised and enforced at the community level, defined the behaviour and practice of belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh*.

#### **5.4 Naming women**

By naming the category of women, the community defined and inscribed standards of behaviour and norms assigned and comprehended by community members. Women held a central role both in the domestic spaces of the Peraktown Sikh community and also in the constitution of the boundaries of belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh*. The women were perceived as the bearer and transmitters of tradition within the family and community. Due to the masculinised ideology of Sikh identity and traditions, transgressions by women or towards women generated greater degrees of rupture within community fabric. *Izzat*, a word loosely translating to mean 'honour', remained largely vested in the braveness of men in defending the purity of women requiring women to take greater responsibility in conforming to expected norms of behaviour such as traditional dress, learning home economics, maintaining a concerted involvement in prayer and ritual

and contracting suitable marriage alliances with good families. Individual actions could bring shame to the family name and result in the loss of *izzat* which caused women within the Peraktown community, to face more restrictions on their behaviour compared to the men, and their conduct was more closely monitored. One respondent explained:

Because your daughter makes a mistake, she pays a very heavy penalty. Son does it, he doesn't pay. The weightage goes the other side. So I think daughters have got to be more, we have got to be more strict with the daughters than with the sons. (SSingh 29 March 2012)

The circumscription of a boundary of *izzat* and emphasis placed on modest and appropriate behaviours within the family conflicted with the continuous flow of change to the commonly practised norms and values surrounding the position of women at the *Pindh* level. Post-Japanese Occupation, the community expected women to go to school but because they did, they needed to strive more to exemplify traditional values in contrast to the encounters with modernity within the school space. The privilege of free interaction with different castes and different genders required a commensurate demonstration of adherence to traditional and inherited norms of dress and religious practice. On leaving the home, they were free to find work, but expected to abide to norms of no romantic dating. These changes were part of movements in the society as a whole, and as with all change, the conflict between the dominant and emergent was continuously being negotiated, through the push and pull between primordial forms of behaviour, inherited and passed down through the generations and the influx of new and sometimes conflicting norms and beliefs. Women were implicated in the reproduction of cultural boundaries and restricted to domestic and kinship roles where family honour and reputation, remained embodied in their body. This centred on their roles in relation to men in behaviour and perception. The expansion to the position and place of women within the Peraktown *Pindh* altered in the post-Japanese Occupation

period, yet change was constricted by the conflict between tradition and modernity. Women in the community gained access to education and the opportunity to contribute to family status beyond the role of good daughter, good mother and good wife, but remained constrained by gendered roles, by modesty in dress and adherence to traditional clothing, maintaining long hair and a generally more subservient demeanour towards the elders. The women themselves enforced and emphasised suitable behaviour. Sikh women needed to marry Sikh men, and probably not members of the Peraktown community. Consequently their reputation needed to be above reproach to Sikhs elsewhere regardless of the changing values and norms in Peraktown. Within this tradition, however, the Peraktown *Pindh* offered a place for new expectations and freedoms, encouraging education for women and valuing their role in improving family status, largely through the agency of the women themselves.

Men in Peraktown wore Western suits, shorts and t-shirts regardless of the historical period but the women in the post-Japanese Occupation period continued to wear the *salwar kameez*, conserving the connection to the pastoral ideal of Punjabi village life, where pure women symbolised family honour. However, this did not prevent the liminal generation women from involving themselves outside the domestic sphere. While modesty and good behaviour, expressed outwardly through traditional dress for women, with the *salwar kameez* or Punjabi suits was expected and practised, the community norms and values altered to include attendance at the local English school and playing together with the boys, following the Japanese Occupation years. The expected mode of dress for women provides a clear example of this dichotomy between appearance and practice in the Peraktown community.

I always wore Punjabi suit and always covered my head. While riding, the bicycle also my head cloth should not drop from the

head. Because if others are noticing will be different. My brother, the temple is by the roadside, if he's cycling towards me, or even any part, it's such a small town, he would know that I was going without my head cloth on the head. Imagine on the bicycle, the car comes, and then again, I will put (giggle) that is how I did it. I have to wear Punjabi suit all the time. (HKaur 4 April 2012)

We wore a Punjabi suit in the house, only uniform to school, and come home we were expected to wear a Punjabi dress, and yeah, long hair, I had very long hair till I got married, only after married, I cut my hair, yeah, we were expected to follow all the Sikh traditions, the Sikh way of life. (FKaur 26 March 2012)

Divergence from these central roles caused moments of rupture that forced re-evaluation of norms within the community. The narratives below describe minor disagreements over appropriate dress, moderate challenges to the idea of suitable career choices, transgressions that are more serious related to relationship choices and the consequences and outcomes.

I wanted to join Girl Guides. I asked my brother, HKBSingh, whether I could join. He said, 'Go ahead'. So I joined. Ordered uniform to be made. When I took the uniform home and I was going to get ready the next day to go for my Guides, my mother said, 'What is that?' I said, 'It's my uniform. I'm joining this and Bahuji,' I called him, I said, 'Bahuji had said that I could join.' 'You're not going to wear this. I don't want to see you wearing this thing.' So I somehow always felt I was the youngest girl, giving me English education they're already sacrificing, and I'm asking more and more every time. Maybe I have to do something about it. I didn't wear the uniform. I went during the Girl Guides' meeting. I asked if anybody wanted my uniform, I'll hand it to them straightaway. They didn't have to pay whatever. I had paid for it. One Malay girl accepted. I never was a Girl Guide that means. (HKaur 21 May 2012)

Women acceded to the appropriate dress for women in non-traditional situations due to strong family and community perceptions and expectations and the use of traditional clothing little varied during this period. Conflict of this magnitude generally resolved at the family level and largely by self-correction. HKaur recognised the degree of norm alteration that allowed her to attend school and chose to accede to the

strictures of modest behaviour, demonstrating the understanding of the reciprocity of trust and how it reinforced familial bonds and normative values.

In contrast, the following narrative described the adaptation and acceptance within the family on changing the definition of acceptable career choices for women. The resilience and strength of familial bonds within the Peraktown Sikh community allowed for inter-generational discussion, negotiation and eventual change to norms and values, which transposed to the community level.

I discussed with my father if I could take up Nursing. Oh, no, nobody wanted nursing those days. Nursing was the lowest paid job. It was a lowly job. All the Sikhs were not happy. They said, 'Oh, what are nurses? They're only washing pans and they only go around talking to doctors, mixing with them and all sorts. They don't do anything but flirt around with doctors. They're not good character girls.' I know quite a few Sikh gentlemen came and told my father, 'Don't let her go nursing. Don't let her go.' Anyway, I went back. I told my father, I said, 'don't listen to these men.' I said, 'Nursing is not all that, you know, it's up to you.' So anyway, I joined nursing and I did very well. (EKaur 8 March 2012)

Gossip played a strong part in regulating behaviour and being the topic of conversation meant loss of status for the entire family. Although gossip occurred, the position of the narrator's family remained strong based on the accumulated strength of their reciprocal relationships and reputation. The negative perception towards nursing as a career choice for women tied up with community feeling of appropriate behaviour and social interactions, aimed at conserving the 'purity' of women, linked to rural traditions of cleaning human excrement as the role of the lowest caste in village society and the gender proscription of physical contact. Conversely, during this period, training as a medical doctor was an accepted career choice. This moment of rupture and the resulting reintegration by the family decision to allow it, offered other women in the community the freedom to choose this as a career for themselves. The ruptures and conflict created the environment for progressive

change within community norms and values towards the role of women. The community moved towards women themselves inscribing their definitions of appropriate behaviour in different situational contexts, entrusting to them too, the protection of family and community *izzat*, altering the boundaries of belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh* to include a wider range of career options for women.

### **5.5 Naming caste and social hierarchy**

As discussed in previous chapters, caste hierarchies represent the prime form of social distinctions within Sikh communities. Kushwant Singh provided a description of social distinctions and hierarchies practised in a Punjabi village in the fifteenth century:

Every *Jat* village was a small republic made up of people of kindred blood who were as conscious of absolute equality between themselves as they were of their superiority over men of other castes who earned their livelihood as weavers, potters, cobblers, or scavengers. (Singh 1999 p.p. 14-15)

Crossing a subcontinent and ocean caused little alteration to the social organisation and structure as the Peraktown *Pindh* developed as a village within the township based on mutual kinship, similar histories and shared geographical location. The Peraktown Sikh community practised the same distinctions of equality amongst fellow caste members and a sense of distinction over others, naming their social positions. The concept of the Sikh caste system predicated in economic power and position, originating from a family's historical profession and to a smaller extent, the number of members within a specific caste (McLeod 2007 p.186). The Sikhs of Peraktown originally ascribed significance to a hierarchical social structure, with codified positions based on primordial identities, innate from the pre-liminal stage of their migration. Most respondents acknowledged knowing their caste and that of other members of the community but some chose to not acknowledge the divisions of caste that existed. Their reluctance centred on the proscription of caste distinction within the Sikh faith and

their perception of these distinctions as anachronistic. In addition, the respondents agreed that the events of the Japanese Occupation loosened the boundaries of inter-caste interaction, making it less practised or discussed, with the sole exception of marriages.

There was a caste system because Sandhus were landowners, Sandhus, Gills were landowners and then the Sachdevs were business people and all. So there was this little inkling of an idea I had but it never mattered to me who I was mixing with because if we went to the temple that was the very, very glaring example of that everyone was equal in the temple. But outside, unfortunately, individuals would impose that they are of a higher caste and because even the bullock cart people were still, to me they were human beings, they were Sikhs. I used to sit on the bullock cart with them, go to the river and, you know, dish out sand to build the Sikh temple there. And we used to go to the houses and the people treated us very well. It was a small community so there was no space to try and exercise this caste system. But there was that subtle difference. I remember my uncles used to tell me, 'You're a Sandhu, I'm a Gill. We're all landowners.' So, we were not, the poor Sikhs or the lower caste, Sikhs who had to work on the fields and do all the odd jobs. (NSingh 12 April 2012)

The structure of Peraktown Sikh society very much resonates with colonial descriptions of Sikh communities in ethnographies written during the British rule and largely, the British articulation of *Jat* superiority in contrast to the other castes and indeed to other ethnic groups in India, tied into the rural nostalgia in Britain. As well, the British transposed career-based class distinctions to the Indian landscape as a constituent part of caste differentiation. In addition, the *Khalsa* identity as the only true Sikh identity and the martial races myth of military prowess contributed to the interpretation of social hierarchies in the Peraktown Sikh community. The families with police or army origins tended to be allocated social distinction within this social structure, in part, a reflection of caste-based recruitment with the British preference for Sikhs from the *Jat* caste, but also as a consequence of their links to the British, their inherited habitus. As one respondent stated, 'He's a police officer, he's of course a higher status'

(USingh 17 April 2012). Many of the families showed me pictures of their great-grandparents or grandparents in the Police or military uniforms, their medals and other memorabilia. Figure 9, on the following page, was taken from one respondent's home. It is a photograph of her grandfather dressed in full Malay State Guides uniform, posing with three toddlers, two boys and a girl, all dressed up in miniature copies of his dress uniform and it was prominently displayed on the wall in the living room.



**Figure 9: EKGFSingh with his sons**

There is an acknowledgement of the status of *Jat* Sikhs as social elites, making up the majority of the civil servants, yet they do not practise caste segregation. As a respondent explained:

The topic of caste was always there. This one is *Jat* family, this is a *Saini* family, this one is a barber's family. They call this *Chimbay. Nai*. These nail cutters and all. And they are also messengers, and they are also body massagers like they can be mendicants, you know, these people. You suffer a certain ailment; they will give you a cure for it. These *Nais*. They are quite good in that aspect, you see. They wouldn't inter-marry. But you see, this is what has been in my mind forever. When it comes to friendship, we were the friendliest of all with all these guys, but when it comes to marriages, there would be

this wedge driven inside, 'Oh, that's a different caste.' But as we grew up, this thing started breaking down. So, we are in that group where the caste is being broken down very fast. (USingh 17 April 2012)

Naming one's caste placed the respondent firmly within the framework of social order, reinforcing their hierarchical position within community. In the following section, I describe how, as the liminal generation grew up, the idea of caste held less meaning to them, replaced by the value for an English education and white-collar professions and the sense of common bonds and kinship within the familial structures of the Peraktown *Pindh*.

## **5.6 Joining together**

Marriage represents a core life cycle ritual within the Sikh faith as religious practise centred on the notion of living within the world yet demonstrating good and pure behaviour in contrast to the renunciation within the Hindu and Buddhist faiths. The religious ceremonies surrounding marriage rites originally followed the Hindu practice, but later Guru Amar Das introduced the *Anand Karaj*, literally meaning 'blissful union.' The Sikh marriage rite represents much more than a civil contract between two people. In the marriage ceremony, the emphasis is on the equal partnership of love, where the couple begins the ceremony as two souls in two bodies and ends it as a single, united soul, joined together. The lines of the marriage hymn read, 'they are not husband and wife, who merely sit together. Rather they alone are called husband and wife, who have one spirit in two bodies.' (Macauliffe 1963 p.788). In this section, I discuss the components and practices used within the community to generate a sense of unity and joining together, the commonly understood precepts of membership to the Peraktown *Pindh*, firstly, through the practice of their religion, secondly through the transmission of value towards an English education.

## 5.7 Joining in prayer and practice of faith

Sikh culture prioritises the values in the tenets of religious practice and the broader social values of honesty, loyalty, bravery, generosity, moral good and thriftiness, encapsulated in Sikh doctrine and tradition. The Peraktown Sikhs, through their spatial position in a more urbanised and polyethnic environment added on to these criteria, incorporating the importance of an English education, social position based on professional status and to a lesser extent, material position. The Peraktown *Pindh* became a site of transmission and accommodation for these new ideas and beliefs, extending the boundaries of belonging. However, the place assigned to the practice of the Sikh faith, as discussed in the previous section, remains largely unaltered. Within the Sikh faith, much importance is attached to the reading of the scripture. As Pashaura Singh states, the focus in Sikhism is 'a path based on the interior discipline of meditation on the divine Name' and not an individualistic path to salvation but rather a 'stress on altruistic concern for humanity ... a concern which is repeated everyday in the Sikh *Ardas*' (Singh 2001 p.p. 74-75). Sikh religious identification varies, from strict adherence to the *Khalsa* ideal of the *Amritdari* Sikh, as explained in Sections 2.4 and 2.5, to the simplified cultural inheritance of being born into a Sikh family. Within these differing practices of the faith, the one constant for all Sikhs is the function and practice of the *Gurdwara* as the central place of worship and the common ground for the Sikh community.

My brother, being a priest in the temple, made sure that every Sunday I went to the temple. And that also will be around 4 a.m., to do *Asa-ji-di-var*, that is the singing of the hymns and reading of the *Salok* and all this early in the morning. My family was really very traditional because my father was known as a preacher in Southeast Asia, you know. So, a preacher's family usually should be more concerned and more traditional-minded, and follow the culture rightly. (HKaur 4 April 2012)

I would be about four years old or so, and I remember my father, mother getting us ready Sunday mornings we must go to the *Gurdwara*. (CKaur 4 December 2011)

The elders in each family encouraged and enforced the practice of prayer and service at the *Gurdwara* through instruction and by setting an example themselves. While some families did not regularly attend service, they fostered the practice of prayers in the home. Prayer formed both a defining practice in the boundary of being Sikh and belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh*, but also offered a connection to the long-cherished ideals and history of the Sikh community. The practice of prayer formed a common ground, following the Japanese Occupation and all members of the community in Peraktown, regardless of caste, regional origins or social status prayed together, participated in religious service and celebrations at the *Gurdwara* and finally, shared work in the communal kitchen or *Langar Hall*.

Regular attendance and the forming of a relationship with the religion connected the families to a larger whole, further demarcating a distinct identity for the community within the multi-ethnic milieu of Peraktown. Within the Peraktown Sikh community, most families adhered to the physical, cultural and religious markers or symbols of the faith until the liminal generation moved away. Consequently, Sikh families in Peraktown adopted more relaxed attitudes compared to the *Amritdari* convention of wearing the articles of faith commonly referred to as the 5Ks (the bangle, the hair, the comb, the long underpants and the dagger) and most deemed long hair and turban sufficient.

When we were growing up of course, we had the long hair and we would use the small comb sometimes or otherwise we don't use the comb, just leave it at home. The *Kara* was there, *Kachera* was there, but not the standard type one, okay? And otherwise, pants, not Punjabi uniform. (USingh 17 April 2012)

I had a turban and a beard. I used to wear *kurtas*, I used to wear the *salwar* and all that, but over a period of time because of our exposure to our jobs and all, we hardly had time. We only wore

that during special occasions. I had a *kachera* and mum made *kachera* for everyone. (NSingh 12 April 2012)

The importance of abiding by outward professions of Sikh identity shifted to emergent westernised modes of fashion and a more critical reflection on the performance and meaning of professing the Sikh faith. Barrier highlighted this change in Sikh identity through legislation, the Delhi *Gurdwara* Act 82 of 1971. Before this, being Sikh meant simply professing belief in the Sikh religion and the tenets of the ten Gurus. This act institutionalised the discourse of Sikh identity as resting also on the *Amritdari* identity, displaying the outwards symbols such as the turban, long hair and the steel bangle and fidelity to the Amrit or baptismal contract (Barrier and Singh 2001 p.45).

Exposure to different belief systems, fashion and a desire to be like everyone else played a strong role in challenging the dominant culture of long hair. In contrast, the symbol of keeping long hair represented a link to the past and to tradition. The community and the town bore witness to a transgression of this norm but mediation took place in the form of family intervention or acceptance of the transgression. In most cases, the family unit evolved towards incorporating a more relaxed form of religious identity, allowing for reintegration of the parties involved. The final resolution of reintegration resulted in social and cultural transformation, placing acceptance of differing degrees of adherence to the physical markers of the Sikh faith into common practice within the Peraktown *Pindh*. An early example of hair cutting and the impact is presented below. The narrator belonged to the local priest's family.

My family was very traditional because my father was known as a preacher in South-east Asia. A preacher's family usually should be more concerned and more traditional-minded, and follow the culture rightly. But I'm the only one who deviated, that is, chopping my hair. My husband was very very careful because he knew that he was going to be married into a very religious family and he did not cut his hair. The other brothers already cut, he did

not. He kept his turban until he married me, after that only he cut. The first time my husband and I went to my mother's place, that's from Penang to Peraktown, she wanted to what they call it *pyar* you know just blessing on the head. It was a normal thing and this time the way she did was by turning her face away from him and just putting her hands on his head like that. That's how she showed that she was very upset. (HKaur 21 March 2013)

The conflict occurred between allegiance to a strict *Amritdari* identity and the perception of the new son-in-law's more westernised and secular beliefs. By demonstrating her displeasure in a minor way, the mother-in-law attempted a redressive action. She expressed her displeasure through the alteration of another tradition, demonstrating her continued identification of Sikh identity with long hair. The family possessed significant social capital from their position as priests to the community and the son-in-law's shorn hair potentially damaged this.

Then later on I talked to her. I said 'You should not mind because he is a footballer and he always told me that the heading for football, he was very good and the turban was always in the way and his father didn't mind.' So I said 'You should just accept it.' So she said, 'Now he cut. Next time he will ask you to cut.' But my husband didn't ask me to cut. I did it on my own. Next time I came home, she would be looking at my hair. I had very long hair. I only cut after my wedding, you know, because I felt it was so much. The travelling and the hassle of it. I had very long hair up to my knee. I just did it away on my own. (HKaur 21 March 2013)

Mediation occurred within the immediate family through explanations and reinforcement of a continued belief in the Sikh faith despite changing appearances. The social drama is constrained within the family but gossip regarding these happenings was common. Acceptance at the family level transferred to the community level, further challenging the dominant understanding of being Sikh and altering this, redefining the boundary of belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh*.

I coaxed her. I said, 'Not easy. It's a bit tough and that's why I've done this. But my heart is still with my own religion, with you all, with everybody.' She took time to understand but she was okay in

the end. And then first time when I cut, I cut it not so short, so I could just wrap it up properly and she will never know. For some time, she didn't know. Slowly I started cutting shorter and then things will stick out here or there little bit. 'It looks you have cut your hair.' I said, 'Just a bit lah ma, that's all.' She was very observant. Always had a look at my face, my hair, and then slowly slowly since I knew that she knows a bit. So it's ok, I just leave it open and let her know it. She said 'All my friends commenting. Your daughter cut her hair already.' And I was very happy towards the end she told them, 'She is working, she lives far from where she is working and she has to get up very early, inconvenience, so she has done it.' She defended me in the end. (HKaur 21 March 2013)

For some, the change expressed their desire to fit in within the multicultural society and while families did not always accede happily to the changes, however, at the minimum, grudging acceptance and reintegration eventuated.

Initially when I was young, it didn't occur to me at all whether I would like to have short hair. I was just like expected. You had long hair; you just carry on with it. It was only later when I went to college and then I had that you know the urge in me 'Why can't I cut my hair? Why can't I have short hair?' So, I used to do things like folding my hair and things like that. Do you know I had very long hair? So, I used to do that. And then much, much, much later only I cut my hair. Just little bit ... little bit ... little bit until it is this length now. Yeah. Lot of objections from my in-laws. They didn't like it. They don't like it up till today. They don't like it. (FKaur 6 April 2012)

In the next generation, long hair exists as a residual form of Sikh community culture and changes continue as the community gains access to literature on the religion and scholarly debates in the field, less reliance on priests from India through training of local priests and family behaviour changes, offering space to question rather than just accept. The community recognised the loss of the rural, slow rhythm of Punjab village life but accepted this change resulted from living in the local, including the liminal generation members with cut hair within the contextual meaning of the Peraktown *Pindh*. Additionally, child-rearing practices altered from emphasis on collective family good to the

incorporation of self-individuation. Parents allowed for questioning of their own positionality, providing children the space to challenge and renegotiate their individual belief structures.

They do know they are Sikhs but they don't believe in most of our Sikh principles. They don't believe thinking like hair things and all that. They feel that this was for those times. They are not religious either. But they are spiritual. They believe in God but they do not believe in all those rituals that go on in our temples. (FKaur 6 April 2012)

Because they were growing up, they mixed with their peers, they had different concepts of the values, they could question and ask why. Like in our case, we just followed what the parents tell you, we just follow, we just accepted it, we never question why. You have to give them an answer why we are doing a certain thing in a certain way, but then they had their own explanations. Sometimes they would follow, sometimes they didn't want to do things like that, but I also kept their hair long at the beginning, you know, but later on, they wanted to cut their hair, so though I was not happy about it, but we allowed them to cut their hair. (HKaur 21 May 2012)

Accepting their children's choices impacted personal belief structures of the liminal generation as their children explained their position of continued devotion to the teachings of Sikhism and their rejection of outward markers of their faith, they too relaxed their hold on the residual forms of cultural markers. However, grief and longing for old forms of behaviour continued. CKaur narrated the incident of her son cutting his hair for the first time. During this narration, she started to cry. To her, the hair cutting symbolised a disruption to the continuity of her own personal history and longing for home. It was not simply cutting hair, but also his connection to her parents and grandparents and their nostalgia for the 'homeland' and a way of life. By choosing to accept his choice, and to eventually adopt his thinking, she acknowledged that there is no return to the traditions of her past.

Actually, I kept my long hair right up to about 1970. No, no, no, when I was seventy years old, and that's only about ten years ago. I never wanted to be proper or anything like that but you

know, when I had the reasoning from my son when he cut his hair short, and he said, 'Mummy, it's I feel much more important is what we do, you know, in the tenets of the religion, to be honest, to be kind, to be helpful, you know, all those things are important, and I will live that.' And so, going backward and thinking, I felt I'm not doing anything if I keep my hair. It's much more what I do that is very, very important. (CKaur 25 March 2012)

Despite the distinct religious and cultural identification of long hair with belonging to the Sikh faith, the issue of hair cutting existed largely as a family-centred social drama within the Peraktown Sikh community. In contrast, for other diaspora groups, the contestation of Sikh identity as personified by the Sikh body, occurs as publicly performed conflict (Bhachu 1985; Drury 1991; Singh 2010). The Peraktown community reintegrated the members who cut their hair, with acceptance of the family deemed sufficient resolution on the issue. The performance of Sikh identity as masculinised symbolism and imagery ignores the female gender position, yet in the Peraktown Sikh community, the women in the family played the central role in mediating the conflict as it related to religious practice and cultural tradition. As the transmitters of tradition and beliefs in the home and at the community level, they decided how and when to accept and reintegrate the offenders. Women too chose to cut their hair, negotiating the wishes of their family, community gossip and their own choices in the process to inscribing their own identity. Following departure from Peraktown, whether in pursuit of education or work, the respondents continued to attend prayer services at a *Gurdwara* and social and religious ceremonies regularly. As Axel highlighted, in the Sikh diaspora in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States of America, 'the *Amritdari* body has become iconic of the homeland' (2001 p.37). In contrast, the Peraktown Sikh community continued to place value on the practice of Sikh faith, in participation in ceremonies at *Gurdwaras* and reading of the scripture, yet evolved to include a relaxation on tenets of the *Khalsa*-centric outward appearances, allowing greater latitude to the

definition of the boundaries circumscribing belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh*.

### **5.8 Joining to teach and to learn**

The Peraktown Sikhs regarded education as paramount and placed great emphasis and concentrated efforts towards transmitting this as a norm within the family and the community. The community valued different forms of learning; the informal transmission of appropriate behaviours commensurate with the notion of 'good family' within the home space and the value of attending school and the English language, the religious education and mother tongue language learning at the *Gurdwara* and finally the formal education system at the English-medium schools and universities. The community acted in concert to enforce norms and values transmitted at the family level. As one respondent explained, 'the other Sikhs, they are responsible for you also. They would advise you what to do, what not to do.' (USingh 17 April 2012). The Sikh families of Peraktown felt it was important to transmit the value and importance of education, as a definition of status and as a personal asset, towards better socio-economic prospects beyond the confines of the local environment.

The most important part is when it came to education. We had very good teachers, Sikh teachers, who were teaching regular school, right from the principal or the headmaster. Mr KKGFSingh, Master EKFSingh, Master NSFSingh, Master JKFSingh, Master LSFSingh, all these teachers took a special interest in the Sikh students and they guided us very well and they were always you know, concerned that we do well in our education. (19 April 2013)

The commonly held value towards education became part of the Peraktown *Pindh* norms, transforming the ideas on the constitution of a 'good family' to include education as a definition of success.

Punjabi remained the language of intimacy, within the space held by the women of the family. All respondents described Punjabi as the primary language used during childhood, within the home with the womenfolk of

the prior generation using Punjabi exclusively, when conversing with the family, despite efforts by their husbands to teach and encourage learning and the use of English.

We were brought up in a Punjabi home and because mother couldn't speak English, so we all had to speak in Punjabi. So, we were very fortunate in that. We tried to teach her English. Mother did pick up a little bit of English. While we were studying, my dad would bring her books, like primary books, and tell her, 'Okay, now you better learn. At least your children are learning, now you also learn.' She did try to learn but we had our grandmother with us, she was my dad's mother. So we had to speak Punjabi, otherwise we were punished. When we were talking to each other and we'll have to say something which was not so nice, we would speak in English so that mother wouldn't understand. But she could understand a lot. She could understand. (EKaur 8 March 2012)

Respondents indicated these varied forms of learning began at home but that they also attended language classes at the local *Gurdwara* and studied it within the school curriculum. They used Punjabi to communicate with most family elders but English usage became common when conversing with their fathers, siblings, age-cohort family members and both Sikh and non-Sikh friends. Sharing a language provided a means of reinforcing family and community bonds but the community balanced this against the inclusion of the English language and the socio-economic benefits it provided. Despite the lack of common cultural capital, even mothers or grandmothers who only spoke Punjabi and without any formal education of their own, practised what Annette Lareau termed the concerted cultivation of their children, involving themselves in ensuring successful navigation of the education system (2011 p.2).

The majority of us except my elder brother who did not attend any formal education, he used to study Punjabi you see, so the other four of us attended Government English School in Peraktown. My mom was one person who was very determined that all the children will go to school so she was the person who

was behind or she plays great importance in education, she saw to it that all of us had a good education.

The primary aim of fostering a norm of valuing English education related to the provision of a better life for the next generation. Enforcement of this value is couched within traditional values of frugality and industry, the idea of the good family, acting as a homogeneous unit, cooperating to better family status and adhering to values and norms of shared history and tradition. Following settlement in Malaysia, inculcating this norm towards education expanded the meaning of the inherited concept of a good family in the new context of Peraktown and its socio-economic culture of the urban middle class.

Implicit within this construction of English education and the emphasis on the forms of knowledge acquired within the colonial school system, the Peraktown Sikhs included the transmission of physicality and good sportsmanship. This incorporated traditional Sikh ethics, honourable behaviour, loyalty and being a good sport with the ideas of rugged, good health and the British interpellation of Sikh martial prowess. The British, from the period of the annexation of the Punjab, actively cultivated an externalist construction of Sikh identity tied in with martial prowess and masculinity. While the externalist approach to identity construction as discussed by Richard Fox (1985) ignores the relevance of pre-colonial structures and the cultural practices that formed the diversity of Punjabi identity, the Sikhs accepted this idea of identity created within colonial institutions of power. Examining ethnographic depictions of the Sikh population during colonial rule, there is a discursive constitution created, through the accounts of manly physiques, loyalty and bravery that are of relevance to discussion on Peraktown Sikh identity. Ethnographic histories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, usually written by British men with links to the military, provided accounts of the physical attributes and masculine values ascribed to the Sikhs (Prinsep 1897, Singh 1962, Cunningham

and Garrett 1966, Steinbach 1976). The value of a manly physique and martial qualities translated well into sporting prowess. As General Sir Gordon James Hood described in 1904, 'The Sikhs are noted for their fine physique and athletic prowess. Army life does much to foster and encourage sport in every way' (Gordon 1970 p.36). These structures of significance continue to hold true within the community of Peraktown.

My grandfather used to make us run a lot and then used to make us play hockey. All the five brothers were good in hockey. Most of them represented the school and when we used to play hockey and come back home, my grandfather will ask us, 'Did you get hit? Hurt anywhere?' When we tell him, 'No, nothing happened,' he'll say, 'You did not play well. If you have got hurt, that means you have really played very hard and you have played with an effort.' Then one of my brothers played for Malaysia. He represented Malaysia in the Olympics. His name was MSBSingh. After my Form Five, we used to play hockey and cricket, with all our friends. There were quite a number of Sikh boys who were playing cricket for the school. (MSingh 15 March 2012)

The Peraktown Sikhs valued good sportsmanship and an active lifestyle. Children were encouraged to be outdoors when chores and homework were complete. The respondents mention a range of games they played together, ranging from childhood favourites such as hide and seek and police and thieves to racing bicycles, hockey, cricket and badminton.

We'd walk all the way to school and come back in the hot sun, you know. Then near your grandfather's house there was one place where there was a slope. We used to take this coconut palm trees, sit on it and slide down. That was our main thing. And then evening by four everybody used to gather around the field, and we all used to get together and then we used to play rounders. And then we used to play hockey. We never played separate. We were all together, all of us together. We used to play together, boys and girls. So, it was no such thing and especially since we were in the coed school. So, we never separated ourselves. We never felt that, oh we are girls and they are boys, and to feel shy or anything. There was no such thing. (IKaur 29 September 2012)

The community allowed free interaction between the sexes and men and women played together as children, in high school and while away

inter-state or overseas, at university. The Peraktown Sikhs did not limit the normative transmission of the value for physical and sporting prowess to just the men, but encouraged women to play sport and pursue their own athletic prowess.

The other Punjabi girls in school with me were EKFSingh's children. We were in the hockey team together, all of us. Hockey team equals half of Punjabi girls in Peraktown's school. There was JKFSingh, the teacher, his sister-in-law, NSS1Kaur, NSS2Kaur, IKaur, myself. There were six of us. (BKaur 7 December 2011)

I was very active in athletics. I played hockey but most of these pictures now I have to dig if you want to look. Mr EKFSingh's daughter, EKSKaur, will be there. Another WSFSingh, Planner they called him, he was a town planner, his daughter, WSSKaur, now she lives in Australia. Okay? And myself, then Master NSFSingh, also from Government English School, although he didn't teach me, his daughter, NSSKaur, all of us in the hockey team. (HKaur 21 March 2013)

My whole family, father was a very good badminton player. We had a badminton court in the house. The family played. Then I played hockey for our school. Then when I joined the medical college, I played hockey for the Amritsar district, they had a hockey team, I played for them. Then I was a good runner, sportswoman. I had a trophy for that. (GKaur 21 March 2012)

The community reinforced values of honour, loyalty and hard work within the framework of participation in play and sport, as they emphasised physical and sporting competence.

The physical spaces of the local playing field and the sporting grounds at the local school became more than geographical locations but also symbolic of joining and coming together as a community. The community responded to the British attribution of physicality and masculine values, adapting it to suit their values towards good sportsmanship and physical well-being and eventually becoming adept at using sport to transmit community ideals.



**Figure 10: The Girls and Boys Hockey Teams 1953**

In the Peraktown Sikh society, the common *Gurdwara*, the small size of the Sikh community as a whole and the shared experiences during the Japanese Occupation reduced the relevance of social positioning in caste, limiting it to marriage practices and the continued use of *gotra* surnames. The community continued to practise social distinction however, incorporating education levels and professional status as the signifiers of difference.

I think this was very evident during this Japanese Occupation when the British surrendered and we had to walk away. We were ready to come back, there was a bridge, and the bridge had been bombed or broken or whatever. That bridge had to be reconstructed for us to move from the estate to the town, and this is where the lower classes had stood stubborn. It's the educated and the uneducated. They called them self-educated and the uneducated. They said the educated people, you do this half. The uneducated people, will do this half. Otherwise, you'll be not going, you know. That's when I first became conscious of this. (CKaur 6 March 2012)

Different educational levels played a major role in the options of professional careers available and careers associated with the British administration deemed of higher professional standing. Membership and belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh* still included the notions of differing status. The community placed great emphasis on bettering socio-economic status and the pursuit of an English education was concomitant with this aim. Social status and position within the hierarchical Peraktown *Pindh* family altered to depend largely on educational status and professional achievements.

This is where the education decided, those who got themselves educated went towards teaching, teaching was a very noble profession then, you know. In our society, we believe that two are the top end professions, doctor and teacher. One saves lives, one is the giver of knowledge, so these are right of the top of the heap in terms of standing within society. (TSingh 12 March 2012)

I think teachers were respected greatly those days. I think we had a lot of Punjabi teachers in Peraktown. And then as the police were also, we had some good police officers, Punjabis, and then clerical. If you're holding a government job, I think you were okay. People thought that you were educated, you were educated. (CKaur 6 March 2012)

Material considerations played a small role, but even with wealth, there remained the stigma of being uneducated. Professional status offered a means of moving up the social hierarchy within the community, with white-collar professions holding more value. This commonly held perception towards the differing professions included distaste for work that involved manual labour or work seen to profit from the efforts of others. Two respondents explained:

They were more a rough sort of a people, you know. The people with the moneylenders because they are all the time going around and a lot of them were drinkers and who used to mix with that type of people. But when those who are teachers and who are in the police, they were more sort of respected than those people. (EKaur 8 March 2012)

I think people, those who actually did not get educated, who failed the Form 3 and did not get through, they invariably became like *jagas*, dairy farmers, running a bullock cart, doing transport you know to the bullock cart. And that's when they tell you, if you do not study you'll end up being a bullock carter, you better buck up. That was the message to you and then you end up becoming a bullock carter, if that's the life you want to lead then carry on doing what you want to do. (TSingh 12 March 2012)

An English education was a ritual, altering the socio-economic relationships and structure within the Peraktown *Pindh* family. In completing this ritual, members of the community attained a higher level of status and a distinction between the purely caste-driven hierarchy and new modes of being and becoming. The value placed on education appeared strong amongst the Peraktown Sikhs during the post-Occupation years until Independence. The association with professional success and a job within the British administration highlighted a sense of self-identification with the elite in power. Caste was relevant only to the realm of marriage relationships until the liminal generation members triggered its re-evaluation, while other differentiations in status depended on professional success and education.

The importance placed on an English education was not limited to the men in the community and following the Japanese Occupation, women too were encouraged to pursue schooling and tertiary education. Families transmitted these norms and values to other families within the perceived community boundaries, encouraging elders towards promoting education and school in the younger generation. The members of the liminal generation understood that solidarity towards the cause of their own educational aims could better be accomplished by appealing to community leaders to leverage the general structures of feeling towards an English education.

And when the time came, the Japanese had surrendered, and the children were all excited, you know, they going back to English

school. And Aunty EKaur was with me. She was goosing. Oh, I am going to Standard Two. Standard Two was Year Four at that time. So I said I will come. Standard One would be enough for me. They may not take me. I was worried you see. And uh sitting along the roadside while grazing cows I picked up some spellings, you know. I knew quite a bit but I had to make sure I knew enough. So, I told my father I'm going to school. He said, what for you are good in your Punjabi school. You know, Punjabi school was easier for me to attend, you know. I remember now, actually I recall now, because EKaur and I were together, you know, and I knew father was saying, he was dilly-dallying about my going. I remember telling EKaur, see if your father can persuade my father. So there was a connection I remember now. But then, I also really was adamant. I was determined to go so I told my father (laughs), 'You don't send me to school, I'm not going to graze your cows.' That was the threat I gave him. Of course, that meant nothing but my brother was going back to the school as a teacher, I followed him. So there was no objection from mum and dad. (CKaur 4 December 2011)

As discussed in Chapter 4 the memory of the Japanese Occupation and the increasing importance placed on education marked the beginning of a commonly held precept, becoming the hallmark of identity and social mobility. Through the engagement with the colonial administration, the prevalence of teachers within the community of elders and the obvious benefits of career prospects and social status, the Peraktown *Pindh* defined itself through the value for English education and the value for each other. The community demonstrated inter-generational closure, through the close-knit connections between the families and effectively used this to ensure effective norm transmission.

The community was so education conscious, you know and those days, you know, everyone, the moment somebody's son is going out, they have prayers in the temple, you know asking God for his blessing, let he be successful in his endeavours to finish the degree. You can see the whole thinking of the community then, whenever somebody's son went for study, the community they have prayer in temple, so and so study medicine in India or doing engineering, and so they have prayers. So is like a topic of discussion even within the family that his son is going to study, you know sort of motivation that you also should work hard and when you finished your O Levels and then you also have the opportunity to go and study. (TSingh 12 March 2012)

In addition to reinforcing the norm of education, members of the community also provided assistance to achieve better outcomes. The Peraktown Sikhs worked concertedly to ensure the improved status of not just their own families, but also the community as a whole. This assistance took the forms of advice, help in navigating unfamiliar territory such as applying for university, passports and visas and in some cases, financial support.

Peraktown being a small town, everybody knew that I was a clever girl. There was a hospital assistant who was junior to my father and he was our neighbour, ZSingh. When the results are out, he would be telling Bapuji, my father, 'this girl is a good girl, she is doing very well, she should study medicine'. It was your grandfather, Mr B Singh, he was talking, you see your uncle had gone immediately after his Senior Cambridge, but he went one year earlier than me. He said 'Adelaide you can get in. KKUSingh is there. EKBSingh is there. EKaur has gone.' So I told my father. My father said, 'No harm. You can try.' So, Mr KKGFSingh helped me to get the forms. So, I got the forms and to my good luck, I got the admission. (CKaur 4 December 2011)

This assistance did not end when a member of the community left the physical environs of the town. The Peraktown *Pindh* network encompassed all members, regardless of geographical location and assistance extended well beyond the physical boundaries of Peraktown. One respondent left Peraktown to pursue a career in the civil service as a clerk, after completing secondary school yet at need, was able to tap into the community membership for help.

I gave up my job when I joined the university, not knowing that I have no money. All right, anyway my father managed to get some help from MSUSingh and one or two other people. They were very helpful. (USingh 17 April 2012)

The value of education related specifically to what the community termed English education as this offered higher status and the potential for further studies. They make a clear distinction between Punjabi education, usually offered at the local *Gurdwara* compared to the

education system offered in the Peraktown School or later, with the introduction of Malay as the official language.

When talking of education, of course we referred to educated, not only in your own language but like attending school which is an English school. (HKaur 4 April 2012)

Family elders enforced the norm of education through contact with teachers and specifying times for homework. The pursuit of education becomes part of the family bonding rituals and included the enforcement of norms towards studying and use of a specific middle-class system of knowledge at the community level.

This table where you are sitting now was in Peraktown during those days. This table is also about 80 years old. If I can remember, it's older than me. My grandfather will go to the club and at about sharp seven, he will come back. He expected us to be sitting on this table. All my brothers and my neighbours' children ... and we should be doing our homework. He will come and check everybody's homework. My father did not take too much interest, I'll tell you frankly, in our education as our grandfather. He was very strict and he wanted everyone to be educated properly. And every day without fail he will come and sit, make us sit and do our homework and do our revision. Then he will teach us whatever we want to know, English language. That time everything was in English and I still thank him that when I was in Form 3 he used to make me do Literature, English Literature, and he used to ask me questions which I thought was not relevant to the topic at that time. Because we did not have English Literature much in Form 3. It was only in Form 5 that we had started doing the Shakespeare. But he started teaching me Shakespeare in Form 3, especially in English Literature. And he used to ask me quotations from the *Tempest*, Shakespeare's *Tempest* and ask when, where, how or who said that. He had a very big hand in our education. It was my grandfather who did all that. My grandmother was not educated. She was not educated in Punjabi, but even she wanted the children to study because she said, 'I did not study. I'm uneducated but I want my children to study.' She will sometimes go on foot to the school, and go and see the teachers and ask them how the children are doing and if there's any problem, the children don't do well, she will go and ask the children and tell the teachers, 'don't spare the cane, we will not ask you why you hit the children. But see that they study.' (MSingh 15 March 2012)

The Peraktown community believed that an English education represented a reliable form of security that could not be lost or taken away from you. It held value not simply for the material considerations of better jobs and economic prospects but also for the status it imparted, as to be considered well-educated concretised as the marker of good character within the Peraktown *Pindh*. The following excerpts described this value, emphasising the belief in education as currency to better social standing and economic position.

I would always hear my mother saying, this is a Punjabi verse, she would sing, she would sing, and the words are (in Punjabi) means that you agree, you are to agree that education is the treasury that will be with you all your life, the thieves can't take from you, nobody can take it away from you. This was her motto. (CKaur 6 March 2012)

My mother had not gone to school but nevertheless she placed a lot of importance on good education and she was the one who always insisted rain or shine that we go to school. And she always used to say that you know with good education you will be able to overcome many of the difficulties that you are currently facing and she always used to say that if you have good education, this is something that nobody can take away from you because what you have with that you can make money and you can have a better quality of life. (OSingh 19 April 2013)

Families practised frugality and economic restraint in order to save up for the education of their children, preferring to aim towards delayed gratification. The community demonstrated a pervading interest in socio-economic betterment with an inter-generational focus. Good families educate their children to increase family prestige with family resources allocated to privilege provision for future educational needs over other material considerations.

My father, WSFSingh, led a very frugal life so as to save money for the education of his children. My parents did not eat out or go to the movies and only spent money on essentials. By doing so, he was able to pay for the higher education of all his children. In my case, I declined a scholarship for the Arts at Raffles College,

Singapore. He supported me in this decision and said he would pay for my University studies to do Medicine. Likewise, he supported all his other children. While I was doing Medical studies, I failed in one subject and wanted to quit and become a teacher. He would not have it and made me continue my studies. He said to me, 'What is money, I will work harder and save more money so you can complete you studies and become a doctor.' Later when I started earning money as a doctor I wanted to give him the money he had spent on me so that he could pay for the education of my younger siblings; he would not accept my money saying 'A father gives but does not expect money back from his children'. My father had sponsored several relatives to come to Malaya so that they could have a better life. He instilled the same values and importance of education in one of his nephews, WSCSingh, he had so sponsored. Following this advice, this cousin of mine took on two jobs to save money for his children's education. (WSingh 12 April 2012)

Describing her mother's role in educating herself and her siblings, one respondent explained:

Because to her, education was 'the' thing. She says, 'I am not having opportunity to be educated but all my children will be educated'. My father was also on that line of thinking because children must be educated. Girls or boys, no difference. The inspiration came from my mother, not my father, my mother was a wise woman. She said, 'Your father's spending money on all of you.' She'll tell my father she doesn't need jewellery, her entire life she had 4 bangles and one chain. And of course Kara. It was only when I started working then I bought my mother gold chain and my younger sister bought her. I never ever saw her draped in jewellery. Even when her eldest son got married, she just wore a chain, that's it. So I think in her mind, her priorities were that her children will be educated. (DKaur 11 April 2012)

This idea of education as more valuable than gold or material assets formed a central structure of defining the boundaries of belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh*. The Peraktown Sikhs take pride in their educational achievements and the respondents displayed photographs of family members in their university caps and gowns, posing with parents and siblings in their homes. One respondent had the university shields of her own alma mater, the University of Adelaide mounted on her dining room wall, a position that allowed admiration from the entry

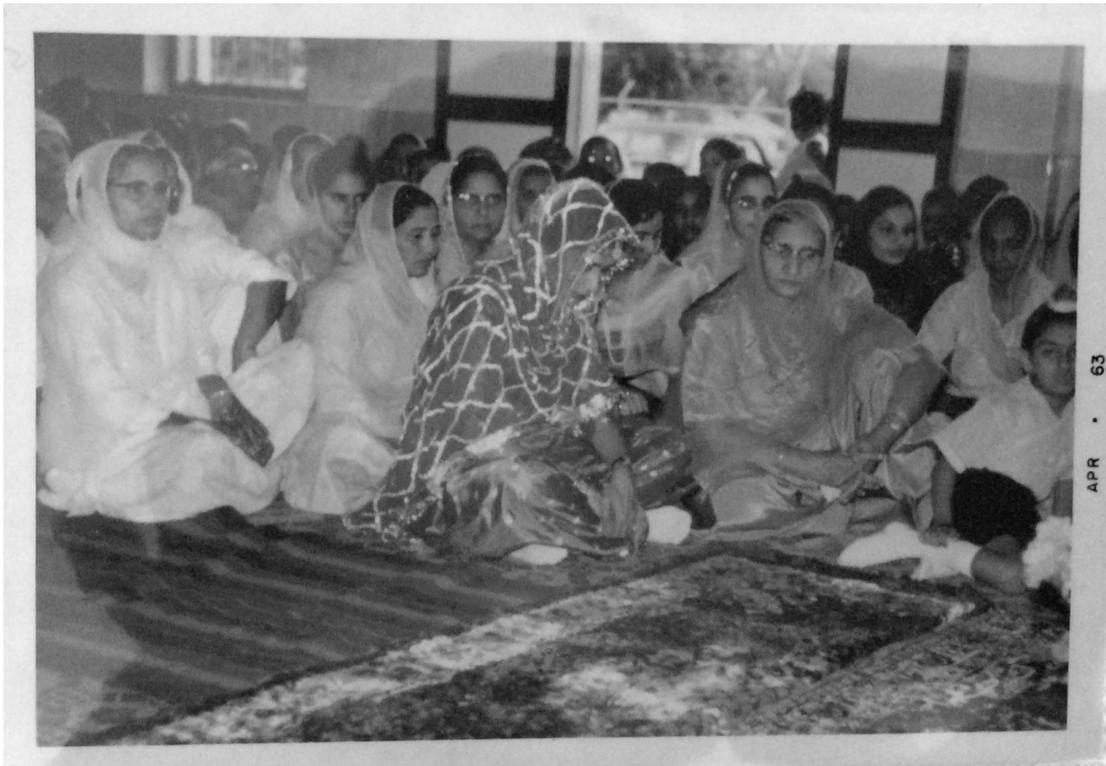
way to her home and from the living room. Two university shields from Oxford colleges flanked it, where her children attended university. Her husband's university was unrepresented as the University of Malaya did not make shields.

## **5.9 Marriage between equals**

Marriage is an important element of Sikh culture, marking the formal end of parental obligations to ensure their children's well-being. While dating and relationships are individual choices in westernised societies, in Sikh communities, these relationships are group decisions, generally decided on within the family. The custom of arranged marriages represented the dominant form of marriage practices, with marriage alliances selected through a caste endogamous and an exogamous patrilineal clan affiliation process (McLeod 1989 p. 109). The selection process boiled down to finding a suitable match from a 'good family.' The notion of 'good family' enmeshed strongly with marriage prospects and status in the Peraktown Sikh community and protecting the reputation and chasteness of the women ensured their eligibility and improved options in the marriage market for both themselves and the men in the family. As previously discussed, the treatment of gender prioritised the roles of good daughter, good wife and good mother for the women of the community and regardless of education levels and careers, the women themselves, their families and the community, as a whole, expected marriage to be part of a complete life.

The liminal generation travelled more, with school, universities and careers, compared with their parents and grandparents exposing them to different mores of behaviour. As Fanon described in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

As long as he remains among his own people, the little black follows very nearly the same course as the little white. But if he goes to Europe, he will have to reappraise his lot ... to choose between his family and European society. (2008 p.115)



**Figure 11: Wedding of GKaur April 1963 Peraktown Gurdwara**

The Peraktown Sikhs attempted to negotiate this alteration and impact on the structure of family with the continued reliance on traditional forms of relationship and romance, much like the Sikh diaspora in the United Kingdom, with dating before marriage restricted to chaperoned or organised meetings with proposed partners (Nesbitt 1980, Drury 1991, Hall 2002). Relationships offered plenty of scope for gossip, and despite the increasing exposure to different values and norms, members of the community evinced sensitivity to the old structures, and in many cases complied with the limits of acceptable behaviour within their own community through the practice of self-censorship or correction. The well-defined expectations, norms and values transmitted throughout their childhood within the boundaries of Peraktown continued to hold meaning for the liminal generation, as they hold on to their position as members of the Peraktown *Pindh*, but in the absence of

community elders, they relied largely on their own understanding to regulate their behaviour.

Actually in Australia, there was a friend, when you call date, like I have gone to pictures and this particular friend if there was a function, he would take me back to my house and even if it was out of his way, he would take me, send me home and go back, and all that. The main thing that stood by me was again my love for my father. He would never accept it. It was a struggle. Yeah. You see, for me it was clear-cut. My clear-cut was my loyalty lay with my father. I think what he had done very few fathers would do and for me to give him any heartache, I just couldn't do. (CKaur 25 March 2012),

In contrast to the United Kingdom and North American experience and other Malaysian Sikh communities, the Peraktown Sikhs differed in their treatment of friendships between the sexes. (Nesbitt 1980, Bhachu 1985, Drury 1991, Hall 2002, Nayar 2004) They did not segregate the sexes, and children attended a co-educational school, played together and continued friendships into adulthood. As USingh explained:

My father was quite liberal. He would say, 'Okay, boys, you have to go and mix with boys, girls have to mix with girls.' You know? And then, of course, when my sisters grew up, they would be having their Form Five parties and all that, my father allowed. (USingh 17 April 2012)

Marriages and romantic relationships involved parental input, cultural practices and remained strictly regulated. Within the Peraktown Sikh community, the freedom of mixing with each other did not result in the formation of romantic relationships as the liminal generation clearly assessed their behaviour according to parental and community expectations in return for the trust between the generations.

I remember my mother always saying, 'Don't do anything that will leave a mark on your father's white turban.' It meant don't disgrace us by doing something we don't want you to do like don't fall in love with somebody else because we have already arranged your marriage with this guy. (FKaur 6 April 2012)

As well, the liminal generation recognised the freedom allowed them to pursue their educational and career dreams. The relationships within families and within the community with the varied accumulated benefits and goodwill, resulted in this self-correction as a mediation process, making reintegration a forgone conclusion during these particular types of social drama.

Close friendships within the Sikh community tend to be explained in terms of familial relationships and despite not being related by blood, members of the Peraktown *Pindh* and close relationships with Sikh families elsewhere were contextualised in terms of blood relationships. A marriage represented the amalgamation of families and careful scrutiny of potential marriage partners and the families involved held precedence over emotions, with the priority being to find matches for good families with other equally good families. Once a marriage was arranged, the betrothed pair rarely met and engagements or betrothals rarely ended as impact on the family *izzat* made it difficult to find new partners. Some betrothals commenced at early ages, as a symbol of the bond between families.

I was engaged even before I was born. There were my mother, father, and another Punjabi family were very close friends, you know and that lady had sons. My mother had two daughters at that time and she was pregnant with me. So, the promise had been made even before I was born. Traditionally, the engaged boy and girl cannot see each other. So even at the age of four or so, if we went to Ipoh my father would leave me with my bachelor, maternal uncle and they would spend a few hours with that family. Engagement was a very strong promise. Any promise made was a promise and had to be kept. You know, that was the word you know sort of, that was so important. This young man went into wrong company in Australia. He didn't make good with his studies. He incurred some problems there. He was deported back, the father had to give him another chance. Sent him to India. In the meantime, CKHSingh and I had got interested in each other. So by the time I had finished my studies and I came back home, I was trying to persuade my father, that he accepts CKHSingh. He was very angry, he was very angry. He thought his brother encouraged us, his brother is my brother-in-law. So, he

was angry. Anyway, he had to be pacified but ultimately I was not going to cross and do things against his permission for all that I had received from my father as a girl at that age doing medicine in those days and uh in the end, he softened. He invited the father of the boy. The end of the story was that they blamed me because, as a woman, any girl going overseas and coming back, they are no good, and all sorts of other things came out, and then he said, 'Okay, Bibi, you are breaking the engagement, so enough, then you write to my son to do that.' Ok. And then he says, 'From now on, whenever you do any undertaking that is promoting Sikhism or our religious group, I will be with you but otherwise, our relationship is broken.' They came with his father, his mother, his sister, sisters-in-law, mother-in-law. They were a group of fireworks these six people, and here we were, with my father and mother, of course it was my house. I had to write a letter and break it up. And then only, father accepted. Even that actually has a long, you know, correction to be made here and there. (CKaur 4 December 2011)

Honour and keeping promises played an important part in the Peraktown *Pindh*, as part of the definition of being a 'good family'. Eventually, due to the trust placed in her ability to make her own choices, CKaur's parents accepted the new relationship but placed the responsibility of breaking the betrothal on her. The family accepted and reintegrated their daughter and her choice, however, the relationship between the two families suffered an irreparable breach. Within the Peraktown *Pindh*, however, the decision of the immediate family defined community acceptance of conflict resolution, further demonstrating the expansion of the role of women as they afforded new choices for the women in balancing their more traditional allegiances to family honour and their own hopes for the future. The Peraktown Sikh community manifested the changing context of tradition, replacing homeland values and norms through adaptation to new situations in the diaspora.

### **5.10 *Majha* and *Malwa*: Never the twain shall meet**

Malaysian Sikhs practiced an additional form of marriage selection, maintaining endogamous region of origin for marriage relationships. In narratives, the Peraktown Sikhs described this inter-regional conflict

between the migrants originating from the *Majha* or *Malwa* regions in Punjab as based within their idea of caste and members from different regions may however be of the same caste, but there existed a divide nonetheless. The conflict between the two sub communities in Malaysia was consolidated during the early years of Sikh immigration through the British allocation of different companies to divide the Sikh recruits based on region of origin within the Malay State Guides (Singh 1965, Sandhu 1969, Sandhu, Mani et al. 1993, Kaur 2003) and in the continued population breakdowns at various *Gurdwaras* (Singh and Kaur 1971). While much of the inter-regional conflict originated from the Sikh Wars, leading to the British annexation of Punjab, it continued in Peraktown, as competition and discrimination, resulting in distaste for inter-regional marriages. Describing this conflict within her family, DKaur explained:

Because, my sister-in-law, JKSILKaur, she was one, a *Malwa* and we are *Majha*. And JKSILKaur, when she came earlier, she was very proud and she wasn't mixing with us. She never mixed with our family, only her family but not with our family. So we thought why want to go for *Malwae*, even they don't want to mix with us. That's how it made us think. We should stick to our own people. (DKaur 14 March 2012)

Unlike caste, the understanding of regional differences continued to hold meaning within the Peraktown *Pindh*, with families clearly defining themselves as *Majha*, *Malwa* or *Doaba*, however, in contrast to other areas of Sikh settlement in Malaysia and in the diaspora, these differences caused little disruption. Like caste, this distinction materially affected romantic attachments and marriage arrangements. The negative attitudes towards inter-regional relationships remained limited to the older generations and even this waned with time, as the liminal generation ceased to distinguish the difference, gradually overriding homeland community boundaries. As Peraktown Sikhs relocated to other cities or countries, common hometown identity and sense of belonging within the space of the Peraktown *Pindh* replaced the

importance of regional identities. The diaspora altered from a Sikh diaspora group residing in Peraktown, through the strength of community kinship and bonding to a common identification as member of a new diaspora, that of the Peraktown *Pindh*. Regardless of community dissatisfaction within the older generation with inter-regional relationships, the community chose to reintegrate the transgressors, deciding to accept and adapt to these new relationships, reconstituting the meaning inherent in being a Peraktown *Pindh* member, ensuring community cohesion. DKaur summed this changing perception well, stating, 'Now Aunty DKSILKaur is very very good. Now she is really good.' (DKaur 14 March 2012)

### **5.11 Marrying down**

Inter-caste relationships received greater censure and provoked more extreme reactions as compared to other forms of non-endogamous marriages. As Gurhpal Singh and Darshan Singh Tatla (2006) described, inter-caste relationships are a major taboo for the Sikh community. The narratives following illustrate two different cases of inter-caste marriage. DKaur's sister married a man from the *Chimba* caste, a lower caste of Punjabi caste system, traditionally the weavers in the villages. She continued attempts to regain her role as a daughter of the family, sending home money to help her adopted mother but displacement continued. The elders of the family disowned their daughter, however, within the liminal generation, the meaning of belonging to the *Pindh* altered, providing acceptance.

My sister got married, yeah, they disowned her. She went and married to a *Chimba*. That's why my parents didn't like it and her parents also didn't like it. I mean, my aunty. They say they are shamed because she's going down, low caste people. I don't know how she got married because nobody attended her wedding. Nobody attended. We didn't know also when she got married. My father was very much against it. Then she went to Taiping. She was working in Taiping and he also was working in Taiping. After married she got a baby girl. Then they went to England already. Later I met her a few times. I went to England last 5 years back.

So I went to her place, stayed a night, two nights. When they come from England, they will not come to our house. But still we have met them in the temple or something like that. She was sending money to her mother, step mother, my aunty. My aunty says she don't want to sign it and get the money. She don't want the money. My aunty was so stubborn. (DKaur 14 March 2012)

Another example of inter-caste marriage from the liminal generation is EKaur's story.

And when my turn came, it was even worse because I was marrying a different caste, remember my husband is a different caste, *Nai*. You know, we don't even think when it was young people, we don't even think about the caste system, they are *Nais*, and we are *Jat*. My father agreed but my mother, no, she wouldn't agree to my marriage. She said, 'Couldn't you find ... there's so many people, why did you have to agree on this and that?' So, then my father was very, very religious person. He went down to Malacca, to see Sant Sohan Singh, from Ipoh he went down. Stayed with him a couple of days and talked to him about all these things and all. And then Sant Sohan Singh talked, told my father, he said, 'I don't see anything wrong if you are happy and your daughter is happy, and you tell your wife there's nothing wrong in that. So please, go ahead.' So he gave the green light so my father came back. He said, 'Okay, the marriage will be on'. (EKaur 8 March 2012)

EKaur's immediate family sought mediation within the religious structures they committed to by asking an authority figure within the Malaysian Sikh community, a *Sant*, or holy man for his judgement on the matter. The *Sant* offered reassurance to her parents but the elders in the extended family continued their hostility, preferring to hold fast to rural traditions from the homeland rather than religious practice, where caste should be no barrier.

My uncles were very angry. They said this wedding will not take place, and one of them will have to die. They threatened. Even the relatives, I remember, did not have enough time but my mother's side, nobody, none of them came. Only father's side, they supported us, like my father's sister and my mother's one sister, that's all. The two aunties at the wedding, the rest, nobody. The rest, my mother's side the menfolk, they were the ones who were against. Only a few friends we invited and only

two aunties came, that's all. And so we had the marriage and I had with me this lady who lives in PJ, POK. She was in the police force. She was with me, my bodyguard, sitting with a pistol in her hand because my uncles said they were going to kill somebody, either my husband or me, one of us will have to die. So, we had the police all around the house. We had the wedding in the garden but none of us died. We all came out alive. So that was our story, you know, this is how bad it was those days. (EKaur 8 March 2012)

The choice to boycott the wedding emblematised the divergence within the community with some families holding on to values from the rural tradition, where the *Jat* caste owned the land and the highest social position within the village structure. Consequently, her extended family felt the relationship was socially beneath them and an embarrassment to the family as a whole. Her in-laws in contrast appeared to relish the coup of gaining a high caste daughter-in-law, adding further insult to injury during the wedding.

Only thing is my husband's side, they were gloating about it. So they said, 'See we are getting a *Jat* girl to come and wash our dishes and all'. They were making so much of fun, that annoyed me very much, and so I told some of them off. I said, 'I'm not marrying your goat, I'm marrying a man. I'm not marrying your relatives. I got married to the person I love,' that sort of thing so they said, 'Oh no, this marriage won't last. (EKaur 8 March 2012)

Yeah, there was a lot of talk at that time. We were talking with your grandfather when the Jhanj came for the wedding, and this fellow, *Nai* fellows were singing some very anti-*Jat* rhymes, you see. So the fellow with them, who was a *Jat*, told them, 'Look, I haven't come here to be insulted.' (SSingh 29 March 2012)

The extended family believed that allowing an inter-caste marriage damaged family reputation and standing in society. It would negate their position as a good family, affecting the marriage chances of other children.

They were saying that 'Today you get her married to a *Nai* family, tomorrow who's going to marry your other daughters?' So we told them, 'Uncle, don't worry. The others also will get married.' Before you know it, in a short time they were all married. That, I

think they sort of couldn't take it. They knew that we were all, I think we were all very brave. I think we were not very outspoken. We didn't bother about what people thought about us. (EKaur 8 March 2012)

The conflict expanded to encompass the Peraktown Sikh community despite her parent's choice to accept the marriage. The rupture caused a schism between the old and the new, the emergent feeling towards disregarding caste distinctions evolved to replace the dominant structure, and for the members of the liminal generation, the insistence and negative sentiment towards the relationship possessed less resonance with their sense of common identification to the space of belonging within the Peraktown *Pindh*.

I sometimes laugh because my father did so many good things, you know, and I really adored him, yet when this marriage of EKaur to EKHSingh came up, he also was angry, he also was not happy. (CKaur 6 March 2012)

He used to dig his heels in and says EKaur is getting married to EKHSingh, nobody in the family can attend the wedding. He insisted the whole family boycott the wedding. My blind uncle didn't go, my father didn't go, his elder brother couldn't go because his younger brother, the middle brother took a stand, my aunties couldn't go, my aunty was very upset, my aunty came all the way from Nibong Tebal to talk to the brother. Times have changed and this and that, my uncle said 'Nope!' Nobody from the family can attend. And then my brother married into a *Nai* family. By that time things have changed, people have really mellowed. So, my brother when he got married to a lower caste, it was so much easier. There was no split in the family, so, I'm talking about the 60's now. The family had already evolved, and, and I'm not talking about my cousin, EKaur, getting married in the 50's, EKaur got married the earlier 60's and my brother got married late 60's, '68. So by the eight years the family had already evolved to accept that things have changed, the society is changing. (TSingh 12 March 2012)

The idea of the Peraktown *Pindh* is constructed as a category of meaning through the continued revalidation of relationships, norms and values transmitted through the community or the Sikh family of Peraktown. This common bond further strengthened within the liminal

generation through shared schooling and university experiences, sports and *Gurdwara* activities ensuring the continued social relationship with EKaur despite disapproval from the elder generation. Eventually, the groom's position as a doctor offered an opportunity for the elders in the community to amend their position, for example, he offered medical treatment, often at discounted fees to these family members, and to maintain reciprocity, they in turn responded with a degree of acceptance. The ruptures generated changing attitudes, beliefs and customs, demonstrating the continual evolution of community structures of feeling surrounding the traditions and expectations of marriages, relationships and kinship bonds. The acceptance and reintegration of the transgressing members of the community exposed the decreasing relevance of homeland concerns and strictures, upheld by few, yet highlighted the boundaries of belonging within the liminal generation and their more flexible enforcement of norms and values in the feeling of the Peraktown *Pindh*.

### **5.12 Marrying out**

In contrast to the degree of rupture generated by inter-caste marriages, the practice of inter-ethnic marriages caused less conflict. The boundaries of belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh* altered with little or no dislocation between the practices of the older generation and the emergent values of the liminal generation as the family arrived at some degree of accommodation, either through requests that the non-Sikh partner participate in the Sikh religion or through eventual acceptance in order to maintain family bonds.

My second brother, he married a Chinese, married second time, you know. There was a lot of unhappiness within the family itself, leave alone the outside people. But in the end, I think father had to agree on the condition that she took *Amrit* and then she kept *Amrit*, that sort of thing. The marriage was a very quiet marriage. (CKaur 25 March 2012)

My own brother was married to a Chinese because he lost his wife during the war. She fell ill, medication was not there to cure her, and she passed away. So, after three or four years while we are in Peraktown, he got married to this Singaporean Chinese. So, that is already outside and he is a priest. I think it was ok because this lady agreed to keep her hair and follow the 5K's, which all Punjabis were happy about. And the children, they had three boys all with the *juda* on top while they were in the temple, but by now they are all doing their own things and they are all modern. (HKaur 4 April 2012)

Acceptance and reintegration required willingness to engage with their family where dominant concerns related to the eventual loss of Sikh cultural heritage. Consequently, community members who married out of Sikh ethnicity, encouraged the willingness of non-Sikh partners to participate in *Gurdwara* activities, cultural traditions and to allow their children to remain involved in the practice of Sikh religion and identity. Marrying a white person generated less rupture within the family and in the community at large.

I remember my brother, SSBSingh, he married an English girl, and my younger brother, SSB2Singh, married an English girl too. Now, the next generation, SSBSingh has got two sons. One has married an American-Italian, another married a Belgian Jew. So, you see where the mixture is? But the beautiful thing is, they all retained their religions. No one was converted. Some of the marriages took place in the temple. They went, for example, the latest wedding we had was my younger brother's eldest son's wedding. His wife is Belgian Jew. Whole group from their side and our side who were there went to the Sikh temple one day earlier and had a brief prayer. And the white girl's women all were dressed in Punjabi clothes. But the wedding too was a registered wedding. And, you see what I'm going to stress, no bride has been asked to change her religion. And all of them accompany their husbands to the Sikh temple. And all of them have permitted and do go to their own churches and for the prayers. (SSingh 22 November 2011)

The wedding of SSBSingh received significant media coverage in the local papers in Malaysia and Singapore as a human-interest story. The families expressed a sense of pride in their white daughters-in-law, in contrast to more pronounced objections towards Chinese or Indian

spouses. In part, this could be attributed to continual integration of Western manners and education in community habitus but also as marriages to whites remained restricted to the men in the community, causing less impact on family *izzat*. Women, despite significant advances in regards to education and career prospect, retained the important position within the community as primary transmitters of culture and religion to the next generation, resulting in a double standard towards inter-ethnic marriage attitudes for them. The gender norms within the construct of the Peraktown *Pindh* may have been more progressive towards providing more options for women through education and careers, but there remained a strong commitment towards upholding beliefs on women as key to family and community standing.

Religious conversion of the Sikh partner following marriage received greater degrees of censure, in contrast, as the act of changing religion meant the loss of a member of the congregation. Unlike other out-marriages, a member of the *Pindh* converting to Islam or Christianity created a distance as solidarity within the religion formed an important component of Peraktown *Pindh* norms, beliefs and identification.

I tell you something that Sikh community does not accept, even probably today, conversion to Islam. This is our history, Sikh tradition is written in blood. For 150 years, Sikhs lived on horseback because they were consistently persecuted and pursued by the Muslim rulers so to answer your question affirmatively if a Sikh converted to Islam, that's like a 'No, no', even till today, people don't like the idea of conversion because we had a rough time coming from the Muslims. (CKaur 6 March 2012)

My mother, has only one sister, younger sister, she was a teacher, she married a south Indian, and moved to Klang and we don't really have much contact with her either. All I know is that she has four children. She married a Christian, so I think they embraced Christianity, or something like that. We don't have much contact with them. (FKaur 26 March 2012)

Social dramas resulting from inter-ethnic marriages mostly concluded with reintegration at the family level, followed by alterations at the community level, as the dominant structures relating to endogamous marriages altered to accommodate the transgressing members within the space of belonging in the *Pindh*. The speed of reintegration differed based on the perceived severity and family reaction to the transgression with outward appearances requiring minimal adjustment time and transgressions relating to marriage requiring the longest periods to reconfigure the boundaries of community belonging. It is interesting to note that in regards to marriage, reintegration in marriage to a white person was instantaneous; on the other hand, marriage to a non-white needed a longer period of adjustment and the complicity of the ethnic 'other' in engagement with the Sikh religion and community norms and values. In the case of marriages to a Muslim, the community refused acceptance, considering the requirement of religious conversion as detaching the transgressor from a key form of identification to the Peraktown *Pindh*, the subscription of faith and belief towards the Sikh religion. Many reiterated that by choosing to send their children overseas to study, some accommodations must be expected regarding marriage partners. However, this acceptance remained limited, despite the strong social capital formations between parents and children and within the community promoted the potential for open-minded acceptance of these relationships. Regardless of marriage choices or other minor transgressions, members of the liminal generation chose to reconfigure their conceptualisation of the *Pindh* boundaries, allowing for reintegration in almost all cases excepting marriage to a Muslim.

### **5.13 Disregarding the 'other'**

The social composition of Peraktown included families of different race, religion and social status. The Sikh community was small in numbers in a township of Tamils, Ceylonese, Malayalees, and Indian Muslims of various ethnic origins, Malays, Chinese and the British. They shared the

physical space, attended the same schools, clubs and public spaces, yet the respondents' narratives made little mention of members of other groups. They highlighted the lack of racial segregation or distinctions, contrasting it to the current political situation in Malaysia, describing a bucolic nostalgia of multiracial harmony.

You know when we were young, there was no racial polarisation. I keep telling even people who are from my generation, even people after my generation, you know, nobody bother whether you are Malay, Chinese or Indian, we all played together. The hockey we played, the Malay play, the Chinese play, the Indian play nobody bothered, we were all kids and I used to go through Malay kampongs regularly and they wouldn't bother you at all. It is all very friendly. (TSingh 12 March 2012)

The primary sites of interaction were the local school, places of work or residential area.



**Figure 12: A Peraktown Sikh and the 'others'**

Despite the narratives highlighting inter-ethnic harmony between *Pindh* members and friends or connections of other races, they clearly demonstrated a distinction, if only in the naming of these relationships

by their ethnicity in contrast to naming them by name. In narratives of interaction with other Peraktown Sikhs, the respondents use names but members of other races enter the story differentiated and described by racial categories.

You see, we were a mixed crowd, Malays, Chinese, Indians, and we never had any problem. Actually, our only enemies were the X College, which were the royal family Malays. So, we used to be our side versus them. Between us, no rivalry. I think there was absolutely, in the class we had, ours was a mixed school, girls and all that. There was no problem. (SSingh 16 December 2011)

And then my neighbours, Malay neighbours, we were very close with them. I mean, there was a time when we could speak Malay so well that if I am in the room talking to somebody else, the person outside cannot say that it's a non-Malay. So, those days, we only looked at the other person as a human being. We didn't look at his colour, his culture, his race, religion, nothing you see. A friend is a friend, that's all. Things are different now. (NSingh 12 April 2012)

Despite living in the multicultural milieu of the township, the Sikh community retained separateness, choosing to prioritise their own cultural norms, values and identity over comprehensive assimilation. They continued to focus on the value of English and a type of education despite the nationalisation of schools and the introduction of Malay as the official language in the civil service. Speaking about a job transfer, SSingh explained his reasons for rejecting it.

My oldest son got through the Senior before that. I was stuck with my second son and my daughter, and that's when I was transferred to Kelantan, so I had to stay back when I was there in Sabah where it was in English. So, I had an influence with the people around here. So, I took my pension at 50. That was the main reason. Otherwise, I would have been in Kelantan, and where Malay is. (SSingh 29 March 2012)

The change of medium from English to Malay in the national school system, caused concern for members of the Peraktown Sikh community. A number of respondents described the consideration of

private schools or sending their children overseas to ensure they acquired an English education. As CKaur described:

At that time when he went to school, that was the first year that the medium of instruction became Malay. We were so worried about his studies, and we thought, let's send him to Australia, because my brother was there, he could study there. We made all the arrangements; we had even paid the fees. We still got the letter to say yes, a place has been saved for your son, the school starts in January, and then we, sat with CKSSingh, I said 'We think we will study in English, we will send you to Australia. You were going to learn Malay and it's no use for you.' (CKaur 25 March 2012)

The value placed on the socio-economic and transnational potential for mobility inherent in English language use and education remained important to the Peraktown Sikh community. Speaking briefly about his children, SSingh explained, 'Without English we are done for. Where would they have gone?' (29 March 2012). The conflict between Malaysian nationalism and a continued adherence to the unique community habitus caused the community to investigate relocating for education and for better opportunities. Despite this increasing geographical distance, the *Pindh* continued to hold meaning, with preferred sites of relocation being countries and cities where a community member lived. When I was applying to universities, my father maintained a strong preference for Adelaide as a place where other Peraktown Sikhs had settled. Despite the lengthy gap of time between his last interaction with these members of the community, he managed to contact them, ensuring they knew I would be attending university there. When I moved off campus, he contacted them again to tap into their local knowledge of the best suburbs for me to live.

Within the concept of the Peraktown *Pindh*, the structures of belonging created at the family level translated into community relationships. The community collectively enforced the same norms and values that they considered paramount to identity, ensuring a distinct boundary, defining

who belonged to the Peraktown *Pindh*. This constituted boundary excludes the intrusion of the 'other' in the Malaysian context, regardless of social or economic relationships. The Peraktown Sikhs used their connections with other ethnic communities to ensure the continued progress towards their own aspirations and goals. In contrast, despite temporal and spatial distances, a Peraktown Sikh remained in the *Pindh*, able to tap into the unique sense of belonging at need.

The Sikh community in Peraktown is a very close-knit community. We know each other very well and as I said right from day one, they were very supportive of each other, during times of happiness or sadness, they got along pretty well, so there was you know a very strong bonding between the families. We knew each other and some of the children of the families, we used to go to Punjabi school together, so I would say that at that point of time, there were very little differences in the community, there were no, sort of you know, backstabbing or back biting or what not. So, when there is a function in the *Gurdwara* or a wedding, each family will come out in a big way to help another. For example, when there is a wedding in a family, there were very few hotels and if the bridegroom party comes from outstation, they used to either come and stay in the *Gurdwara* so what they used to do is the families will bring their *Charpoys* to the temple for the bridegroom party to sleep. The families that have cattle, they would provide milk to the family where the wedding is held to ease their burden of trying to get fresh milk. So, that sort of help, it was very common during that time. So during a sad occasion also is the same thing, the community used to go in a big way to assist the families concerned and help them out. So, we grew up in the spirit of brotherhood. Everybody was very friendly to each other and helped each other. (OSingh 12 April 2013)

The form of narration in discussing members of other ethnic communities raises the issue of what is not said. In a sense, the distance offered by not naming friends, neighbours or colleagues strengthens the distance and difference between the construction of being a Sikh and part of the Peraktown *Pindh* and that of being the 'other', separate and distinct. The community lacked concrete reasons to fully commit and engage with the local communities and political context.

We were double-minded. We were making money here and investing in India. The whole idea was to get up to a certain age and then retire there. That was the idea. And we didn't want to interfere with local stuff. After that, once we were decided, then it was different. By that time, after Independence, and even the whole thing was getting generalized, you see, with the Bumiputeras getting all the goods. (SSingh, 29 March 2012)

They lived within a multi-ethnic society, engaging with and interacting with the many other communities yet stayed within their circle of insularity, managing as best as able, and minimizing their engagement with the political and social changes native to Malaysia during this time period.

### **5.14 Summarising the *Pindh* as boundaries**

Within Sikh cultural tradition, in the hierarchies of self-definition, following the importance of family and caste comes the concept of the hometown village, a place that exists only in nostalgic imagining. The link to this homeland exists for many of the Peraktown Sikhs in the form of a land title, the only connection remaining to a piece of land in their ancestral village. For all practical purposes, they have no real involvement with this piece of land and most had never visited. The idea of this imaginary hometown village exists for them, in the memory of the Peraktown Sikh community, as the Peraktown *Pindh*, the hometown village and as the place of close-knit relationships, extended kin networks and a site of reciprocal generosity and cooperation. The Peraktown Sikhs, as a consequence of occupying a liminal position, between homeland, new home, an ethnically plural environment and the legacy of colonial interpellation, altered norms and values, ascribing new meaning to old symbols and amending the rituals of family life. The Peraktown *Pindh* became a place and category of meaning where a boundary line is loosely mapped, with attributes of membership 'existing in the mind of their beholders' (Cohen 1985 p.12). Key findings in this chapter include firstly, the structure of familial relationships, the norms and values transmitted within family space and the value of

physical and metaphysical cultural symbols create the boundary line of where membership to the Peraktown *Pindh* begins and ends. Each family member understood and behaved accordingly to set behaviours to maintain family reputation and function, working concertedly as a unit towards social betterment. This process demonstrated the importance of the family context as a source of identity and belonging, and the value ascribed to kinship ties, the idea of a good family and the codification of social interaction based on status, despite the change from caste to professional status. The symbols of belonging inscribed within the family, through the articulation of kinship and the transmission of norms and values, both religious and secular, clearly define social identity, position and place within the Peraktown Sikh community.

Secondly, community affiliation based itself on a habitus, validated through daily interactions and shared physical space, later expanding to encompass any location of a member of the community, creating a shared understanding of a specific web of meanings that outline the boundaries of belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh*. The Peraktown Sikhs allowed flexibility in these boundaries, willingly discarding or altering norms and values in pursuit of the ultimate goal of bettering the socio-economic position of all members of the community and to accommodate the new landscapes of space, time and culture. The community relaxed strict adherence to *Amritdari* representations of their faith. Women and men in the community faced different expectations and pressures and despite encouragement towards education and careers, women experienced a conflict between choosing to remain the transmitters and defenders of cultural and religious tradition and their own personal socio-economic achievements. In managing challenges to the common norms and values, reintegration prevailed as a preferred outcome for clear moments of rupture, resulting in changes to boundaries of community norms, values and

behaviour. Finally, despite the evolving of norms and values to better suit the urban environment of the town, the Peraktown Sikhs constitution of a common culture related little to the local context of the Malaysian environment. Social interactions between racial groups were common. They played together, exchanged recipes, attended celebrations and worked in the same offices, but the influence did not extend to adopting from different cultural traditions. The community integrated not to the ethnic plurality of Malaysian life but instead, the Peraktown Sikhs remain influenced by nostalgic memory of the traditions from 'back there', the continued resonance with colonial interpellation and the 'in between' space they occupy, within the host society. The shared aspirations, beliefs, values and norms generate a meaning to community membership, underscoring the distinction of the Sikh community as a separate and distinct entity within Peraktown and indeed, from the rest of the Malaysian Sikh diaspora, defining the boundaries of belonging to the category of meaning of the Peraktown *Pindh*.

I was told by my uncle who passed away about a year plus ago that the people of Perak were very different from that of Selangor, Johor, they were different. The Perak people were more united, he said, they are more together, they are more friendly and supportive. He said the people from Selangor and Johor and other parts were less supportive of each other. (TSingh, 7 March 2012)

The significance attributed to these specific behaviours and practices form a web of meaning for the individuals and the community as a whole, demarcating shared identity.

Discussing the idea of belonging within the Peraktown *Pindh* begins from the position of an exile, as the entire community are exiles in a sense, from earlier places of settlement in Malaysia or from the homeland in Punjab. The place of Peraktown was always recognised as a temporary stop on a continuing journey towards the betterment of family standing and socio-economic position, and there is never fixity of

home as the physical space inhabited, instead, it remains always a future goal. The uniqueness of the Peraktown *Pindh* lies with the attachments and links created within this community, that despite distance and social position, remained constant, activated at need or just merely for the knowledge of not being alone in the world, no matter how far they travelled from the point of Peraktown, culturally, socially and physically. As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson explained:

As actual places and localities become even more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient. It is here that it becomes most visible how imagined communities come to be attached to imagined places. (1992 p.69)

Lacking a cogent political engagement to the local, the Peraktown *Pindh* offered the Peraktown Sikh community a sense of common kinship and a source of identity, constructed through the reiteration of traditional Sikh norms, values and beliefs, yet also the adaptations to these cultural artefacts in the face of engagement with new ideas and differing priorities. The Peraktown *Pindh* underwent a rite of passage, moving from a rural, traditional way of life as practiced in Punjab, choosing not to allow their culture to ossify, accepting the urban and increasingly globalised situation the community resides in now. The past traditions and values no longer possessed the power of absolute domination as the experience of migration, of living in a country not their own and of the continual negotiation of identity in the border crossings forces change to societal norms and values. The continual process of altering and adapting at need the tenets underpinning this common culture resulted in the Peraktown Sikhs creating, inscribing and adapting the boundaries of community membership, no longer fitting into 'back there' nor integrating fully into life here, but always belonging in the place of the Peraktown *Pindh*.

## **6 Conclusion**

This thesis studies the palimpsest of journeys and movements across the physical and imaginary landscapes the Peraktown Sikh community traversed to find a place to belong and call home, in pursuit of that ubiquitous notion of a better life. In a sense, this journey meshed with my own efforts to understand my identity and understanding of what it means to be at home, when home continues to be a multiplicity of physical locales and the presence of family and friends. I have spent the last two decades of my life answering questions that manifests the entire complexity of embodiment as the 'other', usually some variation of 'where are you from?' that is swiftly followed up with 'But where are you really from?'. In my research I found one possible answer to this, that has meaning only to a very small group of people, yet the resonance of it is so strong within this group, that despite age gaps, varied life experiences, different forms of education and cultural knowledge, I am viewed as one of them, a member of the Peraktown *Pindh*. As Bourdieu described, the forms of knowledge and meaning within a particular habitus reproduces the social structures that constituted them originally (1993 pp. 48-9), or as Williams described, the 'official consciousness' of a particular structure of feeling, related to the dominant meaning of community belonging, when activated (1977 p.131). In choosing to research the Peraktown Sikh community, engaging myself in their lives and through the virtue of my position as daughter and grandchild of members of the community, I stepped in and stayed within the interstices they inhabit, inside the boundaries of belonging to the Peraktown *Pindh*.

### **6.1 Summary of findings**

In my research, I sought to make explicit the diversity and commonalities in defining belonging and home within a minority diaspora community of visible difference, the Sikhs of Peraktown, in the

period of transition from colonial to post or neo-colonial and multi-ethnic Malaysian environment. This community entered the Malaysian landscape as subordinates to the dominant British administration and altering to become an ethnic and religious minority, largely subsumed by the trope of Indian indentured labour migration within the independent nation state. Adding to knowledge of non-indentured origin diaspora groups within the rubric of the Indian diaspora discourse, this research creates a counter-history of the social, economic and political representations of Malaysian Indian identity. The Peraktown Sikhs progressed up the socio-economic ladder, from small, manual labour focused small business or auxiliary occupations, to middle-class, educated professionals who created their own place of belonging. I appropriated a traditional homeland concept, the *Pindh*, to provide the theoretical foundation in understanding their creation of a place of significance, where home and belonging become attached to social relationships, cultural beliefs and a shared identification to one another rather than to the physical locale or the remembered 'back there'. The uniqueness of the Peraktown *Pindh* rests with the attachments and links created within this community, that despite distance and social position, remained constant, to be activated at need or just merely for the knowledge of not being alone in the world, no matter how far they travelled from the point of Peraktown, culturally, socially and physically. The construct of the Peraktown *Pindh* offered a source of common kinship and a source of identity, a large family, created and sustained by the reiteration of traditional Sikh norms values and beliefs, yet the adaptation in face of engagement with new ideas and differing priorities.

This thesis relies almost entirely on the oral histories collected, making it a construct of memories. As Rushdie explained:

Memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end

it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own. (Rushdie 2006 p.242)

The narrative form allowed for the understanding of the way the research subjects positioned themselves within the multiple and contested identities of being Sikh, a diaspora and in Malaysia. The emotions and the subjective nature of the events remembered and described in the narratives throughout this thesis represent the point of view of a moment of historical transition, from colonial to independent nation state in Malaysia as experienced by the subjects as their truth. By large, it leaves out the historical process, highlighting the absence of political engagement within the community towards the nationalistic project that eventually became Malaysia. In addition, although all the respondents emphasised the cordial and friendly relationships with members of other ethnic categories residing in Peraktown, there remained a sense of self-definition of 'us' as distinct from the 'other' in the general lack of detailed description or naming of Peraktown residents of other ethnicities. The articulation of these social forms appears explicit within these narratives as they demonstrate the social consciousness of the Peraktown *Pindh* members in the spatial and temporal space, as 'lived actively, in real relationships' (Williams 1977 p.130). The 'other' was a category described as British, Indian or any other subcommunal group, Chinese, Malay or Eurasian and, therefore, remained distinct from the *Pindh*. The story of the Peraktown *Pindh* is a story devoid of direct consideration of the impact and involvement with the political formations of the local, making explicit the community emphasis on an idea of home and belonging that ignores geographical confines, focusing instead on a common feeling of self-identification within the community boundaries.

The *Pindh* members inscribe their sense of belonging through a shared set of unwritten social rules different to the depictions of community norms and values in the post-World War II modern diaspora in Britain,

Europe and North America or in Punjab. Instead, they relaxed their grasp on the fixed culture of their place of origin, to master, as Bourdieu described, the game in a specific social field, developing a new habitus representing a *mélange* of the traditional, their encounter with modernity without losing their grasp of traditional social constructs and the multi-ethnic environment of the Malaysian case (Bourdieu 1977 p.161). In the chapter on the *Pindh* as history, I examined the construction of Sikh religious identity to embody the practices and appearance of the *Khalsa* Sikhs and the intersection between colonial interpellation and the self-agency through the encounter with modernity by the Sikhs themselves. The origins of the Peraktown Sikh community finds its history within this framework, and the beginning of *Pindh* identity is implicated by both this colonial gaze and the choice to appropriate this definition by an outside agency in the construction of community identity. However, as the pioneers settled in the Peraktown locale, they began to develop new ways of understanding and being Sikh, within the diaspora, again through the encounter with the colonial 'other'. Within the geographical confines of Peraktown, the community began to transform the physical spaces into places of meaning, defining themselves through the practice of everyday life, the development of their own histories and their personal and community experience.

The transformation of this geographical space into a *Pindh* commenced with the decision to divorce their religious practice from the nominal control of the colonial powers. They started by constructing a *Gurdwara* outside the confines of colonial space, making it a place of worship managed by and attended by the Sikh community living in the township, regardless of their status within the colonial administration. The community worked together to develop the site, hired a priest and commenced religious ceremonies and the other more social and cultural aspects of use of the *Gurdwara* space. Drawing from the inherited place of origin traditions, they subverted the meaning assigned to these

practices by the British, choosing for themselves how and with whom they shared the practice of their faith. This period commenced the fixity of the locale as their place of home, and they adopted a rural tradition from their place of origin, the *Panchayat*, as a means of norm and behaviour enforcement, transformation and practice of social distinction, countering social organisation defined by caste or regional affiliation. This contrasts the experience in Punjab, where villages relied heavily on *Jat* leadership and their position at the apex of social hierarchies. The formation of the *Panchayat* represented the continued value assigned to place of origin traditions and social constructs, but the community demonstrated adaptation and flexibility in the choice of *Panchayat* members. They selected community elders who possessed skills, social capital, cultural capital and links to British colonial society through work or social connections, to provide new understanding and prospects within the host society for the Peraktown Sikhs as a whole unit.

The antecedents of the *Pindh* began in this inter-war period, as a way for the community to find themselves at home in the locality, remaining linked through cultural practice to the place of origin but beginning to adapt their practices towards the dominant culture and skills valued within the British Empire rather than the fixity of the Malayan context. The entry of the new colonial power, the Japanese, during World War II and the encounter with a different form of colonisation marked the beginning of changes to the conceptualisation of this category of meaning, the Peraktown *Pindh*. The Japanese Occupation described through the experience of the Peraktown Sikhs represented the sole period of history that challenged their identification, altering it from dependence on the relationship to Punjab and the broader forces of empire. Through the disruption of travel and contact with Punjab, the community found space to redefine and to evaluate the inheritance of rural and homeland traditions in the process of constructing new

boundaries of belonging and the conceptualisation of community aspirations and goals as a united entity. The Japanese Occupation shared memory of a community moving to the rubber estate together to wait out the Japanese troop movements during the initial stages of invasion represents the sense of feeling within members of the liminal generation of common bonds and kinship, weakening the meanings of caste, regional or social positions as signifiers of difference. Following this period of history, the Peraktown Sikhs relegated the distinction of caste to arrangement and acceptance of marriages. In addition, the Japanese Occupation marked the acceptance of greater involvement outside the domestic sphere for the women in the community, providing them to demonstrate their capabilities and independence as more than the embodiment of family *izzat*. This provided the women in the liminal generation opportunities to attend further education and choose their own careers in contrast to place of origin gender roles where women may pursue further education but their position within the Sikh community remains intrinsically linked to the domestic sphere, as daughter, wife and mother. The Occupation of Malaya highlighted the increasingly held preference within the community for the colonial education system and English, and a continued alignment with British power despite the presence of a new coloniser. While the community used social connections to the Japanese administration to safeguard the community members' well-being, they chose to remain apart, prioritising the maintenance of English knowledge over the adoption of Japanese social and cultural habitus.

For the Peraktown *Pindh*, the Japanese Occupation remained a period of stagnation in socio-economic movement, as job opportunities were limited and they did not want their children attending Japanese schools. The end of the Occupation marked a return to normalcy and preferred ways of living and being, with career progression for the men returning to the pre-war upward mobility and the commencement of career or

education for the members of the liminal generation. Despite a history of alignment with dominant powers, the Sikhs of Peraktown chose to remain constant toward the *mélange* of community habitus, encompassing both traditional Sikh practices and adoption of the British colonial forms of knowledge that they perceived as more valuable to community progress. The Japanese Occupation also offered a return to rural traditions through the need for subsistence farming, creating the physical link and use of the land, in the same fashion as the use and relationship to the landscapes of Punjab. This created a solid linkage to the locality, removing the last vestiges of nostalgia for their rural traditions of their place of origin. Finally the Occupation years offered the Peraktown Sikhs a period of community building. They formed increasingly close relationships with each other, shared nostalgia for the period of British colonial rule, adapted the *Gurdwara* space to maintain inherited cultures and traditions and they formed their homes as a site of hybridity, including British colonial education and habitus. In my research, my use of *Pindh* became an enabling concept to comprehend and process this particular community and their distinctive sense of identification and sense of belonging to a common unit.

Moving on from the foundation of the *Pindh* as a category of meaning for the Peraktown Sikhs, the *Pindh* as Place explains and describes the contestation and claiming of the physical space within the geography of Peraktown. I explored the practice of turning the physical space into places of meaning and the intrinsic links to community boundary formation and definitions of home and belonging. The many varied practices of everyday life and constant negotiation of definitions of community identification played out across the domestic space of home, the fundamentally Sikh space of the *Gurdwara*, the public spaces of the native officers club, the school and the playing fields and the changing gendered space of the work environments. The Peraktown Sikhs constituted an understanding of the meaning they assigned to being a

member of the Peraktown *Pindh*. Collectively, they adapted traditional practices of culture, retained value for the religious behaviours and symbols and contested the dominant interpellation of themselves by the British administration, becoming more than loyal subalterns, transforming spaces into places of meaning. In the space of home, the *Pindh* is constructed through the understanding and importance placed on family position and responsibility in ensuring an increase in family *izzat*. This intensely personal structure of family interactions did not remain separate from the common understanding of *Pindh* belonging and behaviours. Within the home space, a balance between the traditions of rural culture and the intimacy of Punjabi language remained salient but are joined with the dominant culture habitus, seen through the value placed on books in English from the canon of colonial education literature and the interactions with members of other ethnic communities to build social capital.

The entire conceptualisation of the domestic space within the Peraktown *Pindh* aims at maintaining and improving *izzat* or social standing within the Sikh community at large and the long-term goal of socio-economic betterment while continuing to maintain the key components of their cultural inheritance. In contrast to the continuously changing *mélange* of dominant culture habitus and rural traditions from Punjab practiced within the private, interiors of the domestic space, the *Gurdwara* in Peraktown offered a space entirely resonant to the practice of the Sikh faith in their place of origin. In this space, through the practice of the Sikh religion and the cultural and social activities associated with the *Gurdwara* space, it is transformed into a place of meaning, entirely Sikh. This offered the Peraktown Sikhs a place wholly their own, where the transmission of religious teachings, the understanding of the Sikh faith and the language of their ancestors retains value and allows the experience, in sights, sounds and smell of Punjab, unadulterated by the local, providing a respite from the pervasive influence of the Malaysian

context. The public spaces of Peraktown, however, became spaces of contestation and appropriation, where the meaning of membership to the Peraktown *Pindh* becomes an evolving negotiation between the dominant and the traditional cultural values. The key example of subverting forms of knowledge played out within the school space, with the elders of the community working as teachers to collectively maintain and enforce traditional norms. These included respect for elders, modest behaviour and dress for women and the continued transmission of Punjabi language while simultaneously incalculating the importance of the English language and the colonial education system as a means of improving family status.

The teachers from the community actively worked towards ensuring the success within this system of the liminal generation, offering additional classes outside school hours or assistance in acquiring temporary teaching jobs for financing further education. The treatment differed little for the different genders in terms of educational achievements and the women at school participated in concerts, debates and school sports.



**Figure 13: Peraktown Sikh woman in debate team**

However, there remained a code of behaviour surrounding the issue of purity, chastity and modesty in interactions with the opposite sex and outward appearance such as clothing. As with the work spaces, there remained an inequality of treatment and practice based on gender, with women gaining opportunities to participate in post-secondary education and starting careers, yet continuing to be implicated in the reproduction of traditional Sikh culture and behaviour. The discussion on the everyday life for Peraktown Sikhs and their own journeys towards transforming spaces into places of meaning highlighted the relationships of power surrounding categories of gender, social class and position. Gender remains the means by which cultural continuity and the shared understanding of Sikh ethnic identity, family behaviour and inter-generational responsibility is recorded and transmitted through the re-enactment and negotiation of the remembered values of 'back there'

and the necessary skills and cultural competency to succeed 'here'. As such, the discourse of gender within the Peraktown *Pindh* remained defined by irreducible differences and the continued reproduction of a patriarchal system. The central practice of being female stayed fixed, prioritising the authentic Sikh woman as good daughter, wife and mother, yet within the Peraktown *Pindh*, the definition of these roles altered to include post-secondary education and working in a white-collar job.

The narratives and memories in this thesis also made explicit the consideration of class and social position, where civil service careers or social relationships with the dominant culture represented the apex of Peraktown Sikh society. This assignment of value exemplified the continued narrative of power as dependent on fluent competency with the habitus this community chose to reify, the British colonial project and the value placed on the ability to access resources and knowledge to improve the socio-economic standing of fellow *Pindh* members. The intersection of these hegemonic discourses of class and gender defined the power structures within the *Pindh*, creating spaces with embodied meaning of 'Englishness' as male and 'Punjabi' as female. This altered as the liminal generation commenced their own careers and women gained their own social positions through both their positions as keepers of the family *izzat* and as participants within the workplace, emphasising in turn the value of English as a language of power and education as the currency of social status. The Peraktown Sikhs cease to be merely a Sikh diaspora and become instead a Peraktown diaspora through the construction of members who belong, by means of reproducing and transmitting their specific *mélange* of cultural artefacts, beliefs, norms, values and structures of power. Inherent within these hegemonic discourses too is the notion of movement and relocation, in pursuit of further education, careers or marriage. The physical space of Peraktown possessed a salient meaning for the community, but it

ceased to represent home as they comprehended the transience of any geographical location, instead home is evoked through symbolic remembrance of the places within the Peraktown *Pindh*. As Clifford explained, 'dwelling *here* assumes a solidarity and connection *there*. But *there* is not necessarily a single place or exclusivist nation' (Clifford 1994 p.322). The *Pindh* exists as long as it is remembered, regardless of distances travelled physically and mentally, as *there* became a process of constructing the memory of specific forms of knowledge and practice.

In Chapter 5, the *Pindh* as boundaries, I explained how the Peraktown Sikhs constructed and controlled the norms, values, beliefs and behaviours that comprised the boundaries of community membership. Identification to the Peraktown *Pindh* is invested with a multiplicity of meanings. In defining boundaries, the community incorporated a sense of kinship and connection but also stability and durability, providing the framework for the transmission and resilience of cultural continuity and a uniquely local site of memory implicated in the production and reproduction of self-identification. The chapter explains how family remains at the base of community identity, providing the key structure for the communication and negotiation of the feelings and symbols involved in being a Peraktown Sikh. The naming of family roles, gender position, caste and regional affiliation remain a central part of Sikh identity in Punjab and in the diaspora. Within Peraktown, this remains true, but through the process of naming, the strict definition of inherited definitions altered to adapt community boundaries, redrawing them following moments of rupture. The naming begins with defining one's position within the family hierarchy and the understanding of responsibilities associated with this position. The good family as discussed in Chapter 5, is shorthand in Sikh tradition to mean behaviours commensurate with the adherence to familial and community norms surrounding *izzat* and landholdings. In Peraktown,

this centred on all family members working in concert towards ensuring a good family reputation and social position, through the practice of appropriate norms of behaviour, religious practice, education levels, career achievements and acceptable marriage alliances. Through the process of naming familial and social positions, the Peraktown Sikhs positioned themselves within a web of meaning, forming connections with each other with clear understanding of roles and responsibilities. Within the family of the *Pindh*, the transmission of norms and values was enforced both inside and outside the home space through the close-knit relationships between members of the community with a high degree of inter-generational closure.

The *Pindh* represented the boundaries of membership to a smaller family unit, writ large, to define and adapt the norms and values from back there, surrounding family roles with the removal of strictly enforced gender constraints and the evolution of regional or caste based affiliations and hierarchical distinctions to an education-dependent status largely related to speaking English and professional white-collar positions. Where transgressions occurred, usually relating to forms of religious practice or romantic relationships, the community based their reactions on the *Panchayat* and the immediate family. Norms and values altered to accommodate the lived experience of the locality and the pursuit of better socio-economic position with moments of rupture to the common boundaries of belonging surrounding accepted and valued behaviour resulting in the reintegration of the transgressor within the *Pindh*. The construction of religious identity as Sikh altered with the members of the Peraktown *Pindh* choosing to relax the strict adherence to *Amritdari* or *Khalsa*-centric practice of the Sikh faith as no longer practical, choosing instead to focus in belief and value for the Sikh scriptures. In regards to inter-gender relationships, the community as a whole encouraged the feeling of kinship between the members of the liminal generation, ensuring the formation of romantic

relationships continued to be an exception rather than the norm despite the close relationships formed within the group. Marriage however represented a key site of boundary renegotiation due to the continued value placed on caste and ethnically homogeneous alliances. The alterations to rural traditions and practices as inherited from Punjab to accommodate the increasingly globalised environment in which the community moved, resulted in most transgressions being ultimately forgiven, allowing the return to full and participatory membership within the newly inscribed boundaries of *Pindh* belonging. The *Pindh* boundaries remained clearly defined through the sense of a collectivism in opposition to the push and pull forces of here and back there, providing a clear place of belonging and articulating a common identity and meaning for the Peraktown Sikhs regardless of how far they travelled, metaphorically and physically. The boundaries to *Pindh* belonging remained sufficiently flexible and porous, adaptable to changing circumstances and need, always allowing the exile to return, as long as they chose to do so.

I started the research for this thesis, so far and distant from the subjects of my research, half a world removed and fifty years too distant. Meeting the characters named in the narratives, engaging in their lives, learning their beliefs and values and being included as part of the research process, in a community I knew only through small vignettes of family history, this distance decreased. I participated in their family functions, started to understand their sense of peace acquired through prayer, learnt their customs and the expectations they lived with. I found myself in the position of recognising that in a sense, their boundaries of belonging, surrounding the category of meaning, the Peraktown *Pindh*, have loosened sufficiently to make a space for me, within the community, not merely as an inheritor of this position, as the grandchild and daughter of one of their own, but also, for my sake alone. Now, as I work on my research, there is a sense of return, a

coming home, out of exile, surrounded by the ghosts of times, places and people past. This thesis is in many ways, my own journey towards belonging, finding my way backwards, where this history of my father, my grandparents and all the subjects in my study, becomes more than their history, but also my past and my present. I have spent much of my life moving, between countries, cities and houses and this creates a disruption to the sense of being at home, when there is no one physical space where you feel wholly at ease, where belonging is effortless. My life to date is a succession of journeys, across the geography of Malaysia and Australia, a melange of culture and people. This continual motion, the cycle of adapting and altering to fit into a space not quite yours, moving, geographically, mentally and emotionally makes home and belonging a constantly changing point. The challenge is having an answer to the inevitable question, 'Where are you from?' The Peraktown *Pindh*, for me, has become like North on a compass rose. It is a constant, yet changing landscape, holding always, the same inherent meaning. In the Peraktown *Pindh*, my history is recorded, my present acknowledged and I belong, without qualification, through my sharing in the memories, the narratives and their histories, in concert with my subjects.

## **6.2 Limitations and further research**

My work is interdisciplinary, it is a key value of this research that it draws on a variety of resources and modes, and as my supervisor once explained, paraphrasing his own supervisor, Stefan Collini, in interdisciplinary work, as in other walks of life, it is often difficult to conjoin promiscuity with respectability. My thesis explores a period of history where the colonial encounter and modernity intersected with the formations of a post-colonial state using ethnographic methods and oral history narratives to examine the construction of belonging and home within a minority diaspora community of visible difference within a

multi-ethnic and religiously plural environment. As discussed in Sections 2.5 to 2.9, due to the small number of research subjects, my position within the research and the historical context it is framed within, this method poses limitations on the broad-range application of my thesis findings. As Brah explained, 'there are multiple semiotic spaces at diaspora borders, and the probability of certain forms of consciousness emerging are subject to the play of political power and psychic investments in the maintenance or erosion of the status quo' (Brah 1996 p.208). The specific conditions relating to the formation and structures of feeling surrounding the category of meaning, the Peraktown *Pindh* may not necessarily be reproduced. The value in this research is firstly, as a testimony of unrecorded history of a little-studied community of difference from their own unique perspective. The post-colonial state formation process in Malaysia focuses largely on constructions of communalistic definitions of the population and their histories and future interests. This limits the voices and representation of sub-ethnic communities and indeed the voices of difference from within the dominant ethnic groups, hidden within the mass subsummation of broader categories of identification, eliminating the nuances of personal and real lived experience that does not fit within the nation-building project. The contestation of identification with the nation state is explained best by Fanon's distinction between national consciousness and nationalism where national consciousness may be derived from a common, shared concept of culture and experience (Fanon and Philcox 2004 p.247). Constructing alternative histories within the more recent post-colonial nation state formations through the voices of under-represented minority voices would provide greater insight in the articulation and importance of the nation state to communities of difference. The nature of interdisciplinary work practiced in this thesis offers a prospect for utilisation in further studies to examine these ideas through narratives collected from the ageing

populations in the region, who lived through the decolonisation process and subsequent nationalist constitutions of belonging.

My transposition of a distinctively Sikh concept to become the theoretical category of meaning, the *Pindh*, developed as the data resonated strongly with the construction of community identity and their own comprehension and constitution of home and belonging. Co-opting this term and extending its original meaning to encompass all these ideas and structures of feeling allowed the opportunity to extend the discourse of diaspora, in this particular community, beyond the postcolonial and Western modes of thought surrounding the meaning of being 'other' yet simultaneously belong both 'here,' 'back there' and to many potential future places of home. The concept offers a way to organise and understand migrant group identities and it would be interesting to explore further the potential applications of the *Pindh* of the mind as an enabling concept for different diaspora groups. This research engaged extensively with theoretical concepts from the United Kingdom, specifically, the work of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall and consequently, my own construction of the *Pindh* represents an effort to push back against this discourse, creating a new space for conceiving this community's experience in terms that emerged from the narratives and lived experience of the Peraktown Sikhs. In its evolution, the thesis became a dialogue between Sikh self-conception and Western academic theory and discourse.

### **6.3 Concluding remarks**

This thesis provides a snapshot of a particular historical period and the lived experience of one community, exploring the practice of everyday life in constructing a place they could call home. In a sense, completing this research brings with it a certain sadness, a nostalgia for a way of seeing and feeling that now, is a residual structure of feeling. There is no longer a need for this particular category of meaning unique to this Sikh diaspora community, and when this liminal generation no longer

remain, this thesis will be one of few locations where it remains remembered and evoked. As one respondent explained, when speaking about attending functions within the Sikh community in Malaysia:

These days children don't follow what the parents tell them. They'll question you. They'll say, 'Do I have to? Do I know the person? No, I don't know. I can't remember that person,' so they don't go. I think that's why our children now are not so close as we were. We, if I knew, oh he is from Peraktown, oh yes, I must go. He is from Peraktown. Whether I can remember the person or not, I still would go just because he's from my hometown and I must pay my respects to the person. (EKaur 8 March 2012)

The construct of the Peraktown *Pindh* provided a space of home and meaning for the Peraktown Sikhs, providing them the freedom to move, in search of further education, advanced career prospects and better lives for their children while remaining tethered to an idea of home. The Peraktown *Pindh* offered a fluid and shifting space of meaning not reliant on a fixed physical locale but rather the shared understanding of common norms, values, behaviours and social relationships. The lived experiences of the Peraktown Sikhs in the process of constructing this feeling of home and space of belonging offers a rich and highly textured vision of Sikh lived experience within the diaspora. The lived experiences presented through their narratives describe the uniqueness of this particular community as they made meanings and connections, framed within family relationships, friendships and favour exchanges, evolving community habitus and demonstrate the transformation from a Peraktown *Pindh* to a *Pindh* of the mind. At the end of *Border Country*, Matthew reflects, 'for the distance is measured, and that is what matters. By measuring the distance, we come home.' (Williams 2006 p.436). For the Peraktown Sikhs, the journey from the homeland through both space and time is long yet it does not end. There is no distance to be measured as the Peraktown Sikhs are perpetually within their *Pindh*, regardless of how far they travel, or how many generations pass; there is no exile, but the journey is unending.

Diaspora groups everywhere face a constant push and pull between a home that is 'here' and the nostalgia and longing for a home that is 'back there'. In contrast, the Peraktown *Pindh* is a home that has no fixed address, and like the Peraktown Sikhs, is continuously in motion, moving between memories, the sharing of their stories and the sense of knowing where and to whom they belong. The Peraktown *Pindh* becomes a representation of relationships, connecting its members through a loosely linked web, where it is acknowledged and understood that they continue to belong but the activation of these networks occurred only at need, becoming less a physical representation of their place of origin and more a *Pindh* of the mind. Discussing the idea of belonging within the Peraktown *Pindh* begins from the position of exile, as the Peraktown Sikhs are exiles in a sense, from earlier places of settlement in Malaysia or from the homeland in Punjab. The place of Peraktown is always recognised as a temporary stop on a continuing journey towards the betterment of family standing and socio-economic position, and there is never fixity of home as the physical space inhabited, instead, it remains always a future goal. The uniqueness of the Peraktown *Pindh* rests with the attachments and links created within this community, that despite distance and social position, remained constant, to be activated at need or just merely for the knowledge of not being alone in the world, no matter how far they travelled from the point of Peraktown, culturally, socially and physically. As Rushdie described:

Our lives disconnect and reconnect, we move on, and later we may again touch one another, again bounce away. This is the felt shape of a human life, neither simply linear nor wholly disjunctive nor endlessly bifurcating, but rather this bouncy-castle sequence of bumpings-into and tumbling apart. (1999 p.543)

The Peraktown *Pindh* offered a source of common kinship and a source of identity, a large family, constructed through the reiteration of traditional Sikh norms values and beliefs, yet the adaptation in face of

engagement with new ideas and differing priorities. This unique category of meaning unique to Sikh populations in Punjab and through the diaspora provides a way to know the Peraktown Sikhs. Beginning with the common constitution of locality in the specific geographical location as part of the process of settlement in the host environment, it evolved within the context of the liminal generation, becoming the incorporeal *Pindh* of the mind, providing a place of meaning and belonging for the Peraktown Sikhs, transcending the limitations of geography and temporality. This thesis is a part of the Peraktown *Pindh*, as I am now, through the continued evocation of memory and retellings, the activation of Peraktown Sikh relationships and networks through the process of my research and finally, because in these pages, I found a place of meaning, uniquely Sikh and uniquely Peraktown, that is now part of my multiplicities of identity and where I belong.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1: Information sheet and consent form**

#### Information Sheet

My name is Veena and I am a PhD student at the University of Nottingham, researching the Sikh community in Malaysia. I am a member of this community and my ancestors migrated to Malaysia during the colonial period so it is also a project of personal interest.

My research aims to create a history of the Sikhs in Malaysia from their arrival during the British rule and to understand their culture, identity and motivations. I believe our community in Malaysia is unique in their achievements and I want to document this as a source for my research and to create a comprehensive history of the community, from its origins to the present day.

We are a sub-ethnic group of the Indian community and our culture, religion and identity differ from the over-arching idea of being a Malaysian Indian. Unfortunately, it is rare to find studies on the Sikh community as a separate group. From colonial rule to present day, most research surrounding the Indian community examines the indentured labour migrants from the Tamil community. With this study, I hope to make the voice of the Malaysian Sikhs heard.

I hope to involve a wide range of the community in this project and to use a mix of methods, including video, interview transcripts, diaries and letters. I want to talk to you about your life, your experiences, memories and feelings and what is important to you. Your life history is important and is the best way to gain a true understanding of our community origins in Malaysia and our hopes for the future.

In my research for my PhD thesis and in publications (print and electronic) that emerge from this, your identity will be kept confidential and anonymous. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from this study at any point. You are also free to withhold the use of any images that you produce.

I hope you will give me permission however, to use this data for further research and to provide a visual record of our history. I believe the story of all our lives is an important resource for ourselves, as a community and for others, to gain tangible knowledge about us. Future uses would be limited to reports, presentations, publications, and documentaries and as archival material.

I anticipate that my methods of data collection will require a minimum of five hours of your time. I would like to use a video recorder to capture you telling me as much of your life story that you are comfortable sharing. I would like to schedule two further interview sessions after this to allow us to explore further some different themes within your history. Should you prefer, I would be happy to leave a video recorder with you to record your own video diary. Alternatively, you may be more comfortable with writing it down. The project is important and I want to work with you to ensure the best possible methods. Following this, a transcript of the interviews will be provided for you to review.

During the course of the research, visual and audio material will be saved to a password protected and secure computer. For any transfer of data, a password protected mobile hard drive will be used. Written material will be stored in a locked cabinet. Access to these materials is available only to me, my supervisors for review purposes and to the assistant(s) transcribing the interviews. The assistant(s) will be required to sign a confidentiality statement.

I am very grateful for your assistance and look forward to working with you. Should you have any questions, my contact details are as follows:

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Consent form

I,

\_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in this study on the Sikhs of Malaysia conducted by Veena Kaur. I agree to allow the use of my voice in audio recording, my likeness in video recording and any documents and photographs that I provide for the use of this study.

I understand that with my decision to participate in this project, my participation is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw my consent or discontinue participation at any time.

I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer particular questions.

I understand how confidentiality will be maintained during this project. My privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from this study.

I understand that all interviews will be video and audio recorded.

I understand that all data will be stored in a safe and secure manner.

**By ticking the box below, I give permission for my visual identity to be made known in future projects resulting from the study.** Otherwise, my individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study. The data may be used in the future (in electronic or print form), in reports, presentations, publications, documentaries and exhibitions arising from the project.

I give my consent for all written and visual data to be reproduced for educational and/or non-commercial purposes, in reports, presentations, publications, documentaries, websites and exhibitions by the researcher. I understand that real names will NOT be used with the material.

Signed.....

Date.....

CONTACT INFORMATION:

## Appendix 2: List of Peraktown Sikhs

This is a list of all families identified as potential respondents. Where a name includes the use of Kaur, this indicates a respondent of female gender. Singh is used to indicate a male respondent. A number of families did not have any surviving members or were unable to participate due to considerations of distance. I have included in this list, members of the Peraktown Sikh community that are mentioned in narratives.

Other family members are distinguished by their relationship to the respondent. For example the father of AKaur is listed in the thesis as AKFSingh, where F represents the relationship and Singh indicates a male.

GF – Grandfather

GM - Grandmother

GU –Grand uncle

U – Uncle

B – Brother (numbered if more than one mentioned)

S – Sister (numbered if more than one mentioned)

C – Cousin

H – Husband

A	Kaur	O	Singh
B	Kaur	P	Singh
C	Kaur	Q	Singh
D	Kaur	R	Singh
E	Kaur	S	Singh
F	Kaur	T	Singh
G	Kaur	U	Singh
H	Kaur	V	Singh
I	Kaur	W	Singh
J	Kaur	X	Singh
K	Kaur	Y	Singh
L	Singh	Z	Singh
M	Singh		
N	Singh		

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