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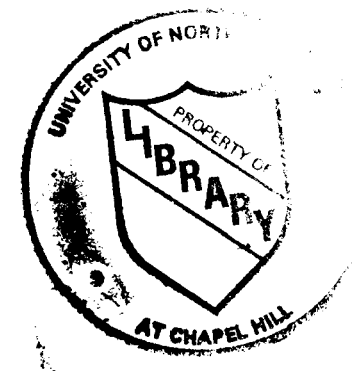
F870
.P36
L46
1992

In the series,
Asian American History and Culture,
edited by Sucheng Chan

Making Ethnic Choices

California's Punjabi Mexican Americans

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Temple University Press
Philadelphia

Temple University Press, Philadelphia 19122
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Published 1992
Printed in the United States of America

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Leonard, Karen Isaksen, 1939—

Making ethnic choices : California's Punjabi Mexican Americans /
Karen Isaksen Leonard.

p. cm. — (Asian American history and culture series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-87722-890-6

1. Panjabi Americans—California. 2. Mexican Americans—
California. 3. Interracial marriage—California. 4. California—
Social conditions. I. Title. II. Series.

F870.P36L46 1992

305.891'420794—dc20

91-24482

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4 Marriages and Children

As the Punjabi farmers settled in the Imperial Valley, some began setting up households, usually joint households consisting of their partners in a farming venture. Unable to bring wives and families from India because of the tightened immigration laws, the men cooked and cleaned for themselves or hired local women. They also formed relationships with local women, and those who wanted a stable family life in the United States began to marry. The demographic patterns of marriage and childbearing are described in this chapter; subsequent chapters explore the social worlds of the men and women and the conflicts they experienced.

The First Marriages

For the Punjabi men, marriage was not a simple matter of choosing among the single women in the Imperial Valley, courting them, and marrying. There were customary and legal constraints even in this domestic arena. Thus the first few Punjabi marriages in the valley were front-page news, arousing concern and prejudice, even though the most wealthy and prominent men were the first to marry. Sher Singh, a Holtville cotton farmer, reportedly took out a license for a Mexican bride in March 1916. "While in doubt as to their legal right to marry under the laws of this state, the clerk . . . issued the license, thereby passing the responsibility up to any authorized person who performs the marriage ceremony." The reporter anxiously tried to ascertain whether or not the couple had been married.¹

The strongest prejudice was against Punjabis associating with white women. When another well-to-do Holtville cotton farmer, B. K. Singh,

married the sixteen-year-old daughter of one of his tenants in 1918, one headline read: *Hindu Weds White Girl by Stealing Away to Arizona*.² The article speculated that since Imperial County would not issue a license for a Punjabi and a white woman, it was doubtful that the clerk in Yuma had acted legally. California's anti-miscegenation laws prohibited marriages between people of different races, and Punjabis were generally classified as nonwhite. One Punjabi man recalled his love affair with a white woman around 1920; an offended Anglo neighbor roused him out of her house with a shotgun and had him arrested. Even the employment of white women as house cleaners and cooks was difficult.³

Local Anglo opinion about Punjabi relationships with "Mexican girls" was somewhat more favorable—a prominent Anglo farmer and the county horticultural commissioner witnessed the first and fourth such marriages in the valley.⁴ Marriage licenses soon were issued routinely to Punjabi men and Hispanic women.⁵ These early marriages caused conflict with Mexican men in the area. In 1918, the *El Centro Progress* headlined *Race Riot Is Staged*. A fight between Mexicans and Punjabis in the cotton fields near Heber had resulted from a Punjabi's marriage to a Mexican woman and an oath of vengeance made by several Mexican men. The Mexican men went to the couple's farm to attack them, but Punjabi farmers got the better of them. Four years later, two Mexican men abducted two Mexican women, sisters, who had married Punjabis. They shot a man whom they believed to be one of the husbands and took the women to a cabin twelve miles across the border in Mexico, where they imprisoned them for several days and flogged them. Returning to their husbands, the women later described their captors and secured their arrest at Calexico.⁶

After the controversies of the first few marriages, a pattern was established, and many Punjabi-Hispanic marriages took place. Cotton was the crop that brought most couples together. Mexican families displaced by the Mexican Revolution were moving across the border into the United States, finding work in cotton fields from Texas to southern California. This was family labor, and women and children worked alongside the men.⁷ Back in the Punjab, women had picked cotton, too; it was the only outdoor work done by Jat Sikh women in all three regions of the central Punjab.⁸

The labor market, and the Punjabi-Mexican marriage networks, began in El Paso, Texas, and extended to California's Imperial Valley.⁹ El Paso

was the most important entry point for Mexican immigrants. Mexican families and women on their own ended up in El Paso as they fled the 1910 revolution.¹⁰ Some early Punjabi-Mexican marriages were performed in El Paso; others took place in Canutillo, Texas, where Punjabis were farming cotton.¹¹ Many marriages were performed in Las Cruces, New Mexico, because in Texas at that time there was a three-day waiting period between securing a license and getting married. In adjacent New Mexico there was no waiting period.¹² One marriage to a Punjabi led to others as the Mexican women called relatives and friends and helped arrange more matches.

Fragmentary records from 1913 show two Punjabis taking wives in northern California: Alice Singh, Canadian-born, married a Sikh in Sacramento; and Rosa Domingo, a common-law wife, was murdered by her Muslim husband in Contra Costa County.¹³ The first Imperial Valley marriage was that of Sher Singh and Antonia Alvarez in 1916; the next year Sher's partner, Gopal Singh, married Antonia's sister, Anna Anita (photo 6). The weddings were civil ceremonies in El Centro, the first witnessed by a leading Anglo farmer and Gopal Singh, the second by the first couple. No attempts were made to carry out Punjabi marriage customs. One wife remembers that when she married, "another Hindu offered me money, but my husband did not accept, saying 'we are not in our country.'"¹⁴

The Alvarez family, consisting of Mrs. Alvarez, three of her daughters (Antonia, Anna Anita, and Ester), and a son (Jesus), had come from Mexico in 1916 via El Paso. The family lived on the Edwards ranch near Holtville and picked cotton for the Punjabi partners who leased the ranch, Sher Singh and Gopal Singh. At the time of the weddings, the men were thirty-six and thirty-seven and the sisters were twenty-one and eighteen. A fourth sister, Valentina, soon came from El Paso to join her mother and sisters. Valentina was older; she had been married already and had four daughters, whom she brought with her. She married Rullia Singh in October 1917, and a month later her fourteen-year-old daughter, Alejandrina, married a Sikh friend of his, a man who had taken the American name of Albert Joe. The youngest Alvarez sister, Ester, married another Sikh, Harnam Singh Sidhu, in 1919.¹⁵

The same pattern appears in the lives of another set of sisters who married Punjabis: women moving from Mexico to El Paso, close ties between mother and daughters, Punjabi partners marrying sisters, and a

significant age difference between the men and their wives. A Mexican woman working for the Holtville cotton farmer Kehar Singh Gill told him about her eligible nieces in El Paso, and he took a train there at the end of 1917. He knocked on a door—as it turned out, it was the wrong door, but a pretty young girl opened it. Matilde Sandoval, her mother, and sister saw a tall, handsome man: "When we opened the door and saw him in that turban, we thought he was a Turk; but we asked him in anyway." After a few days, Matilde married him, and they all got on the train for El Centro. "But Gill, where is it?" the women wailed as they disembarked in the dusty center of El Centro, and they were equally dismayed on arrival at the ranch were Kehar and his partner, Sucha Singh Garewal, shared a small wooden house. They settled in, however, and four months later the younger sister, Lala, agreed to marry Sucha. The wedding party set out on the plank road for Yuma, Arizona, in a hired car driven by a Mr. Johnson. The day of the wedding, Sucha took off his turban and allowed Lala to shave his beard; she shaved his every day for the rest of his life. A third Sandoval sister, Macaria, then came from El Paso with her Mexican husband and children. The husband was employed by the Punjabi partners as a timekeeper, and later one of Macaria's daughters married a Sikh neighbor in Holtville. The mother of Matilde, Lala, and Macaria, Petra Quesada Sandoval, was a frequent visitor to the Imperial Valley, although she married and lived in Mexico for some time. She eventually was persuaded to take a Sikh as her third husband; he kept saying, "Tomorrow *caliitee*" (Let's go tomorrow), and so she married him.¹⁶

A third set of sisters also married Punjabis. A father and his eight children got a job picking cotton for Sikh farmers near Holtville. The eldest sister was courted by one partner, the second sister by another, and the third sister by yet another. The sisters married at ages twenty, twenty, and seventeen. Their father was not initially enthused about these marriages to foreigners—his children had been born in Texas and California—but he feared his daughters would elope and reluctantly gave his permission. When his fourth daughter *did* elope (at age twelve or thirteen) with a Sikh, he sought to annul the marriage.¹⁷

The women involved in these marriages often arranged marriages for their friends with their husbands' Punjabi partners or friends. After the Sandoval sisters, Matilde and Lala, married Sikhs and settled in Holtville, they wrote to the mother of Luz and Antonia Harper in El Paso and asked if the girls could visit them. Luz came first, and soon she eloped to San

Diego with a Sikh, with Lala Sandoval Garewal and Sucha Singh Garewal in attendance. She was only fifteen, but it seemed a good marriage.¹⁸

While the tendency of partners to marry sisters obviously owes much to convenience, it may not have been unusual for the Punjabi men. "The Hindus here married sisters, yeah, same as back in the Punjab; my father's mother and [uncle] Lalu's mother were sisters, in the Punjab," one man said.¹⁹ Such arrangements could result in complex relationships, linking many Mexican women and Punjabi partners.

Household arrangements were complex as well, with partners commonly residing in joint households with their brides. The men and women lived in wooden buildings on the land they were leasing, out along the irrigation canals and country roads. The men took off their turbans but kept their iron wrist bangles, and the husbands or their bachelor partners taught the Hispanic wives how to prepare Punjabi-style vegetables and chicken curry. Some bachelor householders stayed on as helpful "uncles" when the children came.²⁰

Patterns of Marriage and Settlement

Table 5 shows the distribution of marriages made by the Punjabis in California through 1949 by spouse and region.²¹ The table places couples in the region where they first settled and where their initial children were born. It ends with 1949 because, after that date, it clearly was possible to bring wives or brides from India.²²

Almost two-thirds of the couples lived in the Imperial Valley, where 93 percent of the wives were Hispanic. In the north, the composition of the community was different—only about half the wives were Spanish-speakers, while another 40 percent spoke English and 9 percent spoke Punjabi. Family and community life developed differently in northern, central, and southern regions.

These marriage networks were based in the Imperial Valley in the sense that most marriages occurred there or in adjacent San Diego or Yuma, and most children were born and spent their early years there, but the geographic range was initially very wide. Marriages involved Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu Punjabis from all over California, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Texas, and even Mexico and Canada for the first decade or so. The men traveled great distances for their own and others' mar-

Table 5. Spouses of Asian Indians in California, 1913–1949

Counties	Hispanic		Anglo		Black		Indian		American Indian		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yuba, Sutter, Sacramento, San Joaquin	45	50.6	25	28.1	9	10.1	8	9.0	2	2.3	89	23.6
Fresno, Tulare, Kings	38	76.0	11	22.0	0	0	1	2.0	0	0	50	13.2
Imperial, Los Angeles, San Diego	221	92.5	12	5.0	6	2.5	0	0	0	0	239	63.2
Total	304	80.0	48	12.7	15	4.0	9	2.4	2	.5	378	100

Sources: Family reconstitution from county records (vital statistics, civil and criminal records) and interviews.

riages—at least seventy men married outside California but settled in California. Many of the women were recent immigrants from Mexico.²³

A systematic age difference by sex characterized the marriages. For these first-generation couples, the average age at marriage for the men was thirty-five and for the women twenty-three; the median ages were thirty-four and twenty. A comparison sample of marriages of Hispanic women with Hispanic men in Imperial County from 1918 to 1923 gave an average age at marriage for those men of twenty-seven and for women of twenty-one; the medians were twenty-five and nineteen.²⁴ So Punjabi grooms were markedly older than Hispanic grooms.

Religious boundaries, important in India, were not tightly maintained in California: Sikhs, Muslims, and Mexicans witnessed one another's marriages frequently.²⁵ There were also a few early intermarriages, the first involving a Sikh man in the San Joaquin Valley and the daughter of Punjabi Muslim immigrants to Canada.²⁶ Most couples were married in civil ceremonies, although there were a few Catholic wedding ceremonies. The first marriages in the Imperial Valley show a small group of men, the first ones to marry, witnessing the marriages of the next ones and presumably playing some role in bringing those marriages about.²⁷

While the twenty-five earliest marriages included a variety of spouses,²⁸ Table 5 shows that the balance shifted heavily to Hispanic women, for several reasons. A barrier to marriages with white women was posed by California's anti-miscegenation laws, voided only in 1948. In theory, they prohibited marriages between persons of different races; in practice, the clerk issuing the marriage license had to fill in the blank for race with the same word for the man and the woman. For the Punjabis and their intended spouses, clerks sometimes wrote "brown," sometimes "black," and sometimes "white," depending on the applicants' skin coloring and on the county. A clerk who judged the potential mates to be too different in skin color would not issue a license. In several instances, men took their intended spouses to another county, state, or even on the high seas for a ship captain's ceremony. One man recalled accompanying his friend and the intended bride, a "Spanish-looking" Mexican, to three Arizona counties. They went home unmarried, a license thrice refused because she was "too white."²⁹

Then there was pressure from Punjabis against marriages with black women. The proportion of black spouses was highest among the very early brides in northern California. In the Imperial Valley, blacks had

come in as cotton pickers about the same time as the Punjabis, but had settled predominantly in towns. The printed pamphlet of the Imperial Valley Hindustanee Welfare and Reform Association contained a clause warning the men not to marry "colored" women. One explanation of the Punjabi men's avoidance of black women stressed white prejudice against blacks: Why ally themselves with a group hated by whites, when the Punjabis had similar problems and could fight them better alone?³⁰ In northern California, however, the smaller and more diverse groups of wives included several black women who were respected members of their communities. Seven of these nine northern black wives were married to Punjabi Muslims, one to a Hindu, and one to a Sikh.³¹

A positive reason for marriage to a Hispanic woman lay in the tendency for women married to Punjabis to arrange similar matches for their female relatives. In southern California, at least 101 of the 239 wives had one or more female relatives married to Punjabis; these 101 women fall into 34 groups of related women. In the central part of the state, 6 groups of related women accounted for 17 of the 50 wives of Punjabis.³²

Women came across the border, while their brothers tended to stay in Mexico or to return there. The Arias sisters who married Punjabis were born in Chihuahua; there were nine children in the family. One sister crossed the border and married a Sikh farmer. She brought several other sisters, who did likewise; their two brothers stayed in Mexicali. The Martinez sisters, born and orphaned in Mexico, were brought to the United States and married Sikhs, while their two brothers stayed in Mexico.³³

The pattern was one of poor Mexican families with eligible daughters coming into contact with Punjabi farmers through agricultural field work. Often only one parent was present, usually the mother.³⁴ Not only Mexicans but others moving into the agricultural economy as laborers supplied brides. In Arizona, one pair of sisters from Puerto Rico married Punjabis—Puerto Ricans had been brought there to pick cotton in 1926.³⁵ Hispanic women who worked as cooks and house cleaners for Punjabis sometimes ended up marrying their employers.³⁶

Most stories of these marriages involve some kind of courtship, some choice on the part of the woman. One woman told of her husband-to-be cavorting on his horse in the row ahead of her as she picked cotton, while his partner dropped a gaily colored handkerchief over her sister's hair. Another woman, whose uncle was weighmaster to Punjabi cotton growers, fell in love with the boss at first sight. And a daughter told how her

mother met her father: "She worked for my father, although not very hard—she was a very beautiful woman!"³⁷

Yet the situation often was one in which marriage was the best available option for these women, especially when the groom was one's boss or another man of the farmer class. As one man said of his parents' marriage: "Pakistanis were growing cotton on both sides of Dogwood. When they hired workers, my mother was among them. Tom whistled at her and she liked him. Lupe's parents were happy, she had married a boss." One woman told of her situation, deserted at eighteen with two children, and how she decided to make what turned out to be a successful marriage. "Through my sister and her husband, who was Hindu, I met my husband. I was thinking, now what am I going to do, left alone with two children and without being able to work. He was a nice person and single, so to get a father and home for my children I married him." There were stories of occasional bride purchase by the Punjabis, and there were stories of love matches; both were outnumbered by accounts that emphasized economic security as the woman's basic motivation.³⁸

One daughter speculated about an instrumental motive when she said:

I think in the old times the Mexican women were like an instrument to the Hindu people because they wanted children to buy properties in the childrens' names, because they could not buy any property in their own names. Neither could they marry with American women. But the same thing was happening with the Mexican women because they had the ambition to improve their lot for themselves and their children. So the marriage was a convenience for both partners.³⁹

This allegation of a narrow economic motivation for the marriages needs to be dealt with, since it is a common characterization. New immigrants from India, anxious to explain marriages out of caste and community, told me that the wives could hold land for the men and often did so. As *India West* put it in a story about a praiseworthy pioneer: "To counter loneliness and to gain the rights of property-ownership he did not, like many others, re-marry Mexican girls here."⁴⁰ Anglos in the Imperial Valley also charged the men with acquiring land illegally through these marriages. Yet the initial marriages could not have occurred for this reason, since the men were not barred from owning and leasing land until 1923, when they lost access to citizenship and came under the jurisdiction of

the Alien Land Laws. By that date, the biethnic marriage pattern was firmly established. Furthermore, wives acquired the status of their husbands upon marriage (although there is some evidence that both Punjabis and Anglos were unaware of this, and some wives held land for the men despite the law). Certainly the begetting of children who were citizens and could hold land was not the main motivation for these marriages, since most Punjabis in the Imperial Valley did not begin putting land in the names of their children until 1934, well after most marriages had occurred and many children had been born. They adopted that strategy only after the 1933 Imperial County indictment of some Punjabis and Anglos for conspiring to evade the Alien Land Law by forming corporations. Arizona had copied California's Alien Land Laws, but the Punjabis there only began using the guardianship strategy in the 1940s.⁴¹

So the temptation to label these marriages opportunistic attempts to secure land must be resisted. I suggest in Chapter 6 how the men thought about these marriages, and here we must remember that the Punjabi men were becoming permanent residents of the United States. They were making decisions not to return to India and their families there. An Indian student at Berkeley explained the marriages this way:

Nevertheless during the war [World War I] economic and industrial successes brought some changes in their private lives. The "rice kings" in the north, however, were little affected in this regard, but the "cotton kings" in the Imperial Valley came under the enchanting influence of Maya, the female principle in the Cosmic System, and began to crave for a settled domestic life. Some of them married Mexican girls in the valley, and others, who had some higher education in colleges or universities, married broad-minded American girls. Soon a settled Hindu community drew up in that part of the state, with all its dependent Mexican and American members, and many of the single men, formerly accustomed to moving around the country, assumed new responsibilities as heads of happy families.⁴²

Family life and the development of a Punjabi-Mexican community began and flourished best in the Imperial Valley, with settlement in other regions of California and the western states fanning out from there. The towns of Holtville and Brawley seem to have been the initial centers for these couples, but soon they resided all over the valley, moving from

leasehold to leasehold. The collapse of the cotton market after World War I and then the depression in farm prices that began around 1924, followed by the Great Depression, sent some Punjabi-Mexican families elsewhere in search of a livelihood.

The settlement of Asian Indians in the southern San Joaquin Valley began in three counties, Fresno, Tulare, and Kings. In the latter two counties, Asian Indians cultivated cotton from 1928 to 1931. There were a few marriages before that period—to white, black, and Hispanic women and to Asian Indian women born in Canada. The large numbers of marriages with Hispanic women in central California, however, occurred from 1928 to 1931, when couples went to get married in the towns of Visalia or Tulare.⁴³

Depressed agricultural conditions and labor troubles also caused many to give up cotton in the Imperial Valley and move north to Fresno County, where vineyards and orchards provided better livelihoods. Partnerships were less characteristic here. There were farm labor camps in Fresno, at least three of them run by Punjabis.⁴⁴ The proportion of married men farming on their own was lower than in the Imperial Valley; there were more bachelor laborers in labor camps. In Fresno, Chinatown or the foreign section was on the west side of town. As in the Imperial Valley, some bars, liquor stores, and grocery stores were owned by Punjabis.⁴⁵

The ethnic origins of the wives in the southern San Joaquin Valley were fairly diverse. On occasion, all the wives of the local Punjabis gathered together, and communication was in English. Events such as a wedding or funeral, a court trial, or an eminent visitor from India drew almost all Asian Indians and their spouses. One of the few "real Indian" families settled near Fresno, although the family moved around a great deal and both spouses had died by 1934.⁴⁶ Then there were the Spanish-speaking wives, dominated as in the Imperial Valley by groups of sisters. Among the Spanish-speaking wives in the lower San Joaquin Valley, three unrelated sets of Garcia sisters provided fourteen of the thirty-eight wives.⁴⁷

The Punjabi-Mexican couples in the lower San Joaquin Valley tended to have stronger ties to the Imperial Valley than to the north. The ties to northern California were weaker because of the southern origin of many of the couples and because of the smaller numbers of Hispanic wives in the north. Also, families from the south traveled through Fresno on their way to Stockton, but those residing in the north less often traveled south.

This pattern contrasted with that for bachelor migrant laborers, for whom the labor migration included the northern counties but stopped at the Tehachapi Mountains between Bakersfield and the Los Angeles basin. The center for single Punjabis remained in the north, where bachelor life in labor camps was the dominant pattern.⁴⁸

In the 1930s, Punjabi-Mexican families moved to northern California and Arizona. There were few married couples in the north until the late 1930s, when a movement north from the Imperial Valley brought twenty to thirty Spanish-speaking wives into the Yuba City–Marysville area. Because of the ethnic diversity of the couples there, the language spoken by wives at gatherings of the Punjabi men was usually English, not Spanish. Despite this use of English, "Hindu" cooking was prevalent because the Anglo wives in the north prepared primarily Hindu food, while the Mexican wives prepared both Mexican and Hindu food. The other outpost established in the late 1930s was in Phoenix, Arizona, where several Muslim Punjabis went into truck gardening. Growing vegetables in Phoenix, they could market their own produce and avoid doing business with the close-dealing shippers in the Imperial Valley. One or two families were established there; in time, others joined them, seizing a chance to start over after the depression or the tuberculosis inspections of dairies in the Imperial Valley, which forced the killing of many cows. In Phoenix, most wives of the Punjabis were Hispanic, as was true in the adjacent Imperial Valley.⁴⁹

Childbearing, Fertility, and Mortality

Punjabi-Mexican couples had many children. Sometimes records speak eloquently through their very starkness, and here I present primarily quantitative information about fertility and mortality. What it meant to be a child in these families, what people had to say about their childhood experiences, are matters taken up in Chapter 7.

Regional differences are evident in the patterns of childbearing as well. Looking first at the county records, the bulk of the births, and the earliest births, took place in the Imperial Valley. These births occurred in the home, with a midwife and sometimes a doctor in attendance.⁵⁰ The birth certificates give rural locations like "12 miles northwest of Brawley" or "Calexico, by the 10 foot drop." Few of these mothers resided in the same

place for successive births; they moved about in accordance with their husbands' leasing arrangements. The names of the children and parents on the certificates usually were misspelled because others filled out the certificates; these parents were largely illiterate in English.⁵¹

The location of recorded births for the Punjabi-headed families before 1931 makes the concentration of the families in the Imperial Valley clear. Table 6 shows that few couples settled and had children in central and northern California before 1931.

A preference for sons, a strong feature of Punjabi culture in India, showed up in the recording of the California births and in stories about childbirth. Of the 126 birth certificates filed in the Imperial County record office from 1918 through 1930, only 53 were for girls. The underregistration of female children is confirmed by seven delayed birth registrations filed for Punjabi-Mexican children in Imperial County: five of these were for daughters.⁵² And a dramatic story from Yuba City illustrates the preference for sons even better. The young Mexican wife of a Punjabi farmer giving birth to her first child kept telling the doctors and nurses that it had to be a boy, that if it was a girl, her husband would put the baby in a gunny sack and let it die. Her baby *was* a girl, and the mother left her in the hospital for many days, letting her get stronger before taking her home.⁵³

Table 6. Births Before 1931, Selected Counties

County	Births	Mothers	
Imperial	126	69	(64 Hispanic, 3 Anglo, 2 black)
Fresno, Tulare	26	18	(11 Hispanic, 3 Indian, 1 Anglo)
Sacramento, San Joaquin	9	7	(4 Hispanic, 2 Indian, 1 Anglo)
Yuba, Sutter	7	5	(1 Indian, 1 American Indian, 1 Hispanic, 2 Anglo)
Total	174	99	

Sources: County birth certificates, 1910–1931, Records' Offices. I have deliberately broken the northern counties into two microregions because that so clearly demonstrates the later arrival of Hispanic women in the Yuba–Sutter area.

Table 7. Families Begun by 1931: Women and Births to Them

Births (N)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	12	13	Total
Women (N)	12	9	5	7	10	2	6	2	8	5	2	1	69
Total births	12	18	15	28	50	12	42	16	72	50	24	13	352

The childbearing histories of the sixty-nine women who bore children fathered by Punjabis in Imperial County before 1931 are shown in Table 7, which gives the number of women by the number of known births to each of them; for example, twelve women had one child each, nine women had two, and so on. All children born to these women, before and after 1931, in the Imperial Valley and elsewhere, are included.

Clearly, most families were large ones. Over half these mothers (36) had five or more children. Eighty percent of the children (279) had four or more siblings; 42 percent (159) had eight or more siblings! But childbearing histories could not be completed for all sixty-nine mothers; twenty-one women, represented by at least one birth certificate in Imperial County before 1931, quickly disappeared from the official records. Of those bearing a single child, four immediately divorced the father, and one was widowed before her child was born. Four more women eventually divorced their Punjabi husbands, and of twelve others I found no further trace. The experience of these sixty-nine women, then, constituted from Imperial County records, points to large families but a significant proportion (30 percent) of unstable relationships in the first decade of Punjabi family life.

In order to establish a data set of women whose *complete* childbearing history was known, I again used Imperial County as the base, but dropped the twenty-one women whose childbearing histories could not be completed and added eighteen more giving birth there after 1930. This set of sixty-six women bearing children to Punjabi men could be followed to the end of their reproductive careers for a closer look at "maternal fertility." These were mothers, then, who had at least one live birth in the Imperial Valley and for whom I had records for completed reproduction; they were past age forty-five or their childbearing was disrupted by death (fifty-nine and seven cases respectively).⁵⁴

The records of these sixty-six women show patterns characteristic of those families with children. Sixty-five of the women were Hispanic and one was Anglo. Forty of them (61 percent) had relatives married to other Punjabis, another indication of the significance of the female networks. The age difference between husbands and wives is apparent: The women's average age at first birth of a child by a Punjabi father was 23.2 years, while the men's average age was 38.6 years.⁵⁵ These sixty-six women did not all begin their childbearing with Punjabi men or in the Imperial Valley; twenty-four of them had children with other men before beginning their relationships with Punjabis.⁵⁶ Adding up their children by all fathers, or their total fertility, the sixty-six women had 425 children, an average of 6.4 children each.⁵⁷ This high figure is particularly striking when one remembers that seven women had their childbearing careers disrupted by death.

There was a significant number of stepchildren in these families. More than a third (twenty-four of the sixty-six) had had children previously, with an average of 3.2 children each. Fathered by Hispanic men and Spanish-speaking, these seventy-six children were brought into the marriages with Punjabi men. The Punjabi men were said by most to be "good stepfathers." They clothed and fed these children, even though they were not their own.⁵⁸

Marital and premarital fertility were high. In thirty-four of the sixty-six cases, both the marriage certificate and a certificate of first birth to the couple could be located. In five of these cases, the first birth occurred before the marriage, and in three more the first birth occurred within eight and one-half months after the marriage.⁵⁹ Premarital pregnancy, then, was not uncommon. Children were wanted, and birth control was practiced seldom, if at all. In another sixteen cases, the first birth occurred within the first twelve months of marriage; only in less than a third of these cases did the first birth occur after a year of marriage.

By the close of the childbearing period for the sixty-six mothers, the impact of infant and child mortality was heavy. A comparison of all children born to those still living at the end of the women's reproductive careers shows that the average number of children living per woman at the time of the last birth to her was only 5.5. Since the average number of births per woman was 6.4, these couples lost, on average, one of every six or seven children born to them.

Statewide vital statistics for the Punjabis and their families show that

Table 8. Selected Vital Statistics, 1913-1946

Regions	Marriages	Births	Deaths (1905-1939)		
			Child	Spousal	Men
North	17	68	14	2	295
Central	25	75	10	4	87
South	93 ^a	277 ^b	41	4	65
Total			65	10	447

Sources: Certificates from county record offices; statewide register, 1905-1939 (alphabetized and printed state records).

^aIncludes Yuma, Arizona, to 1940 only. (California couples went there for marriages.)

^bDoes not include San Diego or Los Angeles, where the public is denied access to birth records.

although more Punjabi men were living and working in the north (see Table 8), the families were forming in the southern end of the state.⁶⁰ Mortality data show that sixty-five infants and children of Punjabi immigrant fathers with registered death certificates from 1905 to 1939 died in twelve different counties, grouped in the table into northern, central, and southern areas. Fourteen deaths occurred in the northern, ten in the central, and forty-one in the southern counties. Some of the infant and child deaths in the north were of children born in the south but taken along on the migratory labor route by their parents. Most of the deaths of children occurred before the age of one year: twelve were stillbirths, eight were neonatal (defined by the state as occurring at 27 days or less), and twenty-four were infants (which I am defining as from 28 days to 11 months, 27 days).⁶¹ Most deaths, twenty-nine, were due to disease; another sixteen were birth related, twelve were attributed to dehydration and malnutrition, and seven were accidental.⁶²

Because of sex differences in children's health and mortality in India's Punjab region, which testified to a preference for sons,⁶³ I looked for patterns by sex in this data. But here males were overrepresented—thirty-seven were males, twenty-five were females, and sex was not indicated for three "Baby Singhs." It may be that, just as parents sometimes failed to register the birth of a daughter in Imperial County, they sometimes failed to register a daughter's death. Significantly, however, there was a

sex difference in the expected direction in the percentage of female and male deaths that were stillbirths or birth related. Twenty-four percent of the female deaths but only 11 percent of the male ones were stillbirths; 38 percent of female deaths were birth related (this includes stillbirths), while only 14 percent of male ones were birth related. The numbers are very small, but there is one other finding connected with the sex-ratio issue that gives them significance. There was a higher proportion of birth-related deaths in the depression years. Over this twenty-three year span of records (the first Punjabi-sired child was born in 1917), eight of the sixteen birth-related deaths occurred in the three years from 1929 through 1931, four of them in 1929 alone.⁶⁴ The mothers may have been suffering from malnutrition and lack of prenatal care, or the care of female infants may have been deliberately neglected at this time, or both.

Death certificates for spouses number only ten during this same period (1905–1939).⁶⁵ The leading cause of death was childbearing: six deaths were caused by complications with pregnancies or childbirth. Two wives were murdered, and two died of tuberculosis or pneumonia. Breaking them down by the county groupings, four deaths occurred in the south, four in the central area, and two in the north. One wife was Indian, and nine were Hispanic. The Indian wife was forty-two; the mean age of the Hispanic wives at death was just short of twenty-six.

The vital statistics, the demographic parameters of Punjabi family life, have been given in some detail. They reveal important problems, some of which stem from the dominant society. Inaccurate names and ages tell of carelessness and ignorance with respect to these largely immigrant families. Births and deaths at home or without adequate medical attention tell of expertise and institutions denied to those with darker skins and less money. Problems also occurred within the marriages. One sign of instability in relationships between men and women was the difficulty of tracing almost a third of the women bearing children to Punjabis during the first dozen years of such relationships in the Imperial Valley. Even more striking is the high ratio of murders among the wives' deaths: small in numbers, two out of ten, but high in percentage terms.

5 Male and Female Networks

The Punjabi-Mexican families, wherever they settled in California, but particularly in the Imperial Valley, formed a community. Outsiders certainly viewed the men, women, and children as a community and called them Hindus, Mexican-Hindus, or Hindu-Mexicans. Within the community, men and women participated in collective activities—weddings, dances, holiday outings. Nevertheless, the activities of family members often were organized along gender lines. To a significant degree, male and female worlds were separate from one another and sometimes competed with one another.

The men developed networks through their experiences as immigrants, especially through working in California agriculture. Networks based on kinship, so fundamental to Punjabi society, were weak in California because usually only one or two members of a coparcenary group had migrated. But the men's places of origin in India, along with religion and caste, continued to be important means of identifying and differentiating them. Among the women, kinship was the most obvious basis of networks, and the *compadrazgo*, or godparent system, supplemented it; places of origin in Mexico were relatively unimportant.

Male Networks

Their work in California agriculture structured the Punjabi men's lives. In the northern and central regions of the state, independent "Hindu boss men" contracted with employers on behalf of their Punjabi crews. Large ranches in the Central Valley employed permanent Punjabi foremen who

dominant culture.⁷⁷ But there is too much evidence to the contrary, and gender is an important part of the configuration. As a Swiss farmer's wife reminded her husband, "Hindus looked down on Mexicans, including their wives, all right; but women were second rank in the Imperial Valley according to *all* men!"⁷⁸

6 Conflict and Love in the Marriages

The men and women were brought together and driven apart by forces located in the larger society and in the gendered networks of the Punjabi and Hispanic worlds from which they came. These networks coexisted in the biethnic community. Individual personality played a role too, as some men and women perceived their partners as like themselves in important ways and forged emotional bridges across obstacles. The creative conceptualization of new emotional and behavioral selves helped some couples maintain long-lasting marriages and raise children in families characterized by mutual love and respect.

Marriage and Love in Three Cultures

The norms governing marriage in Punjabi and Mexican American society and the grounds for divorce in California and Mexico in the early decades of the twentieth century contrasted in important respects, as did ideas about love in the three cultures. In India's Punjab province, marriages were arranged by one's family, generally within the same caste but outside one's own village (caste endogamy and village exogamy). Age at marriage at the turn of the century was young, and even in the 1920s it varied between twelve and sixteen for girls and thirteen and eighteen for boys.¹ Marriage was a religious ritual, not a civil one, and the state did not register marriages (save for unusual ones across caste or religious boundaries, which were provided for by special legislation). Among Sikhs and Hindus, there was no legal provision for divorce, but a barren wife could be sent home and the husband might remarry. Although claims are made

for the equality of the sexes in both Sikh and Muslim religious ideology, and Islam permits divorce, in practice both Sikh and Islamic law place women firmly under the control of men.²

Some marriage practices in the Punjab resulted from a shortage of women. The Punjab had the lowest sex ratio in India of females to males, a partial consequence of female infanticide and inferior health care for daughters.³ Thus some men never married, and others practiced polyandry, or the sharing of one wife by several men. This practice was noted particularly among Sikhs. Men were responsible for their brother's widow. (Even today, with the sex ratio lower still, brothers sometimes share a wife.) Another practice attributed to the dearth of women was the occasional purchase of brides.⁴

Punjabi women shared in the martial tradition of the frontier to some extent. There is no greater epic romance in India than that of Heer and Ranjha, whose marriage was opposed because they came from two different communities among the Muslims. After many adventures, the young lovers were united at last, only to be tricked and meet violent deaths. Another well-known story is that of Sharan Kaur, the young Hindu bride who converted to Sikhism and became a brave woman spy for Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the early nineteenth century. After obtaining military secrets from a Pathan ruler, she murdered him. Then she helped foil a British-Afghan attack on a Sikh fort, and when four Pathans captured her, she killed them in hand-to-hand combat. The Maharaja personally bestowed honors on her.⁵ Ordinary women led far more circumscribed lives.

The separation of the sexes was one of the most immediately noticeable features of rural Punjabi society, be it Jat Sikh, Muslim, or Hindu. This separation reflected the strength of consanguineal bonds and male companionship and the weakness of conjugal ties. Women in the Punjab followed the concepts of *purdah* in many ways, veiling before men in public and completely separated from men when sitting, talking, eating, and moving about publicly. Women spent most of their time with other women.⁶ Men socialized with other men in the evenings, calling out whenever they liked for food prepared by the women and drinking heavily. Men planned family alliances carefully, establishing links through the marriages of their sisters and daughters and placing a high premium on a woman's honor because it maintained the family's honor.⁷

Marriage arrangement in the Punjab had to do with families, not with

emotional bonds between individuals. Sexuality and love generally were unconnected with marriage; in fact, they were threatening to marriages and family reputations. One Sikh immigrant to California said that when he left the Punjab in 1913, if a young girl had done anything to bring dishonor on her family, such as talking to a boy, her father would have felt it necessary to "kill 'um, kill 'um good."⁸ The Punjabi and Pathan Muslims followed a code that based family reputation on control and exchange of their women, a code often harsh toward romantic love. Thus love stories from the Pathan area (the Afghan-Pakistani border) rarely end happily; most often, the lovers die.⁹

Over half the wives of Punjabis in the United States came from Mexico, where conflict between church and state in the nineteenth century had produced divergent norms and practices related to marriage and the family. Legal reforms deprived the church of its authority over marriage: After the 1850s, marriage was wholly a civil contract, and civil registration was required for a legal marriage. Religious ceremonies had no legal standing, though couples might repeat their vows in a church ceremony. People complied slowly with the new codes, and many continued to marry in a church or live in informal union rather than marry in a civil ceremony. Children born to these church or "free union" relationships were illegitimate after the reforms. Illegitimate births in Mexico rose steadily in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, highly correlated with rural, poor, and Indian populations (the proportion of such births was 42 percent in 1900-1905, with great regional variation). The nineteenth-century reforms provided for legal separations and annulments, but divorce became possible only following the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917.¹⁰

Comparison of the civil codes in California and Mexico shows stronger legal support for the marital union in Mexico.¹¹ California's civil code in the early twentieth century defined marriage as a personal relationship arising out of a civil contract, and divorce was possible. The Mexican civil code defined marriage as the lawful partnership of one man and one woman united in an indissoluble bond in order to perpetuate their species and to assist each other to bear the burden of life. The unity and stability of the family were reinforced, and the interests of children were safeguarded. In Mexico, impediments to marriage included want of legal age and want of consent of the person exercising the *patria potestad* (the father and, in his absence, the mother). Females under age twelve could

not marry unless a dispensation was granted, nor could persons of either sex under twenty-one marry without the consent of their father, or, if no father was living or known, of their mother. (The legal ages at marriage were raised to fourteen for women and sixteen for men in the Federal Civil Code of 1928.¹²) The husband and wife were bound to reciprocal fidelity, the wife to live with her husband and obey him in domestic matters and in matters concerning the education of their children and the management of their property.

Divorce became possible under Mexican civil law in 1917. Grounds for divorce included adultery, particularly by the wife; a husband's proposal to prostitute his wife; abandonment of the conjugal home; extreme cruelty, threats, or grave abuse; false accusations; and refusal to provide support. When a petition for divorce was presented, a conciliation procedure was set in action by a judge. Upon divorce, male children over the age of three were to remain in the custody of the father and female children with the mother. Illegitimate or adulterine children (and there were many of the former, because of the prevalence of nonlegal unions) were protected in that the names of the parents could not be entered in official records. Further provisions of the code enjoined any living relative to protect any child, the father's kin coming first in line to assume responsibility.

In law, then, there were similarities between India and Mexico in matters of parental authority and the precedence given to the patrilineage, but Mexican law provided for divorce and for the care of illegitimate children. California law also provided for divorce with somewhat less attempt at conciliation. Both Mexican and California law provided for community property, a concept foreign to the Punjabi men. In practice, however, Mexican family life differed considerably from that envisioned by the legal codes, and in ways that conflicted strongly with Punjabi law and practice. The concept of romantic love in Mexican culture sanctioned courtship of brides (and men's extramarital affairs after marriage). At lower socioeconomic levels, many men and women entered into free unions, without benefit of civil or religious marriage.¹³ The marital histories of the Mexican and Mexican American women who married Punjabis often featured multiple marriages or sequential marriages, producing children by several husbands (see Chapter 4). This pattern characterized many of their mothers as well, women who had married two or more times in Mexico or in the southwestern United States.

On America's western frontier, a shortage of women heightened tales of romantic love, and at the same time arranged marriages of one sort or another often proved desirable (thus the Japanese "picture brides" and the Swiss "mail order brides"). Relationships with women in the American West involved some very real adaptations and discomforts for the Punjabi men as they learned new relationships between love, marriage, and divorce. Above all, the men learned about women's rights to divorce. Mola Singh eloquently testified about his experiences:

In this country, it's a different class of people. You can't force love here, women go where they want to, even if they're married, even with three or four kids. In India, you could only get a divorce after India got freedom. Here, women go away, here it's different. The woman is the boss in this country. A woman can have four husbands, a man can have two or three women. What you gonna do, that's the way with love. . . .

Sometimes I feel like I'm suffering here, you know, trouble at home. Here, when you marry, you have woman trouble, kid trouble, not like in India. When I got here, I saw, you have liberty, women have liberty, you know. The way it is here, I've been separated, divorced. In India, you stay together all your life. In this country, you have love. When you love a person, you stay with her, with her kids and everything.

I divorced Carmen, when she went away to Mexico. I couldn't do anything, so I filed for divorce. She had two more kids by then. My wife in India, she'd died already by that time. Yes, I knew about divorce. In this country, I no sleep. Everybody was divorced, I could see what they were doing. It's only normal, you see the customs of the country, and so you have to do that. Bhagat Singh divorced too.¹⁴

The same man gave a dramatic account of the breakup of his second marriage to a Hispanic woman in the course of an evening of drinking at his joint household:

Then in 1934 or 1936, this Maria went away. She went to a man who worked for me, Galindo. We were having a big party, with my cousin Lalu (the single one, my cousin brother who farmed with me), and Buta Singh and his wife, and Mota Singh and Julia, and

my father. It was a big party, we all drank. And that Mexican boy . . . I wanted someone to make food, so I called Maria to get him to come in the kitchen to make food. She said, "Yes, he'll come, if I call him." And he did come, he made *roti* and other things. We ate, and we Hindu men all watched the lovers. We saw how they looked at each other. We all knew.

Mota said, "You know what she's doing, I won't let mine do that."

I asked her, "Do you love him more?"

She said, "Yes, I love him more." So I hit her, and I kicked them both out. They went to Mexico. . . .

She said, "Okay, this is my friend, I'm going with him."

I couldn't say, "No, you can't go."

In this country, when she wants to go, my wife, she says, "All right, sonny honey, I'm going," and I say, "I can't stop you." It's because of love, therefore I couldn't stop her.

The themes of Mola Singh's narrative—romantic love as the basis of marriage, men's inability to exercise effective control over women, the ever-present possibility of divorce—are borne out by measures of marital conflict and instability traceable in the public records.

Murder, Divorce, and Remarriage

Murders were the most violent resolution of marital conflict between Punjabi husband and Hispanic wife. A 1919 murder involved the first Punjabi-Mexican marriage in the Imperial Valley. Valentina, eldest of the Alvarez sisters, married Rullia Singh, and they had a baby boy within a year of the marriage. Her daughter, Alejandrina, also married a Sikh, Albert Joe (the American name he took),¹⁵ and she too had a baby (see photos 8 and 9). Albert Joe and Alejandrina ran a dairy southeast of Holtville, next to the ranch of Albert Joe's brother, Gajjan Singh, and they visited Valentina and Rullia every Sunday.

But conflict between Rullia Singh and Valentina led to tragedy. In the spring of 1919, Alejandrina and Albert Joe went for their usual Sunday visit with the older couple. Valentina announced that she was leaving

Rullia and asked her daughter and son-in-law to take her and her infant son away with them. They all left together, with an irate Rullia Singh threatening Albert Joe's life if he did not return his wife. These threats were repeated in the presence of other Punjabi men in the Holtville park over the next few months. Rullia also visited Albert Joe and Alejandrina and told them to "return the mother," threatening in both Punjabi and Spanish. Valentina did not return. She and the baby moved to San Diego, and when Rullia tried to see them, she called the police and Rullia was fined \$50 for molesting her. At the end of November, as Albert Joe worked in the milk house to separate the cream from the milk, a shot rang out. Alejandrina heard buggy wheels rattling off as she found her husband wounded. Following his orders, she picked up her baby and ran to his brother's adjacent ranch for help. The doctor came, but Albert Joe died on the way to the hospital. Rullia Singh was the only suspect in the case, and he was convicted of first-degree murder. Sher Singh and Gopal Singh, partners and husbands of Valentina's younger sisters, testified in the courtroom and then moved to Arizona following the trial.¹⁶

In this first set of marriages, when conflict arose, the mother fled to her daughter's home. Rullia Singh turned to Albert Joe, whom he had originally introduced to his stepdaughter as a "high-class man."¹⁷ He expected the support of other Punjabi men in regaining control of his wife. They could not influence her, however. Albert Joe paid for it with his life.

In another early case, a young wife refused to cooperate when her husband of three weeks took her to his friends' ranches and offered to leave her for a day or two in exchange for money. She went home to her mother and asked for a divorce. Her husband agreed to give her one, but on the way to a lawyer's office in Brawley, he shot her dead (in front of a Japanese packing shed in the "foreign section").¹⁸ By Mexican law, a husband's proposal to prostitute his wife was grounds for divorce; among Punjabi Sikhs, there was no divorce, and men sometimes did share women.

Two more murders in the 1930s show continuing tensions between Hispanic women and Punjabi men. Speaking of these murders and, more generally, of rural violence, one widow of two Imperial Valley Sikhs (sequential marriages) explained her reluctance to remarry another Punjabi: "I was always afraid, out there," she said.¹⁹ These two murders also reveal diverging regional patterns of political integration for the Punjabi men and a uniformly inferior position for the Hispanic women in California.

The first case contrasts the Punjabi societies developing in the San Joaquin and Imperial valleys. Sher Singh Sathi, a young Sikh student involved in Ghadar party politics, was suspected of informing on illegals to U.S. law enforcement agencies. Threatened by fellow countrymen in the Fresno area, he fled to the Imperial Valley in 1933, where Ghadar party politics were less central to the men's lives. There, he and sixteen-year-old Amelia Valdez (photo 10), whose sister and mother were married to Sikhs, became sweethearts. One day, shots were heard, and Sathi and Amelia were found dead in her mother's house, a gun in his hand. His body was taken to Los Angeles for a cremation ceremony that was attended by Sikh men and their wives from all over the state. In Fresno and farther north, his death is remembered as an act of revenge by Ghadar party hitmen; several northern wives viewed it as the tragic death of a young man, a terrible result of the men's political activities. In the Imperial Valley, however, Punjabi-Mexican families viewed it as an ill-fated romance, a suicide pact carried out by a distraught young man who believed himself doomed to an early death at the hands of vengeful political enemies. Despite advice regarding Ghadar party politics forwarded to them from Fresno, Imperial Valley officials also decided on the tragic-romance theory. Amelia Valdez is remembered well by the wives and daughters in the Imperial Valley, but she does not figure in northern versions of this event.²⁰

The other murder, this time of a Hispanic wife by her husband's friend and co-worker, took place near Sacramento in 1937. Here, too, the woman was sometimes forgotten, while the men involved in the case knew each other well. Twenty-three-year-old Isabel Ramirez Singh had three sisters married to Sikhs; another sister, Rose, was still unmarried in Sacramento. Isabel, her husband, and their six children were living in Walnut Grove, where many Punjabis worked in sugar beets. Milkha Singh, a fifty-year-old bachelor who lived in the other half of the house, lured Isabel into his quarters (presenting a bleeding finger for bandaging) and hacked her to death with an ax and two knives. His reason, he told the police officers, was that he had given Isabel \$950 over several years to arrange his marriage with her sister, Rose, and she had not done so. In the seemingly perfunctory trial, the murdered woman's name was forgotten by the presiding judge, but the men involved all knew one another. The arresting deputy sheriff and the constable were brothers and were on familiar terms with the murderer and the murdered woman's

husband. Milkha Singh was declared insane and sent to the asylum at Patton, but he was released five years later because he was "not insane." Isabel's oldest son, who had heard the struggle and had run to the fields to call his father, was in the first grade, but he was too shy to testify in English at the trial. Her last baby, born three months before her death, died before his first birthday.²¹ The case illustrates the men's desire to marry and their expectation that sisters could arrange marriages. It also speaks to the fragility of the lives of women and children in the face of strong bonds between men.

Divorce was another way of resolving marital conflicts. Petitions for divorce were relatively numerous for these couples, at least according to popular notions of norms for rural Mexican Catholics and rural Indian Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus. Scholarly generalizations about divorce in the United States also would predict low rates of divorce for them. For example, because the divorce rates in countries of origin are comparatively lower than in the United States, "the foreign born are culturally less inclined to seek divorce in case of marital discord. The frequency of divorce is particularly low among new arrivals because of their general distrust of courts and language difficulties."²² Certainly the official divorce rate in both India and Mexico in the early decades of the twentieth century was lower than in the United States—in the case of India, almost nonexistent. All the men and most of the women forming the Punjabi-Mexican community were recent arrivals in the United States, and most were not proficient in English. Furthermore, these were rural couples, and divorce rates have always been lower in rural than in urban areas. In addition, most of the women were Roman Catholics, a group (in the United States) for whom the recorded rate of divorce has been thought to be lower than for the population as a whole.²³

There were some 230 Punjabi-Mexican couples before 1946 in the Imperial Valley, and 29 of these couples had filed divorce petitions before 1946. Men and women filed divorce petitions in nearly equal proportions, and defendants frequently cross-complained.²⁴ The first divorce cases filed show that the men expected more obedience and household services from their wives than they were getting. It is equally clear, from the women's petitions and cross-complaints, that the women felt these expectations to be unreasonable.

Again, one of the early marriages illustrates these conflicts. Matilde Sandoval married Kehar Singh Gill in El Paso in 1918; her sister and

mother also married Sikhs. But Matilde's marriage did not go well, and within a year Kehar filed for divorce. He alleged that she reviled him in the presence of friends and refused to keep house and cook as he wished; she did so "only as it suited her convenience." She also went shopping in the town, bought and used makeup, and went dancing. Worst of all, she continually threatened to leave and once *did* leave, going with her mother to New Mexico. The couple reconciled in 1919, but he filed again and secured a divorce in 1922.²⁵ In another divorce, a man reportedly tied his wife to the bedpost to prevent her going out in his absence!²⁶

Not only differing cultural expectations but disagreements about property and money caused conflicts. Many women complained that investment in land and farming was their husbands' first priority; one left after years of allegedly being fed little but cabbage. The men also sent money back to India, to the Sikh temple in Stockton, and to the Ghadar party, sometimes against the wives' wishes. Yet to the men, the women seemed spendthrifts. One Sikh put a notice in the local newspaper, reading "To Whom It May Concern: [She] Having left my bed and board, I am no longer responsible for the debts of my wife, Maria Juarez Singh."²⁷

Divorce was common in the Imperial Valley Punjabi-Mexican community.²⁸ There were fifty-nine divorce petitions filed in Imperial County civil court from 1919 to 1969²⁹ involving first-generation husbands from India. Because of reconciliations or failure to complete the procedure the first time around, these fifty-nine petitions represented only forty-five couples.³⁰ About 39 percent of the petitions were contested, more than triple the national average of 12 percent. While nationally, some three-quarters of all divorce petitions are filed by wives,³¹ among these fifty-nine cases, men filed thirty-four cases and women twenty-four (and one case was an annulment filed by a father). The Punjabi men in these marriages, then, were quite aggressive in seeking divorces.

The filers in these fifty-nine cases³² were almost all Sikh men and Hispanic women, and three-fifths of the women were born in Mexico. Two Anglo women and one black woman also filed for divorce. About half the marriages had taken place in southern California and half in other states of the American Southwest. An astounding thirteen of the forty-five marriages involved broke up in less than a year, four of them in less than a month; the median duration of all forty-five marriages was four years. The causes of divorce generally conformed to a pattern of the men charging desertion and the women cruelty.³³ The men tended to claim that

there was no community property, the women that there was (particularly when children were involved, and the women sought custody). The women sought alimony and child support, the men sought divorce without making those provisions. In five cases, guardianship of the property of minors was an issue in the divorce. One man stated that his property was not community property, it was his son's; his wife then sought custody of the son, whom she had not seen for four years. She argued that her husband was living with his housekeeper, was not a suitable father, and only wanted the boy in order to hold property in his name. The husband charged, in return, that she was a bargirl in El Centro and unfit to have the boy.³⁴

All five adultery charges were made by men, the one "failure to provide" charge by a woman; four men charged fraud or misrepresentation and sought annulments. Eleven petitioners were repeaters, eight of them filing against the same spouse, and two men and one woman against other spouses. In six cases (three couples), one spouse had filed previously and later the other spouse filed for divorce. In sixteen cases, the summons had to be published elsewhere, substantiating charges of desertion; fourteen of these desertions were by women. As for results, the files are not always conclusive, but the male petitioners more often succeeded in getting a final decree.

The women's relatives were part of the problem in many divorces. In twenty-six cases, members of the woman's family appeared in the petitions: her parents, siblings, or children from an earlier marriage. Yet the proportion of women with relatives married to other Punjabis was slightly lower among the women involved in divorces than among all women married to Punjabis. From other sources, we know that seventeen of the women in these forty-five couples had female relatives married to other men from India, or 38 percent, compared to 43 percent of the women married to Punjabis in the Imperial Valley. So, if female relatives were also married to men from India, divorce was slightly less likely. The men's countrymen were mentioned in only nine cases. Full information did not always appear in court records, of course. One wife's official divorce petition was not very revealing, but the local press divulged that her husband was charging another Punjabi with petty theft and that his wife was one of the "articles" taken from the home!³⁵

Not only was divorce a frequent occurrence, it was often followed by remarriage. I have reliable marital histories for twenty-eight of the forty-

five women in the divorce cases discussed here, and of the twenty-eight, eleven were petitioning for dissolution of a second marriage. Of the twenty-eight men with known marital histories among the forty-five, nine were seeking dissolution of a second and three of a third marriage. Many others in the Punjabi-Mexican community married more than once or twice.

One study of marital instability (commonly measured by the incidence of divorce, separation, and remarriage) found it more prevalent among blacks and Anglos than among Mexicans and more prevalent among women than among men. The study used "a presumed familistic structure among Mexican Americans" to explain their lower marital instability.³⁶ Again, the Imperial Valley Punjabi-Mexican couples offer a surprising contrast to these generalizations, as Table 10 shows.

The calculation of multiple marriages here is rough at best. I have defined all those relationships that were long term or that produced one or more children as marriages for purposes of this discussion, and I have included only relationships formed in the western hemisphere. While the multiple marriage rate for men would be raised considerably if I included first wives in India, I do not have reliable data for all the men.³⁷ On the other hand, I did include the women who recorded their status as "widowed" on the marriage license, since researchers on Mexican society recognize that term as a euphemistic one for women who had deserted their husbands or had been deserted.³⁸ So, for the men, there may be an undercount, but the women may represent an overcount of the kind of multiple marriages that indicate marital instability.

Of the 378 women marrying men from India by 1949, at least 115 were

Table 10. Multiple Marriages

	Two Spouses	Three Spouses	Four Spouses	Five Spouses	Eight Spouses	Total Spouses
Women (N = 115)	92	15	5	2	1	267
Men (N = 57)	44	9	2	2		133

Table 11. Spouses of the Women

	Hispanic (N = 98)	White (N = 14)	Black (N = 3)	Total (115)
Punjabi Sikh	112	12	0	121
Mexican	65	0	0	65
Punjabi Muslim	16	9	5	30
Unknown	18	4	2	24
Punjabi Hindu	6	1	0	7
Anglo	7	5	0	12
Filipino	2	0	0	2
Greek	2	0	0	2
Punjabi-Mexican	1	0	0	1
Total	229	31	7	267

married more than once. For 92 of them, I found evidence of two husbands; for 15, three husbands; for 5, four husbands. Two women had five husbands, while one had eight husbands! These 115 women, all but 17 of them Hispanic, had 267 husbands, or 2.42 husbands each. Of the men from India, at least 57 of them had more than one wife in the United States; 44 had two wives, 9 had three wives, 2 had four wives, and 2 had five wives. These 57 men had 133 wives, or 2.33 wives each. The women's spouses were more diverse, as Tables 11 and 12 show.

Not all those who married several times bothered to get divorced. Many informants spoke of the playboy reputations of the Punjabi men, particularly the "wild Hindus of the Imperial Valley." Having found another woman, one man took his first Mexican wife to visit Mexico and then reported her as an illegal at the border so that she could not return and had to stay (and raise their youngest child) in Mexico. There were also stories about the Hispanic women. Just as some wives did not know if their husbands had been married in India or not, some husbands found out later that their wives had been married in Mexico. In one case, a Mexican husband and children turned up for the funeral of a Sikh's wife, surprising him greatly. He had not known that her previous marriage had never been dissolved, and he had not known about the children from it!³⁹

Table 12. Spouses of the Punjabi Men

	Sikh (N=49)	Muslim (N=6)	Hindu (N=2)	Total (57)
Hispanic	90	10	3	103
Unknown	8	1	0	9
Anglo	8	2	0	10
Indian	4	0	1	5
Punjabi-Mexican	4	0	0	4
Black	2	0	0	2
Total	116	13	4	133

One descendant provided insight into the way these immigrant couples may have thought about their remarriages. "My mother left her first husband and then when she married a Sikh she went through a civil ceremony, not a church one because she'd already married through the Catholic church. This marriage was Americanized, not Catholic or East Indian."⁴⁰ So in an important sense a marriage or remarriage in the United States was part of becoming American, just as, in Mola Singh's words, divorce was American, something one learned about and might do while becoming American.

Respect and Love

Despite the conflicts, there were stable, happy marriages among these couples. We can best learn about the successful marriages by listening to what the participants and their children said about them. First, the long-lasting couples successfully negotiated certain immediate obstacles. The joint households proved a shock to many Hispanic wives. When Genobeba Loya married Memel Singh, she was not prepared to cook and clean for several partners as well as a husband. But she persevered and persuaded her husband to get his own land, his own lease, and move the family to a nuclear household. And when Rosa Reyes married Jiwan Singh, she did not like the way her husband's brother called her a "wet-back" and bossed her around. He brought other men and asked her to

cook and wash clothes for them. She told him she was not married to him, and she told her husband she would not be a maid to her brother-in-law and other Punjabis: "Either he goes or I go." Her husband supported her, and the other men moved out. And there were sometimes other women in the joint households with whom relationships could prove difficult, particularly if they were not relatives. When her favorite sugar bowl was broken by another partner's wife, Lala Garewal took herself and her children to a house on a property her husband was about to stop leasing; he had to renew the lease because she refused to move back.⁴¹ In these cases, the couples had children, and the husbands bowed to their wives' wishes; also, these men could afford to farm on their own.

Another obstacle that often proved contentious involved a man's Indian family. Relationships with Punjabi relatives in India varied greatly. Some of the women knew their husbands had been married in India; some found out later or preferred not to know. Some men had lost their Indian wives in the 1918 influenza epidemic but kept in touch with relatives and sent money to children. One man arranged for his brother in the Punjab to take over responsibility for his wife and daughter. Some husbands simply stopped writing to India, but many others told their California wives about their Indian wives and families and sent remittances for years.⁴² The diversion of funds to India became an issue in some families, but most Punjabi-Mexican wives and children accepted that as a minimal fulfillment of family responsibilities. Relatives in India, distanced by law as well as geography, had little reality in the early decades of Punjabi-Mexican family life in California.⁴³

Some degree of bilingualism was an important factor in the successful marriages, although few of the men were rated excellent speakers of Spanish and no wife really learned to speak Punjabi well (many understood it adequately). But mastery of a common language seemed relatively unimportant; in any case, many people argued that there were similarities between Punjabi and Spanish. "Spanish is just like Punjabi, really," they said, illustrating the point with examples of similar words and grammatical constructions. Not only language, but other aspects of Punjabi and Mexican culture were viewed as essentially similar, and the long-time spouses expressed respect for each other's cultures.⁴⁴ Unable to visit the Punjab in the early decades of their marriages, the women found it harder to learn about Punjabi culture,⁴⁵ but many men reported on similarities. Rather than emphasize or even mention the anti-miscegenation

laws that played a major role in determining their choice of spouses, the men and their descendants talked about the similar physical appearance of the Punjabi men and Mexican women. Further, they argued that Mexicans and Punjabis shared the same material culture. As Mola Singh, who had thirteen children from three marriages with Mexican women, put it:

I no have to explain anything Hindu to my Mexican family—cooking the same, only talk different. I explain them, customary India, same Mexico. Everything same, only language different. They make *roti* over there, sit on floor, all custom India the same Mexico, living custom; I go to Mexico two three times, you know, not too far. All same India, all the same. Adobe house, Mexico, sit on floor, to make tortilla, *roti*, you know, all kinds of food; eat here plate, some place got table, bench. India the same, eat floor, two board cutting, make bench.⁴⁶

Not only did the men view the women as coming from a similar material culture, some of the long-time wives came to view themselves as "Hindu." They meant that they cooked Indian food, conducted their households in a "Hindu" fashion to suit their husbands, and were cut off from Mexicans and Mexican Americans. They did not mean they had changed their religion, but they identified themselves with their husbands and the other Punjabi men, rather than with any Mexican American community.⁴⁷

Another important characteristic of the happy marriages was respect for both religions and mutual support of religious observances. The few men who converted to Catholicism also remained Hindu or Sikh in important ways. One man, Ganga Ram, secured certificates of baptism and marriage with the new name of Arturo Gangara, a name used only on those documents insofar as his daughter knew.⁴⁸ And the couples and their children in these long-lasting marriages voiced a strong belief that there was only one God. As Mola and Susanna Singh said,⁴⁹ Susanna speaking first: "Well, God gives a lot of different languages, you know, but I don't think so many Gods." Mola: "Only one God."

This belief in the unity of all religions was stated in different ways: The Sikh religion is just like the Catholic one; Sikhism is a composite of Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity; the Granth Sahib is just like the Bible; all Gods are the same, but they are called different names because languages are different; Sikhism has the ten *cruz*, or ten crosses, which are

the ten gurus; the founding Sikh guru preached exactly what is in the Old Testament; Sikhs have all the commandments Catholics have; one can be Muslim and Catholic, or Sikh and Catholic, at the same time.⁵⁰

These statements ignore religious differences and stress similarities, frequently using metaphors and analogies to erase distinctions. While there were many vigorously contested matters between Punjabi husbands and Mexican wives, the children's religious training was not one of them. The men encouraged their wives to continue their own religious beliefs and practices and themselves served as godfathers in the *compadrazgo* system, but continued to practice their own religions. The men wanted to inculcate respect for Sikhism, Hinduism, or Islam, while they encouraged their children to practice Catholicism (or whatever form of Christianity their wives practiced). Thus, when talking about religion, husbands and wives reconceptualized differences as similarities at a higher analytic level.

Love was clearly the most vital ingredient in the successful marriages. While not necessarily developed in Indian marriages, many Punjabis found love was an integral part of marriage in the United States. Furthermore, love was associated with an aspect of Mexican culture that long-time husbands tended to admire, the greater freedom granted to women. Again, it is Mola Singh's account that shows how Punjabi men came to think about love. Mola Singh learned the meaning of love in the United States, during an affair with an older white woman in the Imperial Valley. He said he learned that love could make you crazy (that early affair got him into trouble with an Anglo man). In 1919 he married Carmen, his first wife in America, because of love. In his personal life, he became committed to the idea of love between man and woman, initially based on sexual attraction, as the best basis for a relationship. Like many other Punjabi men in California, he became critical of India's arranged marriage system:

In India, lots of time in India, I feel, the woman is a slave. I say, no, that's no good. You should have a duty to them, women have rights, even more than men. When you want to make a marriage in India, you never see the boy; the boy and girl never meet each other. That's no good. Maybe the boy's all right, maybe the boy's no good. Maybe he's blind, maybe he has an arm broke, maybe a leg broke. You never know, you see, the mother and the father ask

for him. Today I feel that it's more important to love. First you love, then you should marry. It happens too young over there. The relatives do it all, and they can make a mistake. No, I don't like that way. I like it when a woman and a man get together, fall in love, and marry.⁵¹

Talking about his fourth wife, Susanna, Mola Singh did not use the word love but the feeling pervaded his account of their long-lasting relationship (photo 11). His words about her show another very important element in these successful marriages: respect, especially for hard work.

When I met Susanna, she did sewing, she's a good farmer girl. She cut all the kids' hair, she made all their clothes. . . . I found Susanna in 1937, and then everything got good. Susanna, she didn't want to buy anything, she only wanted to buy groceries. She chopped cotton, she worked, she didn't even want to buy a dress. I went to the store, I bought her a dress. She didn't want to go to the store, I had to buy it. She did go shopping for something, a sewing machine. She was no dummy, she was very smart, that woman. She sewed. For all of our girls, she never bought a dress. She sewed, she worked hard, she didn't want money. She never cared about money, she didn't spend it.⁵²

Other accounts stress love and loyalty between spouses. One son told of the love his father, Sant Ram, had for his mother, Ricarda, a beautiful, gentle, hard-working woman. When she became ill, Sant Ram took her to the Brawley hospital and then went to visit her after a few days, with their two little boys in the car. The boys saw their father come out and fall on the lawn, crying inconsolably. Ricarda had died of typhoid, and since Sant Ram had no telephone, the hospital staff had just waited for him to come in to tell him. Another couple took great pleasure in their many children. Nellie Soto Shine spoke of Inder Singh Shine's joy at the birth of each child, his smiles so broad that "all the neighbors knew Nellie's new baby had come." When I asked a widow how long she and her husband had been together, she answered quickly, "twenty years and nineteen days."⁵³ And a daughter said about her parents: "When my father and mother married . . . they only met for a very short time, I think it was only ten days. And it's gone on forty-eight years. . . . Father worked hard, he would go to the city council, sometimes he wouldn't understand

at all, and he would come home and he would sit here and discuss it and mother would give him his strength to go out into this strange world that he doesn't really understand."⁵⁴ Despite the precariousness (from the Punjabi point of view) of reliance on love as the basis of a long-term commitment, many couples stayed together for decades. There was little concern for legal marriage, and people clearly thought of the ceremony in very different ways. For some Punjabis, marriage seems to have become an unnecessary or unwanted legal contract, a matter of government record, irrelevant and possibly threatening to personal freedom and property rights.⁵⁵ For others, Hispanic women and Punjabi men, a civil ceremony in the United States seemed to negate all previous ceremonies and signal a new commitment (see Chapter 5). By the time of his fourth relationship, with Susanna, Mola Singh seems to have viewed love as a passion that rendered marriage and divorce contracts irrelevant. Both he and Susanna (she was twice widowed) were content simply to live and work together. They finally married much later, for legal reasons (their 1962 civil marriage) and, on her part, religious ones (their 1975 Catholic marriage).⁵⁶

For many women of Mexican descent, civil marriage was less important than a religious ceremony. As the wives grew older, they worried about their standing in the church and asked their husbands for a religious marriage ceremony. The men in long-lasting relationships commonly went through Catholic ceremonies late in life to please their wives, usually decades after the original civil marriage or the beginning of the relationship.⁵⁷

The mixture of love, respect, and humor that characterized long-lasting Punjabi-Mexican marriages shines through the dialogue between Mola and Susanna Singh concerning their delayed marriage. Said Mola:

After a long time, I married Susanna. I didn't want to marry, I'd have to pay for the divorce, I didn't want to pay for the divorce again. Two women, I'd already had to pay for divorces. But the Social Security man told me to marry.

"You better marry, make it legal," he said, so we married.

And for the citizenship paper too, I didn't want trouble. And our kids were not legal until we married, so I had to marry. . . .

I've been with Susanna since 1937 but we never married. I wanted to keep free for other ladies, see, wanted to be able to throw

away another woman, too. (Susanna laughs in the background.)
Yeah, sure . . . no, you're a good woman.
"Working too hard," said Susanna.⁵⁸

At least seven couples celebrated fifty years of togetherness. Given the characteristic age difference for these couples, this was quite an achievement. For one couple, Nellie and Inder Singh Shine, the occasion provided yet another contrast between Punjabi and American concepts of marriage and family, according to the story told by a daughter.⁵⁹ The Shine children held a surprise Golden Wedding anniversary party for their aging parents, and since the old man and his eldest son farmed near Yuba City, with its many new Punjabi immigrants who came after 1965, they invited several newcomers. The new Punjabi immigrants expressed astonishment that such an event would be celebrated and that one's own children would sponsor the celebration! In turn, the open amazement and the criticism of the celebration voiced by the new immigrants greatly surprised the Punjabi-Mexican families in attendance.

Part III

The Construction of Ethnic Identity