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Punjabi Sikh Migrants in Lazio: A Political Analysis

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Introduction

Italy has a new major religion: Sikhism. Transformed by an ever-increasing foreign population, Italy has seen a marked increase in Sikh migrants in recent years, which comprise a majority (80%) of Indian immigrants to the country. This article will explore the existence of a growing Italian Sikh population in mostly political terms, with a particular focus on their presence in the region of Lazio, which has seen the greatest increase in the number of Sikh migrants since 2016. How has labor organizing involved Sikh migrants in the agricultural sector? What role do Sikh migrants play in local and national politics in Italy?

The Immigration Issue in Italy

Much ink has been spilled about the recent surge in migration to the Italian peninsula, largely emerging in the last three decades, which turned Italy from a perceived emigrant nation to the location of the third largest immigrant population in Europe.¹ Over 8% of the Italian population is comprised of immigrants, and that number is only expected to rise in the coming years.² As in the rest of Europe and the broader western world, immigration is an animating issue in Italy. In 2018, 35% of Italians listed immigration as one of the two most important issues in the country.³

Both domestically and abroad, news and controversy about immigration to Italy has been focused primarily on the often-deadly Mediterranean crossings from Africa and the Middle East. Italy plays a crucial role in this type of movement: the nation receives 56% of those who cross the Mediterranean to Europe and has been the top destination of these migrants for most of the 21st century.⁴ In late February 2023, a shipwreck off the coast of Calabria killed more than sixty mostly-Afghan migrants, including children and infants, making clear that the flow Mediterranean migration is persistent.⁵ Migration routes across the Mediterranean generate fierce policy debate in Italy. Long a supporter of reducing immigration, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has notably pledged to establish a “naval blockade” to prevent migrant ships from reaching Italian soil.⁶ Interestingly, despite her hard-line policies against migrants, immigration to Italy has actually increased during the first few months of her leadership, demonstrating the complexity of this issue.⁷

While significant, the international and domestic focus on Mediterranean migration channels misses another crucial population of immigrants: those who arrive in Italy by land and air. Though sea arrivals do make up the largest percentage of migrations, arrivals through other points of entry

¹ “Caritas E Migrantes XXVIII Rapporto Immigrazione 2018-2019.” Caritas Migrantes, 2019. https://www.migrantes.it/wp-content/uploads/sites/50/2019/09/RICM_2018-2019-Dati-regionali-e-provinciali.pdf .

² “Migration Statistical Yearbook 2016 (Italy).” European Website on Integration. European Commission, October 27, 2016. https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/migration-statistical-yearbook-2016-italy_en .

³ Silver, Laura. “Immigration Concerns Fall in Western Europe, but Most See Need for Newcomers to Integrate into Society.” Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, September 4, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/22/immigration-concerns-fall-in-western-europe-but-most-see-need-for-newcomers-to-integrate-into-society/> .

⁴ Bobin, Frédéric. “Italy Again Becomes Main Entry Point for Migrants Arriving in Europe.” Le Monde. Le Monde, August 29, 2022. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/08/29/italy-again-becomes-main-entry-point-for-migrants-arriving-in-europe_5995138_4.html .

⁵ Giuffrida, Angela. “Italy Shipwreck Death Toll Rises to 62 as More Bodies Pulled from Sea.” The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, February 27, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/27/italy-shipwreck-more-bodies-pulled-from-sea-calabria> .

⁶ Bonnel, Olivier. “In Italy, Giorgia Meloni's Government Targets Ngos Rescuing Migrants at Sea.” Le Monde. Le Monde, January 6, 2023. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/01/06/in-italy-giorgia-meloni-s-government-targets-ngos-rescuing-migrants-at-sea_6010517_4.html .

⁷ “Cruscotto Statistico Giornaliero: 1 Gennaio 2023 Al 10 Gennaio 2023.” Dipartimento Libertà Civili e Immigrazione, January 10, 2023. http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_10-01-2023.pdf

comprise a considerable proportion of the total immigration to Italy. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “In 2022, almost 13,500 (non-Ukrainian) refugees and migrants arrived in Italy travelling by land via south-east Europe, mainly originating from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Nepal.”⁸ Migrants arriving by land and air form a disproportionate number of asylum seekers in Italy, as many so-called ‘humanitarian corridors’ bring migrants to Europe legally.⁹

Indian Migrants in Italy

Today, Indians constitute 2.9% of the total immigrant population, making them the seventh largest immigrant community in Italy.¹⁰ Italy also contains the largest Indian diaspora in mainland Europe.¹¹ However, this diaspora is a relatively new phenomenon in the country. The first Indian migratory presence in Italy began in the 1960s, but was limited mostly to wealthy businessmen (especially those involved in the automotive industry) and Catholics (students, priests, and nuns).¹² The flow of migrants from India to Italy began in earnest in the 1990s, as Italy and other western European countries provided favorable economic conditions for low and unskilled workers, especially compared to India following the 1991 Indian economic crisis. In addition, strict border policies in the UK and northern Europe discouraged migration to those areas.¹³ Most of the early migrants to Italy sought asylum or refugee status, and “Italy is reported to have admitted 32,000 [Indian] asylum seekers during the period 1985-90,” but by the late 1990s, the majority of Indian migrants had immigrated (without refugee or asylum status) to work in the agricultural sector.¹⁴ In the last 20 years, the annual inflow of immigrants from India has doubled.¹⁵

The overwhelming majority of Indian migrants in Italy have been—and remain—Punjabi. Reflective of the makeup of the Punjab region (called the ‘heart’ of Sikhism), Indian migrants in Italy are around 80% Sikh.¹⁶ Sikhism plays a significant role in Indian migrant communities in Italy. Like many other immigrant groups, Sikh migrants typically follow familial and social networks in their migration. Communities of Indian migrants in Italy often center around gurdwaras, the central places of worship in Sikhism, emphasizing the role of religious networks in the experience of migration. Throughout this article, Punjabi and Indian migrants as a whole may be referred to simply as ‘Sikhs’ for brevity, but it is important to remember that a fifth of Punjabi migrants do not practice Sikhism.

Punjabi Sikh migrants have settled predominantly in the regions of Lombardia, Lazio, Emilia Romagna, and Veneto of Italy. Lazio has seen the most growth in its Punjabi Sikh community in recent years: between 2016 and 2017, there was a 10.6% increase in the number of Indian migrants

⁸ “UNHCR Italy Factsheet, December 2022.” ReliefWeb. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, January 26, 2023. <https://reliefweb.int/report/italy/unhcr-italy-factsheet-december-2022> .

⁹ “Refugee Population by Country or Territory of Asylum: Italy.” World Bank Open Data. The World Bank, 2021. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.REFG?locations=IT&most_recent_value_desc=true .

¹⁰ Garha, Nachatter Singh. “Indian Immigration to Italy: Concentration, Internal Mobility and Economic Crisis.” *South Asian Diaspora* 12, no. 1 (2020): 51–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2019.1609295> .

¹¹ Roy Chaudhury, Dipanjan, and Ishani Duttgupta. “After UK, Italy Hosts Biggest Indian Diaspora in Europe.” *The Economic Times*. *The Economic Times*, March 23, 2020. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/after-uk-italy-hosts-biggest-indian-diaspora-in-europe/articleshow/74764808.cms?from=mdr> .

¹² Sahai, Paramjit, Lum, Kathryn, “Migration from Punjab to Italy in the dairy sector : the quiet Indian revolution,” *Migration Policy Centre, CARIM-India Research Report*, 2013/10 - <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/29472>

¹³ Saha, J. K. “Smuggling of Migrants From India to Europe and in Particular to the UK: A Study on Punjab and Haryana.” 2009.. Delhi: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

¹⁴ Sahai and Lum 2013

¹⁵ Garha, Nachatter Singh, and Angela Paparusso. “Fragmented integration and transnational networks: a case study of Indian immigration to Italy and Spain.” *Genus* vol. 74,1. 2018. doi:10.1186/s41118-018-0037-7

¹⁶ Lum, K. “Indian Diversities in Italy: Italian Case Study.” 2012. CARIM-India RR2012 /02. San Domenico di Fiesole, FI: Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute.

in the region.¹⁷ In addition to being mostly Punjabi, Indian migrants are mostly male, young, and poorly-educated. Nearly 85% are from agricultural families.¹⁸

Indian migration to Italy is largely irregular. While many Indian migrants arrive in Italy with a visa, they often overstay legitimate visas or falsify documents to obtain them illegitimately in the first place. Many Indian migrants work with ‘immigration agents’ or ‘travel agents’ in India who charge tremendous amounts of money (sometimes as much as twenty five thousand euros) to smuggle them into Italy, usually on six or eleven month visas.¹⁹ Some of these agents are actually traffickers, and between 2010 and 2022, there was an almost 13% increase in the percentage of trafficking victims from Punjab to Europe who were women.²⁰ Unfortunately, this is just one part of the exploitation and abuse that Punjabi Sikh migrants face in their migration to Italy.

Agricultural Exploitation

The majority of the Punjabi Sikh migrants in Italy work in agriculture. This is largely due to a combination of the agriculture economy in the Punjab region, which is a vital producer of grain in India, and the availability of agricultural work in many regions of Italy. Alongside Italy’s well known declines in birth rate, the country has also faced a dramatic reduction in agricultural employment in recent decades, which is often attributed to an unwillingness of Italian youth to enter this industry.²¹ This trend has left an opening for Sikh migrants to move into the sector.

Since the 1990s, Indian migrants have had particular success in the dairy industry of the Lombardia region. By some calculations, Punjabi Sikhs comprise 90% of dairy farm employment in Northern Italy, though estimates vary.²² This phenomenon has gained the attention of the international media who have referred to these Indian migrants in agriculture as “the Sikhs who saved Parmesan.”²³ Though lesser-known outside of Italy, Punjabi Sikhs also play a central role in agriculture in Lazio. More than 27.000 Indian immigrants live in the region as a whole, with well over 10.000 in the province of Latina alone, one of Europe’s largest fruit and vegetable districts that has become a hub for Indians.²⁴ According to an interview with the owner of a travel agency for prospective migrants in the Punjabi city of Jalandhar, Latina has become “la destinazione numero uno” for migrants wanting to go to Italy for work.²⁵

But the agricultural sector in Lazio is also the site of well-documented labor exploitation. A report from the United Nations Human Rights Office outlines the extent of this exploitation in Latina:

[I]n Latina province about 30,000 Sikh workers from India are subjected to extreme forms of coercion, including being forced to take performance-enhancing drugs – prohibited by their religion – so they could [*sic*] work the 10–14-hour days in the fields. Other forms of coercion

¹⁷ Omenetto, Silvia. “La Comunità Punjabi Sikh e i Gurdwara Nel Lazio: Monitoraggio Di Una Presenza in Evoluzione.” Osservato Romano Sulle Migrazioni: Tredicesimo Rapporto, May 2018, 91–97.

¹⁸ Saha, J.K. “Smuggling of migrants from India to Europe and in particular to the UK: A Study on Punjab and Haryana.” 2009. Delhi: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

¹⁹ Lum 2012

²⁰ Saikia, Pari et al. “She Thought a Job Was Waiting for Her in Europe. Then She Met Her Trafficker.” VICE. VICE, July 4, 2022. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/k7bajx/punjabi-women-indian-human-trafficking-europe> .

²¹ Girdziute, Laura, Erika Besuspariene, Ausra Nausediene, Anastasija Novikova, Jarkko Leppala, and Martina Jakob. “Youth’s (UN)Willingness to Work in Agriculture Sector.” Frontiers. Frontiers, August 9, 2022. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2022.937657/full#note1> .

²² Sahai and Lum 2013

²³ Mitzman, Dany. “The Sikhs Who Saved Parmesan.” BBC News. BBC, June 24, 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33149580>.

²⁴ Omenetto 2018

²⁵ Sala, Daniela, and Anand, Ankita. “Dal Punjab a Latina, Pagare per Diventare Schiavo.” IrpiMedia. IrpiMedia, October 19, 2022. <https://irpimedia.irpi.eu/invisibleworkers-da-punjab-a-latina-pagare-per-diventare-schiavo/> .

included physical and sexual violence or threats of violence, withholding of wages and documents, and threats to their families in their countries of origin if they refused to continue doing the illegal work.²⁶

Many farm laborers are paid less than €5 per hour for 12-hour work days and are forced to work in up to 40-degree Celsius weather with few breaks. In order to keep employment ‘by the book,’ local gangmasters who serve as middlemen between landowners and migrants negotiate contracts with laborers, but then pay the workers for only a fraction of the work they actually complete.²⁷ For fear of retaliation, migrants rarely complain or seek legal help (which is, in most cases, financially inaccessible anyways). In addition, nearly half of Sikh migrant workers don’t speak Italian, which makes accessing the judiciary system or government aid incredibly difficult.²⁸

Labor exploitation is not limited to Latina or Lazio alone. The UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery estimates that “more than 400.000 agricultural workers in Italy risk being exploited and almost 100.000 likely face inhumane conditions.”²⁹

Labor Unions’ Role

Especially in the province of Latina, Sikh labor unions play an important role in combating persistent labor exploitation. Labor unions are also the central bodies through which Punjabi Sikh migrants remain politically engaged. In general, immigrants in Italy have a high level of participation in labor unions, and Indians are no exception. In the major Italian trade union confederations (CGIL, CISL, UIL and UGL), the Indian community has the seventh highest number of members among ethnic groups. Indians are most active in the *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (CGIL), which 46.3% of Indian migrants are members, followed by the *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori* (CISL), to which 40.7% of Indian migrants are members, and finally *Unione Italiana del Lavoro* (UIL), which 12.9% of Indian migrants have membership to.³⁰ Labor unions frequently organize strikes and awareness campaigns about illegal hiring and other exploitative practices in the agricultural sector. Notably, in April 2016, over two thousand Punjabi Sikh agricultural laborers protested in Freedom Square in Latina against poor working conditions and demanded a €5 minimum wage. This was the largest immigrant strike in Italian history and resulted in an increase in the number of migrant workers who reported exploitation by their employers.³¹

The sociologist and Italian activist Marco Omizzolo helped organize the April 2016 strike and has spent his career researching Punjabi Sikh migrants in Lazio, especially in Latina. In an interview conducted with him for this article in April 2023, Omizzolo provided valuable expertise into this community and insight into the political dynamics within Lazio’s Indian migrant community. His remarks have been translated from Italian into English by the author.

Omizzolo agreed that labor unions are an important site of Punjabi Sikh political engagement. During the interview, he emphasized that labor unions do play “a fundamental role” in combating agricultural exploitation in Latina. However, he noted that labor unions are often self-limiting. According to

²⁶ “Embrace Migrant Workers as Rights Holders Essential to Italy's Agro-Economy.” OHCHR. United Nations Human Rights Office, October 12, 2018. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2018/10/embrace-migrant-workers-rights-holders-essential-italys-agro-economy>.

²⁷ MacGregor, Marion. “Secret Slaves: Indian Farm Workers in Italy.” InfoMigrants. Infomigrants, July 14, 2021. <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/33595/secret-slaves-indian-farm-workers-in-italy>.

²⁸ Barbieri, Alberto et. al. “Rapporti Sulle Condizioni Di Vita e Di Lavoro Dei Braccianti Stranieri in Agricoltura.” Medici Per I Diritti Umani. April 2015. <https://www.mediciperidirittiumani.org/pdf/Terraingiusta.pdf>.

²⁹ OHCHR 2018

³⁰ “La Comunità Indiana in Italia: Rapporto Annuale Sulla Presenza Dei Migranti.” Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali. Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2021. <https://www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/AnteprimaPDF.aspx?id=3480>.

³¹ Arora, Kusum et. al. “Marco Omizzolo: The Italian Activist Punjabi Immigrants Hail as 'Sent by God'.” The Wire. The Wire, April 17, 2023. <https://thewire.in/rights/marco-omizzolo-the-italian-activist-sikh-immigrants-hail-as-sent-by-god>.

Omizzolo, “too often the general union world is closed within a logic of service only and not of mobilization and emancipation... and therefore when it is only service, the work it does is not of emancipation but only administrative... it diminishes its own role.”

Electoral Impact

Though Indian migrants have a significant level of participation in labor unions, they have limited impact on Italian electoral politics. When asked about their influence on the Lazio regional election in February 2023, Omizzolo said that “from the point of view of the quantity of votes, [the Punjabi Sikhs] had a very very marginal, very small impact.”

There are a few reasons for this. First, few Punjabi Sikh migrants are able to vote in either municipal or general elections since not many are foreign EU nationals (who have the right to vote in municipal and European Parliament elections in Italy) or Italian citizens. Additionally, Omizzolo notes that in recent elections, even among those who have the right to vote, the number of immigrants “who actually went to vote is very very low.” He attributes this low turnout rate to a few political processes occurring in Lazio, specifically prominent in Latina. Omizzolo says that among Punjabi Sikh migrants, “there is a part—above all, men and women workers employed as agricultural laborers—who have no political affiliation. They are very distant from politics.” This may be because of the high levels of agricultural exploitation, which puts a physical and mental toll on many Punjabi Sikh migrants that prohibits them from being able to participate in politics.

In the Lazio regional election in February 2023, the areas occupied by large numbers of Punjabi Sikhs voted overwhelmingly for the right-wing parties, mostly for *Fratelli d'Italia*.³² This is because the community leaders in Lazio and in the province of Latina are the ones who are disproportionately able to vote, and, according to Omizzolo, they have personal connections with center-right parties, especially the *Fratelli d'Italia*. Omizzolo asserts that there does exist a minority of immigrants in Latina who tend to be more leftist, those “who have followed processes of social emancipation.” However, these leftists have no specific relationship with left-wing parties. He says that “while the boss, the Indian leader, has direct relationships with right-wing men and parties, the more rebellious Sikh Indians (those who rebelled against the exploitation) tend to have a left-wing political vision, but not a direct relationship with men or political representatives.” Thus, the electoral impact of these left-leaning Punjabi Sikhs is extremely limited, even compared to the already-limited impact of the more powerful right-leaning leaders.

Still, Omizzolo argues that this reality may be changing. Again, discussing the February 2023 regional elections in Lazio, Omizzolo remarks that, “there were some votes that went directly to left-wing parties, indeed specifically to left-wing candidates, because over the past five years, these candidates have been very committed to us on the issue of migrant and labor rights. And therefore, they have contributed a lot both in the province of Latina and in the province of Rome, to the vote for these left-wing candidates.” As the fight against agricultural exploitation gains momentum and as Punjabi Sikh migrants plant roots in Lazio, they may vote in greater numbers and may continue to move to the left.

“Provisional State”?

Some researchers have suggested that Indian immigrants in Italy “live in a provisional state as their ultimate goal is to settle in English-speaking countries.”³³ The “provision state” would logically result in reduced engagement in Italian local and national politics by Punjabi Sikh migrants.

³² “Eligendo: Regionali [Votanti] Provincia Di Latina (Italia) - Regionali ...” Risultati delle Elezioni Regionali del 12 e 13 febbraio 2023. Eligendo, 2023. <https://elezioni.interno.gov.it/regionali/votanti/20230212/votantiRI12040>.

³³ Garha and Paparusso 2018

Omizzolo agrees that Indian migration was primarily temporary in the 1990s and early 2000s. He remarks, “[i]t can be said that at the beginning of Sikh migration to Lazio, this was the migratory project: coming, working for a medium-long term to accumulate economic resources, and then choosing whether to go to another English-speaking country, above all Canada, United States, England and also Australia, or return to India.” However, Omizzolo believes that this has changed, and now Punjabi Sikh migration to Italy is “largely permanent.” Today, those who move abroad after first migrating to Italy are in the minority. According to Omizzolo, and again translated by the author, there are a few reasons for this change in migratory pattern:

First, over time the rules have changed... it has become increasingly difficult to leave Italy to go to another country. Because some Sikh migrants found themselves working without a residence permit, they were forced to stay. Second, exploitation has prevented them from accumulating economic resources to leave, even when they are regularly employed. Also, there have been family reunifications. Indian immigrants, especially men, over time, staying in Lazio, brought their families. This produced a local settlement, so much so that we have had an Indian presence in the province of Latina for about 35 years and now stable immigration with children who now go to school in Italy.

There are significant generational differences among Punjabi Sikh migrants, which are just beginning to emerge as the first generation of Punjabi Sikh children born in Italy reaches adulthood. These younger Punjabi Sikhs are more likely to speak Italian, work outside of the agricultural sector, and be integrated into the rest of Italian society.³⁴ It is likely that this generation of Punjabi Sikhs will have higher levels of political participation than their parents and, as a whole, may begin to have a more significant impact on electoral politics in Lazio.

Conclusion

The Punjabi Sikh community in Lazio, and in Italy as a whole, is growing and beginning to gain recognition as a crucial immigrant population in the nation. At present, the Punjabi Sikh community may be more influential in the anti-immigrant fervor they create among Italian voters than in their direct electoral impact. However, the high level of participation in labor unions and increasing public denunciation of exploitative labor practices points to the potential for an increased political role for this community in the future. Punjabi Sikhs are in Italy to stay, and their political impact will only increase.

³⁴ “La Comunità Indiana in Italia” 2021