

Institution: University of Strathclyde		
Unit of Assessment: D27 – English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: After Partition: Making Punjabi Heritage Inclusive across Borders		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2015-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Churnjeet Mahn	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Reader	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 01/05/2015 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Literary research on travel, migration, and refugees has enabled Mahn to work with two organisations to address disconnected and marginalised heritage in and around Amritsar, a city with a contested heritage narrative. By working with the Cultural Resource Conservation Initiative and the grassroots NGO, Preet Nagar Residency, Mahn created change in mainstream heritage management and worked with creative communities along the Indo-Pak border to generate new work on ‘missing’ stories about Punjab and its history. In particular, Mahn has integrated community perspectives into government heritage projects, changed attitudes to heritage and facilitated belonging, and created new educational, cultural, and economic opportunities for Punjabis through heritage work.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Mahn’s research examines the literary and cultural representation of mobility, with a special focus on travel, migration, and refugees. She looks at groups or formations, which have become marginal in discussions of travel, migration, and refuge, ranging from the history of British travel to Greece following its independence from the Ottoman Empire to British influence and another retreating boundary of Islamic influence through the case study of the Punjab. Through two AHRC grants, <i>States of Desire</i> (2014-2016) and <i>Creative Interruptions</i> (2016-2020), Mahn has combined research in literary and cultural history [R1, R2], post-colonial and decolonial thought [R3, R4], and participatory methods [R3, R5] to critique how and why particular communities are marginalised from representation in mainstream heritage narratives. This research has made a unique contribution to understanding how the legacy of the British Empire continues to shape the experiences of marginalisation and displacement for communities.</p> <p>In <i>States of Desire</i>, Mahn used film and literature by and about racialized queer minorities to study the experience of marginalisation and the positive use of creative forms for communities, wellbeing, and political expression. A collaboration between researchers from the University of Strathclyde, Brunel University, Queen’s University Belfast, University of Sussex, and Sheffield Hallam University, <i>Creative Interruptions</i> explored how new forms of grassroots action can create ‘radical openness’ for people marginalised from mainstream culture or creativity. With Sarita Malik, Brunel University, as Principal Investigator leading on the delivery of the project as a whole, Mahn led, and was the sole researcher on, a strand of the project related to cultural amnesia in a partitioned Punjab. Mahn’s research focused on the ways that sections of history are ‘erased’ from view, especially in the context of sites connected to heritage.</p> <p>The key findings from these projects included an understanding that the mainstream representation of heritage along the Indian side of the Indo-Pak border in Punjab neglects the history of the Partition refugee crisis in favour of a Sikh-dominated history [R1, R5]. In its historical approach, Mahn identified how oral Punjabi folk culture was a key type of evidence in colonial Punjab for the region’s complex shared heritage, and how that has been undermined [R2]. This work was crucial in showing how communities associated with intangible heritage (including folk) have been neglected in favour of tangible heritage that can be owned, collected, and displayed by state or colonial powers. Informing a Cultural Resource Conservation Initiative consultative process that involved interview surveys with over 30 vendors in a market encroaching on a historical site, the research also found that 1) the majority of vendors were</p>		

descendants of refugees; and 2) **there was a rich variety of Punjab's heritage evinced through craft and food** that was regionally specific and in some cases endangered [R5].

Mahn's research on the challenges of participatory work in anti-racist organisations using decolonial methods allowed her to investigate the power dynamics between researchers and research partners (community organisations, event participants), in turn producing a critique of existing approaches to initiatives around inclusivity and diversity [R3, R4, R5]. This formed the basis of a critique of 'top-down' heritage management, which showed how **new inequalities can appear when doing the work of uncovering or revealing 'hidden' or marginalised stories** [R3, R5].

3. References to the research (Strathclyde affiliated authors in bold)

R1 Mahn, Churnjeet and Murphy, Anne. (eds), *Partition and the Practice of Memory*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. ISBN 978-3-319-87808-9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64516-2>

R2 Mahn, Churnjeet. 'Literary Folk: Writing popular culture in colonial Punjab 1885–1905', in Andrew Smith and Anna Barton (eds), *Rethinking the Nineteenth Century*. Manchester University Press, 2017. ISBN 978-1-5261-0870-8. [REF2]

R3 Mahn, Churnjeet, Milne, Ej, Guzman, Mayra, et al., 'Negotiating space for queer-identifying young people in a refugee organization: viability, complexities and tensions', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, fez101, Dec 2019. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez101> [REF2]

R4 Mahn, Churnjeet. 'Black Scottish Writing and the Fiction of Diversity', in Breeze M., Taylor Y., Costa C. (eds), *Time and Space in the Neoliberal University*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. ISBN 978-3-030-15248-2. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15246-8_6

R5 Malik, Sarita, **Mahn, Churnjeet**, Pierse, Michael, & Rogaly, Ben. *Creativity and Resistance in a Hostile World*. Manchester University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-5261-5285-5. [Available from HEI]

Notes on the quality of research: All references were peer-reviewed ahead of publication. The underpinning body of research was funded through two peer-reviewed external grants:

- Sarita Malik (PI), Churnjeet Mahn (CI), Michael Pierse (CI), Anandi Ramamurthy (CI) and Ben Rogaly (CI). *Creative Interruptions: Grassroots creativity, State structures and disconnection as a space for 'radical openness'*. AHRC, 01/10/2016-31/02/2020, GBP1,214,115 (Strathclyde (GBP165,792)).
- Mahn, Churnjeet (PI): *States of Desire: Sustaining LGBTQ Lives in a Refugee Organisation*. AHRC, 12/2014-31/01/2016, GBP100,000 (Strathclyde: GBP56,954).

4. Details of the impact

Mahn's research focused in and around Amritsar, a city with a contested heritage narrative partially due to its specific colonial history. Amritsar was particularly impacted by the 1947 Partition when most of the city's Muslims moved to Pakistan and camps in Amritsar received large numbers of Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan. By directly working with the Cultural Resource Conservation Initiative (CRCI) and the grassroots NGO, Preet Nagar Residency, through the *Creative Interruptions* project, Mahn created change in mainstream heritage management and worked with creative communities along the Indo-Pak border to generate new work on 'missing' stories about Punjab and its history. Specifically, the underpinning research enabled Mahn to:

- **Integrate community perspectives into government heritage projects**, by informing inclusive heritage decision-making with the first community consultation;
- **Change attitudes to heritage and facilitate belonging**, by engaging local communities with heritage sites and recording marginalised heritage narratives;
- **Create new educational, cultural, and economic opportunities for Punjabis through heritage work**, by supporting workshops and creative events to engage new audiences in traditional practices.

Integrating community perspectives into government heritage projects

With the Cultural Resource Conservation Initiative (CRCI), Mahn influenced a major Government of India-funded heritage initiative to conserve India's most significant heritage cities [S1]. The focus of this work was at an endangered heritage site, the Rambagh Gate, one of the original gates of pre-colonial Amritsar. The aim was to create a space for post-Partition communities living in the vicinity of the Gate to have their history represented alongside 'official' historical narratives through a programme of consultation and creative representations.

The programme of interview surveys and participatory research methods designed by Mahn [R1, R2, R5] developed a mechanism for inclusive heritage decision-making with the first community consultation in Amritsar for an active conservation project. An independent report of the project highlighted how 'a range of research methods from the arts, humanities and social sciences have been drawn from to theorise and examine how to disrupt traditional power relations centred around heritage' [S1]. A consultation with 145 people – 50 market stalls and customers of the Rambagh market and 95 teachers and students of the Rambagh Gate Government School – flagged concerns that the conservation of the Gate would lead to the removal of the market and the school, both of which were encroaching on the site. The consultation **provided community evidence of the school and market's cultural value, which subsequently became part of the conservation project**. The influence of Mahn on changing the approach of the project is highlighted by the Director of the CRCI, who stated in an interview:

'Because of my partner in the project, Churnjeet Mahn, I learnt that we need to have conversations with people and that's what we've done in Amritsar where we've worked within the context of a heritage site and we've had conversations to understand how people look at what heritage [is], what does it mean to them.' and *'We've been able to work in spaces and with aspects which we would other not have been able to engage with as part of [this] project. We would have been just in the domain of the architects and the engineers. To be able to move away into the domain of people and cultural expressions and participatory processes has been what Creative Interruptions has added to the project'* [S2]

By focussing on the community perspective, CRCI were able to **ensure that the heritage initiative at Rambagh Gate was beneficial for the communities it served**:

'We were mindful that it could potentially get hijacked and become a restaurant and a hotel, be a posh, elitist space for so-called tourism for consumption of heritage. Or can it be implemented in a particular way that there's equity and it contributes to the quality of life of all people who are in that area and with their right to their heritage? Creative Interruptions created that mind-space for me' [S2]

As a result of the success of the project at the Rambagh Gate, **CRCI intend to adopt this approach with future initiatives**. According to the Director, *'the learning was for the Rambagh Gate but we're expanding to other heritage sites of the city with a similar understanding'*. [S2]

Changing attitudes to heritage and facilitating belonging

Mahn's research demonstrated that the local community in Amritsar valued the market as the site where many Partition refugees had established businesses and remembered the school as the site of important Urdu-language teaching pre-Partition. However, there was not an awareness of the significance of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, which was the focus of the government heritage plans [S1]. The Gate was built by Maharaja Ranjit Singh and is on the processional route, which connects the Rambagh Garden to the Golden Temple. The new approach of integrating community perspectives led to plans for a **people's museum (Lok Virsa) at the site to build a bridge between divergent heritage narratives**:

'People don't recognise that history, and culture, is them as well... Creative Interruptions clearly helped us delve into processing cultural and historical narratives to a more experiential level. And the Lok Virsa Museum or the Lok Virsa Exhibition is the outcome of that processing.' [S2]

Lok Virsa changed the perception of the market from that of encroachment to a valid part of the Gate's history. Launched in October 2018, the museum featured exhibition panels with

voiceovers from craftsmen who worked in the market alongside installations about Partition and Maharaja Ranjit Singh. As such, the exhibition engaged new audiences in understanding the cultural consequences of Partition, especially in the context of language (Punjabi) and the syncretic practice of faith (e.g. Sikhs who followed Sufi saints or Muslims who attended Sikh temples), as well as demonstrating to community users of the market that they are an important part of the Gate's heritage [S1]. Social media posts about the event were widely shared, including an art installation in the Gate based on Punjab weddings, which received over 3300 likes on Instagram [S3]. The Sikh Foundation called the people's museum 'a participatory space narrating people's stories and creating a revitalized perception of Amritsar' [S4].

One of the student volunteers at launch night commented: 'The Gate has been opened to the public and **it leaves the people with great pride and sense of "belongingness"** . . . The transfer of knowledge and experiences from the older generation about their roots and identity is getting lost, and such initiatives are mediums for people to connect with them.' [S1] A local resident said of having access to the heritage site for the first time: 'I am from Rambagh. I always wanted to see what is inside this historical building gate. But now just due to government initiative it has been possible.' [S1]

In Scotland, Mahn collaborated with AWAZ FM and a heritage lottery-funded project on Scottish diasporic memory to deliver **one of the largest collections of South Asian narratives about Scottish life** (*Making Lives, Making Communities*) to date, which had a limited print run of 200 and was sold out. Mahn's co-authored book on the topic was launched by Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, who tweeted: 'It records the stories of migrants who came to Scotland from South Asia and **celebrates the positive contribution they make to the country we call home**' (331 likes, 106 retweets) [S5].

Creating new educational, cultural, and economic opportunities for Punjabis through heritage work

Through the *Creative Interruptions* project, Mahn also supported NGO Preet Nagar Residency to 'reimagine' the Preet Nagar village as an inclusive site that could use creative practice to build understanding between communities and their history. This work's significance lay in using the existing traumatic history of a community almost destroyed by Partition to create **new opportunities for people normally marginalised from the mainstream economy and with limited access to quality education and economic opportunities** outside the village. By encouraging the community to equally value art, literature, education, and manual labour, the project aimed to guarantee the right of labourers to participate in literary practice, and artists and educators to contribute to manual work.

Building on Preet Nagar Residency's experience running *Preet Lari*, the world's foremost Punjabi literary magazine, published from the village since the 1930s, Mahn and the NGO co-designed creative and educational workshops to provide participants an opportunity to engage creatively with their history and identity, as resources to support this within the current educational system are extremely limited [S6]. Between 2017 and 2020, the project engaged over 2,700 young people in workshops. Flagship initiatives included 1,500 participants in Art Camp Amritsar [S1] and 1,200 in a creative children's workshop in Preet Nagar village [S6]. For Preet Nagar Residency, these workshops **provided access to new audiences**: 'While the magazine has continued to publish, Preet Nagar has lost some of its life. The work with *Creative Interruptions* has been an important step to reviving the work of Preet Nagar through new collaborations that have transformed our work' [S6]. In addition to educational workshops, the project ran two sets of artists' residencies (18 artists) and Melas (festivals), led by Mahn, which enabled artists to work with local craftspeople to exchange skills and create work for exhibition and sale, combining art and labour. These events have had a catalysing effect on collaborations with the magazine, and the publicity meant *Preet Lari* was able to make **rare additions to its endangered pre-Partition magazine archive** through donations [S6].

These events were of particular benefit to groups who have been traditionally excluded from participation with creative practices, as the Creative Director from Preet Nagar Residency highlights:

'In an area with high drug use and a lack of jobs for young people or educational activities, the Mela gave a focus towards something new... These activities united people across religion, caste and economic class. By holding our exhibition in a converted cow shed and using traditional forms of celebration through folk music, we were able to create an inclusive not exclusive experience of art. This work has challenged traditional fine arts practice which requires a disposable income to engage with the arts. In rural and grassroots level one rarely gets a change to be involved in the 'arts world' or 'gallery practice'.' [S6]

The residencies and Melas **reinvigorated traditional creative practices in Preet Nagar, generating 70 commissions for craftspeople and 500 paid opportunities for skilled but low-paid workers** between 2017 and 2020 [S6]. One example of the effect on the village is the experience of two young women embroiderers who undertook the majority of work on a tapestry about Partition designed by one of the residents. They stated *'We saw ourselves as professionals for the first time'*, and went on to challenge their working conditions and agree better payment terms with commercial organisations [S6]. Indeed, several craftspeople involved in the Melas reported increased confidence in setting a higher price for their goods. With regards to taking pride in their craft, a member of a refugee community of brass makers commented:

We have never felt this respect for our work. I have not felt the acceptance or recognition as an artist. My community is looked down upon and our work is seen as labour. We work with soot and acid, and this work is hard manual work. We are made to feel shameful. I have felt a sense of pride and feel that my work is important. To see people from across the country and abroad appreciate our craftsmanship and its history, I am convinced that it is important work. [S6]

The work exhibited as part of the Melas attracted over 1,800 people to Preet Nagar [S6]. Part of the exhibition was also shown at the Creative Interruptions Festival at the British Film Institute in 2018, with 200 attendees. A professional exhibition of the work at the Reach Gallery in Canada was due to take place in June 2020 but was delayed due to COVID-19.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1** Creative Interruptions in Punjab [Draft Report].
- S2** Transcript of interview with the Director of Cultural Resource Conservation Initiative, conducted 23rd January 2019.
- S3** Instagram post of art installation. 18th October 2018.
- S4** The Sikh Foundation. The Lok Virsa Project – Preserving Our Heritage. 27th October 2018. <https://bit.ly/3vQgy1y>
- S5** Scottish First Minister's Tweet. 17th June 2018.
- S6** Supporting statement from Creative Director, Preet Nagar Residency, dated 11th November 2020.