

Davindar Singh

Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

**Thinking in Song, through Blood, and on Roads away from India:
Censored Sikh Separatist Music in Everyday Political Discourse**

A long history of aspirational development literature from the colonial era to the present — and an equally long history of academic publication — argues that the expansion of South Asian transportation infrastructure entails the expansion of conceptual and national unity. A common belief in the power of shared transportation to unify once disparate publics unites the disparate literatures of colonial administrative documents, technocratic developmental speculation, pioneering historical scholarship on South Asian rail, and romantic paeans to bus-borne and truck-borne life on Indian highways. In much the same development literature, the spread of mass media is proposed as a corollary imperative for national Indian unification. This paper proposes the case of contemporary government bans on Sikh militant songs, and ethnography conducted with Sikh militants in the transport industry, as twinned evidence to the contrary. Contemporary Sikh militancy and the economic regionalism fueling it contradicts the aforementioned writings, lay and scholarly, on jointly infrastructurally- and mass-mediated unity. Evidence from the last 140 years suggests the sociotechnical engineering that expanded road transport and colonial propaganda both continues today and compels contemporary Sikh political unrest. Linking colonial documents to ethnographic work conducted with Punjabi commercial drivers, infrastructure-focused bankers and investors, and upper-echelon administrators, I show that contemporary expansion of Indian road infrastructure is but one financialized instantiation of a long history of attempts to concurrently expand supply chains, expand credit relations, and “expand” the minds of the peasants underpinning both. I then use this material to contextualize ethnographic evidence gathered with Sikh militants working in commercial transport, indicating that new roads and their decay provide militants an easy site to discursively link transnational logistical politics, regionalized agrarian unrest, “corruption” within India’s federalized administrative apparatus, and contemporary Sikh militant separatism. I show that through popular banned militant songs, these drivers find evidence of all the ills of the center, and the need for a separate Punjab. This separatism is the opposite of the social connections roads ostensibly compel.