

Punjab



Sree Kumar

Punjab

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Entrance to the Golden Temple, Amritsar









Harmandir Sahib





Pool, Golden Temple





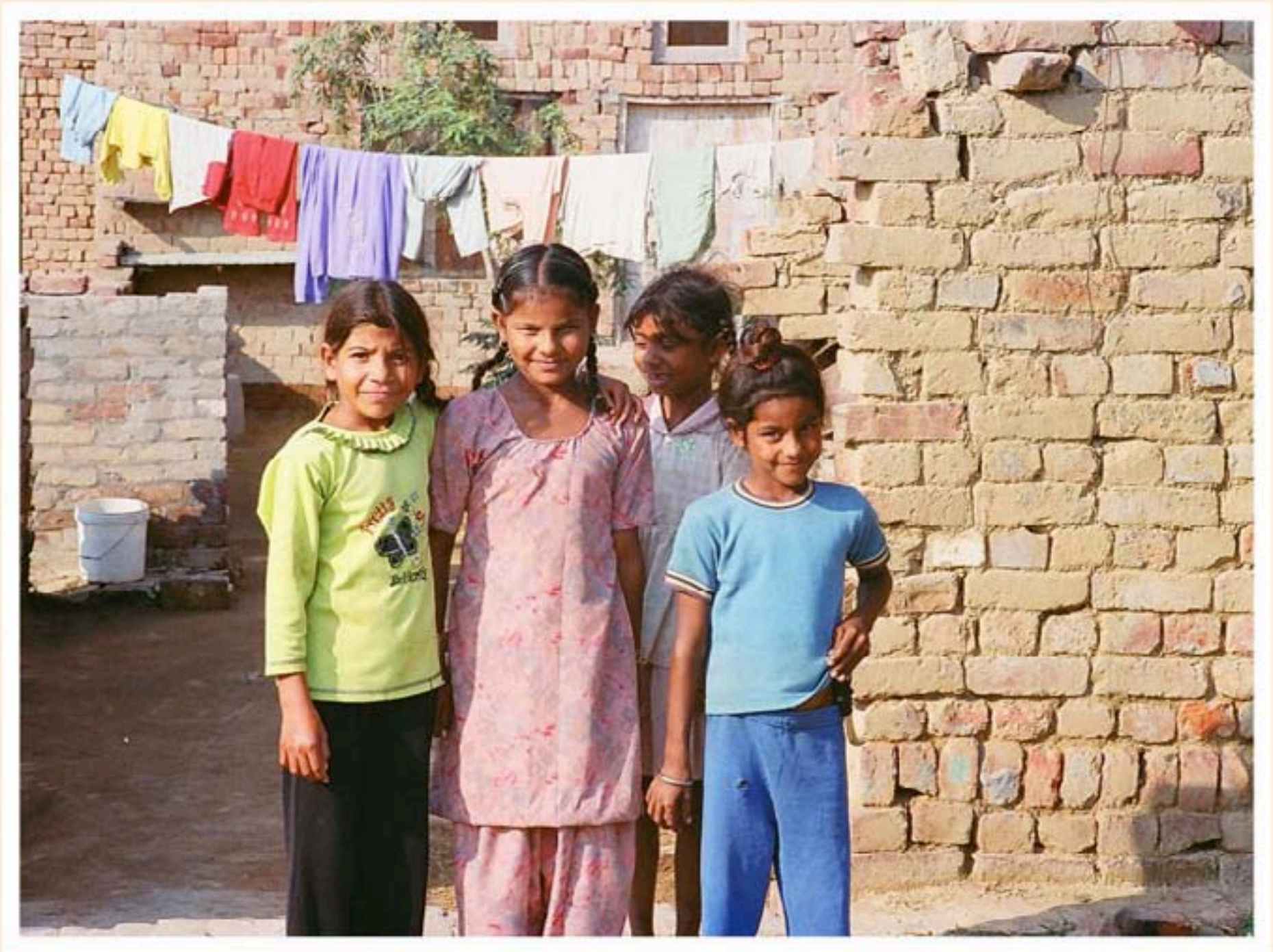
Courtyard, Golden Temple





Rural Amritsar





Children, Amritsar



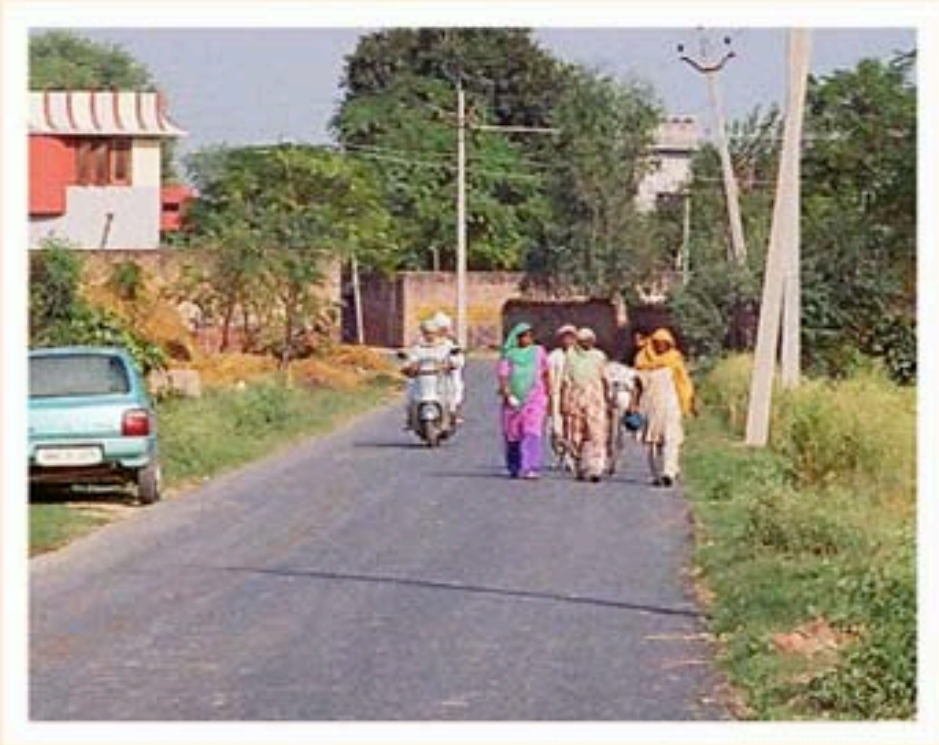














Rural Household, Amritsar





Amritsar









Amritsar













Amritsar

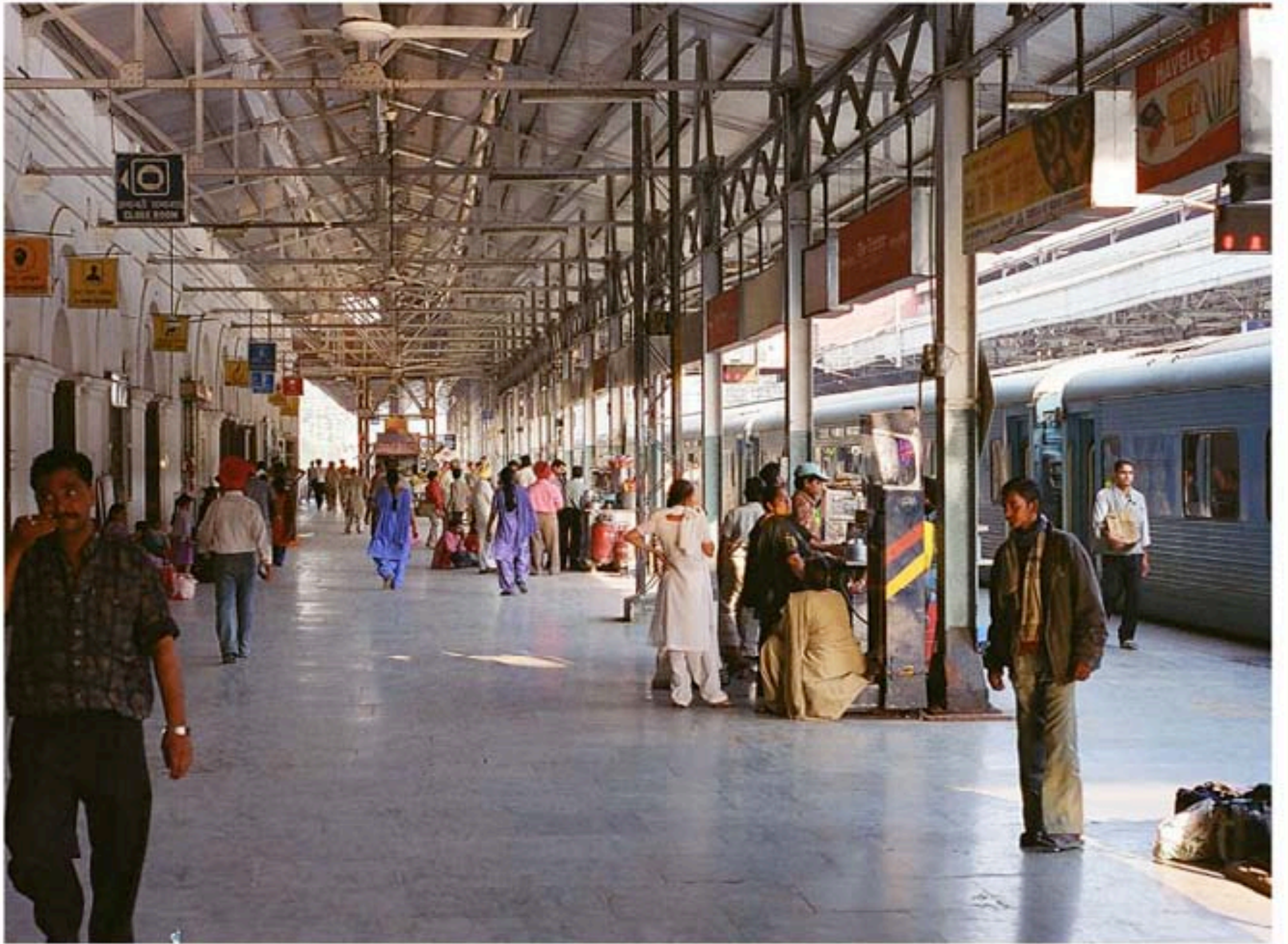




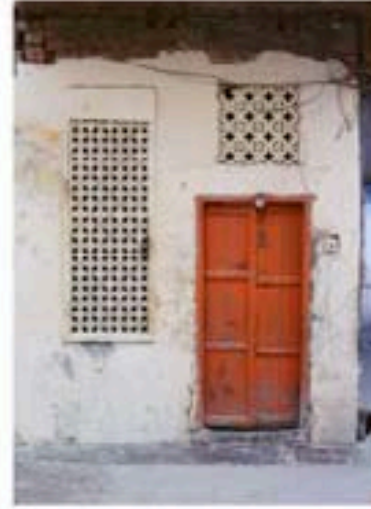








Railway Station, Amritsar







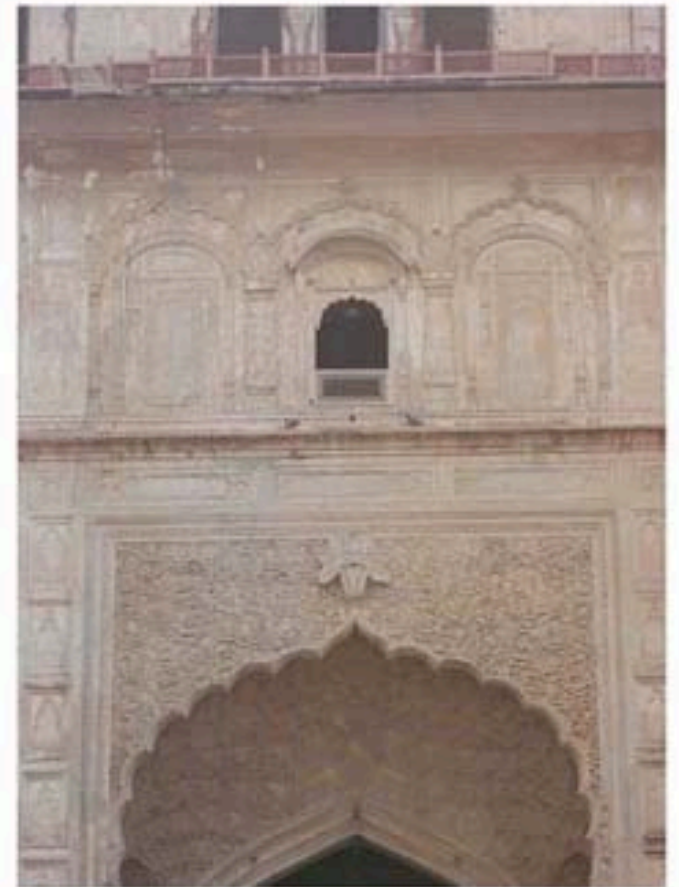


Amritsar

















Patiala

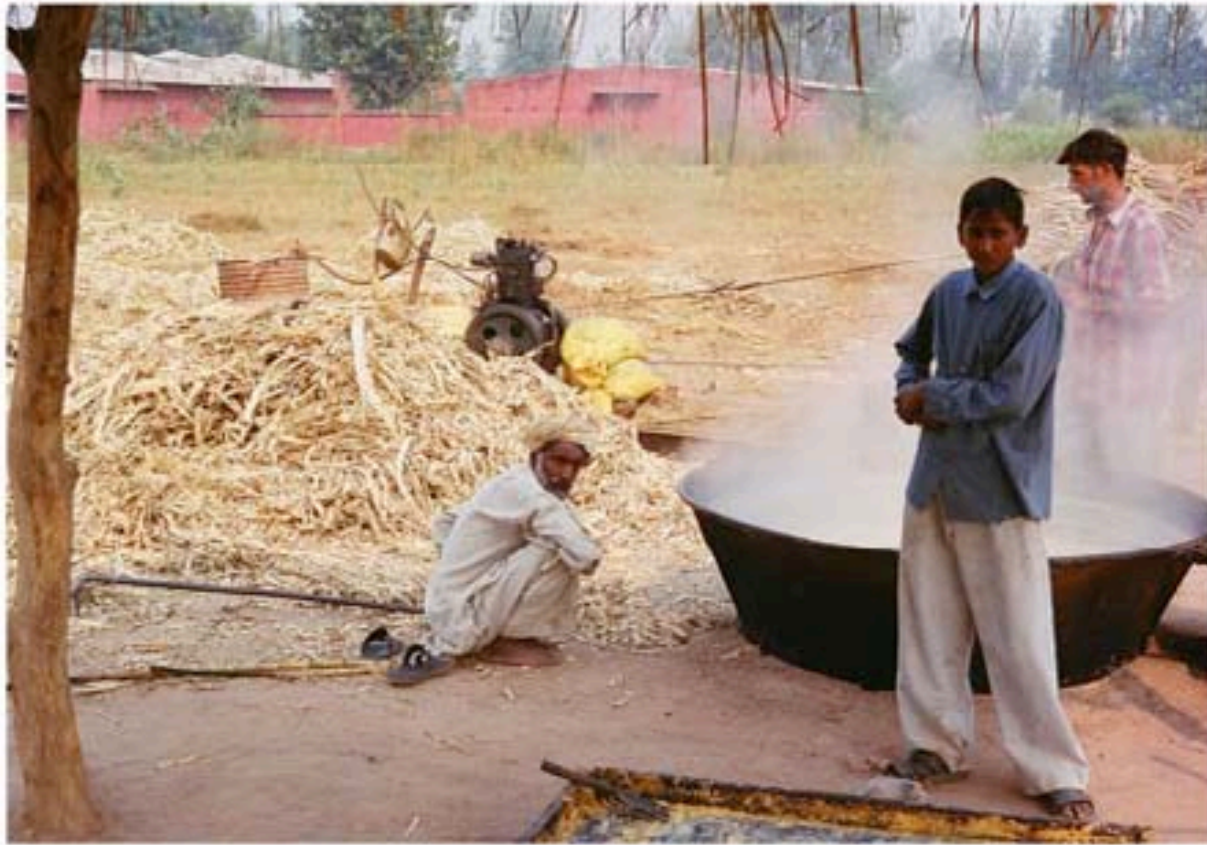








Sweets, Patiala









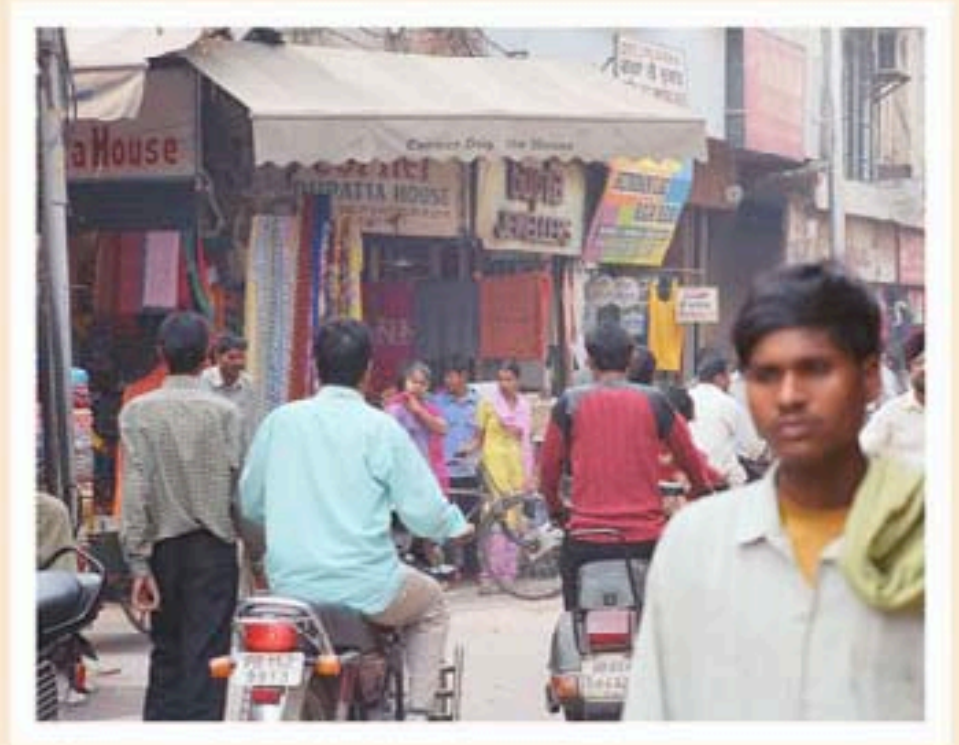
Tailors, Patiala





Patiala









Amritsar



प्रीत
सैव

FRESH FRUITS
WATALA
9115-41510
9187-89129

Pop

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ਬਲੀਆਂ
ਵਾਲੇ
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ਮਹੇਸ਼ਵਰੀ
ਕਲਾਖ ਹਾਊਸ
ਸਪੈਸ਼ਲਿਸਟ: ਦਾਜ ਅਤੇ ਵਰੀ

Jinca
HERBAL SHAMPOO

SHIVA ROADWAY













Patiala Fort









In the Punjab

There is a difference in the air. It is fresh, with the faint smell of a burning field. The harvest is just over and there are fields, brown in places, burnt black in others. In amongst the brown there are fields of green speckled with little yellow flowers. Then there are the spinach, potato, cauliflower and cane fields, as far as the eye can see. There is a lush fertility to this land. In the distance, buffaloes are being led to the village pond. The rains have come and gone. Winter will soon set in. The nights are already cool and the days are filled with a light haze of smoke and fog. This, is the Punjab.

In among the fields there are little villages, each with a Gurdwara with white walls and a yellow flag flapping from the top of the onion-like dome. There is no lack of industry. Everyone seems to be at work, the women and the men, in the fields or in little workshops that dot each village. There are tractors and combines that jostle for space on the crowded roads. Driving is more than just a hazard, it is an adventure in staying alive. The occasional folly of a driver can be seen on the side of the road, a mystery as to whether the occupants survived.

When the sky is clear it is a pale blue, with little or no clouds. And in the distance, the green of the fields stretches to meet the sky. So this is India's bread basket. And it is no wonder. There is a sense of pride in work and in prayer; children walking home from school in the late afternoon; farmers tending their fields; and womenfolk sharing in the chores. But there is also a sense of joy, and of peace, in the faces of the old men sitting under the peepul tree, engrossed in a game of cards or just whiling away the late hours.

But the cities are different. They are dusty with a life of their own. The streets are crowded with scooters, bicycles, cars, and pedestrians. There are shops carrying clothes of all colours and hues, slippers and shoes, stainless steel pots and pans, and bicycles; streets thronged with turbanned men and women draped in clothes of rich, earthy, colours. The men, tall, bearded, lean and well built; the women, faces finely chiselled and of striking beauty. The smells of rotting rubbish, of cooking, of incense; the constant sounds of honking; and the sight of bewildered policemen, long canes in hand, lend a surreal quality to street life. But this is rural India, with the flavour of the Punjab.

The area around the Golden Temple is a Kiplingesque dream. There are shops selling incense, flowers, clothes, sweets and all manner of wondrous things. Amid this cacophony of people and traffic, there is an elephant, painted in religious colours, being led by a group of saffron clothed sadhus. There are people everywhere. There are holy men; there are the martial, Nihang Sikhs, with their blue turbans, swords and spears; there are the devout with their yellow turbans; and there are thousands others, just ordinary folk, all coming to pray in this holiest of shrines. There is a constant traffic of people streaming out from the temple grounds and another going in. The colours melt into one another as men and women find their way up the steps into the gateway leading to the outer sanctum. Inside, steps lead down to the pool of nectar - Amritsar - in which stands the golden temple.

The marbled walkway and the buildings that surround the pool are spotless. There is a civic pride in keeping this holy place clean. Cleanliness and godliness have come together here. Right in the middle of the pool stands the golden temple, the Harmandir Sahib. Here the holy book is kept and recited. A long queue of the devout, offerings in hand, wait patiently in the noonday sun in a line stretching across the causeway leading to the inner sanctum. There is a method in this holy procession. People are let into the sanctum in batches, and as one group melts into the doorway, having shared half their offering with the temple, another is let in. In this well rehearsed manner, all, the rich and the poor, the well and the infirm, the young and the old, get to see the holy book being recited. There is a sense of equality here while the soothing sounds of the harmonium and the chant of holy songs waft across the pool, resonating around the outer sanctum, awakening the spirit.

The marble walls of the outer sanctum are carved with the names of the different Indian regiments that have donated to the rebuilding of the temple. Yes, there is a pain here. In 1984, Mrs Gandhi sent in the troops to clear the temple of the militants she had herself unwittingly created. The resulting military adventurism led to hundreds being killed and left the historical temple and its surroundings badly damaged. In a conciliatory gesture, the Indian Government rebuilt the destroyed buildings and the military gave its share. There are many who felt that other ways of disabling the militants should have been tried. But the spiritual damage had been done. A central and historical place of worship, such as the Golden Temple, has an irreplaceable place in the hearts of the devout. It cannot simply be rebuilt when it has been wantonly desecrated. It is the same emotion that arises among Buddhists and others about the destruction of the Bamiyan statues by the Taliban in Afghanistan. There is a wound not easily repaired. Maybe in a hundred years, the antiquity of the place may give it back its strength of spirituality. But the Golden Temple manages to overcome this by the sheer numbers of people who visit, lending their energy, in a show of the determination of the human spirit.

The road from Amritsar to Jullundur is heavily laden with traffic. Buses have standing room only and sway at full speed, horns blaring. The danger, as always, is the Indian driver. The only rule on Indian roads is that there are no rules. The road crosses the Beas river, passing through the town of the same name. This is a river of joy, and a river of shame, for the Punjab. The Beas waters the Punjab and makes the land cultivable. It also hides the shame of Partition when peasants and farmers, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus, killed each other in a violent frenzy, leaving the swollen bodies to float down the river. The now placid waters hide that shame, washed away in the sorrows of time.

The road then cuts through verdant farmland. On either side of the road fields of corn, cane and potatoes lend their colour to the unbroken vista. Then, just outside Jullundur, there is industry. There are factories and industrial plants. The road widens, there are traffic lights, and there is an American style diner. The car park is almost full, with uniformed guards directing traffic to the available lots. Yes, this is the Punjab where, it is said, every family has at least one member living in the US and yes, this is an American style eatery although it is Punjabi food that is served. There are American Sikhs everywhere, some with turbans, many without, and all dressed in jeans; the women speaking in an American twang mixed with Punjabi words. There is a mist blown by giant fans to cool the seats outside. And unusually for India, the toilets are spotlessly clean. This is where the returning Punjabis seek their sustenance. For them the humble Indian village eatery is now off limits; stomachs accustomed to US habits simply cannot handle the culinary challenge of the Indian village or town.

So this is the Punjab, a mix of the old and of the new. There are villages where life goes on as it has in the past, and there are cities where Mr Kipling would still feel at home, and then there are the amenities that America has introduced. Speaking with a twang or not, the Punjabi, however, remains true to his roots, for in the end he still comes to pray at the pool of nectar. And not many Americans can claim that pride. Who would have thought that America would come this far, east?

Sree Kumar

November, 2006

At the Wagah Border

There is a show every evening, just before dusk falls, at the Wagah border crossing in the Punjab. At the bewitched hour of half past five in the evening, Indian and Pakistani soldiers on either side of the border put on a choreographed display of beating the retreat. This is fine spectacle for the crowds that gather at the gates.

With high stepping and puffed chests the Indian Border Security Force and their counterparts, the Pakistan Rangers, put on a display of feigned animosity and jingoism. The crowds, meanwhile, cheer their own sides. But nothing can camouflage the pain and knowledge that this border divides a land of the same people.

If Checkpoint Charlie came to be a symbol of a divided Germany during the Cold War, then the Wagah Border Crossing is the symbol of a divided Punjab. The difference at Checkpoint Charlie was that West Germans and others could cross into the east, while here, at Wagah, the people of both countries are barred from crossing except with visas obtained through a tedious process. But this is to detract from the show.

On the Indian side, a plainclothes security apparatchik uses a microphone to goad the spectators into loud bursts of “Hindustan Zindabad!”, while his Pakistani counterpart does the same on the other side, calling for “Pakistan Zindabad!”. There is this raucous sense of patriotism by both sides. But the spectacle masks the real divide. As the red evening sun descends into the western plains, an observer watching from the Indian Punjab wonders if the Pakistanis from their side have the same emotions, even as a crescent moon emerges in the evening sky. The irony of this is probably lost on most of the spectators who have come to watch this street theatre.

The partition of India is most painfully felt here in the Punjab. The mass killings that ensued during the Partition have left bitter memories for both Indians and Pakistanis. Yet, this border point symbolises all that can be forgiven but not forgotten. For here, a spectacle for the masses provides entertainment in the class of the Roman gladiators without the gory bloodletting. But the real pain is for the Sikhs for whom some of the important religious and historical sites remain out of bounds, being part of the Punjab in Pakistan.

Places such as Lahore which was the capital of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Sikh kingdom, and Nankana Sahib where Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion, was born. Lahore and Amritsar were the twin cities for the Sikhs, one the capital; the other the holy city. By road, without a border, the travel time between the two cities used to be less than an hour. But today, it is any body's guess depending on how the state of relations between the two countries happens to be at any point in time.

In Indian Punjab there are many older Punjabis born across the border in towns such as Lyallpur, now known as Faisalabad. But the constant state of animosity between India and Pakistan ensures that none can visit their birthplace. The same must be true for the large numbers of Pakistanis who left India in search of the promised land in Pakistan. A cricket match in the Punjab in either country seems to be the one occasion when people from both sides cross over. But these are not necessarily the farmers and peasants who make up much of the Punjab. These are the privileged few.

So a border crossing has become a show for the less privileged, to keep their patriotism intact. But the setting sun and the crescent moon in a clear Punjab evening lends the lie to this daily circus. For the masses who turn up to see Indian and Pakistani soldiers high step and indulge in buffoonery, there surely must be the pain of wanting to know what lies over the electric fence. And sure enough they do. As the flags are lowered and the spectacle comes to an end, the crowds converge on to the fence to see the other side. But there is no chance of seeing each other for there is a no man's land separating the two sides. Yet the farmland on both sides looks the same. And to show that the spirit of oneness should never be exhibited the Indian soldiers quickly disperse those lingering for a view of their divided Punjab.

Perhaps, the real joy may come one day when Punjabis of both sides can cross this border freely. For them, that would beat any spectacle no matter how much the Indian and Pakistani soldiers high step and preen themselves. To be able to pray at the Golden temple in Amritsar in the morning and to do the same at the other golden temple in Lahore in the evening, or to visit a birthplace, would be a far greater solace for many than having to watch soldiers at play.

Sree Kumar
November 2006

About the photographer

Sree Kumar is an amateur photographer and essayist. He studied in Oxford, London and Singapore, where he now lives.



Foothills, Himalayas



Punjab

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