

BREAKING GROUND: IMPERIAL VALLEY'S JAPANESE AND PUNJABI FARMERS, 1900-

1933

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The rapid growth of absentee-owned farmland in the Imperial Valley unintentionally encouraged racial diversity in the Valley. By 1910, Imperial Valley had grown to 1,322 farms, covering 223,602 acres worth \$20.5 million. Approximately 176,000 acres were cultivated due to the abundance of absentee landowners, the majority native-born Anglos. In order to maximize profits and avoid backbreaking labor, these absentee owners leased land to Punjabi and Japanese farmers.<sup>1</sup> Ethnic immigrants in the Imperial Valley performed the majority of the backbreaking work on the land. Long-time Valley resident J.H. Edgar remembered the multiethnic composition in the Valley during the 1910s, “The immigration of Japanese, Filipinos, Hindus, Indians, Mexicans, as well as representatives of most European countries marked the beginning of a new era of farming in the Imperial Valley, and made it one of the most cosmopolitan districts in all the United States.”<sup>2</sup> Ethnic farmers and laborers greatly contributed to the increasing number of acres under cultivation. Because of their

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<sup>1</sup> Benny Andres, “Power and Control in Imperial Valley, California: Nature, Agribusiness, Labor and Race Relations, 1900-1940” (Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico, 2003), 120-21.

<sup>2</sup> J.H. Edgar, “Dirt Roads Mark Early Valley Life,” *Imperial Valley Press*, 13 December 1962.

contributions, by 1915, about 300,000 acres of crops were under cultivation in the Imperial Valley.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the racial prejudice experienced by both Japanese and Punjabi farmers in the Valley, Anglo landowners continued to lease land to ethnic farmers because of their strong work ethic and excellent farming skills. Japanese and Punjabi communities experienced similar challenges, including racial prejudice, anti-alien laws, and physical hardships. These two communities relied on their respective ethnic groups for financial and moral support. The ties Punjabi and Japanese farmers formed outside their communities were equally important. Both groups relied on Anglo collaborators when alien land laws threatened their farming enterprises. Yet support networks within these ethnic communities at times revealed cracks. Intraethnic conflict played a role in shaping and defining community. How these ethnic communities formed, the challenges they faced, and the ruptures within these two groups is the subject of this article.

### **Japanese Farmers**

The Japanese were crucial in the development of agriculture in Imperial Valley. For example, Japanese farmers played an important role in developing cantaloupes, one of the most profitable crops in the Valley. In 1909, when Anglo cantaloupe farmers found cantaloupe growing unprofitable, they leased land to Japanese men. By 1912, Japanese farmers dominated melon production by introducing innovations such as covering cantaloupes to prevent sun damage and the practice of ripening melons earlier in the year. Cantaloupe production rose significantly. In 1915, there were 8,156 acres of cantaloupes

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Martin, "Imperial Valley: Agriculture and Farm Labor," *Changing Face* 7, no. 1 (January 2001): 19.

shipped in 4,666 railroad cars. Acreage jumped to 21,697 in 1920 and 25,690 in 1923. By 1920, the Valley produced more cantaloupes than any other state in the nation.<sup>4</sup>

Japanese farmers in the Valley made great sacrifices as they struggled for success in agriculture and, at times, adhered to a merciless work schedule. The work hours of dairy farmers in the Valley illustrates the commitment of Japanese families to their farming endeavors and the suffering families endured when adhering to an unrelenting work ethic. Japanese dairy farmers awoke at 3 a.m. and worked until 9 p.m. They worked each day of the year without any holidays and had little time for sleep or rest. In his memoirs, Valley farmer Fujioka Shiro told the story of one dairy couple who spent so much time nurturing their business that their baby began imitating the behavior of the cows. Shiro explained, “The parents took their two-year old baby Mary to the cowshed with them and let her play among the cows while they milked. Before they knew it, the baby [began] imitating the cows and mooed while calling her mother.” The girl’s father was so worried he told a friend, “I am troubled. My baby has become a cow.” At another dairy, a boy barked and behaved like the family bulldog. Shiro relates these two anecdotes without sarcasm or humor. With these stories, under the heading “Miserable Farm Life,” Shiro sought to illustrate the burdens of the Japanese families who spent so much time working outdoors around animals and little time with their children. Without parental guidance and nurturing, some children began emulating farm animals.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Andres, “Power and Control in Imperial Valley, California,” 125.

<sup>5</sup> Fujioka Shiro, “Imperial Valley Developed by Japanese,” File A 97.36.5, Historical Archives Imperial Valley Pioneers Museum, p. 8. Excerpt from *Translations of Selections from Ayumi No Ato (Traces of a Journey)*, translated by M. Saito Hall (Los Angeles: Ayumi No Ato Kiando Koenkai, 1976), 16.

At times, the burdens of farm labor resulted in unexpected tragedy. Around 1920, one Japanese farmer brought over a young picture bride from Japan. Greatly overwhelmed by the constant burdens of farm labor, domestic labor, and childcare, the woman was desperate for a way out of her miserable farm life. She committed suicide, leaving a farewell note to her husband and her three-year old daughter Dorothy. The husband, though greatly saddened by the loss of his wife, continued working on his dairy farm from dawn until dusk each day. With his wife gone, the father had no time to care for his young Dorothy, so “he locked her up in a room, and gave her water and food as if keeping a pigeon or a rabbit, and he worked all day long.” Because of this isolation, at five years of age, Dorothy could not speak a word of any language. Shiro lamented, “The father got up and went to work while his child was still asleep, and when he came home at night she was already asleep. He hardly had any chance to talk to her...so Dorothy did not know a word to speak. The dairy farmers were busy raising cows and did not have time to raise their children.”<sup>6</sup>

The early dairy farmers made many sacrifices for the success of their farms, including the care of their children. The suicide of this young wife brought to the attention of the Japanese community the dire need for childcare. Reverend Kuniwaki, the leader of a local Christian church, established a nursery and a kindergarten for the children of dairy farmers, most of who had converted to Christianity. When the news of the nursery spread, 50 families rushed to enroll their children. They were relieved and very grateful to Reverend Kuniwaki and his wife.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

The same work ethic that drove this Japanese wife to suicide earned Japanese farmers in the Valley a reputation of being “the most industrious people you ever saw,” according to one shipper. He believed the Japanese could “make money in a place where a white man would starve to death.” One investigation, which assessed the profitability of loaning to Japanese farmers concluded, “Japanese are in demand as tenants...because they are willing to work during all hours. They are willing to engage in intensive hand labor, which does not appeal to the white man, and they are reliable. Because of their dependability and frugal habits, many bankers and distributors consider them superior risks.” This investigator expressed the belief that the Japanese were more racially suited for hard physical labor. However, racial characteristics did not account for their adaptability to arduous labor in the desert heat. The intense heat and humidity of the Valley were similar to summer conditions in some areas of Japan. Thus, Japanese farmers were more acclimated to the Valley heat because they experienced similar conditions in their native Japan. Moreover, their intense work habits, agricultural knowledge and skill made Japanese farmers desirable tenants and successful farmers.<sup>8</sup>

### **California’s Alien Land Laws**

Despite the success of the early farmers in the Valley, the California Alien Land Law of 1913 eventually presented serious challenges. Racial prejudices and fears that Japanese farmers would take over the majority of farmland in California fueled support for the law. One anti-Japanese man declared, “I am willing to pay 25 percent more for land next to my [white] brother, but would not want to live in the neighborhood of a men of a hostile race.”

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<sup>8</sup> Andres, “Power and Control in Imperial Valley, California,” 143-144.

Racial prejudice and the agricultural successes of Japanese farmers fueled Anglo hostility. In 1913, Japanese in California owned almost 27,000 acres and farmed another 255, 980 acres under labor contract, leases, or shares.<sup>9</sup>

Barred from land ownership, Japanese farmers found ways to circumvent the law, including leasing land and forming corporations to buy land. Japanese who bought farmland placed the title in the name of their children, Anglo friends, business partners, and lawyers. Japanese farmers formed cooperatives, which enabled them to pool resources to maximize profits, end gouging by intermediaries, procure capital, and negotiate with powerful shippers. The Brawley-based Imperial Valley Agricultural Association, formed in 1915, was one such cooperative. By 1918, 250 Japanese farmers belonged to the organization. The cooperative published and distributed daily market conditions and prices. It also offered classes in proper picking, handling, and packaging of produce, elected delegates to attend the daily distributor's meetings, oversaw shipping, and pressured distributors to publish their rules and regulations.<sup>10</sup>

Not all Anglos were hostile toward Japanese farmers in the Imperial Valley. Shiro remembered the help Daniel Leonard, the manager of Calexico's First National Bank, provided after the Alien Land Law limited Japanese farmers. Shiro characterized Leonard as "pro-Japanese" with "a strong sense of justice," because of Leonard's willingness to speak out publicly against the Alien Land Law. At one public meeting, Shiro recalled Leonard's saying, "The Alien Land Act in California is an injustice. Japanese are diligent and hard-

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 161-162.

working people who cultivated the wilderness beautifully. They are better farmers than people for any other countries. To prohibit them from leasing land is an injustice. I will help the Japanese as a banker.” After California passed the 1913 Alien Land Law, Leonard continued to loan money to Japanese farmers in violation of bank policy. He may have based his public support of the Japanese on his views of racial equality and a sense of justice. However, his willingness to be so outspoken in favor of the Japanese also stemmed from his business savvy. The Japanese were regular and loyal customers of his bank. One Japanese farmer, Mr. Takasburo, had a loan for nearly one million dollars. Losing Japanese customers was bad for his bank.<sup>11</sup>

Despite efforts to eliminate Japanese farmers in the Valley, they continued to thrive. Weeks after the passage of California’s 1920 Alien Land Law, which prohibited a citizen from holding title to land on behalf of a non-citizen, Mr. Kojima surprised shippers with an early crop of lettuce. He had successfully experimented with a new variety of lettuce, which matured earlier than most. Another Japanese farmer had discovered a way to harvest peas in November, a crop that had never been shipped before January. In January of 1922, members of the Japanese Industrial Association of Imperial Valley farmed over 10,000 acres of cantaloupes. One strawberry grower outside Brawley netted \$1,000 an acre for his five-acre crop.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Shiro, “Imperial Valley Developed by Japanese,” 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 148-49.

## Punjabi Farmers

The earliest immigrants from India to California were almost exclusively men from the Punjab province on British India's northwestern frontier. Most came from farming communities and served in the British military or police in India. Compared to other ethnic groups that farmed in California, the Punjabi remained small in number with only a few thousand populating rural California. Almost 90 percent of these Indians were Sikhs, the remaining 10 percent Muslims, and in California Anglos did not distinguish between the groups but called them by the catchall name, Hindu.<sup>13</sup>

In September of 1910, the *Holtville Tribune* published an editorial entitled, "The Hindu Question." The article outlined the reasons why Punjabi farmers "should be prohibited at once from landing in California or the United States." The article cited evidence from J.R. Straug, a local Valley businessman, who traveled extensively in Asia and had lived in India at one time. The article stated, "Of all the undesirables who come to our shores, he says this parasite, the Hindu, is the most degrading." The editorial complained of Punjabis looking for work in the Valley during cotton-picking time along with other "doubtful looking bunches of all shades and kinds." The article argued Punjabi workers and other ethnic minorities brought cultural and class degradation to the Valley, which threatened to ruin the Valley's well-bred community.

Before the 1917 Immigration Act created the Asiatic Barred Zone, which barred Indian immigrants from the United States, Punjabi immigrants experienced dangerous and remote border journeys. Punjabi immigrants continued attempts to enter through Mexico,

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<sup>13</sup> Karen Leonard, "Punjabi Farmers and California's Alien Land Law," *Agricultural History* 59, no. 4 (October 1985): 549.

but due to strict border enforcement, they had to use more remote areas of entry. In August of 1915, a group of fifty-six Asian immigrants, including thirty-three Punjabis, twenty Japanese and three Chinese, set out on a journey from San Felipe, Mexico to the Imperial Valley in hopes of entering the United States without going through the customary border check at Calexico. The party of travelers began their journey on an English steamer that sailed from San Felipe to the mouth of the Colorado River. After the steamer dropped them off at the Colorado River, the men planned to walk the remaining ninety miles through the desert. Two Punjabi men took a shorter route heading east of the Colorado River. The rest continued the journey following the river northward. August brought the most brutal heat to the Valley as temperatures easily reached 120 degrees. Coupled with the high humidity levels, travelling through the desert in August was a very risky endeavor.<sup>14</sup>

In late August, the *Holtville Tribune* reported that *rurales* (members of the Mexican Rural Guard) had found two “emaciated Hindus who succeeded in crossing the mountains.” The two Punjabis told the *rurales* “a story of terrible hardships endured while crossing the desert and mountains.” Estéban Cantú, governor of Baja California, sent a detachment of *rurales* to look for the remaining travelers. Despite rescue efforts, only thirty emerged from the desert journey alive while the rest “one by one...dropped in the sand and were left to their fate.” These dangerous desert crossings were the direct result of racist immigration laws. Desperate to enter the United States, this group of men risked their lives for an opportunity to earn decent wages.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “Hindu Band May Be Lost On Sand; 2 of 54 Arrive,” *Holtville Tribune*, 20 August 1915.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid; “30 Survivors of Oriental Pilgrims Reach Mexicali,” *Holtville Tribune*, 9 September 1915.

At times, cultural differences between Anglos and Punjabis fueled racial prejudice. On August 13, 1918, *El Centro Progress* published an article mocking and expressing disgust for the Punjabi way of conducting a funeral. After the death of one Punjabi farmer, his fellow countrymen began making funeral arrangements and expressed their interest to the county health officer, Dr. Mc Guffin, in having their dead friend cremated. *El Centro Progress* reported, “The official gave his permission, but didn’t expect them to stack a lot of wood in the middle of a field, lay the body of the departed on its top and do the old style funeral pyre act.” What the Punjabi farmers understood as cremation a coroner did not perform, but friends and family of the deceased. Local authorities immediately intervened when they observed preparations for the funeral pyre. *El Centro Progress* concluded the brief article with snide remarks, “They were just touching the match to the stack when the officers arrived and stopped the weird funeral. The law says that human bodies may be burned by specially licensed crematories and not right out in the pasture, ala Hindu.” To the author of the article, the Punjabi funeral demonstrated the incompatibility of these immigrant farmers with Anglo American life as evidenced by the violation of county health laws. The phrase “ala Hindu” hinted the Hindu way was unsanitary, backward, and inferior.<sup>16</sup>

On June 18, 1921, the local press coverage of another cultural practice of Punjabi men brought more negative attention to the Imperial Valley Punjabi. The article entitled, “Poppy Harvest Lands Hindu In Court,” recounted the harassment Punjabi farmers endured when practicing ethnic customs. The article quipped, “A Hindu’s pipe dream came to naught late yesterday afternoon when the gentleman was found picking poppy seeds in the

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<sup>16</sup> “Hindus Barred From United States By a Bill Passed in House,” *Holtville Tribune*, 31 March 1916.

city park.” The intended pun, “pipe dream,” hinted the Punjabi man intended on using the poppy seeds to make opium. The article explained the man had gathered a large bunch of seeds in a handkerchief when “along happened” Deputy Marshall, Deputy Constable, and Health Officer Charles D. Hartshorn. The article implied these three officials coincidentally appeared in the city park at the same time and did not intentionally collaborate with each other in apprehending the poppy seed picker.<sup>17</sup>

Soon after the police arrested him for collecting poppy seeds, the man appeared before Judge McDonald and explained that he wanted the poppy seeds for making tea. According to the article, the judge remained suspicious of this explanation since “poppy seeds were occasionally smoked in cigarettes by Orientals and a certain exudation of the poppy boll would make a man forget he had ever raised cotton.” In other words, the judge believed the Punjabi man had gathered the poppy seeds for narcotic use. In actuality, the poppy seeds contained very low levels of opiates and the Punjabi community used them for cooking and medicinal purposes. Invoking stereotypes of the opium-abusing “Oriental,” the officials responsible for arresting the man for innocently gathering seeds in the park were certain a Punjabi man collecting poppy seeds would only use them as a narcotic.<sup>18</sup>

California’s Alien Land Law presented serious obstacles for Punjabi farmers in the Valley. The law became applicable to Asian Indians in 1923, ten years after the state’s original Alien Land Law aimed at the Japanese. In 1923, Punjabi farmers in the Valley were ineligible for citizenship, thus barring them from owning or leasing farmland. According to

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<sup>17</sup> “Poppy Harvest Lands Hindu in Court,” *Holtville Tribune*, 18 June 1921.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

anthropologist Karen Leonard, the 1923 Alien Land Law affected Punjabi farmers the most in the Imperial Valley. Nevertheless, Punjabis in the Valley farmed successfully with help from local and absentee landowners. In fact, the Alien Land Law was unpopular with big farmers and absentee landowners.<sup>19</sup>

Like Japanese farmers in the Valley, Punjabi farmers found creative ways of circumventing the law. Some married Mexican American women and secured land through a wife. Though the 1922 Cable Act revoked the citizenship of any woman who married an ineligible alien, local officials overlooked this legal technicality. At times, Punjabis arranged verbal understandings with Anglo farmers, bankers, and lawyers. Bank directors and lawyers held land for Punjabi farmers. The Director of the Holtville National Bank earned his bank the nickname “Hindu Bank” because it loaned money to Punjabi farmers despite anti-alien laws. Anglo companies did business directly with Punjabi farmers and Anglo landowners fronted for them, handling all money transactions on their behalf. Even judges in the Valley occasionally held or leased land for Punjabi farmers. Another strategy Punjabis used, which originated in Japanese farming communities, was forming corporations with Anglos who arranged for Punjabis to farm the land. By 1925, there were four nonprofit corporations fronted by Anglo collaborators, including a judge, and various Punjabi organizations.<sup>20</sup>

Acts of violence were not limited to interethnic conflicts between Punjabis and Anglos. On September 3, 1933, Hira Singh, 70, and his nephew Amar Singh, 50, were found murdered in Brawley. Amar was found in a field with his skull fractured and Hira had been

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<sup>19</sup> Leonard, “Punjabi Farmers and California’s Alien Land Law,” 549-550.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 553-554.

killed by two gunshots fired at close range, one bullet to the head and another in the neck.<sup>21</sup> Police arrested Bishan Singh, Mala Singh, Ripadman Singh, and Inder Singh for the murders based on the accusation of a fifth Punjabi, Doll Singh.<sup>22</sup> Doll testified that on the morning of the murder, he saw the four men leaving Hira Singh's yard.<sup>23</sup> The *Holtville Tribune* accused these Punjabi men of "bringing their feuds to the United States, attempting to enlist the legal machinery of the country in their racial strife."<sup>24</sup> A judge dismissed the case due to lack of evidence. The murder remained unsolved and the press reduced the motives behind Hira and Amar's deaths to "racial strife."

Other acts of violence plagued the Punjabi community in the Valley. On June 27, 1921, a judge sentenced Gaudesh Singh to hang in San Quentin state prison for the murder of his wife.<sup>25</sup> In November of 1933, the police charged Thacker Singh with felonious assault after beating a Mexican laborer, Pedro Cruz, over the head.<sup>26</sup> In February 1940, Bhag Singh attempted to hire two men to kill Phoren Singh. Police overheard Bhag say, "Slice of an ear or a finger or a piece of his scalp so I'll know you killed him, and I'll give you \$300." Police arrested Bhag for soliciting murder.<sup>27</sup>

The violent acts Punjabi men committed, which local Anglos interpreted as signs of racial propensity toward violence, are best understood in a regional and cultural context. In

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<sup>21</sup> "Two Deaths Net Arrest of Singhs," *Imperial Valley Farmer*, 30 November 1933.

<sup>22</sup> "Fourth Hindu Under Arrest," *Morning Valley Farmer*, 5 December 1933; "Four Hindus Are Released," *Morning Valley Farmer*, 6 December 1933.

<sup>23</sup> "Perjury Charged To Hindu Witness," *Morning Valley Farmer*, 13 December 1933.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> "Gaudesh Singh Decides to Give Up Insanity Plea," *Holtville Tribune*, 27 June 1921.

<sup>26</sup> "About the Court House," *Morning Valley Farmer*, 23 November 1933.

<sup>27</sup> "Murder Deal bared When 'Death Buyer' Arrested," *Imperial Valley Press*, 1 February 1940.

India, the Punjab was a frontier area plagued by violence. The region marked India's northwestern border, lying in the path of invading conquerors for centuries. British conquest came relatively late to the Punjab with the brutal Sikh wars from 1846-1848. Under British rule, the British military recruited peasants of the Punjab because many had well-developed military skills. In fact, at the outbreak of World War I, more than 65 percent of Indian combat troops came from the Punjab. Almost 50 percent of enlistments came from central Punjab with Sikhs enlisting far beyond their proportion in the province. Many of the Punjabi men in the Valley had served in the British military in India. For years, these men lived in a conflict-ridden region, fought their own wars and served as soldiers for the British. Moreover, Punjabi culture valued courage and a willingness to take risks, attributes which made Punjabi men excellent farmers in the Valley. Punjabi culture encouraged the ability to impose oneself on others and maintained an absence of any concept of defeat or submission. Employing violence as a means of conflict resolution was common as personal power in the Punjab province based on landownership often legitimated killing and other acts of violence. For Punjabi men in the Valley, these cultural values coupled with decades of regional conflict and military service at times resulted in volatile situations, which resulted in violence.<sup>28</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The obstacles and challenges Punjabi and Japanese farmers faced and the support networks they maintained came from both outside and within their respective communities. Race hatred, Alien Land Laws, and a racially prejudiced judicial system worked against these

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<sup>28</sup>Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 25, 26, 29.

farmers. However, Anglos did not always impose these conflicts and disturbances onto these communities from the outside. In fact, both ethnic communities cooperated with Anglos to circumvent restrictive land laws. Moreover, Punjabi and Japanese farmers experienced conflict and tensions within their own ethnic groups. Early accounts of violence, suicide, and child neglect demonstrate community formation was complex and cannot be oversimplified by emphasizing strife between Anglos and ethnic communities in the Valley. The source of trouble in ethnic communities was not always the typical Anglo racist. At times, Punjabi and Japanese farmers experienced their own intraethnic conflicts and cultural challenges. The narrative of ethnic farmers in the Valley cannot be fully understood by only examining the injustices Anglos perpetrated on these communities. Rather, historians must look within these communities for sources of tension and conflict that reveal the hardships of life as an ethnic farmer in the Valley.