

Patterns of Home: Religious Art and Traditional Design in Pnjabi and American Truck Decoration

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine a specific set of cultural and religious artifacts and patterns used in the visual transformation of the underlying tractor/trailer body of Pnjabi and Sikh American truck drivers. These transformations are used to create a home space on the road as well as feelings of nostalgia and pride for home and religion. There is a specific set of artifacts that are repeatedly used to produce a consistent and recognizable outcome for each individual truck.

It is a long-standing tradition for truck drivers in the Pnjab region of India to decorate their tractor/tractor trailers with religious phrases, patterns of flowers, geometric patterns, religious figures. In recent years, tens of thousands of Sikhs

and people of Pnjabi origin have taken to the roads of the US as skilled professional truck drivers. These drivers often carry with them the traditions of decorating their trucks and cabs, but in the US, there are different styles of trucks as well as different DOT regulations for truck modifications. How do these differences change the decoration styles, and what traditions are kept alive on the American roadways?

This paper will answer those questions through exploring the use of a defined decorative procedure that is applied as a rule set that can consistently produce a recognizable emotional and cultural experience for both the driver as well as the highway audience.

Premise

Trucks (tractor/trailers) are the canvas for art in this research. The trucks themselves act as the starting parameters for the transformative process. The applicable modifications are variable based on the rules and availability of materials in each country discussed.

1. Trucks in Pnjab

In Pnjab, truck drivers and/or owners spend a great amount of time and care to

decorate their trucks with a set of standard, yet individualized decorations. Trucks are often just like a second home; therefore, drivers take along with them sacred words, talismans, and decorations which are reminiscent of home. As Jason Torchinsky writes, "One of the most striking things an American will notice on India's highways is how almost all...cargo seems to be transported by these lavishly decorated...trucks... The trucks tend to be owned by individual families and are lavished with decorations and attention because the truck makes possible the entire family's livelihood. They're very loved machines." [1]. Definitions of home space include home as a reflection of the self, any space in which the occupant feels safe, or a place where one can perceive a separation between outer and inner sections of space, be it by traditional brick and mortar, metal siding, or even tin and cardboard, as is often found in impermanent housing. Regardless, the perception of home is a construct which is reinforced by the individual through personalization of the space. Trucks are a second home for many drivers, and as such are often personalized for the purpose of feeling safe and comfortable therein. A set of common aesthetic features found in Pnjab will now be discussed.

1.1 Sacred Iconography

Pnjab, in Northern India is predominantly Sikh. Phrases and words from Sikh sacred text, Gurbani, are often painted on the front and sides of trucks. These phrases are most often written in Pnjabi but are sometimes written in Hindi (Devanagari) or English. The most common words and phrases are

"SatNam WaheGuru," "Ek Onkar," "WaheGuru," and "Guru Rakah." Along with sacred text, the Khanda, symbol for Sikhi, is often displayed. Finally, pictures and names of historical Sikh figures and Gurus are placed upon the trucks. Common examples seen are "Guru Nanak" and "Dhan Dhan Baba Deep Singh Ji." As ideas of domesticity are often a metaphor for or symbol of the ego, displaying such religious iconography allows the driver to both project his or her ideological fascinations as well as gain a sense of spatial familiarity on the road, thereby fully realizing the home space of the truck.

1.2 Superstitious Décor

Although Sikhi teaches against superstitions, the cultural traditions of India, at times, permeate into the realm of Pnjab trucking. Along with the previously mentioned Sikh iconography, many trucks in Pnjab feature black yarn or rope tassels as well as the mask depicting the black grinning face of Mahakal as Nazar Battu, or a symbol to ward off the evil eye. By adding these items to the trucks, the drivers can reinforce a sense of security and safety that is parallel to the sense of safety found in an immobile home.

1.3 Ornate Decorations

Floral and geometric patterns have been used to decorate everything from home exteriors and interiors, book pages and covers, clothing, dishes, and even food for centuries. This style of decoration is also a common feature on trucks in Pnjab. One internationally acclaimed truck artist uses his creations to "expresses everyone's desire for peace and unity" [2]. Traditional decorations of home such as floral and geometric motifs

seem universally appealing, regardless religion, socioeconomic status, or location. The peace and unity expressed through this art, again appeals to a sense of home on the road. Many trucks in Pnjab are completely covered in colourful and welcoming patterns of flowers, swirls, plants, and organized abstract designs. Bachelard explains the importance of images and a sense of home in the following, "For the house furnishes us dispersed images and a body of images at the same time. In both cases...imagination augments the values of reality. A sort of attraction for images concentrates them about the house" [3]. In other words, what we consider home is based on images and an imagination into what those images provide for a sense of safety, familiarity, and defined border of outside versus inside.

2. Migration to the USA

Driving along I-10 or I-40 in the US, you can find more Khandas than in any Gurdwara (Sikh place of worship). Sikhs are beginning to dominate the logistics industry along the coasts, and in the West and Southwest areas of the US, particularly in California. A story from the *Los Angeles Times* reports, "There are 3.5 million truckers in the United States...But as drivers age toward retirement...and a shortage grows, Sikh immigrants and their kids are increasingly taking up the job...In California alone, tens of thousands of truckers trace their heritage to India. The state is home to half of the Sikhs in the U.S...At Sikh temples in Sacramento, Fresno, Bakersfield and Riverside, the majority of worshipers are truck drivers and their families" [4]. So, when Sikh drivers come to the US, or when Sikhs come to the US and start a career in driving, do they, and

how do they continue the same traditions of truck decorations that are omnipresent in Pnjab?

3. Differences in Starting Parameters

The form factor of the canvas differs between trucks in Pnjab and trucks in the US. According to one journalist, "The trucks [in Pnjab] are a bit smaller than an American-type 18-wheeler, and unlike common US cargo trucks, the cab and cargo areas are an integrated unit. Most seemed to be made by Tata, though there are some other makes in there" [1].

4. Differences in Applicable Modifications

There are several differences between trucks, rules, and available materials/crafts in Pnjab and the US that account for the more subdued accoutrement seen on and in trucks in the US. Aside from the form factor of the tractor/trailer, each state in the US also has specific restrictions for what a truck can look like. For example, blue lights are allowed in some states and not others, and windows and mirrors must be free of accessories and anything which might obstruct the driver's view.

4.1 Sacred Text in the US

Many trucks in the US which are driven by Sikhs feature a Khanda decal or metal figure, while some have decals of Baba Deep Singh Ji, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Sacred text is rarely seen, and Pnjabi script is also not common. The tools for creating the same sacred texts are not as common as print shops often print only in Latin characters. Text in the US for Sikh drivers often consists

of the driver's last name or the company name which is often a word borrowed from Sikh ideology such as "Khalsa" or "SatGuru."

4.2 Superstitious Décor in the US

While black tassels do adorn the mirrors of a few trucks in the US, it is exceedingly rare. Often the drivers of these trucks are Hindu, as that tradition is predominantly Hindu. The black smiling mask is nowhere to be found. These tools of décor are generally only available in India and therefore are an artifact of the superstitious past.

4.3 Ornate Decorations in the US

To paint a 53-foot trailer in the same style as the intricate and ornate florals in the US would be a great task and would not necessarily be allowed. There are few if any working truck artists in the US who would paint a trailer. Also, as opposed to the higher ownership statistics for Pnjabi drivers, US drivers often do not own their trailers, therefore personalizing a trailer with such intricate and expensive artistic detail would be out of the question.

5. Conclusions

Regardless the country of domicile, there is a strong desire and long tradition of many Sikh drivers to transform their trucks into works of art representing the Sikh religion. In Pnjab, Sikh iconography is ever present in homes, businesses, and eateries. A longing for a sense of home is fulfilled by mirroring this iconography. Be it on trucks on the highways in Pnjab and the larger India, or on the US highways, seeing familiar Khandas, Babas, and vocabulary is

comforting and point of pride for Sikhs everywhere. Starting parameters and transformations may differ between each country, but the transformative process always has, at its roots, a desire for home.

6. References

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