

Spectacles of Supply: Punjabi Trucking's Post-Eugenic Mass Media

Davindar Singh

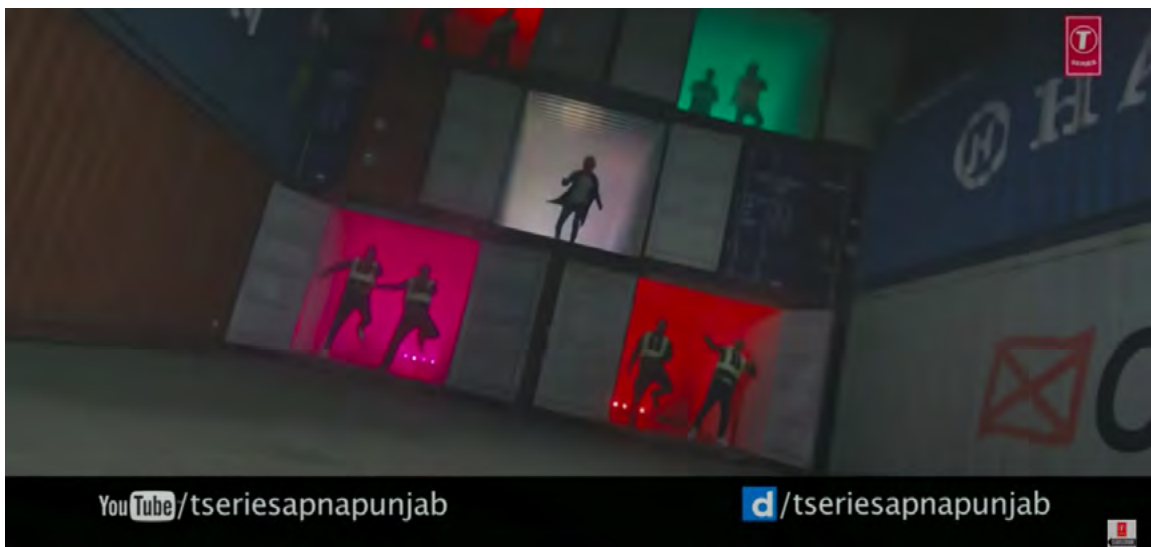
Lately, scholarship has made a large deal of infrastructure's 'infra', excavating the 'hidden' regularities and contradictions that pervade sociotechnical systems. Much of the recent boom in logistics scholarship follows suit, whether examining logistics' occultation through "seamlessness" (Chu 2020), its defensive cloaking of its vulnerabilities (Orenstein 2019), its obscuration of the difficult lives of infrastructural laborers (Chua 2018), or its quotidian effects on patterns of calculation and other cultural logics (Hockenberry, Starosielski and Ziegler 2021). However, logistics has also served as gloriously mass-mediated spectacle. Its storage sites are picturesquely out-of-the-way backdrops for silver-screen and cartoon fantasies of vigilante justice, private locales in which vengeance is enacted for public good.¹ Supply chains underpin transnational montages of developmentalist propaganda, as in Chinese state-produced music videos celebrating Belt and Road's happy camels and gemstone shipments. Despite the importance of camouflage to logistical technics, logistics also makes for gripping consumer entertainment – sometimes with uncamouflaged political implications.

One such logistical spectacle is a recent Punjabi musical media craze for trucking. Though the Punjabi truck song has a storied history, in the last decade a wave of pop hits and

transnationally produced musical films have valorized male Punjabi truckers' North American emigration. These media bemoan long hours and celebrate male laboring perdurance, adorning shipping containers and new digital distribution formats with Bhangra dance. Here, I briefly trace continuities and changes in some popular logistical media – from 1960s Indian governmental eugenic propaganda films to contemporary Punjabi trucking music. From Malthusian past to labor-migrant present, these media reflect and contribute to regionalized political economies of supply, endeavoring to shape audiences' moral perspectives with respect to the exigencies of logistics.

Today, employment in North America's trucking industry is an aspiration for many Punjabi migrants, stemming from an admixture of causes beyond geographic wage differentials. These include limited education and English-language requirements, as well as comparatively easy entry due to worsening labor conditions behind the wheel. Such circumstances form part of concerted governmental and industry efforts to cheapen North American labor, thereby expanding logistical geographies of supply (Viscelli 2016; Chua 2019). These changing geographies are discussed in Punjabi musically mediatized (Agha 2011) and personal conversations about the financial and ethical merits of emigrant trucking life, including prior generations and future transnational relationships sustained through flows of remittances to South Asia.

Still from Ranjit Bawa's
Truckanwale 2018,
1:59–2:14.
Source: [https://
www.youtube.com/
watch?v=XEhHKIvgYzY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEhHKIvgYzY)



One such mediatization, *Truckanwale*, tropes upon elements of previous decades of Punjabi trucker songs: couples' repartee about a morally insufficient husband/driver, driving's physical challenges and a romantic gaze at images of the driver's beloved, who is compared to a heroine of Punjabi eighteenth-century sung epics. However, verse-by-verse, *Truckanwale* plots the geography of the logistics revolution and its supply chain of cheap transportation labor to the Global North: from Punjab, via Dubai, to the United States and Canada, where it is filmed in the Punjabi enclave of Surrey, British Columbia. It also plots the social politics of transnational flows of remittance: "dust rises from the angry looks of those-with-dirhams-in-the-bank" (*Truckanwale* 2018, 1:58-2:03; translation by the author).

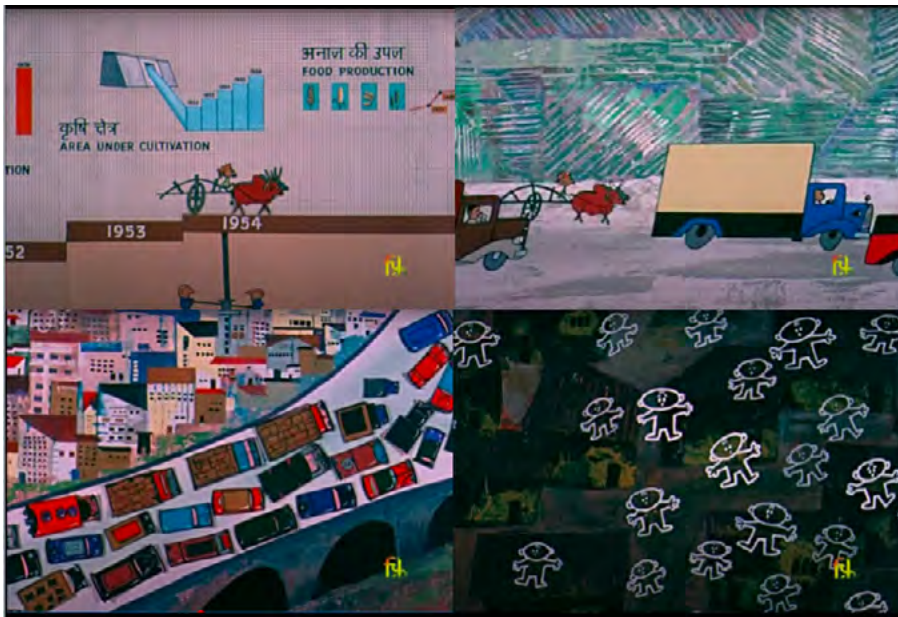
Truckanwale's rapid scene cuts and changing tempos are hallmarks of short films across the social media platforms advertised at the bottom of the video, but its slow-motion panning on romantic images has a longer filmic pedigree (though its predecessors were rarely shot atop tractor-trailers). Its wah-pedal guitar hits between choruses and keyboard minor-chord quarter notes are hallmarks of early Nineties LA hip-hop, a common touchstone for contemporary Punjabi pop. This is perhaps understandable given the large, often logistically laboring, west coast Punjabi population. Beneath their references to contemporary genres, media like *Truckanwale* and the emigrant logistical labor they extol emerge from a long logistical history on the Subcontinent. This history starts in colonial and postcolonial regionalized and racialized calculations of agricultural production, which administratively demarcated types of laboring persons across a landscape to be made agriculturally profitable through increased grain yields or decreased population (Bear 2007, 2015; Ali 2018; Bhattacharya 2019).



One media object that channels the state's Malthusian eugenic calculations (Khorakiwala 2017) is *Power for Progress*. Produced by the Films Division for broadcast over India's state broadcast network Doordarshan, over the course of one minute it flows from colonial-era domestic starvation, impotent rural labor and failed agricultural logistical transport to postcolonial supply chains, industrialized infrastructure and international trade imbalance. These speedy transitions' real-world histories haunt the present: the nationalist industrialization of agriculture, the Green Revolution, brought Monsanto pesticides into Punjab. It exacerbated economic inequality, engendering Punjabi militant separatism and, eventually, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination (Singh 1997). Fears of such tensions between center and hungry periphery made outreach, like this cartoon, essential for negotiating political crises in independent-yet-fractured India.

Like *Power for Progress*, other governmental media linked paeans to production with laments about poor logistical circulation. In *Shadow and Substance*, produced for the Indian Films Division, the logistical progress of national development is diagrammed in higher agricultural yields and a "faster, faster" trucking industry, but stymied by a bumper crop of screaming "Babies! Babies! Babies!" The narrators – a bullock-cart driver and an alien speaking Russian-accented English – first bemoan India's lethargic modernization, then celebrate its future after resolving 'population issues'. They twice break the fourth wall to chide the audience for reproducing: fewer children mean more professionally developed children and more national resources, including logistical circulation. The on-screen scaling of production meets logistical bottlenecks, as

Stills from Madhav Kunte's Power for Progress 1969, 0:22–1:34.
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lbguc6Zjvo>



Stills from G.N. Gokhale's
enigmatically named
Shadow and Substance
1967, 5:15–6:00.
Source: [https://
www.youtube.com/
watch?v=uEDWGNpaUho](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEDWGNpaUho)

yesterday's bullock-cart is swarmed by today's gridlocked trucks and newly urban hordes. A montage of transport vehicles resolves these reproductive admonishments, starting with bullock-carts and ending with future spacecraft – futurity after Indians stop breeding excess hungry children.

Through public broadcast media like these, the developmental state put logistical calculations on full pedagogical display. Whether preindustrial, complicit in postcolonial transnational supply chains' extractions of capital (*Power for Progress*), or mired in excess population's choking of urban transport systems (*Shadow and Substance*), gridlock in the motion of supply entailed gridlock within calculable national development.

By using logistics to measure national development, these cartoons attempt to instill in the citizen-audience the state's calculations of supply, and of 'excess' population's untenable demands. Train the citizen-audience in logistical calculations of national demand and modernizing rhythms of industrial supply, and the citizen-viewer might personally aid production by reducing personal reproduction.

Such calculations, like the industrialization they compelled in Punjabi agriculture, expanded Indian road transport and drove Punjabis into a postcolonial trucking boom. Though many scholars consider road transport a 'traditional' Punjabi occupation (Ghuman 2012), it became a dominant part of the Punjabi economy during the Green Revolution (ibid.; Bhalla et al. 1990). Under Cold War USAID and World Bank pressure, new agricultural technologies required larger fields and much capital investment (Patnaik 2007). Moving the resulting expanded yields to cities required high-volume road transport. Truck-borne, the Green Revolution's economic extraction entailed particularly regionalized center-periphery and scalar political tensions (Singh 2008; Kennedy 2013; Balakrishnan 2019). Concurrently – and not coincidentally – this regionalization became culturally audible through mass media. As documented in ethnomusicological classic *Cassette Culture* (Manuel 1993), regionalized musical styles gained circulability through



Stills from cross-generational trucking epic Banjara 2018, 4:42-6:40. Its star, Babbu Maan, is a much-loved Punjabi artist who has sung truck songs and whose family worked in transportation. Source: Pasha 2018.

imported consumer electronics (Sundaram 2009). This consumer-technology supply chain stemmed from India's logistical woes and developmental inability to wrangle a capital-intensive industrial technology sector (Chibber 2006; Neveling 2014).

Unlike the national development narrative guiding Films Division cartoons, interpersonal logistics in popular contemporary Punjabi trucking media follows routes orthogonal to developmental India's family planning austerities. Music videos valorize drivers' North American salaries, remitted funds to large subcontinental families and support of brides in lavish suburban homes. Feature films present heroic drivers braving tornados in fantasy truck races, mirroring these music videos' often no-less-fantastic narratives of migrant personal wealth. And unlike logistics in national development, these media focus on the interpersonal logistics of crossing chokepoints: focal points that constrain mobility, even as they route circulation for the extraction of value (Alimahomed Wilson 2018; Carse et al. 2020; Dua 2020). Such chokepoints may be spatial (like borders), interpersonal barriers to economic mobility, or both.

Many drivers in India's logistics industry express their frustrations about these chokepoints through recorded media. They self-release hundreds of songs and poetic recitations about contemporary trucking's difficulties, tying their struggles to those of farmers in India's protests against agricultural logistics bills. The perils of undocumented emigration are also recorded in mass spectacle, punctuated with bhangra song-and-dance routines on flatbed trucks in Canada, or songs of death in Mexico's jungles before reaching the US border. Some critical songs and poems about undocumented crossing depict the logistics industry as abattoir, its shipping containers quiet sites of migrant death (cf. Chu 2016).

In a locked truck's trailer, many emigrés died.

When asked, fraudulent immigration fixers say: "They were dropped off in Germany."

Don't swallow their lies, like me.

Brothers of my colorful Punjab! Don't emigrate illicitly.

– Tuc Dauky na Laio 2020, 4:03–4:40.

Although today's mass-media logistical fantasy of fulfillment through transnational wealth speaks to unfulfilled fantasies of Indian national development, this is often not the same fantasy of seamlessly untroubled mobility and smoothly circulating value in the logistics industry's self-narratives (Chua et al. 2018). Rather, public discourse across a broad Punjabi media ecology indicates distinct and conflicting "political rationalities of flow" (Chua 2019) that hinge upon logistical exigencies. Such conflicting political rationalities emerge from historical geographic tensions within the distinctly biopolitical and eugenic political economy of developmental India, and today delineate spatially differentiated valuations of supply, whether of goods or of laboring persons. Rather than cloaking the rationalities of logistics, mass-mediatized objects performatively enact them in spectacle. As these highly visible and audible productions show, the spatialized logics of logistics, and the political tensions they engender, circulate widely in public cultural life.



Stills from Tuc Dauky
na Laio 2020, 4:03-4:40.
Lyrics: Jassa Mattewalia,
singer: Jaswant Singh.
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHFrK8Iylh4>

Notes:

¹ Orenstein 2019. See especially the luxurious pyrotechnics in the warehouses and docks of John Woo's *Hard Boiled*.

References:

Agha, Asif. 2011. "Meet Mediatization." *Language & Communication – Mediatized Communication in Complex Societies* 31 (3): 163–70.

Ali, Tariq Omar. 2018. *A Local History of Global Capital: Jute and Peasant Life in the Bengal Delta*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Alimahomed Wilson, Jake. 2018. *Choke Points: Logistics Workers Disrupting the Global Supply Chain*. London: Pluto Press.

Balakrishnan, Sai. 2019. *Shareholder Cities: Land Transformations along Urban Corridors in India*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Bear, Laura. 2015. *Navigating Austerity: Currents of Debt along a South Asian River*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bear, Laura. 2007. *Lines of the Nation: Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy, and the Intimate Historical Self*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bhalla, Gurmail Singh and Jawaharlal Nehru University (eds.). 1990. *Agricultural Growth and Structural Changes in the Punjab Economy: An Input-Output Analysis*. Research Report 82. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute in collaboration with the Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Bhattacharya, Neeladri. 2019. *The Great Agrarian Conquest: The Colonial Reshaping of a Rural World*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Carse, Ashley, Townsend Middleton, Jason Cons, Jatin Dua, Gabriela Valdivia and Elizabeth Cullen Dunn. 2020. "Chokepoints: Anthropologies of the Constricted Contemporary." *Ethnos* (May), 1–11.

Chibber, Vivek. 2006. *Locked in Place: State-Building and Late Industrialization in India*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Chu, Julie Y. 2020. "Un/Boxing Fulfillment: A Field Guide to Logistical Worlds #Roadsides." *Allegra* (blog), 31 March 2020. <https://allegralaboratory.net/un-boxing-fulfillment-a-field-guide-to-logistical-worlds/>

Chu, Julie Y. 2016. "Boxed In: Human Cargo and the Technics of Comfort." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 29: 403–21.

- Chua, Charmaine. 2019. "La Logistique." *Revue Periode*. <http://revueperiode.net/la-logistique/>
- Chua, Charmaine. 2018. "Containing the Ship of State: Managing Mobility in an Age of Logistics." University of Minnesota. <http://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/200214>
- Chua, Charmaine, Martin Danyluk, Deborah Cowen and Laleh Khalili. 2018. "Introduction: Turbulent Circulation: Building a Critical Engagement with Logistics." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36 (4): 617–29.
- Dua, Jatin. 2020. "Ambergris, Livestock, and Oil: Port-Making as Chokepoint Making in the Red Sea." *Ethnos* (May): 1–20.
- Ghosh, Swarnabh and Ayan Meer. 2021. "Extended Urbanisation and the Agrarian Question: Convergences, Divergences and Openings." *Urban Studies* 58 (6): 1097–119.
- Ghuman, Ranjit Singh. 2012. "The Sikh Community in Indian Punjab: Some Socio-Economic Challenges." *Journal of Punjab Studies* 19: 87–109.
- Hockenberry, Matthew Curtis, Nicole Starosielski and Susan Marjorie Zieger (eds.). 2021. *Assembly Codes: The Logistics of Media*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kennedy, Loraine. 2013. *The Politics of Economic Restructuring in India*. New York: Routledge.
- Khorakiwala, Ateya A. 2017. *The Well-Fed Subject: Modern Architecture in the Quantitative State, India (1943–1984)*. <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/37365508>
- Manuel, Peter. 1993. *Cassette Culture*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Neveling, Patrick. 2013. "Structural Contingencies and Untimely Coincidences in the Making of Neoliberal India: The Kandla Free Trade Zone, 1965–91." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 48 (1): 17–43.
- Orenstein, Dara. 2019. *Out of Stock: The Warehouse in the History of Capitalism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Pasha, Mushtaq (director). 2018. *Banjara: The Truck Driver*. Jalandhar, Punjab, India: Ohri Productions.
- Patnaik, Utsa. 2007. "Neoliberalism and Rural Poverty in India." *Economic and Political Weekly* 42 (30): 3132–50.
- Singh, Pritam. 2008. *Federalism, Nationalism and Development: India and the Punjab Economy*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Singh, Pritam. 1997. *Political Economy of the Punjab: An Insider's Account*. M.D. Publications Pvt. Ltd.

Sundaram, Ravi. 2009. *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism*. London and New York: Routledge.

Viscelli, Steve. 2016. *The Big Rig: Trucking and the Decline of the American Dream*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Woo, John (director). 1992. *Hard Boiled*. Hong Kong: Golden Princess Film.

Cite as: Singh, Davindar. 2022. "Spectacles of Supply: Punjabi Trucking's Post-Eugenic Mass Media." *Roadsides* 7: 65-74. <https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-202200710>

Author:



Davindar Singh is a Presidential Scholar and PhD candidate in ethnomusicology with a secondary field in anthropology at Harvard University. His dissertation project, "Cultures of Cargo: Trucking, Musical Media, and the Logistics of Punjabi Mobility," traces how changes in Punjabi popular media, and parallel changes in South Asian logistics industries, emerge from a common history of transnational logistical extraction. This history looms large in contemporary political conflict in Punjab and is constituted, in part, through music, political oratory, masculine sports poetry, and everyday discourse about the spatialized motion of value in the making of post-Liberalization India's political economy. He is co-chair of the Society for Ethnomusicology's Sound Studies Section. He also used to be a saxophonist.

Roadsides is a diamond Open Access journal designated to be a forum devoted to exploring the social, cultural and political life of infrastructure.



⊕ **roadsides.net**
✉ **editor@roadsides.net**
🐦 **@road_sides**
📷 **@roadsides_journal**

Editorial Team:

Julie Chu (University of Chicago)

Tina Harris (University of Amsterdam)

Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi (University of Fribourg)

Madlen Kobi (Academy of Architecture, Mendrisio)

Galen Murton (James Madison University, Harrisonburg)

Nadine Plachta (University of Toronto)

Matthäus Rest (Max-Planck-Institute for the Science of Human History, Jena)

Alessandro Rippa (LMU Munich and Tallinn University)

Martin Saxer (LMU Munich)

Christina Schwenkel (University of California, Riverside)

Max D. Woodworth (The Ohio State University)

Collection no. 007 was edited by: **Julie Y. Chu** and **Tina Harris**

Managing editor: **Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi**

Copyediting: **David Hawkins**

Layout: **Chantal Hinni** and **Antoni Kwiatkowski**

ISSN 2624-9081

Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.



Cover design: Creative Direction **Julie Y. Chu**, Illustration **Shahira Bhasha**



**University of
Zurich**
UZH



**Swiss National
Science Foundation**



**UNI
FR**
UNIVERSITÉ DE FRIBOURG
UNIVERSITÄT FREIBURG