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Outlaws in Suburbia: Vancouver's Punjabi Gangsters

A criminal to most and a folk hero to many, Bindy Johal pioneered the idea of the Brown suburban gangster, shedding light on the darker side of the Indo-Canadian dream.

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GIFT STORY FOR FREE

Bindy Johal.

At 4:30 a.m. at the Palladium nightclub in Vancouver, British Columbia, Bindy Johal was shot dead. It was 1998, just a few years after Johal had founded The

Punjabi Mafia, a fancy name for a small-time gang that did the dirty work of more established organizations like the Hells Angels and the Triads. The killer approached Johal on the dance floor, shooting him in the back of his head at close range. Rumor had it that the gunman was one of Johal's men, but it would stay a rumor, since not one of the 350 people in the club would describe the assailant's face.

Death at 27 ensured Johal's immortality. During his life, he'd been a fixture on mainstream media, performing for the cameras, giving TV reporters flashy quips. Particularly famous was the clip of Johal threatening a rival before speeding away in a sexy red car. "I just want these guys to know you got another thing coming, bitch," he says, with a noticeable Canadian accent. "I'm still around." These words — *'I'm still around'* — became Johal's tagline, a phrase still posted on social media decades after his murder. Death made Johal a legend, particularly among many young Punjabi Canadian men.

Racial discrimination in Canada

For South Asians, particularly Punjabis, immigration to Canada has largely been a story of success. Punjabi is now the third-most widely spoken language in the country, and the community has amassed visibility, wealth, and political power. There are currently more Sikh representatives in the Canadian House of Commons than in the Indian Lok Sabha. And dastars are common — even Prime Minister Justin Trudeau occasionally dons a turban (although sometimes while doing brownface).

But racism in Canada is still a reality. Leader of the New Democratic Party Jagmeet Singh was unlawfully detained by police 11 times since the age of 17, and Brown Canadians experience police profiling frequently. For some, it was neither education nor economic achievement that brought Canada out of the dark days of the 1980s, when words like "Paki" were all too common, when Brown men had to worry about getting beaten in the streets. What changed things was Bindy Johal.

NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh at a Pride Parade, 2017. (ideas_dept/Flickr)

In the 2009 documentary film *Warrior Boyz,* which explores the gang scene in Greater Vancouver's South Asian community, a former gang member recalls Johal. "I remember even my mom saying, 'That's disgusting what he's doing. But at least white folks ain't gonna fuck with us anymore.'"

Bhupinder "Bindy" Singh Johal was born in the Punjab, India in 1971, and moved to Vancouver at age 4 in 1975, when the name "Bhupinder" was no small burden for a Canadian child to bear. In school, Johal was clever but violent: when the vice principal pulled him aside for behavioral issues, Johal beat the man bloody, then claimed the man had discriminated against and provoked him. The judge didn't buy it, but years later, his fans did.

"I was lucky enough to be born when Bindy was around," writes one YouTube commentator under a mini-biography of Johal. "Brown people were called

names in the 80s by basically every white and when Bindy came around in the

90s, he stopped all that and made white supremacists think twice before saying anything...Sure, he was a criminal but he basically saved the whole community and without him we Punjabis would be nothing today."

How the media depicted Bindy Johal

To this day, Johal is the exact opposite of nearly every media portrayal of Brown men: the Apus, the Raj Koothrappalis of *The Big Bang Theory*, the nameless, desexualized extras playing surgeons on set. Johal was introduced to the lifestyle after prison for the assault on his vice principal, and, soon enough, he was all over the news: his sexual exploits were well publicized, as was his hot blonde girlfriend. He made a lot of money — the media estimated around $4 million a year — despite getting kicked out of school. The fact that he killed Brown people rather than white racists didn't tarnish his legacy. Johal changed the game for what it meant to be Indo-Canadian, pioneering the idea of Brown suburban gangs.

Whether you loved him or hated him, you had to admit he put on a good show. Johal's trial in 1995 was one of the most expensive and widely covered trials in Canadian history, and after months of damning evidence, he was acquitted of homicide. Only later did law enforcement discover that Johal's brother-in-law had seduced one of the jury members, who in turn convinced the jury to let him off. By the time he died, he had left behind hundreds of young men hungry to fill the role of the next Bindy Johal — and a Canadian public newly fascinated with Indo-Canadian Organized Crime.

"It's very easy to sell newspapers when you put on the front page 'INDO-CANADIAN KILLED IN BRAZEN GANG SHOOTING,'" said filmmaker and activist Mani Amar, whose 2009 documentary *A Warrior's Religion* examines gangsterism within the Punjabi British Columbia community. "Versus 'WHITE MALE SHOT A SHOTGUN INTO A SHOPPING MALL.' What sounds sexier? What will make the audiences say, 'Whoa, what's going on with the South Asian community? These Brown folks, what are they doing?'"

Punjabi immigration to British Columbia and the myth of Indo-Canadian crime

The immigration trajectory of Punjabis in British Columbia is very different from most other South Asians coming to North America. For one thing, the majority were Jats, a traditional peasant caste, and they took on the most dangerous labor, usually in mills and the lumber industry. After decades of toil, the community was able to own the land it had once worked on; little did they know, it would soon become a multibillion-dollar black market as America launched its 'War on Drugs,' sending the demand for 'B.C. Bud' — a particularly potent form of marijuana — through the roof. Punjabis ended up smack in the middle of the drug trade, giving people like Johal just the chance they desired.

Vaisakhi parade in Vancouver, 2017. (Wikimedia)

Johal took advantage of the fact that Punjabis had cornered the transportation

industry. "The trucking industry and the taxi industry and most of the transport industry was controlled by South Asians," said Amar. "So making connections going north to south or south to north was very, very easy." It wasn't difficult to convince a few truck drivers to hand over transported electronics, or to pick up a log that had been hollowed out and filled with weed.

But whereas the white Hells Angel members are largely viewed as anti-establishment renegades, 'Indo-Canadian' crime still stirs up a panic when it hits the news. South Asian gang homicides — usually against its own members — *are* disproportionately high. An analysis showed that between 1994 and 2006, there were 656 homicides in Greater Vancouver, 14% of which had been Brown, a higher percentage than the proportion of South Asians (9.9%) who lived in the area. But the focus by the media has been disproportionate to the problem. The same *Vancouver Sun* that in 1913 called Sikhs a "semi-barbarous race" later developed a fascination with Brown crime, leading one writer to lament that the phrase "Indo-Canadian" had been linked to words like "gang," "shooting," and "violence."

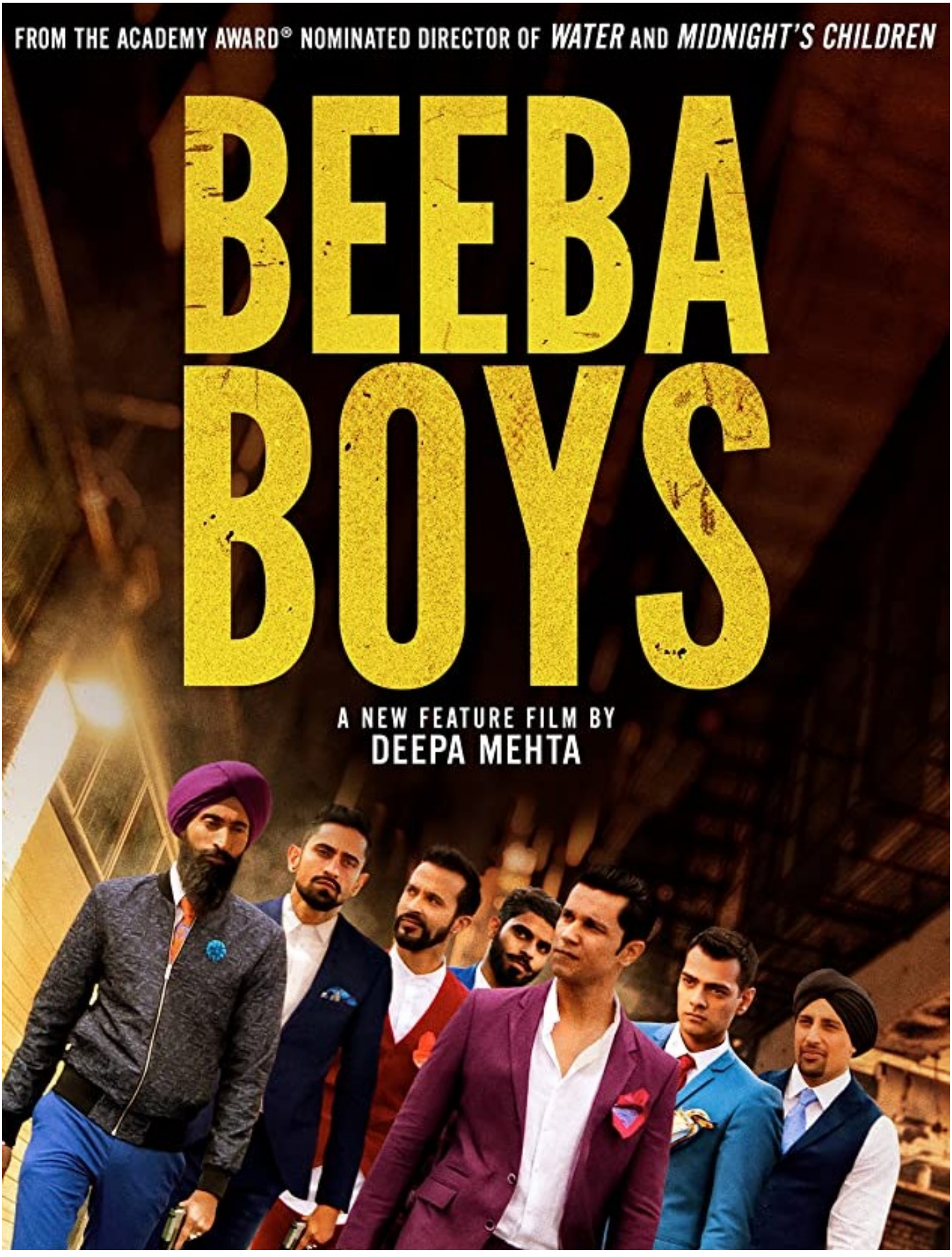
"There was really bad publicity about South Asians and gang violence, and it was not received well by the community," said Jacquile Singh Kambo, whose film *Help Wanted* (2016) tells the story of a young man who gets involved in a gang. "There were boycotts, and a lot of people took it out on social media. It was an uproar."

A 2018 Global News news report explored the glorification of guns in Punjabi hip hop and its potential impact on gang activity among the South Asian community in British Columbia — nearly a third of all targeted deaths related to gang violence in B.C., according to the report, were South Asian. A local from Surrey — home to a large Punjabi community — shared the report on YouTube as "the latest smear campaign against young Indo-Canadians."

"Fucking hypocrites at Global TV [sic] and the rest of the media are the ones glorifying [violence]," states the YouTuber. "Anytime a fucking paintball gun goes off they *jump* on that story and blast it all over the news like it's 9/11."

There's a joke in Surrey that the bridge connecting it to Vancouver is the longest bridge in the world, the only bridge that can take you directly from Canada to the Punjab. In reality, Surrey is only 32% South Asian, but it is now famous for its Punjabi community, and infamous for the 'Surrey Jack.' The Surrey Jack is a Punjabi take on the Italian American 'guido': young tracksuit-clad men who act like a caricature of Bindy Johal. A culture of suburban pseudo-gangsters sprung up in Surrey — whisky-swigging teens who travel in packs blasting Punjabi hip hop and priding themselves on female conquests and mediocre grades. Many are wannabes, but many are earnest in their desire to be future Bindy Johals.

The media has focused a lot on Surrey, usually with the same portrayal: young Punjabi men, attracted to the "bling-bling" lifestyle, play at being gangsters in the suburbs while their moms do their laundry. Why, living in luxury, and having before them the whole Canadian dream, did these boys turn to crime? Director Deepa Mehta, inspired by news coverage and the story of Johal, decided to make *Beeba Boys* (2015), a gangster film that follows a group of stylish Punjabi Canadians who turn to a life of crime.


FROM THE ACADEMY AWARD® NOMINATED DIRECTOR OF WATER AND MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN
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A poster for filmmaker Deepa Mehta's "Beeba Boys" (2015).

"Sitting in Toronto, this happens in Vancouver, I said 'It's not real, it couldn't be real!" said Mehta in an interview. "It broke every stereotype of what I thought of [as] an immigrant." The movie was not well received by critics or at the box office. But locals from Surrey's Punjabi community were especially irked by its glamorization of gang life, and inaccurate depiction of their community.

Mehta may be a Punjabi Canadian, but she understood the situation as much as 'crazy rich Asians' understand Chinatown. Karan Mahajan, in his essay "Two Asian Americas," argues that, "There are now, in a sense, two Asian Americas: one formed by five centuries of systemic racism, and another, more genteel version, constituted in the aftermath of the [American Civil Rights Act]. These two Asian Americas float over and under each other like tectonic plates, often clanging discordantly." The same factors are at work within Canada, only in different ways.

A bridge between two worlds

Most Punjabi Sikhs in Canada, especially Surrey, came to the country "family class." Their presence was the result of immigration policies that restricted highly educated immigrants but let in relatives of people who were already

there. The community gained a lot of wealth; second- and third-generation kids from Surrey may have BMWs, but their parents took two jobs each to obtain them. And the Canada they entered was far from a multicultural paradise.

"One of my uncles used to carry a cricket bat with him when he'd go drive his taxi," said Gurdeep Singh Jagpal, a Toronto-based activist who wrote a research paper on police profiling towards the Punjabi community. "Because people tried to jump him all the time."

"I remember young men like ganging up on trying to beat me up while I was growing up," said Amar. "In the 80s and 90s, when our forefathers came, there was a shit ton of racism." A 1977 national survey of white Canadians found that of 24 ethno-racial classifications, South Asians were the least likely category to be selected as being "Canadian," "similar to me," or even "likeable." Facing a hostile environment, immigrants stuck to their own, first within cities, then within suburbs like Surrey. One unfortunate side effect, however, was that the media became the link between South Asians and the "mainstream" community.

Bindy became a bridge between worlds: he sold newspapers and appeared tough to Brown kids who couldn't afford not to be. He went by the name 'Bindy' when Punjabi kids were getting teased about their names. While many mock Punjabi Canadians for adopting hip hop culture, kids in the 80s seriously identified with the Black American struggle, preferring the stereotype of hypermasculine rebels than "Pakis" and "Hindus."

"When we sit down and think about race relations in this country and our community, shit we look at people like fucking Bindy and say: 'Hey. Did he do something for our community? Did he?' Like moralism aside, put the ethical, moral shit [aside], let's just deal with power relations," said one gang member, in a recent paper published by Manjit Pabla, a doctoral candidate at The University of Waterloo. "And so, when you look at South Asian young men today, this guy becomes fucking icon. He becomes a fucking God in the

imagination of the emasculated South Asian male."

Bindy Johal's legacy

Of course, not everyone deifies Johal today. "Like, I'll go to high schools, 20 years after the fucking guy has been dead, and [students are] like, 'Hey, Bindy Johal, he's the man. He's the man. He put us on the map,'" said one activist, in that same paper. "Bro, he didn't put you on the map, he put you on the pavement. You're going to live a lifestyle that's going to get you shot or killed."

"[Young men] think, 'Man, they banded together, they're using their art, they're fighting against the police, against racism,'" said Amar. "But did they experience racism and poverty and urban blight to the same extent as African Americans in California? No. But did they experience some oppression, some racism? Yes. But was it enough for them to band together and become gangsters? No."

What confused the public most was that gang life didn't spring from poverty: it had been a choice. Young men like Johal had the chance of being 'good immigrants': getting good grades, getting through college, being 'respectable citizens.' It was for exactly that reason that he's admired to this day: his fans say he was intelligent, but got expelled for assaulting his vice principal. He could have had it, but he decided to throw away the Canadian dream.

These days, Vancouver's gang scene reflects a changing Canada: ethnically-segregated gangs are a thing of the past. Groups like the United Nations sprang up, their names reflecting their racial mixings, while even predominantly Punjabi gangs like the Brothers Keepers have members of other races these days. The young men of Surrey no longer face the kind of racism Johal did. "I probably faced less racism in the last five years, 10 years, than any other period of my life," said Amar.

But the lesson remained: while their parents' hard work got them mocked and beaten, Johal's violence got them respect. Communities are still beset with self-segregation, and the drug market has switched from B.C. Bud to heroin. Every time the community gets put on trial again — whether it's a shooting, a news

story on the Khalistan movement, or a new wave of anti-immigrant rhetoric — kids think of Johal. The man, like his country's racism, is still around.

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