

A Social History of South Asians in British Columbia



EDITORS
SATWINDER KAUR BAINS
BALBIR GURM

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SOUTH ASIAN CANADIAN LEGACY PROJECT



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Editors: Satwinder Kaur Bains, PhD and Balbir Gurm, EdD.

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South Asian Studies Institute

University of the Fraser Valley

33844 King Road

Abbotsford BC

V2S 7M8

www.ufv.ca/sasi

FRONT COVER Clockwise from upper left:

Image of school children and their teacher posing for a class photo on front steps of a building. Joan Mayo fonds. South Asian Canadian Digital Archive, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, Canada.

Ocean Falls on BC's central coast was a remote community where South Asians found work in sawmills. "Road to Steamship Dock, Ocean Falls, BC" ca. 1918. James Crookall photo, CVA 260-1097, City of Vancouver Archives.

A group of primarily South Asian workers on a lumber site. South Asian Canadian Digital Archive, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, Canada.

Meera and Aarti Shaw during their Bharatanatyam Arangetram dance performance at the Terry Fox Theatre in Port Coquitlam. Chandra Bodalia fonds. South Asian Canadian Digital Archive, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, Canada.

Banto Gill and her extended family in a backyard. Charan Gill Family fonds. South Asian Canadian Digital Archive, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, Canada.

Group photo of women farmworkers. Judy Cavanagh photo, Photos-036, Canadian Farmworkers Union Collection, Simon Fraser University Library.

BACK COVER Mayo School, Paldi. Group portrait of school children and teacher in 1956. Students holding a sign 'Mayo 1956'. Courtesy of Joan Mayo fonds. South Asian Canadian Digital Archive, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, Canada.



Dedicated to our ancestors
and those that followed
in their brave footsteps to
this land called Canada

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Truth and Reconciliation

We humbly acknowledge that the work we have undertaken is foregrounded with the knowledge that we live on the unceded and ancestral territory of the Indigenous peoples of British Columbia. They have lived on these lands for time immemorial which gives them a rights-based position over and above all others who have settled here.

Settlers to BC since first contact are working towards an abiding reconciliation of the many truths of land displacement and that of its people and the manifestation of many repercussions that followed.

We acknowledge our settler position and work to dismantle the power and privilege attached to it.

This book is written on the unceded and ancestral home of the Stó:lō peoples, the people of the river. Long before Canada was formed, the Stó:lō have lived on the land on which the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV) is located, speaking Halq'eméylem, also known as the upriver dialect. UFV recognizes and honours the Indigenous communities we are privileged to work in solidarity with.



Message From Premier John Horgan

The South Asian Canadian community's long history in British Columbia has contributed significantly to the success of this province.

From those who journeyed to these shores over a century ago to those who arrive today, the South Asian community reflects the best of our province. In each chapter of our province's story — from the early settlements in the Skeena, to farms in the Fraser Valley, to communities in cities — South Asians of all backgrounds have set an inspiring example. South Asians have been united in the common hope of building a better tomorrow for their families. This book shares these stories with future generations. It honours the perseverance and diversity of our multicultural communities.

Several legacy projects were launched in response to a call for development of educational resources on the histories of racialized communities in B.C. These projects, including this book, *A Social History of South Asians in British Columbia*, were developed by the South Asian Studies Institute of the University of the Fraser Valley in partnership with the Abbotsford Community Foundation, South Asian

Canadian Legacy Committees, and community partners in seven regions across B.C., including settler communities in Golden, Prince George, Kelowna, Vancouver, Surrey, Abbotsford, and on Vancouver Island.

Like British Columbia itself, the South Asian community draws strength through a diversity of cultures, languages, and religions. Each has a vibrant history and a unique perspective contributing to our provincial society, economy, and cultural landscape. By focusing on stories from many diverse communities, this book illustrates and provides context for the development and history of South Asian Canadians in British Columbia. It recognizes their determination, humility, and integrity even while enduring hardships resulting from racism and systemic discrimination.

I invite British Columbians to celebrate the significant achievements, contributions, and history of South Asian Canadians in British Columbia.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John J. Horgan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

*Honourable John Horgan,
Premier of British Columbia*

Message from Melanie Mark

As the Minister of Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport of the Province of British Columbia, I am pleased to introduce this special publication.

This book celebrates the important impact the South Asian Canadian community has made on our province's advancement. With determination and optimism, South Asian Canadians have risen to the top of their fields — from academia to healthcare to government. Yet they have also faced a long history of injustice — from the Komagatu Maru incident in 1914 in which South Asians were denied entry into Canada; to opportunity-limiting regulations like the “Continuous Journey Passage Act” of 1908 and the restrictive Immigration Acts; to the forty-year ensuing struggle for the right to vote for South Asians during the first half of the twentieth century. With courage and compassion, South Asian British Columbians faced numerous injustices, but always challenged our province to be better through activism and diplomacy.

This special book, the first of its kind, brings together research, historical documents and photographs drawn from archives and personal collections across the province. The book also celebrates the contributions to our province's culture and the arts—by highlighting language, historical places, literature, poetry, and storytelling—illustrating the complex and diverse experiences of South Asian Canadian communities in British Columbia.

I invite all British Columbians to read this publication and to celebrate the enormous contributions that generations of South Asian Canadians have made to British Columbia's history, society, and culture.



*Melanie Mark, Minister of Tourism, Arts,
Culture and Sport for British Columbia*



Message from Rachna Singh

It is an honour to present this book to British Columbians as a celebration and recognition of the immense contributions South Asian Canadians have made to strengthen this province.

People of diverse backgrounds have long come to B.C. to build a better life in our province, and the story of South Asian Canadians, which spans generations in British Columbia, is evidence of this promise. This book celebrates the many contributions South Asian Canadians have made to this province, honours the irreplaceable roles they have played in our past, and serves as an inspiration for current and future generations, adding their unique voices and experiences to B.C.'s story.

The South Asian Canadian community's rich and deep legacy in British Columbia reminds us of important and painful chapters of the province's history. Confronted with grueling working conditions, hundreds of South Asians working at canneries, mills and logging operations, and the generations of subsequent newcomers from every field of work, pushed economic and social prosperity forward. However, we must also recognize that despite the incredible contributions to this province, many South Asian Canadians also faced racism and discrimination, including harassment, suspicion and violence in the communities in which they work and live, which continues to this day. For South Asian Canadian women in particular, discriminatory practices continue in workplaces and society in the form of unconscious bias and aggression that impact on individuals and communities.

We are working across government to develop anti-racism legislation and advance data collection to counter systemic racism and the barriers that South Asian communities continue to face.

I invite all British Columbians to read about the significant contributions made by South Asian communities in the province. The history of South Asian Canadians shows us how we can overcome challenges with hope and resolve, and continue to strengthen British Columbia.



*Rachna Singh, Parliamentary Secretary
for Anti-Racism Initiatives*





Group photo of temple attendees in front of the Paldi Sikh temple (1936).

Mayo Singh Family fonds. South Asian Canadian Digital Archive, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, Canada.

Introduction

Threading our stories....

South Asian Canadians have a long, rich, vibrant, robust, and evocative history in what we call British Columbia — land of the Indigenous communities long before European settlers invaded it and displaced them in such great numbers and with great violence to their culture, language, heritage, and land.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, South Asian immigrants from undivided India came to Canada for economic reasons and since then have integrated their lives and worked tirelessly to contribute to the Canadian economy, culture, and history. The diversity of Canadians of South Asian descent has increased manifold, with community members coming from all parts of South Asia and from second and third migration countries.

Canadians of South Asian ancestry have embraced Canada by excelling in every field of endeavour that they have undertaken and giving back to the country that they call home. They have faced intense racism and continue to do so, but they have fought the good fight for human rights, they have supported philanthropy across all communities, they have stood up and been counted when it mattered, and they are consistently working towards making Canada a better place for all.

The work of this book for adding to the Canadian historic record through our own voice and with care and attention is to be lauded. Individual authors have been guided by their own pride in telling the history of their families, and communities that have not always been in the limelight. Amplifying the voices of South Asian Canadians has been a joyful exercise wherein

the story transports one transnationally across bodies of water and land that could not stand in the way of dreams and desires to immigrate to Canada and settle in British Columbia. We stand as vanguards to the future, because these stories will inform our future actions and we hope that the historic injustices of the past will never be repeated, because we are vigilant and attentive to the world around us.

While these stories are just the beginning, we take encouragement in the fact that many more stories are yet to be penned and need to be brought forward for all of us to enjoy. By telling our stories, we leave a legacy behind that guides our future — both in terms of challenges faced and successes achieved. As Martin Luther King said: “We are not makers of history. We are made by history”.

By threading our stories through the ages, we have produced a book that will add to the Canadian record for the next one hundred years and we hope many companion books will follow through the efforts of strongly committed South Asian British Columbians.

This book on social history is one of the products of the South Asian Canadian Legacy Project. Other products are:

South Asian Canadian Digital Archive: Province wide digitization of South Asian Canadian collections, including artefacts, photos, texts, materials, oral histories, exhibits and other resources which will be accessible to all through a digital archive.

Haq and History Travel Exhibit: Exhibit of South Asian Canadian history is developed in partnership with the Royal BC Museum.

Historic Sites: Documentation and further engagement with 15 sites that are of historic importance to South Asian Canadians, which have been recognized by the Government of BC.

Saffron Threads Learning Resources: Curriculum for South Asian Canadian relevant studies for K-12 schools in BC developed in partnership with Open School BC, supported with outreach boxes for educators.

Union Zindabad! B.C. Labour Movements Social Histories Research: Research and development of resources on writing and exhibiting a comprehensive South Asian Canadian Labour History in partnership with BC Labour Heritage Centre.

These projects collectively tell the stories of struggles, intense racism, many hard-fought successes, and great resilience of British Columbians of South Asian descent. These projects provide strong historical examples of how our ancestors have helped create the province of BC in hopes to lessen and mitigate the racism that continues to exist in structures and society today.



Preface

This social history book is the culmination of ten plus years of connecting, learning, recording, and consulting with South Asian Canadians in this beautiful province. Writing history in the first-person narrative by South Asians was particularly important for us and we have shaped this social history book to reflect our stories, our profiles, and our rich and challenging history.

We have, for very long wanted to record and share our history in a manner that is publicly appealing and historically accurate. The desire to know our history is a deeply personal matter for all South Asians since, as an oral collectivist community, we have relied on the vibrant storytelling of our ancestors. They so rightly deserve our first acknowledgement for passing down our history through the generations. First arriving at the turn of the last century, little must they have dwelled on the fact that 100 plus years later we would be mining the archives for their stories, trials, tribulations, successes, and prideful moments and recording it in a book for present and future generations. This work is a legacy of these giants who paved the way for us all today.

We acknowledge and thank the many authors who spent so much time offering their stories to the book with generosity of spirit and an abundance of goodwill. The book is rich because of the stories it contains between its covers. History is made one chapter at a time, by historians, cultural brokers and people with

passion in their hearts — this book is a testament to all that and more.

The South Asian Canadian Legacy initiative is a labour of intense commitment from many through the years. We are beholden to the many generous and committed people who walked this journey with us at the South Asian Studies Institute. Members of our Project Management Team are recognized here because of their spirit of giving, caring, and truly believing in the need to publish a public history book in order to create a fulsome narrative of our diverse communities. This book is a true celebration of our unity in diversity — the first attempt to bring our diversity under one cover and to truly revel in our collective history. This book is the beginning to build our record and we hope to create even further historical records.

The Government of BC, has supported this endeavour with grace, knowing that this is a much needed and important history for our province and for all Canadians. There are many public servants who believed in us and in the project and we are grateful for your support and good guidance along the way. We thank you for your passion and support.

EDITORS

Satwinder Kaur Bains, PhD
Director, South Asian Studies Institute,
University of the Fraser Valley

Balbir Gurm, EdD
Nursing Professor, Faculty of Health
Kwantlen Polytechnic University

Project Management Team

Dr. Satwinder Kaur Bains

Dr. Satwinder Kaur Bains is the Director of the South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley and is an Associate Professor in Social Cultural Media Studies. Her current research interests include migration, settlement, and integration; cross-cultural education and curriculum implementation; race, racism, and ethnicity; identity politics; South Asian Canadian Diaspora studies and Punjabi Canadian cultural historiographies. Satwinder has extensive years of professional experience in community development and has worked extensively with organizations in the area of cross-cultural mental health, immigrant women, youth and families and on diversity, equity, inclusion, cross cultural development, women's rights and socio-religious interfaith dialogue. She serves the community as a diversity educator, community developer and community activist in the field of anti-racism and immigrant settlement integration.



Dr. Tzu-I Chung

Dr. Tzu-I Chung is a cultural and social historian, broadly interested in transnational migration within the context of historical, cultural and economic interactions between North America and Asia-Pacific and of cultural and economic globalization. She received her PhD from the University of Arizona, studying political economy, representation in popular culture and comparative cultural and social history. Since becoming the Curator of History at the Royal BC Museum in 2011, Tzu-I's research has focused on BC's diverse cultures and communities and their transnational connections. Her work is enriched by her experience in community outreach and her own cross-cultural and multi-lingual background.



Mo Dhaliwal

As Director of Strategy at Skyrocket, Mo collaborates with creative minds across the country and continues to create moving experiences for clients and community. His long-standing passion for technology, and his hunger for new experiences led him to Silicon Valley where he honed his talents in software development and Internet marketing. He returned to Canada with a newfound appreciation for the cultural diversity and set out on a personal mission to shatter barriers and encourage cross-cultural understanding. In 2012, Mo was recognized for his contributions by Business for the Arts as the national recipient of the Arnold Edinborough Award, and in 2013 was the recipient of the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal.



Dr. Balbir Gurm

Dr. Balbir Gurm is a ½ generation community leader, activist and nursing professor with strong values of social justice and seva (volunteerisms), and is a role model for leadership in education, on boards and advisory panels, and engages communities to advocate for policy and system change. She facilitates workshops on diversity and inclusion to address systemic racism. Her multisectoral project, NEVR, breaks down silos by bringing together critical understandings of relationship violence. One product is a free ebook *Making Sense of a Global Pandemic: Relationship Violence & Working Together Towards a Violence Free Society*. Dr. Gurm's excellence in education, leadership and dedication are acknowledged with multiple awards including Excellence in Nursing Education (RNABC), NISODS Teaching Excellence, YWCA Women of Distinction and Connecting the Community (2021) BC Achievement (2021), Soroptimist's Ruby, Times of Canada, Shakti and Leadership Canadian Cancer Society. She is a fellow of the Canadian Academy of Nursing and best known for using her privilege to improve health by addressing social justice issues in communities.



Anita Lal

Anita Lal is a fourth-generation settler, born and raised in so called 'British Columbia' on the traditional territory of Lhtako Dene and Semiahmoo, Katzie and Kwantlen First Nations. Her Biji, Thakuri Kaur Lal, instilled in her the Sikh values of seva, social justice and advocacy from a young age. These values fuel her work as the co-founder of Poetic Justice Foundation where she has been creating impactful and transformative programming, organizing, and activating the South Asian community. Her approach is always inclusive, intersectional, and critical; she draws attention to biases, inequalities and oppressive systems of racism and discrimination. Recently, her work has focused on creating space and dialogue around anti-casteism and the Dalit narrative. Anita strongly believes in giving back to the community and serves on Boards and Advisory Committees such as the South Asian Canadian Legacy Project, the South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley, and Seva Thrift Society. She also undertakes consulting work for the Royal Academy of Bhangra and Moving Forward Family Services, community-based organizations that work with marginalized people. She is inspired by Dr. Ambedkar's words: Educate. Agitate. Organize.



Kim Gough

Kim Gough is the Learning Program Developer at the Royal BC Museum. She has over 20 years of experience working in museums, heritage sites and interpretation centers. Her work for the Royal BC Museum has included school programs, feature exhibitions, volunteer training, gallery interpretation and the development of a smartphone app. In 2017, Kim earned a Master of Museum Education from UBC, focusing on outreach kits for seniors living in care facilities. Continuing with a focus on outreach and community programming, Kim will develop more opportunities for people who cannot physically visit the museum to explore the collections, learn new skills and encourage dialogue and reflection.



Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra is the Coordinator at the South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley, co-curator of exhibits at the Sikh Heritage Museum, located in the National Historic Site Gur Sikh Temple in Abbotsford, BC and a sessional faculty in the Department of History at UFV. She is currently a PhD Candidate in the Department of History at UBC and is interested in looking at the affective experiences of museum visitors through a critical race theory lens. Sharn is passionate about activist work and engagement in the community through academia and museum exhibits.



Project Advisor Emeritus

Janet MacDonald

Janet MacDonald joined the Royal BC Museum as a program developer in 1998, after 11 years of wide-ranging experience in exhibition and program work at McGill's Redpath Museum. She holds an MA in museum studies from University of Leicester, a BA in anthropology and art history from McGill, and has studied applied museum studies, museum exhibition and interpretation at Algonquin College. Recently retired as Head of Learning, Janet oversaw all public and school programming activities as they related to formal and informal learning programs delivered by full-time staff, seasonal staff, contract workers and volunteers. She worked with museum staff, cooperating societies, outside agencies and organizations and other government departments. In developing programs, she sought to explore and ensure a balance between existing popular programs and innovative initiatives designed to address new educational transformations, community engagement and diverse populations.



Social History Book Advisory Committee Members

Amarjit Sahota

Born in India and raised in England from an early age, Amarjit has a Bachelors Degree in Social Work.

He emigrated to Canada in 1991 and worked for the Government of British Columbia in various positions from front line to senior leadership. In his most recent role, he was the Director of Practice for the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) and was appointed as the Vice-President of Sophie's Place Child and Youth Advocacy Centre.

Throughout his career with the Provincial Government, he has played a key role in service transformation initiatives; the development and delivery of related training and leading a team of Consultants to support Ministry staff in responding to the

most complex child protection cases. In recent years, he was instrumental in shaping the Ministry's approach to intimate partner violence (IPV) both at a local and provincial level. This included the establishment of the Surrey Domestic Violence Unit and the creation of the only child protection program in BC focused on engaging male perpetrators of IPV. He was also the Ministry lead in the creation of Sophie's Place which was one of the first Child and Youth Advocacy Centres established in BC and was short listed as a finalist for the Premier's Award in 2017.

Amarjit is a strong proponent of culturally responsive services and collaborative practice across sectors.

Dr. Ranbir Johal

Dr. Ranbir Johal received her PhD from UBC's Asian Studies Department in April 2020. Ranbir's research focusses on the intersectionality of caste and gender in South Asian performance traditions. Her doctoral research sought to understand how shame and stigma shaped women's participation in Punjabi theatre. Ranbir teaches Punjabi language and literature, as well as

South Asian courses at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. In addition, she is a Board Member of the Punjabi Language Education Association and has created an open educational resource for the teaching of the Punjabi language. She is also a creative writer and co-director of Rangmanch Punjabi Theatre.

Dr. Molly Ungar

Dr. Molly Ungar received her B.A. and M.A. from McMaster University in Hamilton and her PhD from York University in Toronto. Her field of study is Canadian History, with a specialization in cultural history. Until her retirement in 2017 she held the position of Associate Professor in the Department of History at University of the Fraser Valley.

Her publications include a number of biographies in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, and chapters in books ranging from the *October Crisis in Quebec* to the significance of food on

the *Royal Tour of 1939*. Her most recent publication is *The Last Ulysseans: Culture and Modernism in Montreal* (2020).

She has presented a wide range of conference papers and community talks. Drawing on her extensive experience in the field of publishing, graphic arts, and oral history, she has contributed to academic and community initiatives, such as the publication of *Alphabetically Abbotsford*, and the establishment of an Oral History Centre at Lifetime Learning in Mission.

Mani Deol-Fallon

Mani Deol-Fallon was born in Duncan, B.C. Her grandfather immigrated to Canada from India in 1906 and brought with him a strong work ethic and a desire to build a life in a country that would give his future family an opportunity to thrive. A small town upbringing, along with the example set by her parents, instilled the importance of family and the value of hard work in Mani at a young age. Mani has a degree in International Relations

from UBC, and recently completed a MBA from UBC. Mani also believes in the importance of giving back to her community, demonstrated in her volunteer efforts. Mani currently sits as President of the Surrey Crime Prevention board. Various other board positions include the South Asian Family Association, Diversity Advisory Committee and the Motion Picture Theatre Association of B.C.

Dr. Tzu-I Chung

Dr. Tzu-I Chung is a cultural and social historian, broadly interested in transnational migration within the context of historical, cultural and economic interactions between North America and Asia-Pacific and of cultural and economic globalization. She received her PhD from the University of Arizona, studying political economy, representation in popular culture and comparative

cultural and social history. Since becoming the Curator of History at the Royal BC Museum in 2011, Tzu-I's research has focused on BC's diverse cultures and communities and their transnational connections. Her work is enriched by her experience in community outreach and her own cross-cultural and multi-lingual background.

Dr. Balbir Gurm

Dr. Balbir Gurm is a ½ generation community leader, activist and nursing professor with strong values of social justice and seva (volunteerisms), and is a role model for leadership in education, on boards and advisory panels, and engages communities to advocate for policy and system change. She facilitates workshops on diversity and inclusion to address systemic racism. Her multi-sectoral project, NEVR, breaks down silos by bringing together critical understandings of relationship violence. One product is a free ebook *Making Sense of a Global Pandemic: Relationship Violence & Working Together Towards a Violence Free Society*. Dr. Gurm's excellence in education, leadership and dedication are

acknowledged with multiple awards including Excellence in Nursing Education (RNABC), NISODS Teaching Excellence, YWCA Women of Distinction and Connecting the Community (2021) BC Achievement (2021), Soroptimist's Ruby, Times of Canada, Shakti and Leadership Canadian Cancer Society. She is a fellow of the Canadian Academy of Nursing and best known for using her privilege to improve health by addressing social justice issues in communities.

Poetry



Mr. Mayo Singh.

Courtesy of Mayo Singh Family fonds South Asian Canadian Digital Archive, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, Canada.

Words in Motion

Cornucopia!

Subbu Govindarajapuram

Water all over the vast coastline and shore,
Shore of dreams, opportunities and abundance;
Abundance in nature, resources; multicultural,
Multicultural mosaic making my Nation!

Nation, my Canada, my adopted mother-land,
Land welcoming everyone, arms outstretched;
Outstretched to assimilate and unite,
Unite, to form a beautiful kaleidoscope!

Kaleidoscope of cultures intertwine,
Intertwine to form here, a beautiful mosaic,
Mosaic, reiterating Unity in Diversity,
Diversity in every aspect of our life!

Life, the voice, being equal to one and all,
All are equal here; no matter what their belief;
Belief in gender, race, colour or creed; all polite,
Polite, is the way of life, in my Canada!

Canada, a true heaven on earth, a beauty;
Beauty, inside out; gorgeous with valleys and peaks,
Peaks with snow, the lumber and prairie fields;
Fields of abundance - grain, cattle and fresh water!

In the above poem, I have tried a style of poetry in Tamizh called “Andhadhi”. Andhadhi is the style where the ending of a line / paragraph becomes the beginning of the following line / paragraph. Also beginning and end is the same. This form is also a representation of the circle of life and its abundance. Thought this would be an apt style for my poem as moving to Canada and living a happy life here is indeed a complete circle and Canada provides equally to one and all. Also, we have an abundance of all that we need to lead a wonderful peaceful life in Canada, alluding to the title of my poem, “Cornucopia”. Thanks to Dr. Palaniswami Rathanaswami for sowing the idea of trying “Andhadhi” in English, for my poem.

Gadar di Goonj

ਗਦਰੀ ਬਾਬਿਓ ਪਰਤ ਕੇ ਵੇਖਿਓ ਜੇ, ਵਾਰਿਸ ਤੁਸਾਂ ਦੇ ਜਿਹੜੇ ਮੁਕਾਮ ਪਹੁੰਚੇ।
ਓਹੀ ਜੂਹ ਤੇ ਸ਼ਹਿਰ ਗਰਾਂ ਓਹੀ, ਪੈੜਾਂ ਨਾਪਦੇ, ਕਦਮ ਨਿਸ਼ਾਨ ਪਹੁੰਚੇ।
ਗੂੰਜ ਗਦਰ ਦੀ ਗੂੰਜਦੀ ਰਹੀ ਜਿੱਥੋਂ, ਉਨ੍ਹਾਂ ਰਾਹਾਂ ਨੂੰ ਕਰਨ ਸਲਾਮ ਪਹੁੰਚੇ।
ਵਣਜੇ ਤੁਸਾਂ ਦੇ ਓਸ ਵਿਉਪਾਰ ਵਿਚੋਂ, ਵੇਖਣ ਆਪਣਾ ਨਫਾ ਨੁਕਸਾਨ ਪਹੁੰਚੇ।

ਪੁਛਣ ਤੁਸਾਂ ਆਜ਼ਾਦੀ ਦੇ ਘੋਲ ਅੰਦਰ, ਕਾਮੇ ਭਾਰਤੀ 'ਕੱਠਿਆਂ' ਕਰੇ ਕੀਕੂੰ।
ਸੋਹਣ ਸਿੰਘ ਤੇ ਲਾਲਾ ਹਰਦਿਆਲ ਵਰਗੇ, ਹੀਰੇ ਚਾਕ-ਦਾਮਨ ਅੰਦਰ ਜੜੇ ਕੀਕੂੰ।
ਆਇਆ ਪੜ੍ਹਨ ਸਰਾਭਾ ਤੇ ਬਰਕਲੇ ਸੀ, ਸਬਕ ਗਦਰ ਵਾਲੇ ਉਨ੍ਹੇ ਪੜ੍ਹੇ ਕੀਕੂੰ।
ਬਰਕਤਉੱਲਾ ਦੀ ਕਬਰ ਤੇ ਬੈਠ ਰੋਏ, ਏਥੇ ਸੁੱਤਿਆਂ, ਬੀਤ ਗਏ ਵਰ੍ਹੇ ਕੀਕੂੰ।

ਚੜ੍ਹੇ ਦੇਸ ਆਜ਼ਾਦੀ ਲਈ ਜੰਵ ਲੈ ਕੇ, ਸੇਹਰੇ ਸਿਰਾਂ 'ਤੇ ਕਿਸਤਰਾਂ ਧਰੇ 'ਕੱਠੇ।
ਜ਼ਾਤ -ਪਾਤ ਤੇ ਧਰਮ ਨੂੰ ਰੱਖ ਪਾਸੇ, ਕੀਕਣ ਬਾਬਿਓ ਲੜੇ ਤੇ ਮਰੇ 'ਕੱਠੇ।
ਢੱਠੇ ਪਿਆਂ ਦੀ ਕਿਸਤਰਾਂ ਪਈ ਹਿੰਮਤ, ਰੱਸੇ ਫਾਂਸੀਆਂ ਤੇ ਚੜ੍ਹਕੇ ਫੜੇ 'ਕੱਠੇ।
ਚਸ਼ਮਦੀਦ ਗਵਾਹ ਇਤਿਹਾਸ ਸਾਹਵੇਂ, ਕਬਰੀਂ ਪਏ ਕੱਠੇ ਸਿਵਿਆਂ ਸੜੇ 'ਕੱਠੇ।

ਅਸੀਂ ਹੋ ਕੇ ਵੀ ਨਹੀਂ ਆਜ਼ਾਦ ਹੋਏ, ਲੋਕੀਂ ਪੁੱਛਦੇ ਫਿਰਨ ਸਵਾਲ ਓਹੀ।
ਉੱਚਾ ਹੋਰ ਉੱਚਾ, ਨੀਵਾਂ ਹੋਰ ਨੀਵਾਂ, ਚਾਹੀ ਤੁਸਾਂ ਕੁਝ ਹੋਰ ਦੀ ਹੋਰ ਹੋਈ।
ਬਦਲੇ ਘੋੜਸਵਾਰ ਹੀ ਘੋੜਿਆਂ ਦੇ, ਚਾਬਿਕ ਰਹੀ, ਲਗਾਮ ਤੇ ਡੋਰ ਓਹੀ।
ਦਈਏ ਦੋਸ਼ ਹੁਣ ਧਾੜਵੀ ਕਿਹੜਿਆਂ ਨੂੰ, ਡੋਲੀ ਜਦੋਂ ਕਹਾਰਾਂ ਨੇ ਆਪ ਖੋਹੀ।

ਬਾਬੇ ਆਖਦੇ ਹੰਭਲਾ ਮਾਰ ਉੱਠੋ, ਸੁਪਨਾ ਸੁੱਤਿਆਂ ਨਈਂ ਸਾਕਾਰ ਹੋਵੇ।
ਤੁਰਦੇ ਦੇਸਵਾਸੀ ਜਦੋਂ ਹੋ 'ਕੱਠੇ, ਨਾ ਇਹ ਕਾਰਵਾਂ ਫੇਰ ਖਲਿਆਰ ਹੋਵੇ।
ਹੂਕ ਦਿਲਾਂ ਦੀ ਗਦਰ ਤਦ ਗੂੰਜ ਬਣਦੀ, ਆਮ ਆਦਮੀ ਜਦੋਂ ਦੁਸ਼ਵਾਰ ਹੋਵੇ।
ਏਸ ਗੂੰਜ ਅੱਗੇ ਭੋਰਾ ਠਹਿਰਦੀ ਨਈਂ, ਨੀਲੀ, ਪੀਲੀ ਜਾਂ ਲਾਲ ਸਰਕਾਰ ਹੋਵੇ।

Translated by Dr. Rajneesh Dhawan

Ghadrites come and watch how far they have come.
It is the same place, farms, and factories you once worked; the paths you treaded.
It is the same hilltop whence your call for freedom resonated around the world.
As your heir apparent they have come to figure out what to make of the investment you had made!

They ask how you organized ordinary Indian laborers into the struggle for total Independence.
How did you set the jewels like Sohan Singh and Lala Hardyal into your torn down garment?
Sarabha came here only to seek higher education; how did he receive lessons to become a mutineer?
They stopped and wept at the grave of Barkatullah; how come you have slept here for so long?

Riding for the wedding of bride freedom from a distant land; how did you tie the ceremonial
garlands on all your heads together?
How did you keep the cast, creed, and religion out and aside and fight against the oppressor as one
people?
Lying low as underdogs for so long; how did you muster the courage to stand up to the oppressor
and fought to the finish?
History bears witness: how did you all share the grave and the cremation ground hand in hand?

Having received freedom, we are still not free; how come people are asking the same questions
again?
The rich got richer, and the poor got poorer; you thought of something but something else
happened.
Only the horse riders changed; the whip, the bridle and the hunting rope stayed the same.
How can they blame the outside marauders, when the palanquin is robbed by the palanquin bearers
themselves?

Ghadarites say!
Rise again for a second Ghadar; the dreams never come alive sleeping.
When all the countrymen unite as one people to move forward; the caravan fighting injustice and
inequality becomes unstoppable.
The heart ache stemming from hopelessness brings out a rebellion that turns to be an echo
resonating louder and louder as the common man's life becomes more difficult.
Confronted with such a resonating echo; no oppression of any kind or color stands its ground.

அகரம் சிகரத்தில்!

முப்புறம் பேராழி சூழ்ந்த
முக்கரை நிலத் தொடருடைத்
தீபகற்பத் திருநா டெங்கும்
பனிமகள் தழுவி எழில்
பனிக்கரடி உறங்கும் நாள்கள்
ஓராண்டி நிலவையே யதிகம்
இவ்வவனியி லதைக் கொண்டது
இப்பாரோ ரேத்துமெம் கனடா!

உயரியவிக் கனடாவின்
குடதிசை நெடுங்கடலோரம்
நீண்டகன்ற மாநிலமே
பிரிட்டிஷ் கொலம்பியா!
கடலதனின் வளத்தாலும்
நகரினுடைய வெழிலாலும்
காடுகளி னடர்த்தியாலும்
வாழ்வோரி னுழைப்பாலும்
பொருளாதாரம் செழித்திருக்கும்
அழகிய பிரிட்டிஷ் கொலம்பியா!

பார்த்தோரேத்தும் அழகியவிப்
பிரிட்டிஷ் கொலம்பியாவில்
முகிலாடும் வரைகளோரம்
கயலாடும் கடல்நீரில்
எழுந்துயர்ந்த வோர்நகரை
வானொழுகி நீராட்டும்
வான்கூவர் நகரெனவே
வாய்மொழிவர் மக்களெல்லாம்!

வெயில் காட்டும் பொழுதுகளில் - இந்த
நகரெங்கும் மிதிவண்டி யோடும்
கடலெங்கும் நாவா யோடும்
ஊரோரம் வானோக்கிச் செம்மாந்து
உயர்ந்திருக்கும் மலைகளெங்கும் மானிடரின்
பனிச்சருக்கு விளையாட்டிருக்கும் - நாளெல்லாம்!

ஆழ்கடலுள் அலைச்சறுக்கு
நிலப்பரப்பில் உருளைச்சறுக்கு
மலைமகளிடத்தில் பனிச்சறுக்கு
ஓர்நாளில் ஓராளே
ஓரே நகர்ப்புறத்தில்
அனைத்தையும் ஆற்றவும்
மாந்தர்நலம் பேணவும்
நல்வாய்ப் பமைந்ததுவேயிப்
பிரிட்டிஷ் கொலம்பியாவில்
எழுந்திருக்கும் வான்கூவர்!

'நிலமகள் கடல்மகளென
இருமகள் துணையோடு
இங்குநாம் செழிப்போம்'
என்றவொரு குறிக்கோளை
எம்மவர்க்கு எடுத்துரைக்கும்
இந்நகரில் எழுந்திருக்குமோர்
இருகரை யிணைக்கும்
பழம்பெரும் பாலமொன்று!

இற்றைக் கீராயிரத்தோ டொரு
அறுநூறு ஆண்டுகள் முன்பே
இலக்கண இலக்கியச் செழுமை
செறிந்த மொழியாம் தமிழோடும்
அறநிலை வழுവാப் பண்பாட்டோடும்
செழித்திருந்த வுயர்நாடேவெந் தமிழ்நாடு!

மேலையுலகின் தொல் பண்பாடுடை
உரோமா புரியோடும் கிரேக்கத்திலிருந்தும்
கீழை நாடுகளாம் மலேசியாவோடும்
இந்தோனேசி யாவுடை பாலியீறாக
நாவாய் செலுத்தி நுட்பமோடு
நாடுகள் கடந்து நாற்புறமும்
நல்வாணிகம் நாளும் செய்தனர்
நற்பண்போ டன்றைய நற்றமிழர்!

'யாதும் ஊரே யாவரும் கேளிர்'
செப்பியது தமிழ் சிறப்பாயன்று!
செயலாக்குபவர் தமிழர் இன்றுவரை!

இற்றைக் இவ்விருபத் தோராம்
இனிய நூற்றாண்டிலத் தமிழர்
சென்றனர் தம்பண் பாட்டோடு
மேலைக் கண்டமாம் அமெரிக்காவிற்கு!
மேம்பட வைத்தனரக் கண்டங்களைத்
தம்மறிவு நிலைகொண் டங்கும்
தம்தொல் பண்பாடு மாறாமலேயே
உள்ளூர் ஒழுக்கங்களையு முள்வாங்கி!

இரவும் பகலும் இருவேறு வகையெனினும்
இரண்டும் இணைந்தே நாளொன்று முகிழும்!
கிழக்கும் மேற்கு மெதிர்திசைக ளெனினும்
இணைந்தாலே யிங்கிவ் வுலகுரு வாகும்!
இதுவே யிற்றைக்கு இக்கனடாவில் எங்கும்
இனிதாய் நிகழுது நாள் தோறும்!
எட்டுத் திசைகளி லிருந்தும் வந்த
மானிட ரோடெந் தமிழரும் இணைந்தே!

அறிவொடு அறமும்
ஆற்றலொடு ஆசியப்பண்பும்
இணைந்தன இங்கின்று -
இப்பிரிட்டிஷ் கொலம்பியாவில்!
ஈன்றாளை ஈகமாயேத்துந்தமிழர்
உதக்கிலுள்ள உறைபனிநாட்டில்
ஊக்கமுடன் ஊன்றுகோல்பெற்று
எப்பணியையும் எத்தனித்து
ஏக்கழுத்தத்துடன் ஏமமாய்
ஐந்தவியருளால் ஐயம்நீக்கி
ஒத்திசைவுடன் (இந்நாட்டினருடன்) ஒட்டுறவாகி
ஒகையுடன் ஒம்பியனைவரையும்
ஒளவியமின்றி ஒளதாரியமொடு
அஃகுதலின்றி அகமலர்சியுறுவோம்!

எந்நாட்டவரும் நம்மவரே
எவ்வினமும் செவ்வினமே
எம்மொழியும் உயர்மொழியே
எப்பண்பும் நற்பண்பே
எப்பாலும் மேற்பாலே
என்றுணர்ந்தோமித் திருநாட்டில்
ஏற்றமடைவோ மொன்றிணைந்தே!

முனைவர் ப. இரத்தனசாமி

Jewel in the Crown!

Dr. P. Rathanaswami

Water on three sides
Cuddling the coastline
In this great country; where
In a year, with more days; in
Snow covered beauty, and
The bears in hibernation;
Marks this land, praised
And revered, my Canada!

In this charm-land, Canada,
Along the long Western Coast
Is the wide spread province,
British Columbia!
Abundance in Land, Water and Forest,
Known for tourism, fishing and lumber,
Having the best of economies
With the hard work of one and all
Makes, Beautiful British Columbia!

In British Columbia (which is)
Acclaimed by anyone coming here,
Is a towering city with dazzling
Clouds, dancing along the ranges,
And salmons aplenty in waters;
Showered by rains throughout,
Called lovingly by all (is)
My Vancouver!

Those days when the sun comes out
Out come the bikes, on the roads
Boats, on the blue ocean waters
Skiing continues with aplomb
On those tall North-shore mountains;
All in a day, all through the year!

Surfing on the ocean,
Roller Skating on the land,
Snowboarding on the mountains;
Anything is possible
In just one day
In and around one city;
For, Beautiful British Columbia
Has given the opportunity,
For the well-being of everyone
In our alluring Vancouver!

'By Sea and Land
We prosper!';
Is the motto
Of our land;
Says the inscription,
Etched for us to
Remember and follow,
In the Old Burrard Bridge!

A couple thousand, and half a dozen
Hundred years ago, was formed a land;
Rich in language and literature, with
Complex syntax and intricate poetry,
Tamizh, a culture with highest morals,
In my motherland, Tamizh Nadu!

Coexisting with the oldest;
Civilizations of Rome and Greek in north
To the southern land of Malay
Indonesia and Bali;
Trading prospered via the sea
Across all regions and countries;
With highly structured techniques,
And with virtue, at its peak!

'A global village with all connected'
Tamizh mantra of yonder days
Followed diligently by Tamilians;
Even today, in this
Twenty first century
Bringing with them, the rich culture,
To this developed nation!
Flourishing, both the continents,
With their intelligence, without losing
The Tamizh culture, and also following,
The law of this land, truly multicultural!

Dark night and daylight, being very distinct
In union, becomes an Earth Day!
East and West, though stark antonyms,
In union, makes the world go around!
Individuals, with their own points of view
From far and wide, come together,
Unity in diversity, forming a wonderland
Tamils, join this mosaic, in Canada!

When Morales and Ethics,
Expertise and (Asian) culture,
Intertwined in British Columbia!
With enthusiastic support (from)
Mother, the pinnacle of sacrifice
In this Northern cold country,
Attempting all duties,
Protecting with pride and love,
Removing ignorance with Wisdom,
Connected, though multicultural,
Happily safeguarding one another
Magnanimous with no jealousy,
For us to broaden our Horizons!

All humans linked; one for all and
All for one; all races with its glory
All languages, with its sweetness
All actions, only for betterment
All genders, being equal
Realizing this universal truth here,
Together, we thrive and prosper!

Translation by: Subbu Govindarajapuram

Meaning of Akaram Sigarathil

Direct meaning: அகரம் = Akaram = 'அ' – கரம் = The Alphabet 'A'

சிகரத்தில் = Sigarathil = on the peak

Here, in the poem, I imagined that the Akaram is Canada and due to various immigrants' contribution, it sits on the peak of the fame. The second way I imagined in the poem, that the Tamil alphabet அ = A, and hence the literature richness of the heritage language Tamil and the culture of people of Tamil origin has enriched Canadian heritage and culture and puts it on the peak of fame. The third way of my imagination was that the Tamil language and Tamils originated in the body of the globe (imagine the globe as a body and the Tamil origin is around the stomach and Canada is around the head) and by moving (immigrating) to Canada, it sits as a jewel in the Crown on the head of Canada.

Dr. P. Rathanaswami

ਬੇਇਨਸਾਫ਼ੀ ਨੂੰ ਚੁਣੌਤੀ - ਨਸਲਵਾਦ ਦਾ ਚੜੀਆ-ਘਰ

Dr. Kusum Soni

ਨਸਲਵਾਦ ਦੇ ਚੜੀਆ-ਘਰ ਵਿੱਚ ਭਾਂਤ-ਭਾਂਤ ਦੇ ਪਿੰਜਰੇ ਨੇ
ਜਿਸ ਵਿੱਚ ਰਹਿੰਦੇ ਨੇ ...ਕਾਲੇ, ਚਿੱਟੇ, ਕਣਕ-ਭਿੰਨੇ ਤੇ ਮਿੱਟੀ ਰੰਗੇ ...
ਉੱਚੇ-ਲੰਮੇ, ਮਧਰੇ, ਅਤੇ ਭਾਂਤ - ਭਾਂਤ ਦੀਆਂ ਸ਼ਕਲਾਂ ਵਾਲੇ
ਫਿੰਨੇ ਨੱਕ 'ਤੇ ਚੁੰਨੀਆਂ ਅੱਖਾਂ ਵਾਲੇ
ਭਾਂਤ ਭਾਂਤ ਦੇ ਜਾਨਵਰ ਨਹੀਂ ਪਰ ਮਾਨਸ ਜਾਤ!!!!

ਹਰ ਮੁਲਕ ਵਿੱਚ ਨੇ ਏਦਾਂ ਦੇ ਚੜੀਆ-ਘਰ
ਅਤੇ ਪਿੰਜਰੇ ਘੜਣ ਵਾਲੇ ਕਲਾਕਾਰ
ਜੋ ਕਰਦੇ ਨੇ ਮਾਨਸਿਕ ਹੱਤਿਆ ਦਾ ਕਾਰੋਬਾਰ....
ਪਰ ਇਹਨਾਂ ਸਭ ਦੀ ਰਾਈ ਹੈ ਇੱਕ
ਗੋਰੀ-ਚਿੱਟੀ ਚਮੜੀ ਵਾਲੀ, ਨਸਲਵਾਦ ਦੀ ਮਾਂ ਕਹਿਲਾਵੇ
ਏਦਾਂ ਦੇ ਹੀ ਇੱਕ ਪਿੰਜਰੇ ਵਿੱਚ ਮੈਂ ਵੀ ਰਹਿੰਦੀ
ਖਾਣ-ਪਹਿਨਣ ਨੂੰ ਸਭ ਹੈ ਮਿਲਦਾ
ਫੇਰ ਵੀ ਕਿਉਂ ਹੈ ਦਮ ਜਿਹਾ ਘੁਟਦਾ?

ਮੇਰੇ ਪੁਰਖੇ ਦੱਸਦੇ ਨੇ ਇੱਕ ਸਦੀ ਪਹਿਲਾਂ
ਇੱਕ ਜਪਾਨੀ ਪਨਡੁੱਬੀ ਸੀ ਆਈ
ਕੋਮਾਗਾਟਾ ਮਾਰੂ ਨਾਂ ਸੀ ਉਸਦਾ
ਮੇਰੇ ਵਰਗੀ ਨਸਲ ਦੇ ਉਸ ਨੇ ਜੀਅ ਸੀ ਢੇਢੇ
ਪਗੜੀਆਂ, ਟੋਪੀਆਂ ਵਾਲੇ ਕਣਕ-ਭਿੰਨੇ ਜਿਹੇ ਭਲੇਮਾਣਸ ਇਨਸਾਨ!!!!
ਜੋ ਧਰਮ - ਛਾਪ ਨੂੰ ਵੇਖੀਏ, ਤਾਂ ਉਹ ਸਨ ਸਿੱਖ, ਹਿੰਦੂ, ਅਤੇ
ਮੁਸਲਮਾਨ !
ਰਾਈ ਹੁਕਮ ਚਲਾਵੇ ਬੈਠੀ ਸੱਤ ਸਮੁੰਦਰੋਂ ਪਾਰ
ਨਸਲਵਾਦ ਦਾ ਬੁਣਿਆ ਸੀ ਜਿਸਨੇ ਇੱਕ ਘਾਤਕ ਜੰਜਾਲ

ਵੈਨਕੂਵਰ ਦੇ ਪੋਰਟ ਤੇ ਲਿਆ ਪਨਡੁੱਬੀ ਬੰਨ੍ਹੀ
ਸੰਘ-ਘੁੱਟਣੀ ਜਿਹੀ ਲਾ ਦਿੱਤੀ ... ਜਿਉਂ ਮਛੇਰਿਆਂ ਨੇ ਸੀ ਮਛਲੀ ਬਿੰਨ੍ਹੀ
ਦਾਣਾ-ਪਾਣੀ ਵੀ ਬੰਦ ਕਰ ਇਉਂ ਕਹਿਰ ਸੀ ਢਾਇਆ
“ਚਿੱਟਾ ਕੈਨੇਡਾ” ਬਨਾਉਣ ਦਾ ਐਲਾਨ ਸੁਣਾਇਆ
376 ਯਾਤਰੀ ਪਰ ਵੱਡਾ ਸਰਮਾਇਆ
ਪੁਰਖਿਆਂ ਨੇ ਵੀ ਅੱਡੀ-ਚੋਟੀ ਦਾ ਜ਼ੋਰ ਸੀ ਲਾਇਆ
ਐਕਾ ਸੀ ਪਰ ਫੇਰ ਵੀ ਬਾਬਿਆਂ ਹੀਲਾ ਕੀਤਾ
ਘਰ ਜ਼ਮੀਨਾਂ ਗਹਿਣੇ ਧਰ ਮੇਢੇ ਨਾਲ ਮੇਢਾ ਡਾਹਿਆ

ਵੇਖ ਜੋਸ਼ ਭਾਈਚਾਰੇ ਦਾ, ਸਰਮਾਏ ਨੇ ਸੰਘੀ ਘੁੱਟੀ
ਨਸਲਵਾਦ ਦਾ ਪਿੰਜਰਾ ਉੱਥੇ ਜਾ ਨਵਾਂ ਸੀ ਬਣਾਇਆ
ਰਾਈ ਦਾ ਕੰਨੂੰਨ ਸੀ ਉਹਨੂੰ ਕੋਣ ਨਕਾਰੇ
ਝੋਲੀ ਚੁੱਕ ਕਰਿੰਦਿਆਂ ਨੂੰ ਬਈ ਕੋਣ ਹਟਾਵੇ
ਸਰਮਾਏ ਦਾ ਜੁਲਮ ਸੀਬੜਾ ਕਹਿਰ ਸੀ ਢਾਇਆ
ਬੰਦੂਕ ਸਾਧ ਕੇ 20ਹਾਂ ਨੂੰ ਤਾਂ ਸਿਰੇ ਚੜ੍ਹਾਇਆ
ਚੁੱਪੀ ਸਾਧ ਜੋ ਸਹਿ ਲਵੇ ਉਹ ਦਾਸ ਕਹਾਵੇ
ਸਿਰ ਕੱਢ ਆਵਾਜ਼ ਕਰੇ ਤਾਂ ਬਾਗ਼ੀ ਕਹਿਲਾਵੇ

ਗਦਰੀ ਇਨਕਲਾਬੀਆਂ ਫੇਰ ਬੀੜਾ ਚੁੱਕਿਆ
ਪਿੰਜਰੇ ਤੋੜ ਫਰਾਰ ਹੋਣ ਦਾ ਨਾਰਾ ਕੱਢਿਆ
ਮੌਤ ਦੇ ਬਦਲੇ ਮੌਤ ਦਾ ਐਲਾਨ ਸੀ ਕੀਤਾ
ਮੌਤ ਦੇ ਬਦਲੇ ਮੌਤ ਦਾ ਐਲਾਨ ਸੀ ਕੀਤਾ!

ਉਸ ਪਨਡੁੱਬੀ ਦੇ ਹਾਦਸੇ ਨੇ ਅੱਖਾਂ ਖੋਲ੍ਹੀਆਂ
ਜੁਲਮ ਜਬਰ ਨਾ ਸਹਾਂਗੇ ਤਕਰੀਰਾਂ ਬੋਲੀਆਂ
ਨਸਲਵਾਦ ਦੇ ਅੰਤ ਦੀ ਇਉਂ ਲਹਿਰ ਚਲਾਈ
ਇੱਕ ਵੱਡੀ ਜੁੰਮੇਵਾਰੀ ਮੇਰੇ ਮੋਢਿਆਂ ਪਾਈ
ਪਿੰਜਰਾ ਤੋੜ ਅਜ਼ਾਦ ਹੋਣ ਦਾ ਮੈਂ ਟੀਚਾ ਬੰਨ੍ਹਿਆ
ਮੂੰਹ ਤੋੜ ਜਵਾਬ ਦੇਣ ਦਾ ਕਫ਼ਨ ਲੈ ਬੰਨ੍ਹਿਆ
ਬੇਇਨਸਾਫ਼ੀ ਨਹੀਂ ਸਹਾਂਗੇ ... ਨਹੀਂ ਸਹਾਂਗੇ!
ਗਲਘੋਟੂ ਸਰਕਾਰਾਂ ਤੋਂ ਹੁਣ ਨਹੀਂ ਡਰਾਂਗੇ ਨਹੀਂ ਡਰਾਂਗੇ!

Challenging Injustice – The Menagerie of Racism

In the menagerie of racism, there are varieties of cages
In those cages live varieties of “beings” ...
Blacks, Whites, Browns, and those of the colour of Dirt
Tall, short with a variety of looks
Flat-nosed and with narrow lined eyes
The varieties are not of, “The Faunas” But... our
fellow women and guys!
In all the nations and world empires, there are cages and
cages
and cage-carving artisans who are not the Sages
but are human killers, professional daily wagers,
All of them come from one mother – the white Queen
of Racism
Soaked in abundance of food, dresses, and shoes
I also live in one of those cages
I wonder sometimes, why
I feel suffocated among all that rich and shiny illusion
Amongst these people full of rage?

My elders narrate this story ...that a century ago
A Japanese boat had arrived
Komagata Maru was its name
Which boarded people who looked alike my race
With Turbans and Caps, wheat-colored humans
“humbled” was their surname
They were Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims for their
religious virtual frame
Across the seven seas, far away and away
The Queen commands it all, and knits that deadly net
That’s what she thrives in her expertise of entangled bets

That Historic Ship came and moored at Vancouver Port
Suffocated, pinched, and perished it was...
Like the fishermen who succeeded and trapped a fish in
their mesh
“No Food – No Water” was the deadly rule
“White Canada” announcement echoed in arrogant
abuse
376 passengers vs. superpowers!

Our elders accepted the challenge and pitched in
together in unity
Tough It was but our great-grand fathers took great-
grand responsibility
Lands and homes leased and moved forward together
shoulder to shoulder in support

Seeing enthusiasm of the community, Government
tightened the rules
And established a brand-new cage right there, at the
shores
Who would deny the Queen’s Law?
Who would stop her puppets?
Threatening were the government’s tight laws
When 20 were shot with the guns
“Slaves” were synonymous with silence
And the ones who would raise their head and speak
were named “Revolutionary”

The Ghadri revolutionaries took over responsibilities
Echoed the slogan to break the cage
“Death will bring Death” was the call
“Death will bring Death” was the call

The Historic Ship tragedy opened our eyes
Pontificated in public “Will not tolerate oppression”
“End Racism” was the wave to spread
with a big responsibility held on my shoulders
I decided to break the cage and run away
And decided to “talk back” to their face but not let them
sway
“Will not tolerate oppression at all”, I said
“Will not fear suffocation pressured by the governments
anymore” I said

Migration



"Komagata Maru in Vancouver Harbour." Moore, W. J. 1914, July 1, 1914.

Courtesy of Komagata Maru Journey website: www.sacda.ca/exhibits/km

Footsteps in time

South Asian Histories in British Columbia, 1897–1947

The Interconnectedness of Settlement, Resistance and Power

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra

ABSTRACT

This chapter sets the early 20th century context of South Asian migration, settlement, struggles and strength. The chapter begins by exploring broadly ‘Canadian’ state white supremacy against many communities and the way in which South Asian settlement fits into these patterns. Following these foundational historical trends, the chapter looks to patterns of migration and the intersections to Empire which led to the majority Sikh presence in British Columbia. The chapter then explores significant moments in South Asian settlement history from 1897–1947 including: racist legislation, the Ghadar movement, the fight for the vote, migration from a gender perspective, the *Komagata Maru*, etc., and how these histories are interweaved into a complicated and early phase of migratory history that has set a pathway forward for future waves of migration.

KEY WORDS

Punjabi, Sikh, South Asian, Settlement, Migration, Legislation, Racism, Decolonize, Ghadar, *Komagata Maru*, Enfranchise, Franchise, Anticolonial, the Great War, Women, Resilience.

Beginnings: A Decolonized History of British Columbia and Canada

This book begins with decolonization in mind, it begins with concepts of decolonization while being written during a time of worldwide pandemic and race revolution through a resurgence of #BlackLivesMatter. As this book chapter was being written (winter 2021), the Mig’maq in Nova Scotia fended off violent white fishers while engaging in an activity of sustenance that has existed within Indigenous ecosystems for centuries, long before white settlers came and claimed their lands, stole their resources, signed treaties, and limited their access to continuing to do so. As this book chapter was

being written, peaceful anti-racist demonstrators in Red Deer were met with violent white crowds, while all white law enforcement officers stood by and watched. As this book was being written the Braided Warriors in Vancouver were brutally assaulted while protesting inside the AIG insurance company, a corporation connected with the Trans Mountain Expansion pipelines in BC. As this book was being written, the news story revelation of a burial ground of 215 Indigenous children was found at a former Kamloops Residential School. These are the truths and the ongoing systems of colonization, genocide and racism that undergird the work and research on South Asian settlement histories

to these lands where Indigenous people have lived since time immemorial. As this book was being written, an atmospheric weather storm (November 2021) struck parts of British Columbia resulting in floods, landslides of a catastrophic nature in the same moment the RCMP arrested leaders of the Wet'suwet'en land defenders demanding sovereignty of their own lands to combat a climate emergency. These moments remind us of the cyclical nature of our relations, our world and our histories. History then is implicated in an ongoing process of challenging oppression, and challenging structures and systems and institutions that are built upon colonialism and its legacies.

Canada, as part of a system and history of colonialism, is rife with conflict, erasure, neglect and homogenous understandings of itself. Even the understanding of 'Canada' as a nation erases the past of Turtle Island,

where Indigenous peoples have been since time immemorial, with land and resources each a part of an ecosystem maintained through sustenance, preservation and protection.

When our modern day understanding of Canada was first conceived through the moment of Confederation in 1867 and the British North America Act, led by John A. MacDonald and other white colonials, it was a moment that solidified the colonial stamp on Canada. It was a moment predicated through the building of the railway, something that was thought to be a unifying venture to the Canadian nation building project, unifying economy and geography. What wasn't looked at however was the manipulation through treaties and the claiming of Indigenous lands in order for that land to be made into railways. What also wasn't looked at historically was the number of Chinese settlers and migrants who were the majority builders of this railway, and how that connection has been historically erased and neglected amidst most Canadian historical narratives of nation building success.

As such, this book moves forward with an awareness of those important histories that have shaped and continue to shape our understandings and changing understandings of settler migration histories on Indigenous lands.

Canadian Migration & the White Supremacist State

The formation of the Canadian nation and state is one that is predicated on exclusion, based on the undesirable versus desirable immigrant and settler. And even the *who* was undesirable has changed over the course of centuries. In the 19th and early 20th century for example, certain groups of European settlers, including those from Ireland and others were deemed undesirable. In the mid 20th century, when immigrants from China came to Canada, the categories of European became less and less scrutinized as communities of racialized people began to migrate, settle, live, and work in Canada. It would be the focus on excluding and limiting the rights of Asian immigrants which became the focal point of Canadian nation state formation.

Even though the Canadian state forged the Immigration Act of 1869 Canada implemented the first immigration policy following Confederation. This Act ensured the safety of immigrants on their route to



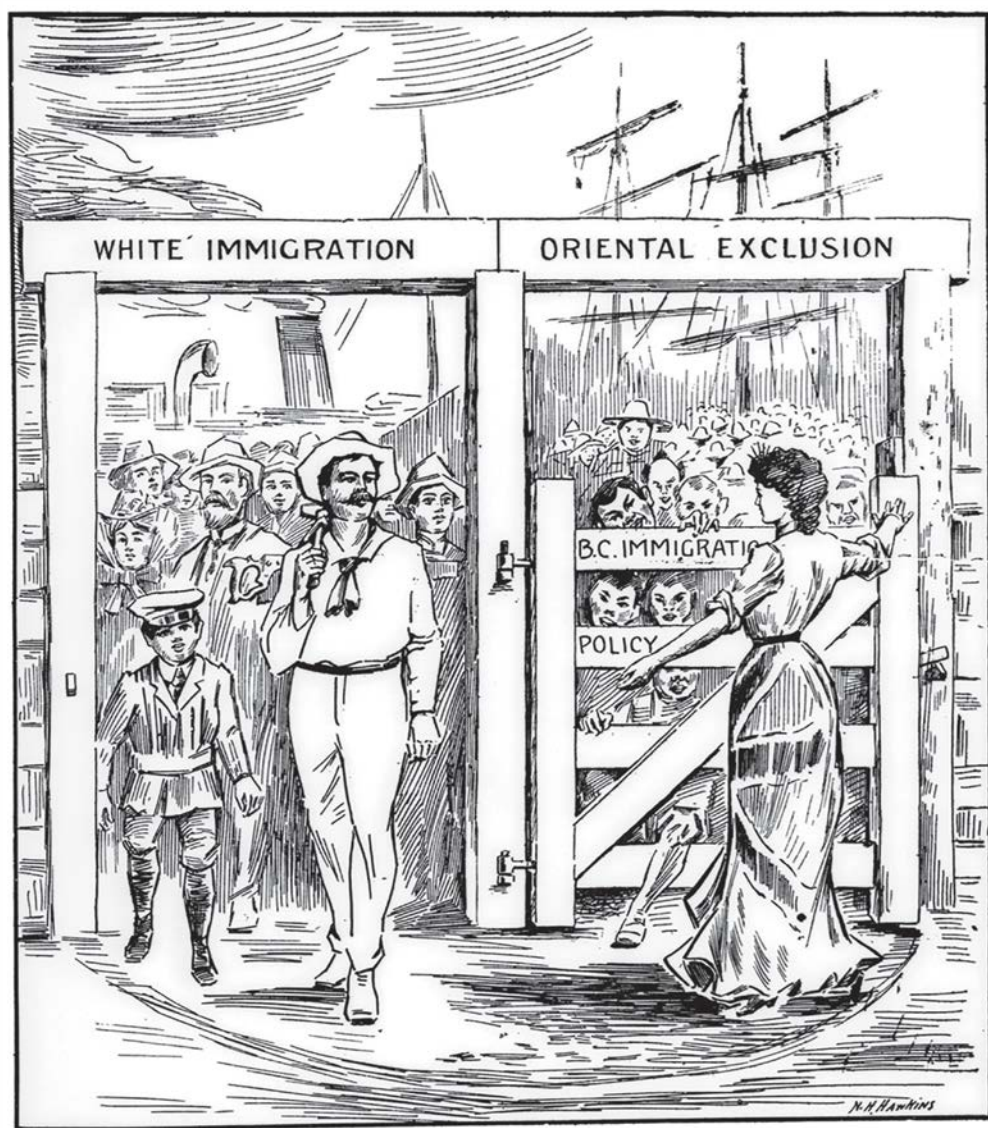
"Canada—The New Homeland" Immigration Poster

Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada MIKAN 2958967

Canada and ensured they were not taken advantage of upon arrival. This policy by the government was put in place to attract European descent immigrants in particular to the Prairie provinces and towards the west.

The switch from the undesirable immigrant being a very specific type of European settler in Canada to Canada becoming a specifically white supremacist state is not explicitly identifiable; however, the sentiments can be attributed to the late 19th century with the increase in Chinese immigration to Canada and more specifically British Columbia. According to historian Timothy J Stanley, the House of Commons debates led by Canada's first Prime Minister, John A. MacDonald (from 1867–1873; 1878–1891) indicates a significant marker on the White supremacist state:

Significantly, Macdonald is the only member of the House of Commons or of the Canadian Senate to speak of the “Aryan” nature of Canadian society. Indeed, the term is so unfamiliar in 1882, when he first used it, that the clerks recording the debate in the House of Commons spelled it “Arian” (Commons, Debates, 1882, vol. xii, p. 1477; see also Aryan/Arian, n.d). On this earlier occasion, he stated that he shared the general feeling in Canada and the United States “against a Mongolian or Chinese population in our country as permanent settlers” as the Chinese were “an alien race in every sense, that would not and could not be expected to assimilate with our Arian population.” However, despite their being undesirable, their labour was essential to completion of the railway: “At present it is simply a question of alternatives—either you must have this labor or you cannot have the railway” (Commons Debates, 1882, vol. xii, p. 1477). Macdonald also is the only member of the House of Commons or Senate to put forward the view that



THE SAME ACT WHICH EXCLUDES ORIENTALS SHOULD OPEN WIDE THE PORTALS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA TO WHITE IMMIGRATION.

“White Immigration & Oriental Exclusion” B.C. Saturday Sunset, The British Columbia Saturday Sunset Immigration, August 24, 1907

Courtesy of SFU Digitized Newspapers Library

the most extreme polygenist views, representing Chinese and Europeans as biologically different and likely meaning as separate species (Stanley 2016).

That the first Prime Minister of Canada led the foundational colonial ideologies of this country with notions of Aryanism and white supremacy sets the pace for the ways in which settlers like South Asians would continue to face state sanctioned racism and restrictions. It was within this historical precedence that formative restrictive measures were also created to hinder Chinese immigration to Canada. In 1885 for example, the Act to restrict and regulate Chinese immigration and the head tax system was introduced. This was mainly due to the fear from the white population that Chinese immigrant workers would take away their jobs and

establish settlement in Canada with their families as permanent citizens.

The head tax required current and future Chinese immigrants to pay money for migrating to Canada. Beginning at a demand to bring \$10 and increasing in increments over the years from \$50 in 1896, \$100 in 1901 and \$500 in 1903, the exorbitant charges would be the equivalent to roughly \$14,000 today. European settlers on the other hand, were not imposed this demand beyond a mere \$20.

What was created by the Canadian state then, through forced enactments of legislation in various forms was the undesirable migrant, a term perhaps best coined by Ali Kazimi (Kazimi 2011). It is within this contentiously political and racist moment of maintaining a ‘White Canada Forever’ that Sikh settlers, the first settlers from the South Asian region, began arriving in small, yet significant enough numbers to gain notice.

South Asian Settlement: Disruption, Contestation and Resiliency

Histories of South Asian Canadian settlement to Canada have been written in many meaningful, powerful and nuanced ways.¹ They each have provided nuance of context, as it relates to Empire, the Sikh Empire, the colonial Punjab context, etc. This chapter is certainly not an attempt to reinvent or repurpose the immense work that has been done by scholars, researchers, academics and community members. This chapter situates the ebbs and flows of South Asian settlement histories from 1897 to 1920 as part of a continuum of the work that has already been done.

At the turn of the 20th century, the Northwest area of Punjab was in a unique position in the trajectory of colonial rule under the British Empire. Having annexed Punjab in 1849 soon after the internal upheaval following the death of its Sikh ruler, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the British Empire seized on the opportunity to incorporate Sikh soldiers into their army (Grewal 1998). Further, because many Sikh soldiers played a pivotal role in allying with the British and quelling rebellion in the First War of Indian Independence in 1857, the British rewarded many Sikhs in the military ranks.

South Asian men who arrived in Canada were physically sturdy and culturally an enterprising group of individuals, striking away from their homeland in

search of opportunity and decent wages to support themselves and their families back home. When they arrived on British Columbia’s West coast in the early years between 1903 and 1906, for the most part they found their new home welcoming and inclusive of the rights afforded to them as British subjects in Canada. Until 1906 South Asian immigrants received almost no government or press notice and there were no immigration laws or regulations that impeded or affected their entry to Canada in these first years. However, many of the initial freedoms they enjoyed would soon be revoked.

From 1904 to the 1940s, 95% of all South Asian immigrants to Canada were Sikhs from the Punjab region of India. Sikhs in particular have traditionally been extremely resourceful, independent and undaunted by the idea of taking risks to better their situation. This character, along with previous British army experience in the colonies made international migration to British Canada a natural movement. Coming from a largely agrarian background and farming tradition in the Punjab also lent itself to adaptation of the Pacific Northwest working environment.

The first Sikh Punjabi immigrants to Canada arrived in the summer of 1903, when five Sikh men landed in Victoria and another five Sikh men landed in Vancouver. Altogether about thirty men came to Canada between 1903 and 1904.

South Asian Immigration to Canada, 1904–1907

1904–05	45
1905–06	387
1906–07	2,124
1907–08	2,623
Total	5,179 ²

Almost all the men who arrived in British Columbia worked in labour industries including forestry, fishing, and railway. Since the Canadian government was preoccupied with restricting Chinese and Japanese

immigration at the time, South Asians were quite easily able to find employment. On average, these men earned from \$1 to \$1.25 a day, but this was less than the pay received by workers of European descent. Some socially conscious employers, however, did pay their South Asian workers up to \$1.50 to \$2.00 a day.

Since wages were so low South Asian men lived together within the mill sites — often between twenty to fifty men living under the same roof in homes that were commonly referred to as bunkhouses. To find forestry related work, many men would travel to and from cities across BC including Abbotsford, Golden, Paldi, Youbou, Honeymoon Bay, New Westminster, the Cowichan Valley, Prince George, Terrace etc.

Along the years as Indian migration into British Columbia increased, so did overt racial tensions which had for the early years remained nominal. In 1906 after some 700 South Asians had arrived, the Canadian government suddenly started to take notice. Furthermore, because some employers preferred to hire Punjabis due to their work ethic at lower pay, many Europeans resented their presence in Canada. A great deal of racial tension and strife ensued from 1906 onwards as South Asians were laid off from work, were barred from entering public facilities, evicted from their homes, physically abused by the police, individuals, and publicly scrutinized by the local press and media.

The formation of racist and exclusionary groups in the early 20th century such as the Asiatic Exclusion League³ produced discrimination and mistreatment of the South Asian, Chinese, and Japanese communities. The 1907 riots, beginning at then City Hall on Main Street and converging to Pender Street where Chinatown was, led by the Asiatic Exclusion League is demonstrative of the challenges these immigrant communities faced as their homes, businesses, and livelihoods in general were meaninglessly destroyed. So too, is it important to acknowledge that white supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan were a prominent feature in British Columbia. In the Fraser Valley context for example, a newspaper clipping from the *Abbotsford and Matsqui News* titled “Ku Klux Klan Starts Organization in Abbotsford” sheds light on a significant moment in history where a lumber baron family member signed up to become the first member of Abbotsford’s local chapter. These histories are not

in silo from larger histories of white supremacy across the North American subcontinent, but in tandem with ongoing mechanisms to assert white supremacy.⁴

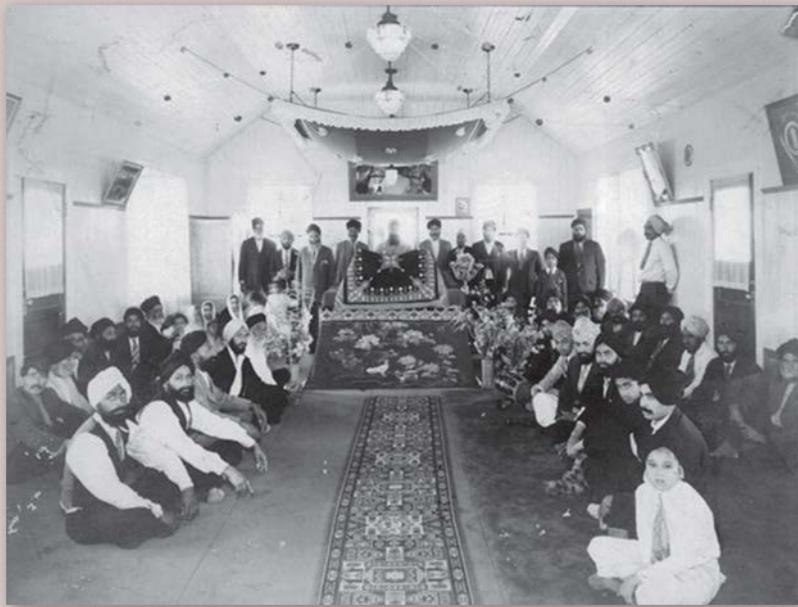
Within this backdrop in order to hinder South Asian migration to Canada, the government implemented the infamous “continuous journey” regulation on January 8, 1908, which decreed that migrants had to arrive in a continuous journey at a Canadian port from his or her country of origin.

Another significant regulation demanded that all incoming migrants from Asia must have in their possession a sum of \$200.00, which was an inconceivably large amount of money. In comparison, European migrants were only required to have \$20.00 in their possession.

Troubles in Canada were further exasperated by the lack of family units for men from Asia. Canadian regulations at the time restricted Punjabi women and children under the age of eighteen from entering Canada, and such was the case that from 1904 and 1920, only nine Punjabi women migrated to British Columbia. The majority of men were left alone, without their wives and families they lived amongst themselves in compact lodgings.

In March 1907, British Columbia Premier William Bowser introduced a bill to disenfranchise all natives of India not of Anglo-Saxon parents. In April 1907 South Asians were denied the vote in Vancouver by changes to the Municipality Incorporation Act. The federal vote was denied by default as one had to be on the provincial voter’s list to vote federally. South Asians would be barred from the political process in Canada for the next 40 years until 1947 when the vote was finally reinstated after much struggle.

Many in the South Asian community protested the discriminatory treatment they faced. For example, in November 1909, Teja Singh and Hari Singh presented their case on the restrictions of South Asian migration while they were in England. Others, such as Gurun Ditt Kumar, tried to forge a unified South Asian identity through the newspaper, *Swadesh Sevak*, which was eventually censored. Bhag Singh, the President of the Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver, went to India to pressure the British government to take action. Even the average South Asian community member took to the streets in order to publicly protest their untenable conditions



Gur Sikh Temple, Abbotsford. Date Unknown.

Courtesy of Naginder Singh Sidhu Family

and by sending petitions to the Canadian, British and Indian governments.

Despite the intense discrimination felt by South Asians in Canada, the community still forged on as they began to solidify their permanent presence through the creation of the Khalsa Diwan Society. The Khalsa Diwan Society was founded on July 22, 1906 and registered on March 13, 1909. Incorporated under the name “The Khalsa Diwan Society,” the first Canadian Gurdwara (meaning the doorway to the guru) was built in 1908 at 1866 West 2nd Avenue. This gurdwara was the very first in all of North America and the Society itself being the oldest South Asian Society to date in the Americas. The Vancouver Gurdwara was built through the generous spirit of the South Asians living in British Columbia at the time who each donated a portion of their wages to its construction. By 1920, gurdwaras existed in Vancouver, Abbotsford, Victoria, Paldi, New Westminster, Nanaimo, Golden, and Fraser Mills.

During times of stress, success, challenges or community discourse the Khalsa Diwan Society Gurdwara was a critical site. This was the site that housed and gave sustenance to the first migrants because no one else would provide them housing or access to basic necessities. It provided a place of communal consciousness, camaraderie, and even practical help by providing food and housing to new arrivals. The Gurdwara became a

site for sharing of concerns within the community, of rhetorical speeches and poetry, and for strategizing on how to overcome the racism they faced as a community. It was a communal space shared by Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims alike but also a radical space where ghadarites would read aloud anti colonial poetry, and where communities would come together to decide on how to combat hate and bigotry. Indeed, Gurdwaras were in their historical foundations in British Columbia “the spaces from which they responded to the injustices of British colonialism and anti-Indian racism and forged their dreams of liberation” (Sohi 2014).

State Separation of South Asian Families: Fight and Pain

To get immigration restrictions eased for Punjabi women and children lifted⁵, the Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver and many of its management and community members worked tirelessly to send delegations to Ottawa, sought support from the British Empire, and pursued legal help from local Vancouver lawyers. But these well organized campaigns and social movements did not enact or result in meaningful changes. The Canadian Government’s method to hinder immigration was effective as the Immigration Act (1906) that was overhauled including the Continuous Journey regulation. The amended Act now gave sweeping powers to the government to exclude people explicitly on the basis of race. The Immigration Act of 1910 for example, included a provision stating that any immigration deemed unsuitable to the “climate or requirements of Canada” would be denied entry (Timlin 1960). This sort of language legitimized exclusion based on stereotyping and coupled with a demand that Asian immigrants bring with them a minimum of \$200 dollars upon arrival, was specifically targeted at hindering Asian immigrants — namely South Asians, Chinese, and Japanese immigrants.

The purposeful and state designed separation of South Asian women from joining the men working and residing in BC had tremendous social impact. As an example of one story that relays this pain in separation, Kartar Kaur Gill would write letters to her husband Indar Singh Gill. The couple were separated for decades while he built his life in Canada. Kartar Kaur wrote in her letters:

- July 14, 1937: *You can understand how my soul has become lonesome without you. I hope, my Sardarji that you would not worry. By God's grace we shall meet again. We must have committed a grave sin that we are still apart, my Sardarji if I had known, I would have never let you go.*
- Letter from Kartar Kaur Gill in India to her husband Indar Singh Gill in Abbotsford estimated in 1942: *What should I write about you returning home, I don't understand anything, you always leave me with false hope. Twelve days are toilsome enough and it has been twelve years now.*
- Letter from Kartar Kaur Gill in India to her husband Indar Singh Gill in Abbotsford, 1946: *The ladies sing songs taunting me about bearing this 20 yearlong separation. I write this in agony as what do I live for, I have not seen you in years. You gave me the hope that you will come back in five years, those five years are long gone. We are alive yet separated. If it is in God's wish he will unite us, else it is what it is. I need you in my life, I don't need anything else.*

The state sanctioned exclusion of South Asian, Japanese and Chinese, was purposefully constructed, by design, and that too often in conflict with itself, whereby:

Producing a racialized nation can take place not only through practices of exclusion, but also through practices of inclusion. The arguments to include female migrants from China, Japan, and India were also located within a project of constructing whiteness. Tasked with the maintenance of racial boundaries, the inclusion of Asian women within the body politic seemingly offered the assurance that white women would continue to reproduce the racialized nation (Dua 2007).

The state policy of exclusion and inclusion then, according to Dr. Dua, was a fluid manipulation that continued to centre the need to preserve whiteness. The Canadian state wanted to create boundaries and barriers to immigration by Asian settlers; however, at the same time, they wanted Asian women to reunite with families in order to prevent white women bearing children with Asian men. Thus, the boundaries by which federal and provincial powers attempted to hinder migration was navigated through the ways in which the state wanted to maintain white supremacy (ie. fear of miscegenation). What gets lost of course in these conversations led through or centring whiteness is the humanity of the stories of women like Kartar Kaur and

Indar Singh. The humanity and real lived experiences of family and loss were impacted in the process of racist Canadian state formations.

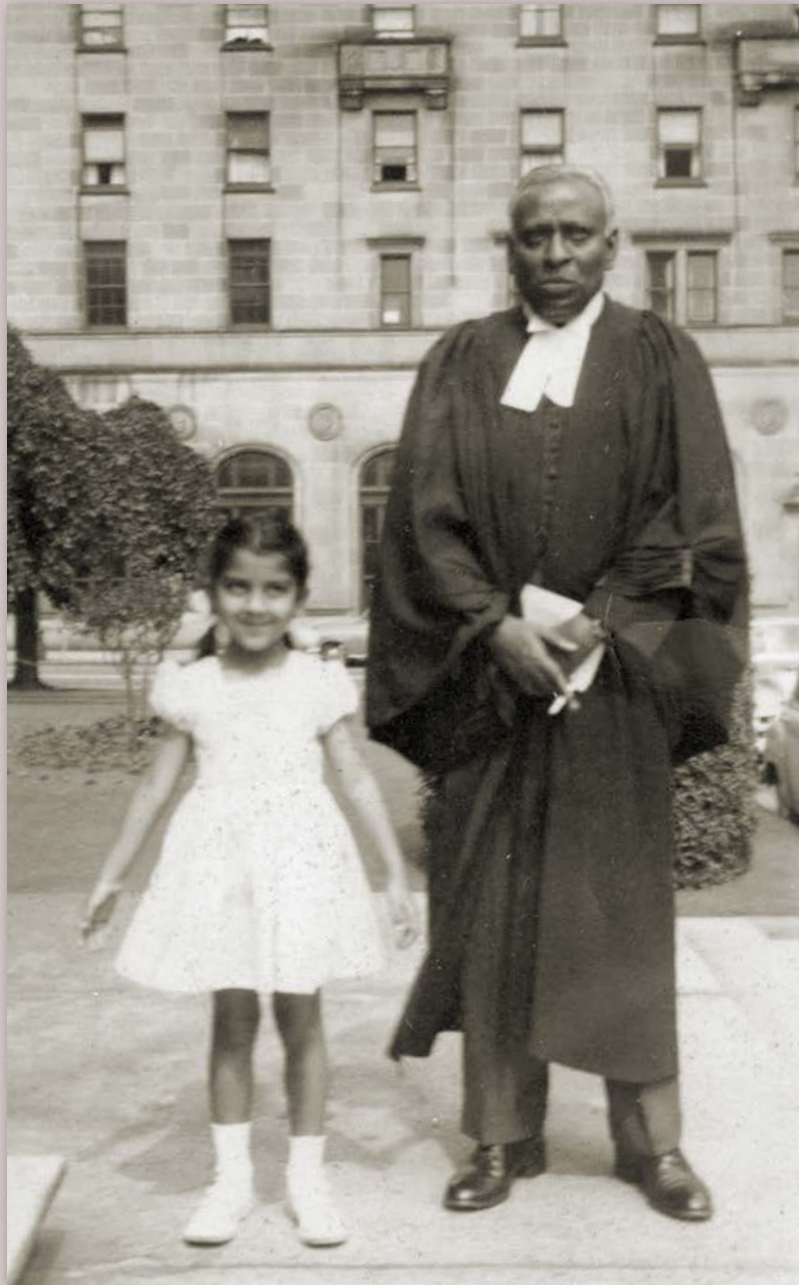
To get the immigration ban on Punjabi women and children lifted, the Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver and many of its management and community members worked tirelessly to send delegations to Ottawa, sought support from the British Empire, and pursued legal help from local Vancouver lawyers. But these pleas would usually fall on deaf ears and any changes were laboriously slow. The Canadian Government's methods to hinder immigration was effective as the Immigration Act that was overhauled including the Continuous Journey regulation. The amended Act now gave sweeping powers to the government to exclude people explicitly on the basis of race.

On July 30th 1918, the Canadian Government received word from the British Ministry of Information that, "Indians already permanently domiciled in other British countries would be allowed to bring in their wives and minor children."⁶ Under these new rules, the first South Asian women, spouses and partners to many of the men already in the country, began arriving. In the year 1912, the first Punjabi Sikh child was also born.

During the critical period of South Asian migration history, in the early 1900's while the community continued to face legal and social forms of discrimination in British Columbia, all within the colonial frame of a "White Man's Province," there were many figures in the community who attempted to better the plight of their fellow South Asians. These brief snapshots capture the stories of those figures:

Taraknath Das: The Hindustani Association was founded in Vancouver by Taraknath Das, a Bengali nationalist in 1907. The Hindustani Association at first was devoted to improving the lives of Indians in Canada, but later it turned to overthrowing British Rule in India as part of the Ghadar movement (Bose 2020).

Guran Ditt Kumar: Guran Ditt migrated to Canada in 1907. In 1910 he started publishing a monthly paper in Gurmukhi entitled *Swadeshi Sewak*, which was mailed to India for Sikhs in the Indian army to rise against colonial rule, until its prohibition in 1911 by the Indian Government. He was the secretary and chief spokesperson for the Hindustani Association of Vancouver.⁷



Dr. D.P. Pandia with daughter Aruna. Date Unknown.

Courtesy of the South Asian Studies Institute

Teja Singh: Teja Singh was a highly educated and accomplished individual, after finishing his MA in English, LLB, and working at Northern Indian Salt Revenue Services under the British. He attended University of Cambridge, Columbia University, and Harvard University. While at Columbia he delivered a lecture on India that caught the attention of Taraknath Das and Balwant Singh, who was another Vancouver based revolutionary, Ghadar Party member and the first granthi of the Khalsa Diwan Society Vancouver gurdwara. Thus, began his long association with Sikhs in British Columbia and California.

Gurdit Singh: Gurdit Singh was the central figure in the *Komagata Maru* incident. Gurdit Singh chartered *Komagata Maru* in 1914 to help Indian citizens immigrate to Canada. *Komagata Maru* was denied entry and was sent back to Kolkata, India where the British government suspected the passengers of inciting rebellions and went to arrest the leaders of the ship. Shots were fired and nineteen of the passengers were killed. Gurdit Singh escaped and lived in hiding until 1922 when Gandhi urged him to surrender. He was imprisoned for five years, after which he lived a long and politically active life.

Dr. Sundar Singh: Born in Amritsar Punjab in 1882, he received formal medical training in Britain and entered Canada through Halifax in March 1909. He published several issues of the *Aryan* and the *Sansar* in English and Gurmukhi. He petitioned for immigration rights and changes to the laws and was a prominent spokesperson for Sikhs until 1916 when he disappeared from public view.

Mayo Singh Manhas: Mayo Singh was the founder of Paldi, a small town in the Cowichan Valley, based on the name of his village of Paldi in India. Mayo Singh started a lumber mill on Vancouver Island, and the village grew around it, housing and employing many South Asian men and their families.

Kapoor Singh Siddoo: Kapoor Singh embodied the enterprising spirit of all immigrants by partnering with Mayo Singh on Vancouver Island in building a lumber empire. He was also prominent in community efforts, fighting for full citizenship rights and for changes in immigration regulations in favour of immigrants from India.

Mohinder Kaur (“Bossni”) Thandi and Sundar Singh

Thandi: Sundar Singh and his wife Mohinder Kaur, were affectionately known as Taya ji and Tayi ji among the community. Sundar Singh Thandi was instrumental in the construction of the Gur Sikh Temple, from purchasing the land to inspiring the Sikh community to donate money or give in-kind for the construction of the Gurudwara.⁸ Mohinder Kaur held the political title of Treasurer within the Abbotsford Khalsa Diwan Society gurdwara, serving as one its longest serving treasurers. This is significant because very few, if no women during this time of the mid-20th century ventured outward into the political scope of the Gurdwaras. Mohinder Kaur had the foresight, independence, and power to do so.

Thakur Singh Banga: Thakur Singh Banga played a significant role in the construction of the Gur Sikh Temple, Abbotsford, whereby he along with other

men carried lumber on their backs to the Gur Sikh Temple site after their shifts at the mill at Mill Lake. For the rest of his life, he continued to donate lumber, money, and his time to maintain the Gur Sikh Temple in good condition.⁹

Husain Rahim: Husain Rahim was at the epicentre of many of the early 20th century South Asian activist movements including the Panama Maru case (Claxton et al 2021), the *Komagata Maru* and the ongoing battles against restrictive Canadian and BC Provincial immigration policies. Rahim, born in 1865, belonged to a Gujarati merchant caste community that had spread from Gujarat to Bombay (the centre of the Indian cotton trade), and to South and East Africa and the Far East.¹⁰

Dr. D.P. Pandia: Born in Madras, Dr. Pandia was a lawyer who was asked to support the South Asian community in BC after members of the community became impressed with a lecture he gave at the Eaton Centre in Victoria, BC in 1939 (Vig 2015). It was Kartar Singh (Editor of *Khalsa Herald* and *Sansar*) and Kapoor Singh Siddoo who invited Dr. Pandia to stay and help them in their struggle in British Columbia to gain immigration and franchise rights. Dr. Pandia would also be instrumental in supporting the Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver and the South Asian community gaining the right to the vote in 1947.

Ghadar: Anti-Colonial Rebellion in the Diaspora

In the early 20th century, Indian migrants living in British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest in the United States faced constant racism and discrimination. Meanwhile in India, these same people had been dealing with over one hundred years of racism and abuse because of British colonialism. Thus, in June 1913 a meeting of minds gathered under the guidance of Sohan Singh Bhakna and Lala Har Dayal to form the Hindu Association of the Pacific Coast which would later be known as the Ghadar (mutiny) Party. The aim of this Party was very simple—to advocate for an independent India. This was done by also challenging and fighting colonial powers that restricted immigration of Indian immigrants to Canada/the US and through protesting the overall treatment of Indians as ‘second class citizens.’ Ghadarites believed their freedom from discrimination would only come once Britain no longer had control of India.

The Ghadar Party engaged in its activism through

the power of the press, and the power of oral speeches. In that vein, the main newspaper for the party was the *Ghadar* newspaper. In its inaugural issue on November 1, 1913, the *Ghadar* printed some of the most powerful words of propaganda ever seen through this advertisement which summarized the nature of this revolutionary movement:

Pay: Death

Prize: Martyrdom

Pension: Liberty

Field of Battle: India

The Ghadar Party also used the art of poetry. This can be seen in its greatest form through the *Ghadar Di Gunj* (Echoes of Mutiny), which was an anthology of Ghadar Party poetry which published a first run of 12,000 copies. One very short, but powerful example of a poem in this anthology reads:

*No Pandits or Mullahs do we need,
No prayers or litanies we need recite,
These will only scuttle our boat.
Draw the sword, it's time to fight.*

Many Ghadarites had local lower mainland, Vancouver, and Abbotsford connections as they were known to give powerful oral speeches at the gurdwaras. Once again, the gurdwaras across BC would become critical spaces and sites for these conversations around anti colonialism and rights to take place.

South Asian migrants in the early 20th century certainly faced their moments of angst, discrimination, and struggle; however, it is just as important to recognize the immense successes. By 1923, 102 South Asians owned: logging camps, lumber companies, shingle factories, grocery stores, fuel dealerships and farms.

The business-owning and successful labour class working South Asians considered themselves Canadian on all aspects in terms of their contribution to building the country; however, without the right to vote, they still saw themselves as “second class citizens.” The 1920 Dominion Franchise Bill which denied the federal vote to anyone barred from the provincial vote on the account of race was especially shocking to some in attendance at the 1921 Imperial Conference. During this Conference, a resolution was passed that specifically granted South Asians in the Dominions the right to

vote. Clearly, the Imperial conversations were not being transferred to its Dominions.

Whereas some politicians such as Liberal MP S.W. Jacobs supported the South Asian vote, others such as MP MacBride countered with aggressive Anti-Asian sentiment, declaring:

...we in British Columbia want no more Hindus... We have on the coast of British Columbia Chinamen and Japs running our stores. They are running white people out. We have the Greeks running our hotels and we have the Jews running our second-hand stores, and now some people want to bring in the Hindus to run our mills...If this country wants to cast British Columbia adrift let her cast it adrift before any Orientals come in. If they do, we white people out on the Pacific will prevent any more Orientals coming to British Columbia.

In the end, and by the close of the 1920's, the British Columbia government reaffirmed its standby maintaining racial restrictions in the Provincial Elections Act of 1924, which disenfranchised all Asians except Japanese who had fought in World War I. The fight for the right to the vote was a critical moment in South Asian history in BC, one with parallels to other community histories including Chinese and Japanese and wouldn't be until 1947 when this right would be granted to Asian communities in British Columbia.

Lightning Rod Moments and Pathways To Change: *Komagata Maru*¹¹

The story of the *Komagata Maru* (herein referred to as 'KGM') is one of the better-known stories and perhaps the one known narrative that attaches itself to the public or popular understanding of South Asian migration and history in BC. The intersections of the KGM story, a story of law, protest, empire, contestation, resistance and expectations intersects with the role of South Asians in WWI. This moment is best told as a timeline of moments, as so many scholars, researchers and community story tellers have devoted their life to understanding the multifaceted nature of the history of the *Komagata Maru*.

APRIL 1914

The *Komagata Maru* (Guru Nanak Jahaz) departs Hong Kong for Vancouver to challenge the

"continuous journey" clause. The continuous journey regulation, as described earlier in this chapter, was a Federal government attempt to curb settlement and migration of settlers from India, and done so by halting any CPR steamships that would have offered a direct passage from India to the Port of Vancouver.

APRIL 4, 1914

Gurdit Singh a successful railway labour contractor and rubber plantation owner in Malaysia, Maru charts the *Komagata Maru* and starts to sell tickets to Indians residing temporarily in Hong Kong who want to immigrate to Canada. The journey also included two women and four children in total although very little is known beyond the fact the one woman was the spouse of a resident doctor on board the ship. Bhagwan Singh Gyane, a well-known Ghadarite also stepped aboard the ship while it was docked in Hong Kong to make a passionate anti-colonial speech. From this point onwards, Gurdit Singh sets sail from Hong Kong with 165 passengers, picking up 111 more in Shanghai, 86 in Moji and the final 14 in Yokohama, Japan.

MAY 23, 1914

The *Komagata Maru* arrives in Vancouver at Burrard Inlet with 376 passengers, mostly Sikhs. The ship is secured by the militia and forced to stay in the harbor while 22 returning immigrants are allowed to come on shore. The other passengers are forced to stay on board, and they mount a legal challenge with support from Indians living in BC.

In a letter sent to Immigration agent Malcolm Reid, Gurdit Singh writes, "I hereby give notice that if you don't let me go ashore you will be held responsible for the damage which I have to suffer. You know that I'm a merchant, and that there is no law to prevent the merchants to land. I have to sell my coal and have to arrange for cargo from here. I have to buy necessary provisions for the steamer. You can detain the passengers, not me."

Singh's letter spoke the truth but it was ignored when Reid explained to his superiors the dangers of allowing Singh to land. Malcom Reid, Vancouver's Dominion Immigration Agent does not allow any one including Singh's lawyer Edward Bird on board. Reid gains the support of everyone including the Prime Minister Robert Borden on his actions. Reid also increases security having the surrounding area patrolled by ex-cops and militias wielding rifles.

JUNE 9, 1914

Since Singh could not sell his coal or cargo, Husain Rahim, head of the shore committee and other members raise \$20,000 required to pay the remaining balance on the ship to the Japanese owners. By doing so they prevented the ship from being recalled by its owners, which would have solved the government's problem of turning away the ship.

JUNE 6, 1914

The passengers' lawyer J.E. Bird argues in front a judge that the immigrants' civil rights were being denied, as cited in the *Magna Carta*. Bird also tries to argue that as citizens of the empire leaving from Hong Kong they are also "natives" of Hong Kong thus they had travelled on a continuous journey. This was ultimately denied due to it being overruled by the BNA act, which gave Canada the right to determine its immigrants. During this time those on the ship were virtually being starved and deprived of water, due to the government manipulating when supplies arrived on board. An account by Gurdit Singh explains how the lack of supplies was resulting in the suffering of the children "One day a child... named Fouja Singh...fainted due to thirst. His mother began to weep. It was a heart-rending scene; I hastened to the cabin of the captain...and brought a bottle of beer. As soon as a few spoons of it were put into his mouth, the child began to regain his senses."

JULY 19, 1914

Several days after the ruling, the *Komagata Maru* is seized from the Japanese crew by the immigrants. In response the city sends out the tugboat *Sea Lion* with 150 policemen on board along with Reid, Hopkinson and Stevens. The policemen face strong opposition from the army trained immigrants and are forced back after sustaining injuries and damage from projectiles thrown at them. In response to this the Prime Minister calls for the HMCS *Rainbow* to control the situation. When faced with the intimidating confrontation of *The Rainbow* the passengers of the *Komagata Maru* are steadfast in their resolve. Gurdit Singh later writes: "It was agreed that it was an impossibility to fight and win against such fearful odds...The warship was preparing for action and on the other hand we were preparing for death. On behalf of the Government the commander sent the message, 'Leave our shores, you uninvited Indians, or we fire.' Our reply to this command was that if

Canada will allow us to provision the ship we will go, otherwise, Fire away. We prefer death here than on the high seas."

JULY 23, 1914

The real threat posed by half of the Canadian Navy against the *Komagata Maru*, forces Singh to accept the denial of entry into Canada. But before they leave the members of the Shore Committee are finally able to go onboard and meet the passengers. They find that the mood on board is defiant. Vancouver resident G.S Bilga later recounted in an interview "Their point [was] this: "if we do go back, where I am going to? What are we going to do? We have nothing left. If we go back to India, we know the Indian government will not give us any assistance at all. They might arrest us and put us in jail. So why not we die here, instead of going back to die there?" We explained to them that we are not happy that you are going back, but our hands are tied. We don't have any resources; don't have any power to fight with. So the best way is for you people to go back." The *Komagata Maru* lifts anchor after 2 months in Vancouver and is coerced away from BC shores to the Pacific by the HMCS *Rainbow*.

SEPTEMBER 26, 1914

The *Komagata Maru* reaches the coast of India, at Budge Budge near Calcutta. British authorities are convinced the ship is carrying Ghadarite nationalists and arrange for the passengers to take a special train back to Punjab, where it would be decided who would be detained or not. The majority of passengers do not agree to get on the train instead choosing to disembark on foot. The procession is intercepted by authorities and a riot ensues. During the riot Gurdit Singh's son is captured and he is forced to go into hiding until 1921. In the end, up to 22 passengers are killed and nearly 24 passengers are injured with 28 of them escaping.

The Budge Budge conflict was one of the most serious to occur in India in several years. The army was found to have fired 177 shots alone. When news of the event reached Canada, it caused widespread anti-British sentiment. Gurdit Singh's recollection of the event underlines the shock and chaos the passengers of the *Komagata Maru* experienced when the conflict broke out, "I understood at once the meaning of this act...and to our horror we felt the police bullets hitting us. No warning of whatever nature war given for this unprovoked attack...three

or four of my men lifted me on their shoulders and carried me to safety. I protested...but they replied, 'Alive, you will tell the world the sad story of the *Komagata Maru*.'

OCTOBER 21, 1914

Bhai Mewa Singh came to Canada in 1906, a time when thousands of new Punjabi Sikh immigrants were coming to Canada looking for greener pastures and a better life. Bhai Mewa Singh arrived in Canada at a time when racism against non-Caucasian immigrants was at its peak. Despite these unsavory experiences of racism and hostility, Bhai Mewa Singh decided to stay in Canada. For Bhai Mewa Singh the turning point came on September 15th, 1914, when he witnessed a man named Bela Singh (who worked as an informant for Hopkinson) enter the Gurdwara on West Second Avenue, and shoot two devout Sikhs: Bhai Bhag Singh and Bhai Battan Singh. Soon after this Bhai Mewa Singh started receiving threats from Inspector Hopkinson and his South Asian Indian agents. He was threatened that if he didn't give testimony in favour of Bela Singh that he would also be murdered just like Bhai Bhag Singh and Bhai Battan Singh. However, Bhai Mewa Singh didn't waver; he testified in court and spoke the truth. After this the threat was even more severe: the next time he is seen walking the streets of Vancouver he would be shot dead.

Hearing this threat infuriated Bhai Mewa Singh. He thought that not only were his countrymen being severely oppressed in Canada they were now being told that they didn't even have the right to speak the truth. It was then that Bhai Mewa Singh decided to die a death of a martyr rather than to live the life of an oppressed person.

Bhai Mewa Singh held Inspector Hopkinson responsible for the murder of the two Sikhs in the Gurdwara because the killer was working as a mole for him. Mr. Hopkinson was to appear in court on October 21, 1914 to testify in favour of the killer Bela Singh. Bhai Mewa Singh entered court on that same day and shot and killed Mr. Hopkinson. After shooting him Bhai Mewa Singh dropped his weapons and surrendered to the authorities. Bhai Mewa Singh was put on trial for the murder of Mr. Hopkinson. The presiding judge found him guilty, and he was sentenced to death by hanging.

JANUARY 11, 1915

Bhai Mewa Singh is hanged on January 11 in New Westminster in one of the quickest trials in Canadian history, without due process. He is given a ceremonial funeral as a Canadian Sikh martyr in New Westminster. On the morning of January 11, 1915, hundreds of South Asians wait outside the penitentiary to receive Bhai Mewa Singh's body for cremation. He is cremated at Fraser Mills where a large number of Sikh men work.

2016

A little over a hundred years later the Provincial and Federal apology and recognition of the *Komagata Maru* tragedy has been heartening for the South Asian Community in Canada. The work to eliminate racial injustices continues.

MAY, 2021

The City of Vancouver issued an official apology for the *Komagata Maru*, with the official proclamation stating:

A. THAT Council formally apologizes for the previous Council's injustices and their cruel effects on individuals and families impacted by the *Komagata Maru* incident.

B. THAT the City of Vancouver declare, by proclamation, that May 23rd shall be known as "*Komagata Maru* Remembrance Day" in Vancouver."

Yet globally, the challenge by South Asians, led by Baba Gurdit Singh, was very much a challenge to colonial and the very same global systems of power. In the same moment that the *Komagata Maru* ship was sent back, soldiers from India served as one of the largest (many of whom were Sikh soldiers) troops supporting the British Empire and for the commonwealth. And the same Indians, the same soldiers were not welcome in Canada despite having a passport that clearly indicated their status of empire. It is these questions on systems of empire and upholding white supremacy that the *Komagata Maru* represents.

Beyond the tragic moments and incident itself, what should be emphasized is that the *Komagata Maru* incident is one of the best examples in all of Canadian history, which shows this incident within 'national borders' and its connections to broader conversations

across the globe and the imperial history in which Canada is embedded.

What has received less attention within the many perspectives and viewpoints on the *Komagata Maru* itself has been the passionate writing by the charterer of the boat, Gurdit Singh. There is much speculation and stories about the motivations of the man behind the incident which had National and Global impact; however, his writing on the experience deserves due recognition. On racism in Canada in particular, Gurdit Singh writes in his autobiography *Voyage of the Komagata Maru or India's Slavery Abroad*:

But what about the Indians who are said to be British subjects protected by their benign government? What most grievously hurt them was that Indians living in Canada had sent for their wives and children who purchased tickets up to Hong Kong (as there was no direct steam ship service to Canada) and thence to Canada. When they were about to land the Canadian government stopped them with an order to return back to Hong Kong.

Pause for a moment to imagine the hearth-rending scene on the docks. Fathers had come to receive their children, husbands had come to receive their wives but the Canadian Government's brutal order stood between them. To sigh and shed tears in silence was all they could do.

Gurdit Singh's passionate plea and passage on Canada's role in denying access to people from India is a powerful way to end this first chapter, which looked at South Asian settlement to British Columbia until the 1920's. The years 1890s to 1920 were years of exploration, learning, community building, denial, racism and so much more. And once the South Asian community began to grow from the 1920s onward, it allowed for the solidarity and strength of the community to continue to be a powerful presence in the Province.

When War and Empire Collide: Contradictions and Service

The *Komagata Maru* incident perhaps seems insignificant and can become lost when set against global histories and the impacts of the first World War, which began in the same year, 1914.

However, the *Komagata Maru* story is not adjacent to global histories, but rather, a cog in the wheel of

imperial and global histories aimed at creating boundaries and barriers based on race and exclusion.

Certainly, it is powerful to note the contradiction of boundaries based on exclusion when at the same moment the *Komagata Maru* ship was sent back to India, other ships from India were being sent to fight for the British in World War I. Indeed, one of the largest supporters of the British Empire during WWI included the combatants and soldiers as part of the British Indian Empire.

Many may know the macro stories of how soldiers from India served as one of the largest contingencies within the commonwealth and for the British Empire — but a lesser-known story, is the one of ten Canadian Sikh soldiers who served for Canada during a time when they were told they do not belong to the state, and are in fact, undesired and unwelcome. This chapter, in highlighting many contradictions of state sanctioned racism and denial is also a complicated space from the South Asian Canadian experience. For those Sikh soldiers in particular who decided to fight for Canada when Canada denied their people rights — it is a story and history worthy of sharing.

Canadian Sikh soldier stories are important for understanding the nature and range of the ten soldiers' roles in WWI. The fact that these ten Sikh soldiers even served for Canada in the 'Great War' needs to have historical light shed on. This chapter has revealed how South Asians, along with other Asian settlers not deemed white or Aryan were the undesirable as part of state sanctioned systems to exclude migration and settlement. They were excluded as part of Canadian nation building in order to preserve Anglo-Saxon whiteness, yet they were celebrated when they preserved world imperial power structures. These too are the tensions of war and racism.

Despite facing such immense and intense discrimination, soldiers such as Bukham Singh, Harnam Singh, Lashman Singh, John Baboo, etc., decided that they still wanted to serve for the country that refused to accept them as citizens in the form of having the right to vote. Stories like that of Hari Singh for example, who served in the 5th Bombay Cavalry Sindhars for three years in India. His Canadian military service included time with 75th Battalion and the 198th Battalion in 1917, and the 3rd Reserve Battalion

in 1918, before joining the Royal Canadian Dragoons. Hari Singh was the second of the four Canadian Sikh soldiers wounded at Vimy Ridge and was wounded in the back by an exploding shell at the front line at Vimy Ridge on April 1st, 1917. He was awarded a good conduct stripe in July 1917.

The story of Santa Goujer Singh is also unique. Born in Lahore, Punjab, in 1881, he enlisted in Montreal in January 1915 at the age of 32. Goujer Singh served for three years in the 32nd Punjab Rifles of the Indian Army and joined the 24th Battalion (the Quebec Regiment) sailing from Montreal to England on the S.S. *Cameronia* in May 1915. The Battalion arrived in Boulogne, France in September 1915 where a month later he became the first casualty of the ten Canadian Soldier Sikhs when he was killed in action early in the War, on October 19th, 1915, in the trenches near Kemmel, Belgium, just South of Ypres. At the time of his death, the Battalion working parties were in the front-line trenches day and night, under heavy Artillery bombardment. Goujer Singh's gravestone is in the La Laiterie Military Cemetery, near Kemmel. His grave is among those of 197 other Canadians, all from three Infantry Battalions, all buried together. Strangely, Goujer Singh's gravestone does not have the expected Canadian Maple Leaf, though his Canadian Battalion number is noted. The inscription is very unusual for a Canadian gravestone. The script is in the Gurmukhi language and reads: "God is one" and "Victory is to God." The gravestone itself, aligns with Christian last rite processes as Sikhs do not bury, but cremate. These too, reflect a lack of acknowledgement of the nuances of different non-Christian standards of last rite processes and rituals though the inscription on Goujer Singh's gravestone reflect his Sikh background.

Another soldier had specific ties to the Vancouver Sikh community was Waryam Singh. Waryam Singh, a farmer and labourer, belonged to the West 2nd Avenue Gurdwara in Vancouver. He was born in the Punjab in January 1883 and his family lived in Kapurthala. He enlisted in Barriesfield, Ontario in May 1915 and served in 59th and 38th Battalions (Eastern Ontario Regiment) where he served in Canada for 5 months, in Bermuda for 10 months, and England for 2 months before arriving in France in August 1916. When he wrote letters home from France to India in 1916, three of his letters

were intercepted by the censor of the Indian Army mails. His translated letters are at the British Library in London, England, along with thousands of letters from soldiers in the Indian Army. Two letters describe events during the Battle of the Somme.

In one of the letters to his father Wazir Singh in Kapurthala, India, in November 1916, Waryam wrote: "On 4th of November there was a big fight, and much hand to hand fighting took place and many prisoners were taken... When we took the trenches some of the enemy escaped and some were taken. The dead were countless. The bravery which we showed that day was the admiration of the British soldiers. After the fight they asked me how it was that I was so utterly regardless of danger."¹² Four months after his last intercepted letter home, his Battalion had moved north to take part in the capture of Vimy Ridge. There, in late April 1917, Waryam Singh was wounded in the shoulder. He remained on duty despite his wound, but then he also got "trench fever" and pneumonia and spent almost eight months in hospitals in France and England. He also underwent an operation on his shoulder because the wound had not healed, and a piece of shrapnel had to be removed. Waryam Singh was the third soldier to return to Canada. Waryam was discharged in Vancouver in March 1918, still with impaired functioning of his shoulder.

The stories of the ten Sikh soldiers who served in WWI for Canada may seem insignificant in the grandiose scale of the war experienced; however, set against an entire state machine that refused to acknowledge their humanity and existence, these stories weigh heavily on the overall South Asian Canadian experience.

This chapter highlighted how the Canadian White supremacist state created systems of inaccessibility for South Asians in the early 20th century. Despite those mechanics of in-access, the South Asian community, whether through forging communities or challenging legislations outright, continued to be players in a global scale. With World War I ending in 1918, the 1920s would be a time for continued resistance against racism, but also community building and solidarities.

Endnotes

1. See Kazimi (2011), Jagpal (1994), Bughnani et al (1985), Johnston (1988, 1995, 2005, 2011, 2013, 2014), Dua (2007), Sohi (2014), Ward (2002), Roy (2003).
2. See Buchignani et al (1985), where on page 7 this graph details the patters of migration and settlement from the South Asian community. Note, in the official Canadian data records, South Asian is referred to as 'Hindoo' immigration.
3. The Asiatic Exclusion league (AEL) began in 1905 as the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League in California, but as the movement spread along the Pacific Northwest, it became the AEL to include South Asians, Chinese, Japanese, all those of Asian descent in December 1907. See Lake, M., & Reynolds, H. (2008), *Drawing the global colour line: White men's countries and the question of racial equality*, Melbourne Univ. Publishing.
4. "Ku Klux Klan Starts Organization in Abbotsford," *Abbotsford and Matsqui News*, December 3, 1925, page 5, Historical Digitization Newspaper by the University of the Fraser Valley: <https://asmn.arcabc.ca/islandora/object/ufv%3A1729>.
5. As noted in detail by Enakshi Dua in her article "Exclusion Through Inclusion: Female Asian migration in the making of Canada as a white settler state," Canadian state formation post 1867–1920s in particular were predicated on various policies of exclusion of Asian migrants predicated on protecting whiteness. This shifted in ways, forms, and preference, but the Khalsa Diwan Society early 20th century meeting minutes indicate an ongoing conversation around navigating these restrictive policies. See: www.sacda.ca/exhibits/km for the entire meeting minute collection.
6. See (Dis) *Enfranchisement 1907–1947: The Forty-Year Struggle for the Vote* www.sacda.ca/exhibits/km pages 14 in the section titled "1907 The Era of Disenfranchisement."
7. See: www.sacda.ca/exhibits/km
8. See: <https://canadiansikhheritage.ca/2017/10/31/sundar-singh-thandi/>
9. <https://canadiansikhheritage.ca/2017/10/26/thakur-singh-banga/>
10. See <http://www.sacda.ca/exhibits/km>
11. This timeline is based on an exhibit held at the Sikh Heritage Museum titled "Challenge Denied: Komagata Maru 100 Years Later 1914–2014": www.sacda.ca/exhibits/km
12. "Canadian Sikhs in WWI: A Forgotten Story," *Sikh Heritage Museum Exhibit*, 2016.

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Migration



Gurdit Singh (front row, left with his son) challenged Canada's exclusion laws by chartering the *Komagata Maru* in Hong Kong and bringing 376 of his compatriots to Vancouver.

(Courtesy: Vancouver Public Library, 6231. Frank Leonard photograph)

Footsteps in time

The Extraordinary Story of the *Komagata Maru*

Challenge to Canada's Immigration Colour Bar

John Price and Satwinder Kaur Bains

ABSTRACT

The historic reference to the Komagata Maru has been linked to Canadian and Indian national narratives, however its transnational impact was felt in the larger colonial context. The ship's perilous journey, carrying 376 passengers and a Japanese crew was fraught with challenges right from the start which an astute entrepreneur, Gurdit Singh sought to overcome. However, the long reach of Empire prevented any gainful conclusion to the long and weary voyageurs who fought a futile court battle and faced racist government officials bent on preventing their entry to Canada. While the ship was forcibly berthed at Burrard Inlet in Vancouver BC for two months, the Sikh community on shore rallied to provide all kinds of support by confronting the Govt and creating a wellspring of anti-colonial sentiment. After two long and difficult months at sea, the passengers were forcefully escorted out of the Inlet and returned to India to face the British Raj's planned seizure of the boat and capture of its passengers whom they saw as seditionists. The Komagata Maru journey brings to account the legislated racism, discrimination and colonial violence against those who considered themselves to be British subjects.

KEY WORDS

Indian migrants, Komagata Maru, colonial violence, transnational, legislated racism, social justice.

One hundred and seven years ago, Gurdit Singh Sirhali chartered the Japanese steamship *Komagata Maru* and brought 376 Indian passengers to Canada in a direct challenge to Canada's immigration colour bar.¹ The ship's forced departure from Vancouver harbour on July 23, 1914, ended an extraordinary two-month standoff between the passengers, determined to enter Canada, and a Canadian government determined to enforce its anti-Asian exclusion

policies, come what may. The ship's departure, however, was not the end of this saga—the passengers faced unimaginable hardships on the return voyage only to be met by the iron fist of British authorities upon their arrival in India.

The *Komagata Maru* story has tended to be inscribed in national narratives, both Canadian and Indian, but in this article we argue that the 1914 confrontation was a historical moment in which a heterogenous, diasporic

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movement for social justice became a wellspring for a transborder, anti-colonial upsurge. Entangled in the maw of virulent settler racism and the emerging British-American alliance for global white supremacy, the *Komagata Maru* saga would have profound repercussions that continue to be felt to this day.

Transnational Background

Pacific coast settlers on both sides of the US-Canada border share a long history of anti-Asian racism. British Columbia and California were centers of this anti-Asian agitation that would have both national and transnational effects. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act in the US and the 1885 head tax in Canada reflected how white supremacy had become integral to the fabric of politics in both countries. Canada, as a dominion of the British Empire, was also part of a transnational racial network that included other settler colonies such as Australia, New Zealand and Natal, where Gandhi cut his political teeth advocating for the colony's Indian population.² Substantial Indian migration to Canada and the United States began in the early 1900s.

In the wake of Japan's victory over Russia in 1905, anti-Asian movements accelerated, precipitating the decision by the San Francisco school board to segregate Japanese students.³ This was followed by anti-Asian riots in September 1907. These riots targeted the Japanese and Chinese communities in Vancouver (BC) and in Bellingham (WA) angry mobs drove Indian sawmill workers out of the town. In response, the Canadian government moved quickly to limit immigration from Japan and from India in response to public anti-Asian sentiment. With the help of the British ambassador in Tokyo, Canadian officials forced the Japanese government to accept immigration quotas. In respect to India, the jewel in the crown of the British empire, colonial officials advised the Canadian government to avoid introducing overtly racist restrictions that might fan the flames of anti-colonialism. Thus Canadian legislation against Indian immigration, introduced in 1908, came in the form of a 'continuous journey' regulation requiring all newcomers to travel on a direct sailing from their country of origin. Since no such tickets or routes were available from India to Canada this became the convenient subterfuge for racism. The reason why it was necessary for anyone to travel in such a manner

was never really provided but it allowed the government to construct a discourse of 'plausible denial' when faced with criticisms of racial discrimination from Indians turned away at Canadian ports.

US president Theodore Roosevelt followed these local events very closely. When Roosevelt learned that Canadian representatives in Japan had refused to include the American ambassador in negotiations with the Japanese to limit immigration, he realized the need for closer relations with the British Empire. Japan and Britain had signed a strategic pact in 1902, the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, leaving the US as a secondary power in the Pacific. Questions of race proved to be an important wedge against nascent Japanese imperialism. Roosevelt encouraged the Canadian government to press London to pursue a hemispheric accord to limit Asian immigration. He also sent the 'Great White Fleet' on a global tour starting in the Pacific in a flagrant display of gunboat diplomacy aimed at Japan. Thus were sown the racial seeds of British-American collaboration.

To South Asians aspiring to come to the Pacific coast as well as to those already there (since 1904) government policies and public sentiment made it clear that they were unwanted. As a consequence South Asian communities in Vancouver, Victoria, Seattle, Astoria and San Francisco became centres for social change as reformers and revolutionaries challenged exclusionary immigration regulations and other injustices including the denial of voting rights. Sundar Singh in Victoria; Bhag Singh, Taraknath Das, Teja Singh, and Husain Rahim in Vancouver; G.D. Kumar in Seattle; Lala Har Dayal at Berkeley and a host of other activists worked with the predominantly Sikh communities in the mill towns to build support for a political movement. Though small in numbers, white allies ranged from members of the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) or the Socialist Party of Canada, to members of the clergy and even imperial loyalists such as Isabella Ross Broad in Victoria who called for equality for all subjects of the Empire including Sikhs.

By 1908, the British Criminal Intelligence Office had begun to systematically monitor South Asian activities in the US and Canada. A number of Indian intellectuals and students had gone to the United States for further education. To some, the US appeared as a



Immigration agent and intelligence operative William C. Hopkinson (far right); immigration agent Malcolm Reid (3rd from right); and Conservative member of parliament H.H. Stevens (3rd from right) meet with reporters during *Komagata Maru* crisis

(Courtesy: Library and Archives Canada, PA 034017)

safe haven for anti-colonial agitation given that country's earlier war of independence against the British. However, British intelligence reports of the time pointed to what they saw as dangerous developments on the Pacific coast where anti-colonialists such as Taraknath Das were making contact with the largely Sikh, working-class communities in Vancouver and Seattle. A secret British intelligence paper concluded "continued friction between Indians and immigration authorities leads to much ill-feeling and unfortunately prepares the ground for disloyal agitation. The main danger lies in the fact that the Indians concerned are mostly Sikhs, many of whom have formerly served in the Indian army, and that on their return to India they are likely to sow the seeds of disaffection amongst the classes from which the Sikh regiments are recruited."⁴

The Canadian government employed William C. Hopkinson, who was born in India, as an immigration officer, interpreter, and agent charged with spying on Indian communities in British Columbia. He was subsequently also employed as an interpreter for the US department of immigration and began crossing the border regularly. In 1913 Hopkinson secretly travelled to London for discussions with the Criminal Intelligence Office and shortly afterwards the British Indian government, with the Canadian government's

agreement, began paying Hopkinson for "securing information in foreign territories."⁵ He became an important liaison with US commissioner general of immigration Anthony Caminetti. One of his first acts in this role was to secretly transmit a message that the British colonial office hoped the US would arrest Lala Har Dayal, a revolutionary anti-colonial activist in Berkeley.⁶ In the summer of 1913, with the concurrence of the first secretary of labour, William Wilson (founder of the United Mine Workers union), Caminetti moved to restrict Indian immigration by forcing all those arriving from Manila (then a US territory) to a second immigration examination.⁷ This move prompted widespread protest and Hopkinson reported on this resistance to Caminetti. In November 1913, Hopkinson moved to Oakland, California and the following spring travelled to Washington (DC) to meet with officials of the British embassy as well as with the Caminetti.

Hopkinson's move to California coincided with the formation of the revolutionary Hindustani Association of America, founded in Astoria in 1913. Better known by its journal name, *Gadar* (Mutiny), it called for the overthrow of British colonialism in India and quickly gained a small but dynamic audience.⁸ For a number of Indian expatriates, including Taraknath Das and Bhagwan Singh, it had become clear that the struggle

for justice in America was impossible without challenging British control of India. By the spring of 1914 the *Gadar* newspaper began to attract a substantial following with 5000 copies being distributed on the Pacific Coast as well as in India and the Punjabi diasporic communities in Manila, Yokohama, Hong Kong and Singapore. Declared a seditious publication it was banned in Canada and postal authorities began to intercept its parcels. Postal authorities later received word that sympathetic Chinese Canadians in Victoria and Vancouver, members of the Nationalist Party (Guomintang) of Sun Yat-Sen, were receiving and forwarding the *Gadar* in order to subvert postal scrutiny.⁹ This upsurge in revolutionary anti-colonialism generated closer collaboration among Canadian, American and British authorities determined to suppress the movement. It was at this precise moment that a Sikh businessman decided to challenge the colour bar—inextricably weaving together the politics of race and empire.

The Extraordinary Case of the *Komagata Maru*

In January 1914, Gurdit Singh, a businessman based in Singapore visited Hong Kong where he found many of his countrymen destitute and stranded because racially motivated immigration restrictions prevented them from going to Canada or the US. He resolved to break the immigration colour bar and chartered the Japanese steamship *Komagata Maru* to go to Canada in the hope of establishing a business-venture taking passengers from India to Canada.

The *Komagata Maru* left Hong Kong on Sunday, April 5 and stopped at Shanghai and then in Japan to collect more passengers. On board after departing Yokohama were a diverse group of 376 Indian passengers including Gurdit Singh and his young son, Balwant Singh. Bound by a determination to settle in Canada, the passenger's religious affiliation included 340 Sikhs, 24 Muslims and 12 Hindus. Two women were on board—Dr Raghunath Singh's wife (he was the medical officer on the ship), with their one son, and Kishan Kaur Tumowal with one daughter and one son.

Taking two months to cross the Pacific, the *Komagata Maru* entered Canadian waters off Vancouver Island on May 21 and proceeded to William Head quarantine station near Victoria. Aware that the ship might be prevented from docking, community activists accompanied

by the minister L.W. Hall tried to reach the vessel but immigration officials prevented them from doing so. The ship weighed anchor a few hours later and arrived in Vancouver on May 23. In an unprecedented move, the ship was not allowed to dock. This decision was part of a strategy to prevent any passengers from reaching land. Why this extraordinary treatment? Canadian officials, from prime minister Borden to Malcolm Reid, the Vancouver immigration agent and avid exclusionist were worried that if the passengers disembarked, they would have to detain them, immediately leading to a court challenge. Fearful that they might lose in the courts as they had in a previous case, they prevented the ship from docking even though the passengers were lined up on deck, smartly dressed with packed bags fully expecting to disembark and find work.

From the first moment it entered Vancouver harbor an armed launch constantly patrolled around the ship, holding the passengers as virtual prisoners without legal recourse and preventing supporters and lawyers from boarding the vessel. This was an unprecedented act in Canadian maritime history. Realizing they were faced with an extraordinary challenge, community supporters organized a Shore Committee to mobilize support for the passengers. Key figures included Husain Rahim, Bhag Singh Bhikiwind, Mitt Singh Pandori and Balwant Singh Khurdpur. J. Edward Bird was retained to act as legal counsel. From the US, the Yugantar Ashram in San Francisco, headquarters of Ghadar activity, sent a telegram of support to Gurdit Singh. Immigration officials intercepted the communication and interpreted it as evidence of sedition and conspiracy.

After a week of being stonewalled, the Shore Committee called a meeting of the Indo-Canadian community to support the cause of the *Komagata Maru* passengers. About 500 people attended including about 20 women and men of European decent. Husain Rahim chaired the meeting and explained that the immigration department was deliberately delaying the immigration process and the landing of Gurdit Singh in the hope that the charter would default on a payment of \$15,000 that was due in about 10 days. Failure to pay would result in the ship being ordered to return to Hong Kong. The priest of the Vancouver *gurdwara* (Sikh temple), Balwant Singh told the crowd that "Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand, had

all adopted measures to keep out Hindus, and now Canada was doing the same.” He reminded the crowd of Sikh battles of the past and urged them not to “submit to tyranny.” Over \$5,000 in cash was raised immediately and a further \$66,000 was pledged.

Extraordinarily lengthy on-board medical examinations were finally completed on June 1 and immigration inspectors began interviewing passengers in boards of inquiry. The process was excruciatingly slow with one passenger at a time taken off the ship to be interviewed on shore, with no decisions being rendered. Meanwhile, the passengers were unable to get off the boat and supplies of food and water were running out. Gurdit Singh realized that he and the ship were being subjected to extraordinary and unjust treatment and he refused to allow further boarding by Canadian officials. Instead he sent telegrams to Canada’s Governor-General and to King George V stating: “No provisions since four days. Reid refuses supply, charterer and passengers starving. Kept prisoners.” Canadian officials opened and read the private telegrams before they were sent. The passengers subsequently began a hunger strike to protest their conditions.

On June 6, the British monarch, King George V, actually received Gurdit Singh’s telegram and through his personal secretary inquired what was going on.¹⁰ This caused a flurry of telegrams with the Canadian government reporting to the British authorities: “Authorities reported only way to handle shipload without danger of escape or riot was to examine Hindus on ship at a short distance from shore and this is being done. They are supplied with food and water, were permitted to consult their solicitors, and arrangements made for charter to unload cargo and reload.”¹¹ The same day this report was sent, the interpreter and secret agent William Hopkinson reported he had ‘visited the boat again and found the passengers in a state of unrest for want of food’. King George V read only the Ottawa report and approved a reply to Gurdit Singh in which the British government unabashedly told him “The passengers on board *Komagata Maru* are supplied with food and water and have been permitted to consult solicitors.”¹²

The Shore Committee managed to raise \$11,000 cash and offered it to the ship’s owners toward the \$15,000 owed for the charter. The Japanese steamship company was interested and allowed more time to raise the

remaining funds. A few days later its fundraising had reached the \$18,000 mark and the Shore Committee became the formal charterer of the *Komagata Maru*. The on-shore support of the South Asian community was instrumental in stymying the Canadian government strategy to force a default on the charter. This was a major setback for the government. At the same time word of the standoff was spreading internationally and the British government began to receive telegrams from cities and villages across India protesting the treatment of the passengers.

On Sunday, June 21, the Shore Committee called a public meeting and over 500 people, including about 120 folks of European heritage, attended. Husain Rahim chaired the session and introduced his comrade in the Socialist Party of Canada, J. Edward Bird who was acting as counsel for the passengers. Bird gave a rousing speech explaining that immigration authorities wanted “to delay matters and delay matters and procrastinate and delay until such time as these people were starved back to their original port from whence, they sailed.”¹³ The authorities hoped to avoid court proceedings by keeping the passengers off shore. The “immigration officials” stated Bird, “have felt that they are little Czars and have proceeded as such, absolutely in the most autocratic manner ever known in Canada.” From the US, Taraknath Das wrote to Rahim around this time stating that in the US, he and others would not “leave any stone unturned” to ensure the passengers present their case in the courts: “To deny the right of justice will lead to the destruction of the British Empire.”¹⁴

Meanwhile the mayor of Vancouver, T.S. Baxter called a public meeting to demonstrate support for immigration officials. Endorsed by Vancouver newspapers, a large crowd attended the Tuesday evening meeting and Conservative member of parliament H.H. Stevens addressed the audience telling them “what we face in British Columbia and Canada today is this—whether or not the civilization which finds its highest exemplification in Anglo-Saxon British rule shall or shall not prevail in the Dominion of Canada.” Stevens’ extended speech was followed by former MP Ralph Smith who called on the crowd to support the immigration officials. There was, he said, no work for many White men and so newcomers were unwelcome. A resolution adopted at the end of the meeting declared



The HMS *Rainbow* forces the *Komagata Maru* from Vancouver Harbour, July 23, 1914

(Courtesy: Vancouver Public Library, 130. Canadian Photo Co.)

“the influx of Asiatics is detrimental...from the standpoint of citizenship, public morals and labour conditions.” The meeting called for support of immigration authorities and the enactment of “stringent legislation” to prevent such immigration in the future.

Stymied in its initial strategy and with H.H. Stevens invoking the threat of riots, the Canadian government recognized that they could no longer avoid a legal challenge. However, they still refused to allow the ship to dock and would only allow a single test case that would not proceed through a regular appeal process but would be expedited immediately to the Court of Appeal for a quick decision by a full bench of five justices. Finally, on June 29–30, the single case of one passenger, Munshi Singh, was argued in the Court of Appeal in Victoria over two days. J. Edward Bird and R. Cassidy argued on both anti-racist and technical grounds. A week later the judges released their decision upholding the discriminatory immigration laws.¹⁵ The Canadian government had adjusted the regulations after they lost a case the previous year, and there were no technical loopholes left. On the political level, the justices held that the Canadian government had every right to discriminate. As Justice McPhillips put it, “the Hindu race, as well as the Asiatic race in general, are in their conception of life and ideas of society fundamentally different to the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic races, and European races in general.” The judge further claimed that, “the germ of discontent that would be brought to this country within any considerable influx of people so different in ideas of family life and social organization — better

that peoples of non-assimilative — and by nature properly non-assimilative — race should not come to Canada but rather that they should remain of residence in their country of origin and there do their share as they have in the past in the preservation and development of the Empire” The justices had ruled and in so doing lay bare how far the law had strayed from any notion of justice, further proof of the Empire’s callous disregard for its Indian subjects as well as for all Asians.

On July 7, a day after the judgment was rendered, J. Edward Bird finally gained permission to board the ship and met Gurdit Singh to discuss the court’s ruling. The passengers remained in dire straits, with few provisions and little water. For ten days immigration officials tried to force departure but the passengers refused to leave without full provisioning of the ship, knowing that without provisions they would surely perish on the open seas. The shore committee also submitted claims for its huge commitments necessitated by the government’s stalling tactics. The passengers, who had taken direct control of the ship, refuse to depart. The delays infuriated H.H. Stevens and Malcolm Reid and they conspired with the Japanese captain, Yamamoto, to force their way onto the ship and force it to depart. In the early morning of July 19, the tug *Sea Lion* was boarded by immigration officials and 150 armed constables. The tug went alongside the *Komagata Maru* but the passengers took advantage of their location above the tug to rein coal and other objects down on the officials and police. Apparently shots were fired but no serious injuries occurred and

the officials had to call off their charge. Having being held like prisoners the passengers were in no mood to accommodate their jailers. This debacle prompted a flurry of telegrams to the prime minister with H.H. Stevens suggesting that warships be brought in to force the *Komagata Maru* out of the harbor. Borden agreed that drastic measures were necessary and that it was the government's intention to "enforce the law firmly and effectively but with no unnecessary violence." Borden ordered the HMS *Rainbow* to Vancouver harbor from Victoria, and authorized the mobilization of the militia to board the ship as its marine corps. At the same time he asked a cabinet minister, Martin Burrell, Minister of Agriculture visiting in the interior of the province, to proceed to Vancouver to take charge of the situation.

With the warship *Rainbow's* guns trained on the *Komagata Maru*, passengers and the Shore Committee negotiated with Burrell and immigration officials. A deal was reached by which the government would provide the food and resources necessary for the return voyage and in exchange the passengers returned the control of the ship to the Captain. Burrell further agreed that an inquiry would be held regarding the financial losses the Shore Committee had incurred in taking over the ship's charter. On July 22, supplies were put on board but members of the Vancouver Sikh community were still prevented from going on board. Finally, in the early hours of July 23, the *Komagata Maru* weighed anchor and left the harbor under armed escort by the HMS *Rainbow* as thousands of Vancouver residents watched. What lay in store for them was utterly unimaginable. The Governor General of Canada, Arthur the Duke of Connaught, cabled the Colonial Office, "It is thought here that political agitators or secret revolutionary societies financed the trip of the *Komagata Maru*," setting the stage for what lay ahead.¹⁶ While at sea, the British Empire went to war with Germany.

Three weeks after leaving Vancouver, the *Komagata Maru* arrived in Japan. On August 17, Sohan Singh Bhakna, a Gadar activist met the ship in port in Yokohama and conveyed a message to the passengers that the movement was actively proposing an ousting of the British from India. He proposed that returning Indian nationals should fight for this cause and placed some ammunition that was hidden on board. The

passengers were curious about his message but most of them were distant observers to this aspect of the unfolding drama on the ship. Nevertheless, as Canadian scholar Hugh Johnston put it, the *Komagata Maru* was a marked ship.

A day later, the Hong Kong colonial secretary issued instructions barring passengers from disembarking in Hong Kong. The ship was forced to move to the port of Kobe on August 18. Eighteen passengers disembarked at Yokohama and fifteen at Kobe, some to find an alternate route home and others to find work. On September 3 the ship set sail after lengthy negotiations to cover further costs of the voyage. Shortly thereafter, the British Indian government passed the Ingress to India Ordinance giving the Viceroy the power to arrest anyone entering India considered a threat to the safety of the nation state.

The *Komagata Maru* arrived in Singapore on September 13 but it was forced to anchor five kilometers from shore. Again, British officials prevented passengers from disembarking — even those who had lived in Singapore previous to their journey, which included Gurdit Singh. After five days being held offshore, the ship departed on the last leg in a long journey that had started with such promise. It steamed in unscathed through naval conflict zones in the Pacific — the German government hoped to sow dissension in the British government by supporting the Ghadar movement.

On September 26, the *Komagata Maru* arrived at the mouth of the Hooghly River where British officers forced it to drop anchor on the east bank about ninety kilometers downstream from Calcutta. The ship was quarantined while British and Punjabi police searched the ship and its passengers. Finding nothing, the ship proceeded towards Calcutta. The following day on September 27, the ship approached the industrial town of Budge Budge, about twenty-seven kilometers from Calcutta where it was forced to drop anchor. The commissioner for police in Calcutta, Sir Frederick Loch Halliday boarded the ship and told Gurdit Singh that the passengers would be sent by train to Punjab. Gurdit Singh refused this suggestion, as he was extremely suspicious of berthing on the wrong side of the river — direct trains going to Punjab boarded on the west side of the river at Howarah station. The officers treated Gurdit

Singh with hostility and threatened to kill all the passengers if they did not disembark. However, some passengers agreed to disembark and under threat of death the others followed suit and Gurdit Singh reluctantly left the ship with the passengers on the 29th of September.

On the afternoon of September 29, an entourage of passengers carrying the holy scriptures, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* on their head (as is customary), left the ship and were told that they could be forced to board the train on the platform of whose destination they knew nothing of. The passengers refused and asked permission to deliver the scriptures to the *Gurdwara* at Calcutta as it would be sacrilegious to carry the scriptures on the train and they refused to enter the train. While they waited on the platform for the request to be fulfilled, and seeing no resolution, the passengers decided to march to Calcutta and left the station with the scripture. However, after having marched for about four miles, they were stopped and convinced by a British official to return to the station and that he would listen to their grievances. Two hours later, at five pm, the passengers arrived back at the Budge Budge railway station only to face a contingent of armed police. They were told to wait on the grassy bank while the officers decided whether to put them on a train or back on the ship. No water was given to the thirsty and hot passengers and the soldiers mistreated them, pushing, hitting, and verbally abusing them.

At 7 pm, Superintendent J.H. Eastwood of the reserve police plunged into the passengers to capture Gurdit Singh, but he was overpowered by passengers determined to protect Gurdit Singh. Halliday ordered the troops to fire and they indiscriminately shot into the crowd of waiting passengers. Twenty died and many more were gravely injured. In the ensuing melee, many took refuge in the ditches around the station and some escaped under cover of darkness. British troops hunted down those in the vicinity of the station and jailed them. Gurdit Singh escaped by dressing like a Bengali and fleeing to the other side of the river on a small boat as did many others. Those that ended up boarding the trains arrived in Punjab on October 2, where they were held and interrogated for one week before being discharged and ordered to go to their home villages where they would be under surveillance. A journey that

began as a search for justice ended in tragedy, sending shockwaves across Asia and the Pacific.¹⁷

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the *Komagata Maru* incident, Taraknath Das and Sailendra Ghose declared that Indian independence and freedom from racism required an end to 'Anglo-Saxon' imperialism, "the most pernicious imperialism in the world." That Das and Ghose identified the organic racisms connecting British and American imperialism reflected their experiences in the United States and Canada. Theodore Roosevelt's racial initiative to forge closer US-British ties ten years earlier had born fruit as British-US collaboration intensified up to 1914. With the onset of WW I hundreds of Indian expatriates had abandoned the Pacific coast to return to India in response to the *Gadar's* call for an insurrection against British rule. The British regime responded by introducing a series of repressive laws and arresting hundreds on charges of sedition. So-called conspiracy trials were convened in Lahore and in Mandalay, Burma leading to the execution of dozens of activists and imprisonment of hundreds. The British government established MI6 in 1916 to spy overseas. By 1918 it had at least 200 agents working in the US monitoring anti-imperialist activities.¹⁸

In the United States, the *Komagata Maru* incident and the branding of Indian activists as radicals prompted a tightening of immigration regulations. In early 1917, Congress passed a new immigration law, the Asiatic Barred Zone Act, prohibiting immigration from India, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. As Woodrow Wilson brought the US into the war, the British and US governments worked closed to indict Indian and other radicals still in the United States for working with Germans against the British during the war. In what became known as the 'Hindu conspiracy' trial from November 1917 to April 1918, the US government tried 17 Indians, nine Americans and nine Germans. Evidence intercepted illegally by Japanese postal authorities at the request of British officials was used in the trials.¹⁹ The most expensive trial in the US to date, the British government covered \$2.5 million of the costs compared to \$500,000 by the US. The accused were found guilty and served sentences of two to 22 months.²⁰

The diasporic Indian communities in America were a wellspring of anti-imperialism in the early 20th century in ways quite similar to Chinese communities in the Americas.²¹ They clearly perceived that their status abroad was directly connected to the colonized state of their home countries. The *Gadar* movement and its many allies faced terrible consequences yet they exerted a profound influence on the anti-colonial movement in India. Gandhi and Congress moved from a position advocating co-operation and home rule to one of non-co-operation and independence. And the small communities of South Asians in Canada and the US, often bound by their faiths, managed to survive despite tremendous challenges. Once India achieved independence in 1947, immigration would re-open and eventually flourish.

In the aftermath of World War I, the Canadian government continued to press for closer British-US ties. Robert Borden, prime minister during the *Komagata*

Maru affair, wrote to British prime minister Lloyd-George: “You know my own conviction that there is at least possible a League of the two great English speaking commonwealths who share common ancestry, language and literature, who are inspired by like democratic ideals, who enjoy similar political institutions and whose united force is sufficient to ensure the peace of the world. It is with a view to the consummation of so great a purpose that I should be content, and indeed desire, to invite and even urge the American Republic to undertake worldwide responsibilities in respect of undeveloped territories and backward races similar to, if not commensurate with, those which have been assumed by or imposed upon our own Empire” (Paris Peace Conference, 1919, p. 3). Despite British and American hesitations, the US did take on a greater role and, as a number of scholars have argued, the echoes of the Anglo-American racial empires continue to resonate to this day (Lake and Reynolds, 2012).

Endnotes

1. General references used in the writing of this essay are appended at the end.
2. On this topic see Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the Question of Racial Equality* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Jeremy Martins, “A Transnational History of Immigration Restriction: Natal and New South Wales, 1896–97,” in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 34, 3 (September 2006), 323–344.
3. See Erika Lee, “Hemispheric Orientalism and the 1907 Pacific Coast Race Riots,” *Amerasia Journal* 33:2 (2007), 19–47 and John Price, “‘Orienting’ the Empire: Mackenzie King and the Aftermath of the 1907 Race Riots,” *B.C. Studies*, 156 (Winter 2007/08), 53–81.
4. Criminal Investigation Office, “Indian Agitation in America,” 17 December 1912, British Library, L/P&J/12/1, 7
5. J.A. Cote to the Governor General's Secretary, 8 August 1913 (British Library, L/P&J/ 12/1), 1.
6. Handwritten note, O.H. Dumbell to Under-Secretary of State, 9 May 1913 and approved on 13 May 1913 despite Viceroy of India's objections. Lala Har Dayal was arrested in the spring of 1914 and fled the US.
7. Seema Sohi, “Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism in the Transnational Western US-Canadian Borderlands,” *Journal of American History*, 98 No. 2 (September 2011), 430–431.
8. On Ghadar see Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011) and Hugh J.M. Johnston, “The *Komagata Maru* and the Ghadr Party,” *B.C. Studies*, 178 (Summer 2013), 9–31.
9. R.O. Montgomery to H.F. Bishop, Postmaster, Victoria, 23 July, 1915 (British Library, L/PJ/6/1395/3292).
10. F.G.A. Butler to Lord Stamfordham, 12 June, 1914 (British National Archives, CO 42/979).
11. Governor General to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 10 June, 1914 (British National Archives, CO 42/979).
12. Stamfordham to Butler, 14 June, 1914 (BNA, CO 42/979).
13. William Hopkinson brought stenographers to these meetings and so we have a verbatim transcript of the June 21 meeting. See “Minutes of a Hindu Mass Meeting,” (BNA, CO 42/980), 1–13 as well of a meeting the two days later, see “Minutes of a Public Meeting” (BNA, CO 42/980), 1–23.
14. Taraknath Das to Rahim, nd (British Library, L/PJ/6/1341/5372 1914).
15. Re The Immigration Act and Munshi Singh, British Columbia Court of Appeal 20 B.C.R. 243, 29 W.L.R. 45.
16. Hugh Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru*, 142–143.
17. A number of murders occurred in the South Asian community in Vancouver in the aftermath including the murder of the agent William Hopkinson by Mewa Singh who was subsequently tried and executed. He remains a martyr for many in the South Asian communities.
18. Reg Whitaker, Gregory S. Kealey, Andrew Parnaby, *Secret Service: Political Policing in Canada from the Fenians to Fortress America* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2012), 55.
19. Japanese authorities, in intercepting large volumes of mail to and from Indians “have acted illegally and are naturally anxious that the fact should not become known.” W. Conyngham Greene to British Ambassador, Washington and to A.J. Balfour, 16 April 1917 (British Library, L/PJ/6/1559/5784 1918).
20. On the conspiracy trials see Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, Chapter 3.
21. On the limits of this anti-imperialism particularly in regard to indigeneity see Renisa Mawani, “Specters of Indigeneity in British-Indian Migration, 1914,” *Law and Society Review*, 46, 2 (2012), 369–403.

References

Lake, M. & Reynolds, H. *Drawing the Global Colour Line*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Prime Minister to Prime Minister of United Kingdom, Nov 23, 1918 (*Documents on Canadian External Relations*, Vol. 2, The Paris Peace Conference of 1919), p. 3.

Narration



Children in front of the 2nd Ave. Gurdwara, Kitsilano, BC.

Courtesy of Charan Gill Family fonds. South Asian Canadian Digital Archive, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, Canada.

Footsteps in time

Timeline of South Asian Canadian History

1885

Chinese Head Tax

The Act to restrict and regulate Chinese Immigration and its head tax system was introduced.

This was mainly due to the fear from the white population that Chinese immigrant workers would take away their jobs and establish settlement in Canada with their families as permanent citizens.

The head tax required current and future Chinese immigrants to pay money for migrating to Canada. The head tax started at \$10 and increased in increments over the years: \$50 in 1896, 100 in 1901 and \$500 in 1903. This is the equivalent to roughly \$14,000 today.



1869

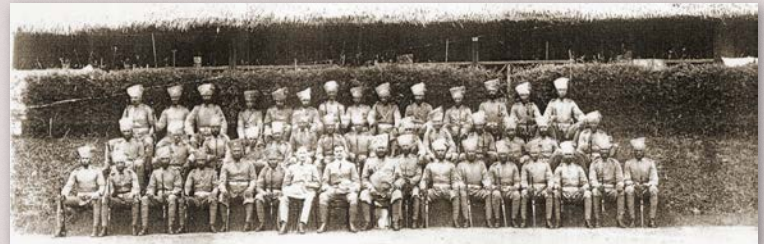
The Immigration Act

Canada implemented the first immigration policy following Confederation. This act ensured the safety of immigrants on their route to Canada and ensured they were not taken advantage of upon arrival. This policy by the government was put in place to attract European descent immigrants to the west.



1897

South Asian migration to Canada commences



Troops from the Hong Kong and Malay States visit BC on their return from London via Atlantic Canada after celebrations of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in London. It is believed they told stories to other troops about the new immigrants and many British subjects that were settling in British Columbia. This resulted in South Asian migration to Canada.

1902

Coronation of Edward VII originated South Asian Immigration



The first Sikhs to travel across Canada in 1902 were part of a Hong Kong military regiment en route to England to taking part in the celebrations on the coronation of King Edward VII. They arrived in Victoria on the Empress of Japan before sailing to Vancouver for a grand welcome. Upon arriving they were inspected by the head of the Armed Forces in Canada, General Sir Charles Parsons. The Sikh contingent left by train to Montreal where they embarked for England with the Canadian contingent on June 14, 1902.

1903

First South Asian men arrived in Vancouver and Victoria

By mid 1903 five men had landed in Vancouver and five in Victoria. Altogether approximately 30 men came between 1903–04 as immigrants to Canada. Without exception the first few hundred South Asian immigrants to Canada came from Hong Kong or one of the other British Far Eastern strongholds. The majority of them were Sikhs.



1904–1905

South Asian immigration starts to increase in Canada.

South Asian Immigration to Canada, Fiscal Years 1904-1907	
Fiscal Year	Number
1904-05	45
1905-06	387
1906-07	2,124
1907-08	2,623
TOTAL	5,179

SOURCE: "Hindoo Immigration to Canada," n.d., RG 76, #536999, pt. 1.

The number of South Asians in Vancouver number around 100–150, with majority of them being Sikhs.

1906

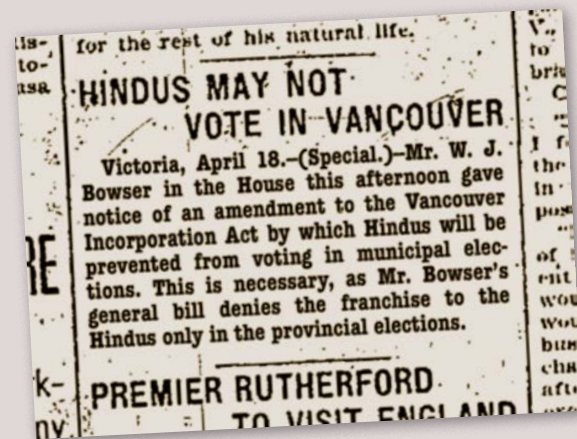
Government raises the Chinese Head Tax

The Canadian government raises the Chinese head tax from \$100 to \$500, putting restrictions on immigration, attracting less skillful workers for the labour market and the CPR shipping lines. Due to the decrease in immigration from the East to Canada, the labour force was suffering. By March 1906, there were fewer than 300 South Asians in B.C.

1907

British Columbia Premier Bowser introduces a bill to disenfranchise all natives of India not of Anglo-Saxon parents.

In April 1907 South Asians are denied the vote in Vancouver by changes in the *Municipality Incorporation Act*. The federal vote is denied by default as one had to be on the provincial voters' list to vote federally.



Anti-Asian Riots

In August 1907, the Asiatic Exclusion league was formed in Vancouver, with the support of both the liberal and conservative local associations. September 7, 1907 hundreds of people broke out into riots through Vancouver's Asian district to protest Asian Immigration to Canada. They did extensive damage to the Chinese and Japanese businesses and homes.

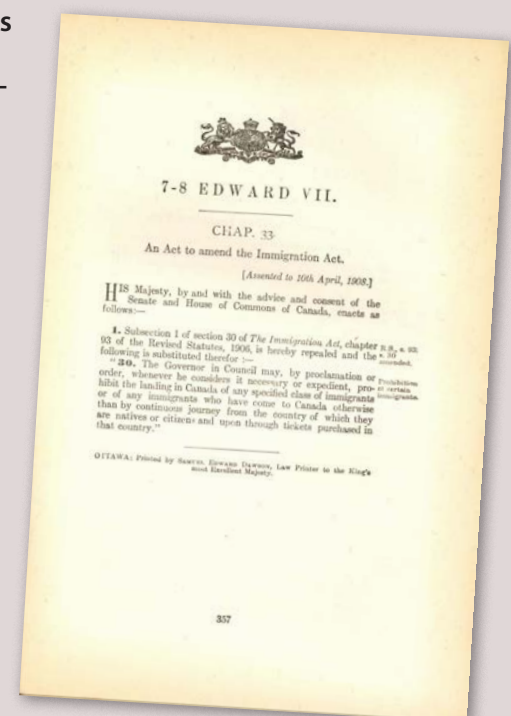


1908

The Canadian government's first attempt to restrict immigration

The government passes an order-in-council on January 8, 1908 prohibiting immigration of persons that did not travel on a continuous journey to Canada.

Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King and others in the Government devise a plan to send Indian immigrants to Honduras in an attempt to get 'rid' of them. The plan is rejected by the majority Sikh community in BC under the guidance of Sant Teja Singh.



Immigration from Fiji

In February 1908, six South Asians from Fiji made the first attempt according to the passage regulation. They sailed from Fiji, but were held for deportation due to the interpretation by the immigration officials of the *Continuous Regulation Act*.



First Sikh gurdwara in North America was built on 1866–West 2nd Ave. Vancouver, BC

January 19, 1908 The first official South Asian organization in Canada was established. The Vancouver Khalsa Diwan Society was created early in the year to deal with the expansion of Sikh religious establishments.

1909

The Guru Nanak Mining and Trust created

The interest in real estate for South Asians lead to the creation of the Guru Nanak Mining and Trust Company in Vancouver. Teja Singh supported this company to buy and develop agricultural land for South Asians. This company was one of the earliest entrepreneurial ventures by South Asians in British Columbia.



South Asians workers employed across BC in mills, farms, and logging sites.

By 1909, in the lower Fraser valley alone, 35 South Asians were working on farms in Mission and Matsqui, 15 worked in construction in Abbotsford while 160 worked at mills in Abbotsford, Huntington and Harrison mills. Another 40 were workers at a brick company in Clayburn.

1910

The Immigration Act is amended

The Immigration Act is overhauled including the Continuous Journey regulation. The amended Act now gives sweeping powers to the government to exclude people explicitly on the basis of race. These amendments are aimed at stopping the South Asian immigration.

1911

Completion of the Gur Sikh Temple in Abbotsford

In 1908 local Fraser Valley Sikh settlers carry donated lumber from the local Trethewey Lumber Mill to begin the work of building a Sikh Gurdwara. The construction of the Gur Sikh Temple in Abbotsford, under the auspices of Khalsa Diwan Society, is officially completed, in the year 1911. The gurdwara officially opens in 1912. On March 1, 1912 Sant Teja Singh speaks to the Abbotsford congregation.



Delegation Travels to Ottawa

A delegation led by Dr. Sundar Singh is sent to Ottawa to plead for more relaxed immigration regulations to allow the entry of wives and children of the South Asian men residing in British Columbia.

1912

Hardial Singh Atwal is the first Sikh born in Canada on August 28th.



1913

South Asians arrive on the *Panama Maru*

The *Panama Maru* arrives in BC on October 17, 1913 carrying 56 South Asians to Canada. Most passengers were first time arrivals to BC. A Board of Inquiry allows 17 passengers who could prove prior residency to disembark and ordered 39 others to be deported. Their lawyer J. Edward Bird appears before Justice Dennis Murphy who hears submissions and eventually dismisses the case.



1914

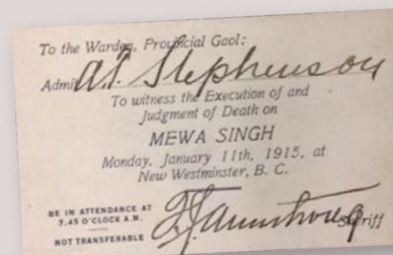
May 23, The *Komagata Maru* arrives with 376 South Asian passengers, under the leadership of Bhai Gurdit Singh In Vancouver.

During the months of May until July, the *Komagata Maru* sits in the harbour, becoming a spectacle, with daily newspaper reports of developments and crowds of hundreds gathering at the waterfront to stare at the passengers. The *Komagata Maru* is formally ordered out in July. According to the Canadian law of the "continuous Journey" which forbids immigrants on ships from travelling to Canada unless they are sailing straight from their country of origin. The *Komagata Maru* had sailed to Canada via Hong Kong, having challenged the Canadian law of continuous Journey and therefore being returned.

1915

Execution of Bhai Mewa Singh

On the morning of January 11, 1915, hundreds of South Asians wait outside the penitentiary to receive Bhai Mewa Singh's body for cremation. Bhai Mewa Singh was executed for his assassination of immigration inspector William Hopkinson. He is cremated at the Fraser Mills where a large number of Sikh men work.



Ticket to view Mewa Singh's Hanging.

1918

Mayo Singh establishes Logging operations in Paldi (Cowichan Valley).



Mayo Singh establishes logging operations in Paldi (Cowichan Valley). The company establishes a community and provides jobs and housing for South Asians, Japanese, Chinese and Europeans. The Mayo Lumber Company built a Sikh Temple near Duncan, BC at Paldi. This town is named after Mayo Singh’s village in India.

1919

The immigration restriction on bringing wives and children under the age of eighteen from India are lifted.

December, Order in Council (PC2498) an immigrant in Canada was allowed to apply for his family. Only eleven dependents were allowed in between 1914–1922. The immigration application procedure in India for families to enter into Canada was a very difficult and lengthy process.



1921

The government restricts entry into Canada for some South Asians

“From 1921 on, the government stiffened entry further by setting three years as the maximum time a South Asian Canadian could be out of the country without losing domicile, registering out certificate or not. The majority of men who had returned to the families in India prior to 1920 were never allowed back into Canada and were lost forever

to the community. An adequate system of registering families in India was not worked out until 1924–25 and many men were so concerned that they would not be let back into Canada that they were reluctant to go to India to get their families. During the five-year period between fiscal 1914–194 and 1920–21, only one South Asian family member was allowed into Canada.”

(Buchignani et al, 1985, p. 72).

1923

South Asian Businesses Grow

By the year 1923 South Asians in British Columbia were a small size community but still managed to own or operate a number of businesses.

South Asian Businesses in British Columbia, 1923.	
Types of Businesses	Number
Logging Camps	7
Lumber Companies	6
Shingle Factories	2
Grocery Stores	2
Fuel Dealerships	60
Farms	25
TOTAL	102
Continuous Journey, A Social History of South Asians in Canada	

1924

By 1924 the majority of the South Asians residing in British Columbia were employed in lumber mills across the province.

609 out of 680 South Asians were employed in the lumber mills. There were many changes in the economic situation of South Asians in Canada in 1920’s.





1925

The Khalsa Diwan Society has autonomous branches in Vancouver, Abbotsford, New Westminster, Victoria, Paldi, Fraser Mills, Golden, Duncan, Coombs, and Ocean Falls.

1929

Sir Rabindranath Tagore visits



The Khalsa Diwan Society invites Charles Andrew, a friend of Mahatma Gandhi, and Sir Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel laureate, to see firsthand the unfair treatment of the Sikhs. Tagore was introduced to the community members at the Victoria theatre, where hundreds of people attend. He also visits the West 2nd Avenue Gurdwara.

1932

Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, a democratic socialist party.

The CCF, founded in 1932, was formed by farm and labour organizations in the western provinces of Canada. CCF supported the South Asian right to vote and would figure prominently in applying the necessary political pressure to improve the lives of South Asians in Canada.

1933

Mayo Lumber Company's mill burns down.

This was a tragic economic loss to the South Asian community. Only two mills remained open; Hillcrest Lumber Company and the Yuba Lumber Mill. Quite a few men went back to India, to wait out the depression on their family farms.

1935

Hillcrest Sikh Temple



On September 7, the Hillcrest Sikh temple opens (4 miles from Duncan). A parade is held to celebrate the opening.

1938

First Mosque built in Canada



December 12th in Edmonton Al Rashid Mosque, the first Mosque in Canada officially opens for the Muslim community.

1939

Dr. Pandia goes to Ottawa

Dr. D.P. Pandia, an Indian lawyer and former secretary to Gandhi, travels to Ottawa to petition for the plight of "illegal" South Asian immigrants living in British Columbia. The Federal government agrees not to deport them as long as they are willing to come forward and register.



1942

IWA Union

The IWA Union gives equal pay for Asian workers (mill-workers) The union disputed the inadequate bunkhouse conditions tolerated by South Asian and Chinese workers at Fraser Mills and other plants.

1943

Request for the Franchise

A delegation is sent to Parliament Buildings in Victoria to request that the franchise be extended to South Asians. This is lead by the President of the Khalsa Diwan Society, Naginder Singh.

1947

South Asian immigrants are granted franchise to vote and become Canadian citizens.

Attaining the franchise after a forty-year struggle, was also a powerful step towards changing the continuous passage restriction law. Dr. Pandia plays a key role in assisting the journey of South Asians enfranchisement in British Columbia.



1948

Commissioner Hardit S. Malik

In May, Hardit S. Malik, India's first High Commissioner to Canada and a proud Sikh, takes up his official post in Ottawa, signifying the end of the battle for South Asians in their fight for franchisement.



1949

India's Prime Minister visits Vancouver

Prime Minister Nehru visits the Vancouver Sikh temple with his daughter Indira Gandhi.

1950

First South Asian woman graduates from High school

Nsibe Kaur Puri, a resident of British Columbia, becomes the first Sikh woman to graduate from high school.



1951

Quota system for South Asian Immigration

The government starts a change in the policy of South Asians in Canada. A quota system is started for South Asian immigration. The quota is set to 150 Indian, 100 Pakistanis and 50 Ceylonese per year to allowed to migrate to Canada.

1958

Family Sponsorship

The Canadian Government allows South Asian Canadians to sponsor a wide range of relatives, including mothers and fathers over the age of 65.



1960

Migration starts from 2nd and 3rd countries

First four Fijian Indians set sail to Vancouver in response to a newspaper article on Canadian immigration point system. They then send letters to relatives and friends leading to others making their way to Canada.

The Government removes almost all racial and national restrictions from its Immigration regulations

The Canadian government adopts new immigration rules in 1962, ending the quota-by-country system. The Immigration Act of 1967 establishes a new point system for determining immigration eligibility. Immigration between the years 1962–1971 was twelve times more than in the early 1900s.

1965

The first Mosque in British Columbia is built by the Pakistan Canada Association on 655 - West 8th Avenue, (Al-Jamia Masjid). It was the first mosque that allowed the Muslim community to grow and form the BC Muslim Association (BCMA).



1967

A new immigration regulation based on a points system is introduced



The new policy assigned "points" based on criteria like language fluency, education and job skills. Immigration from South Asian countries increased drastically during the period between 1970 and 1979. Canada began its immigration shift towards becoming a multicultural country.

1972

In August the President of Uganda, Idi Amin, ordered the expulsion of the country's Asian minority



Idi Amin gives South Asian Ugandans 90 days notice to leave the country. At that time there were 80,000 individuals of South Asian descent in Uganda. Gujaratis were accepted as political refugees in Canada. Goans also came to Canada during the expulsion.

1973

More than 7,000 Ugandan Asian immigrants came to Canada

It's the first time in Canadian history that Canada accepts a large group of non-European refugees. Many of them were Ismailis. (About 1600 settled in British Columbia). Many were professionals or business owners.

1983

Dasmesh Punjabi school opens

In February, the Abbotsford Dasmesh Punjabi School officially begins with 142 registered students as a weekend school teaching the Punjabi language. The Khalsa Diwan Society of Abbotsford, in its efforts to preserve the Punjabi heritage in the Fraser Valley, is instrumental in the formation of the Dasmesh Punjabi Educational Association that is to manage the School.

1985

First South Asian Supreme Court Judge

The Honourable Wally Oppal is appointed a Supreme Court judge. He later conducts the Royal Inquiry into Policing in British Columbia.





1986

First South Asian elected to any Federal or Provincial riding.

Manmohan (Moe) Sihota from Esquimalt is elected cabinet minister. He is appointed Minister of Labour and Consumer Services as well as Minister Responsible for Constitutional Affairs.

1987

A 59 metre Tramp Steamer named *Amelie* carries 175 refugees to Nova Scotia



174 men and one woman from India, mostly Sikhs from the Punjab state, wade ashore on Nova Scotia's southwestern shore. The battered freighter that carried them, the *Amelie*, is later seized by the RCMP at sea and towed to Halifax. Sikhs claimed refugee status for being persecuted in their homeland.

1989

First South Asian to play in the NHL

Robin N. Bawa a North Cowichan native is signed by the Washington Capitals of the National Hockey League (NHL).

1990

Commemorating the Komagata Maru Incident

The Municipal, Provincial, and Federal Governments jointly place a plaque commemorating the Komagata Maru Incident at Portal Park in Vancouver on May 23.



1990

First Sikh joins the RCMP

March 15, the Solicitor General of Canada announces that the RCMP dress code would be amended to have a turbaned Sikh join the force. Constable Baltej Singh Dhillon has the honour of becoming the first Khalsa (baptized) Sikh to join the RCMP.



1993

Main Street

Vancouver's Punjabi Market at 49th Avenue and Main Street is officially recognized with bilingual signs in English and Punjabi.



1995

Vaisakhi Parade

The British Columbia Government officially recognizes the Vaisakhi Parade and publishes a brochure.

1996

Punjabi language becomes part of the public school curriculum

In September, British Columbia schools started to offer Punjabi language in their regular curriculum from grades five to twelve.

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1999

A Commemorative stamp for the 300th anniversary of Khalsa

The Canadian Government and Canada Post issue a commemorative stamp celebrating the 300th anniversary of the Khalsa (Vaisakhi) and the legacy of Sikhs in Canada.



2000

First South Asian Premier in BC

Ujjal Dosanjh is elected as the 33rd Premier of British Columbia after serving as an MLA and Attorney General. Later he would serve as an MP and Minister of Health.



2002

Designated as a National Historic Site of Canada

The Gur Sikh Temple in Abbotsford is designated as a National Historic Site of Canada, which is officially carried out by Prime Minister Jean Chretien.

2009

National Hockey Broadcasting in Punjabi



The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) begins broadcasting Hockey Games in Punjabi with hosts Parminder Singh and Harnarayan Singh.

2010

Sri Lankan refugees arrive in BC

The MV *Sun Sea*, a cargo ship, brings 492 Sri Lankan Tamils to British Columbia. They are seeking shelter as refugees in Canada.



2011

The Sikh Heritage Museum first exhibit

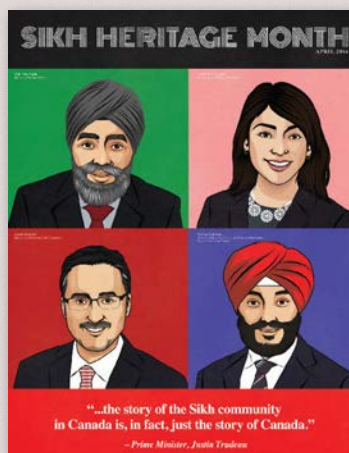


The Sikh Heritage Museum located within the National Historic Site, Guru Sikh Temple in Abbotsford officially opens in commemoration of the Centennial year of the Gur Sikh Temple (est. 1911). The first exhibit highlights the early Sikh settlers in the Valley who helped build the site.

2014

Komagata Maru stamp unveiled

An official stamp from Canada Post is released which commemorates the centennial of the *Komagata Maru*.



2015

Highest number of South Asians elected in Federal elections

A record 17 Sikh MPs are elected in the 2015 Federal Election—16 from the Liberal Party of Canada and 1 Conservative—the highest number of Sikhs ever elected. In addition, four MPs are appointed as Ministers, including the

first Sikh female Minister, the Honourable Bardish Kaur Chagger.

Lt. Col. Harjit Singh Sajjan, the first Sikh to command a regiment in Canada—the British Columbia Regiment (*Duke of Connaught's Own*)—is appointed as the Canadian Minister of National Defence.

2016

Canada Apologizes for the *Komagata Maru*



In May, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau offers an official apology in the House of Commons for the then government's role in turning back the majority of the passengers on the *Komagata Maru* in 1914. The Prime Minister states that "the passengers of the *Komagata Maru*, like millions of immigrants to Canada since, were seeking refuge and better lives for their families. With so much to contribute to their new home, they chose Canada and we failed them utterly. As a nation, we should never forget the prejudice suffered by the Sikh [Muslim and Hindu] community at the hands of the Canadian government of the day. We should not and we will not."

2017

The 40 year struggle for the vote exhibit

As Canada commemorates 150 years since its Confederation, the Sikh Heritage Museum launches exhibit looking at the story of the South Asian Vote. This commemorates the 40 year South Asian struggle for the vote (1907–1947). May 19th, the Right Honourable Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau makes his first official visit to Abbotsford by visiting the Gur Sikh Temple and National Historic Site.



Photo Sources

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- 1869 "Canada - The New Homeland" Immigration Poster, 1925. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada MIKAN 2958967
- 1897 Sikh regiment in B.C. after Queen Victoria's Jubilee. Courtesy of KomagataMaruJourney.ca
- 1902 Chinese and Japanese immigrants aboard a ship docked in Vancouver. Soldiers from Hong Kong en route to or from London for Edward VII's coronation, 1902. Courtesy of Vancouver Public library VPL#3027
- 1903 First South Asian men arrived in Vancouver and Victoria, 1900-1910. Courtesy of University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections. UW 18744
- 1904-1905 Table of South Asian Immigration in Canada 1904-1907. Courtesy of Continous Journey, A Social History of South Asians in Canada
- 1907 Newspaper Article April 18, 1907. Courtesy of South Asian Studies Institute, UFV
- 1907 Anti-Asian Riots. Courtesy of the Vancouver Archives, MIKAN no. 3363536
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- 1908 2nd Avenue Sikh Temple, Vancouver. Courtesy of KomagataMaruJourney.ca
- 1909 One of the first companies created by South Asians in British Columbia. Courtesy of South Asian Studies Institute, UFV
- 1909 Sikh Logging Camp. Courtesy of KomagataMaruJourney.ca
- 1911 Gur Sikh Temple in Abbotsford. Courtesy of The South Asian Studies Institute, UFV
- 1912 Hardial Singh Arwal and family. Courtesy of South Asian Studies Institute, UFV
- 1913 Men in front of immigration detention centre, Victoria. Courtesy of KomagataMaruJourney.ca
- 1914 Canadian Pacific Railway Company's Telegraph. Courtesy of South Asian Studies Institute, UFV
- 1915 Mewa Singh funeral procession. Courtesy of KomagataMaruJourney.ca
- 1915 Mewa Singh Funeral ticket
- 1918 "First Mayo School," 1921. Courtesy of South Asian Studies Institute, UFV
- 1919 Thakur Singh Banga and family. Year Unknown. Courtesy of South Asian Studies Institute, UFV
- 1924 Sikhs loading lumber at B.C. Mills, Timber and Trading Co. 1919. Courtesy of KomagataMaruJourney.ca
- 1925 1866 West 2nd Avenue Khalsa Diwan Society Sikh Temple, 1943. Courtesy of KomagataMaruJourney.ca
- 1929 Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver. Courtesy of KomagataMaruJourney.ca
- 1935 Hillcrest Gurdwara, 1937. Courtesy of the Canadian Sikh Heritage website.
- 1938 Al Rashid Mosque Edmonton, BC. Courtesy of www.anewlife.ca/alrashid
- 1939 Portrait of Dr. DP Pandia, 1946. Photo courtesy of the Vancouver City archives.
- 1947 Mahinder Singh Beadall. Courtesy of South Asian Studies Institute, UFV
- 1948 Hardit S Malik as a young man, 1917. Courtesy of South Asian Studies Institute, UFV
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- 2014 Official *Komagata Maru* Stamp. Courtesy of Canada Post Corporation
- 2015 Sikh Heritage Month. Courtesy of Sikh Heritage Museum of Canada
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- 2017 Prime Minister Justin Trudeau visits SASI exhibit at National Historic Site Gur Sikh Temple. Courtesy of the South Asian Studies Institute, UFV



Women and children in Paldi, BC.

Courtesy of Mayo Singh Family fondsSouth Asian Canadian Digital Archive, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, Canada.

Historic Sites of Significance in BC

Simcoe Park

124 MacInnes Street, New Westminster B.C.

1860s, 1915, 1952

Historic Place

Located on the former site of the Provincial Jail, Simcoe Park is a 3.8-acre neighbourhood park with a community garden, tennis courts, adventure playground, soccer field, benches, pathway, planters, open green space and views of the Fraser River. Ornamental landscaping includes large red oak trees which demarcate the original Simcoe Street right of way. The park is located at the corner of Eighth Street and Royal Avenue in New Westminster, B.C.

Values

New Westminster's Simcoe Park has historical, cultural, social, spiritual and political value for the South Asian community, primarily for its association with the Sikh martyr Bhai Mewa Singh Ji.

Simcoe Park is highly significant to B.C.'s South Asian community because it is the site of the former Provincial Jail, the location of Bhai Mewa Singh Ji's incarceration and execution. Mewa Singh was tried and convicted of shooting an immigration inspector in 1915, motivated by the ongoing inflammatory actions, surveillance and persecution by officials with the federal Immigration Department. These acts were undertaken by immigration officials against

suspected Indian nationalists who were considered to be a threat to British rule in India.

Simcoe Park is significant because it represents an extreme expression of the South Asian immigrant experience in B.C. Arriving in Canada in 1906, Mewa Singh was typical of many male Punjabi Sikh immigrants who were attracted to B.C. by relatively high wages, mostly as labourers in the lumber industry. This was also a period during which racism and discrimination against non-white immigrants was at its peak. The 1907 anti-Asian riots in Vancouver culminated in the implementation of the "Continuous Passage" law of 1908 that effectively blocked Indian immigration to Canada.

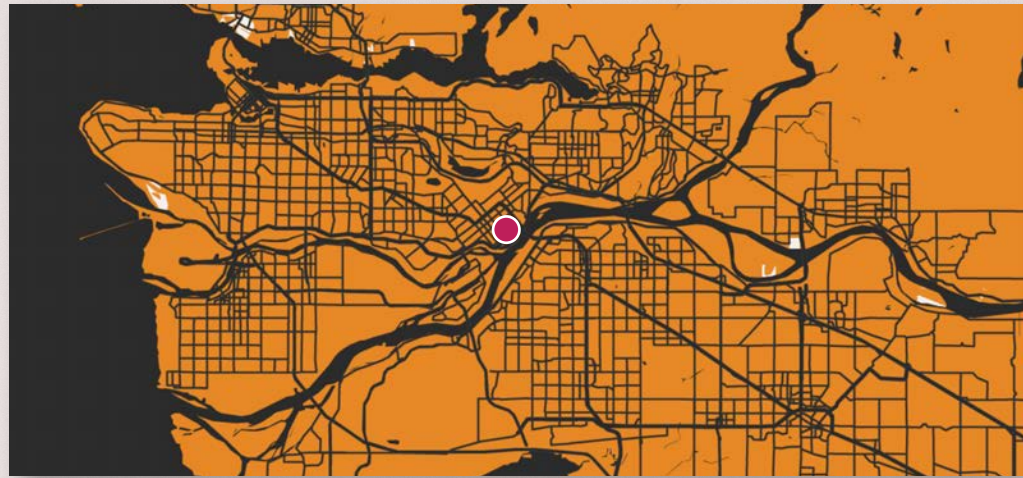
Mewa Singh is widely regarded by South Asian Canadians as an icon and martyr, both for voluntarily surrendering to authorities, and for his testimony at his trial which highlighted the racism and discrimination suffered by the South Asian Canadian community in B.C.

While the site has connections to

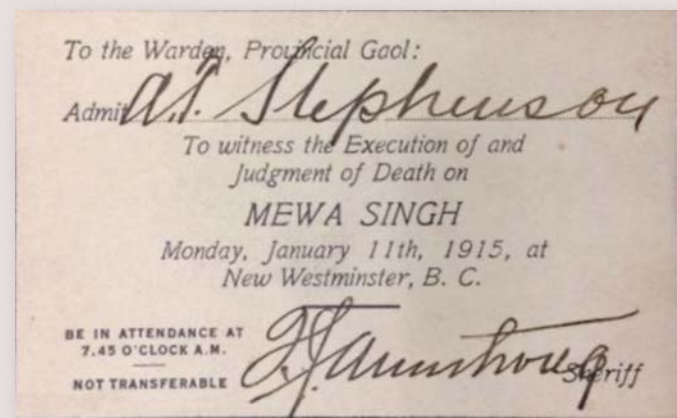
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Map data: Google, 2021



challenging history and figures associated with racial persecution, the historic place is important as a unifying factor in the South Asian Canadian community. It is a reminder of Mewa Singh's struggle for South Asian Canadian rights and as a symbol of perseverance.

The historic place is an important touchstone for expanding the dialogue surrounding Mewa Singh's death, and for supporting current debate on serious issues such as the nature of racism, human rights, historical commemoration, the role of religion in civil society and other significant and challenging topics.



Historic Sites of Significance in BC

Golden Sikh Temple

Golden, B.C.

c. 1902

Historic Place

The historic place is the former site of the Golden Sikh Temple, originally located on the property of the Columbia River Lumber Company, now 9th Avenue, in the town of Golden, B.C.

Values

The former site of the Golden Sikh Temple has historic, cultural, social and spiritual value, particularly for its association with early Sikh pioneers and their contribution to B.C.'s forestry industry.

The former site of the Golden Sikh Temple, one of the earliest temples established in the province, is valued as a reminder of the hard work and tenacity of the first South Asian pioneers who arrived in 1902 from India's Punjab region to work in the province's forest and lumber milling industries in very remote mountain communities such as Golden.

The temple offered the South Asian community a place to practice their faith, socialize with others in their community, and receive the spiritual and emotional support needed to endure the shared experience of racism and discrimination of the time.



Map data: Google, 2021

The temple is important for its association to the Columbia River Lumber Company and the role of South Asian immigrant workers who helped fill the need for manual labour in the province's resource industries in the early 20th century. Likely a re-purposed sawmill building, the gurdwara, or Sikh temple, was located on company property among the bunkhouses that accommodated the South Asian work force.

The gurdwara was so central to South Asian community life that Sikhs have established these temples wherever they have lived and worked. In order to meet the needs of their South Asian workers, it was common for mill owners to build or accommodate gurdwaras within the mill grounds, establishing a sense of the village life of the mill's South Asian employees.

Despite its non-traditional structure, the Golden Sikh Temple is important because it accommodated all Sikh religious beliefs and practices. The interior was finely decorated, with carpets on the floor where worshippers sat, a place for the *Guru Granth Sahib*, or sacred text and the *Nishan Sahib*, or Sikh flag, located on the exterior. The temple provided Sikh hospitality to visitors in the *langar*, or dining area and communal kitchen, a place where a free, vegetarian communal meal was available to all.

While the closure of the lumber company in 1927 after a forest fire led to the dispersal of Golden's early Sikh residents to other B.C.

communities, the Golden Sikh Temple site is a reminder of their legacy of settlement, development and culture in B.C.'s Kootenay region.

The former temple site is significant for generating awareness about Golden's South Asian Canadian community. This community has sought to educate citizens and visitors about their history and culture through initiatives such as museum exhibits and a provincial stop of interest sign that was installed in 2015. These endeavours assist in the recognition of the story of Golden's Sikh pioneers as one of hard work and determination and highlights an important chapter in the rich history of the city and region.

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Historic Sites of Significance in BC

Youbou Mill

North shore of Lake Cowichan, B.C.

1903

Historic Place

The Youbou mill site consists of the remains of a former sawmill located near the community of Youbou on the north shore of Lake Cowichan. The site is at the end of Highway 18, 38 kilometres west of Duncan, on central Vancouver Island B.C.

Values

Youbou has historic, cultural, social and economic significance to the history of South Asian Canadians in B.C. because it was the site of a large sawmill and associated community that employed many South Asian Canadian immigrants. The site represents their contribution to the expanding resource-based economy of the province.

The site of the former sawmill at Youbou is considered significant because it demonstrates the ways in which South Asian Canadians helped to build the economy of B.C. through their labour, resilience and innovation in the lumbering and sawmilling industries.

Founded in 1913 by the Empire Lumber Company, the Youbou mill is valued for its association with the South Asian Canadian labourers that helped fuel its growth from a small portable sawmill to one of the largest sawmills in the Lake Cowichan area. The mill's craneway was known as one of the longest craneways in the British Empire in the early 1900s.

The community of Youbou that grew up around the sawmill is named after two founders of the Empire Lumber Company which operated the first sawmill there. The mill site at Youbou has historic and social

value for its employment of many South Asian immigrants, particularly after 1947 when the Canadian Citizenship Act allowed residents of Canada to obtain citizenship regardless of their country of origin. The site's value is heightened by the fact that multiple generations of South Asian Canadians worked at this mill as a means of raising their families and making a living.

This legislation also resulted in the growth of the number of South Asian families who resided in the adjacent community of Youbou, a still-existing, former company town historically associated with the now-defunct sawmill site. Youbou grew to house the mill offices and workers' accommodation, and to support a church, an elementary school in a converted bunkhouse, volunteer fire department, and community hall, all of which served the mill-working community.

Today the few remains of the sawmill at Youbou, visible at a distance from the town, include wharf remnants, wood pilings and other small structures that are valued as a reminder of the once-thriving sawmill that existed until the relatively recent past. These remains are important as physical indicators of the location and scale of the mill site and its relationship to current townscape of Youbou.

The former sawmill site at Youbou is important for its relative longevity and

viability in a small community that endured the boom-and-bust cycles of the industry. The final closure of the sawmill at Youbou in 2001 is important because it signalled the end of an era of logging and sawmilling on Cowichan Lake that was highly significant to B.C.'s South Asian community and set the stage for an important alliance between former mill workers and environmentalists, both of whom opposed the mill's closure.

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Map data: Google, 2021



Historic Sites of Significance in BC

Tod Inlet

Gowlland-Tod Provincial Park, Vancouver Island

1904 – 1910

Historic Place

The remains of the former community of Tod Inlet are situated within the boundaries of Gowlland-Tod Provincial Park in the municipalities of Saanich and Central Saanich on southern Vancouver Island, British Columbia. The area is south of the community of Brentwood Bay, bounded on the north by Interurban Road and on the west by Benvenuto Avenue.

Tod Inlet includes the remains of a cement plant that was the reason for the settlement's existence, remnants of worker housing, concrete building foundations and scattered artifacts left by workers at the former cement plant, all becoming overgrown by the encroaching forest. The remains of wooden wharf pilings are still visible in the water of the inlet.

Values

Tod Inlet has historical, cultural, scientific, social and spiritual values associated with the operation of the Vancouver Portland Cement Company and the South Asian and other ethnically diverse workers who lived and worked at the plant.

Established in 1904, Tod Inlet has historic and cultural value for being the workplace and communal living space for forty Sikh men, undocumented through official records, who arrived in 1906 to work at the Vancouver Portland Cement Company near Victoria, B.C.'s first cement plant.

It is significant that this group of men worked at the cement plant, because this type of work was a rare choice at a time when most South Asian immigrants gravitated to the lumber, sawmill and agricultural industries. Notably, when the Sikh workers left Tod Inlet approximately five years later, they relocated to places such as

Vancouver Island, Golden, Ocean Falls and other forest-based communities to work as loggers and in the province's sawmills.

Established at a time of restrictive immigration policies, particularly the "Continuous Journey" legislation of 1908 that obstructed South Asian immigration, Tod Inlet is culturally significant today because it was a multi-racial community and workplace for South Asian Canadian, Chinese Canadians, and First Nations employees. It was part of a segregated community that also included white engineers, managers and plant workers and their families.

Tod Inlet also has historic and cultural value as an illustration of the typical living and working conditions in South Asian Canadian worker communities at B.C.'s industrial sites, including the bunkhouses and temporary quarters that were a common fixture in B.C.'s early workplaces. South Asian Canadian workers often lived communally, with four to six men in each bunkhouse and meals eaten in one large building.

Tod Inlet has historic value for representing the sacrifice many South Asian workers made on early work sites in B.C., often for lower pay than their European counterparts. The site saw industrial accidents and deaths from hard labour in the limestone quarries, in the cement plant, and in loading bags

of cement on to ships for transport, as well as from diseases such as typhus and tuberculosis.

Tod Inlet has spiritual value as a place where South Asian Canadians practiced their own religious rituals when their fellow workers died in the course of their work. There is evidence that one of the earliest Sikh cremation ceremonies in B.C. took place at Tod Inlet.

Tod Inlet has historic and scientific value as the site of the first cement factory on the west coast and its associated limestone quarry and clay mining site. The cement manufacturing process and its transportation patterns are seen in the physical arrangement of the remains of the plant, wharf, and other historic resources on the site.

The remains of structures and artifacts on the site have scientific value for industrial archaeological investigations because the site is protected within the provincial park. The site has the potential to reveal more information about Tod Inlet's former residents and ways of life.

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Map data: Google, 2021



Historic Sites of Significance in BC

Khalsa Diwan Society Gurdwara

1866 West 2nd Avenue, Vancouver, B.C.

1908

Historic Place

The historic place is the original location of the Khalsa Diwan Society Sikh gurdwara at 1866 West 2nd Avenue, Vancouver, B.C.

Values

The Khalsa Diwan Society Gurdwara has historical, cultural, social and political value for being the home of the oldest Sikh society in Greater Vancouver and the centre of early South Asian life in the province, and for symbolizing the history of South Asians everywhere.

Constructed in 1908, the Khalsa Diwan Society Gurdwara is significant as the oldest Sikh Temple in North America. With the largest South Asian population in the province at that time, community, religious and political life centred around this gurdwara in Kitsilano at a time when most of the first South Asian immigrants in Vancouver found employment in the lumber mills located along False Creek.

The central importance of the Sikh temple in South Asian communities in B.C. in the early 20th century resulted from the fact that Sikhs at that time comprised the only South Asian group in B.C. populous enough to build, support and maintain temples or community centres. As part of South Asian culture in the Punjab, it was natural for practitioners of Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu religions to participate in each other's festivals and utilize each other's temples and shrines.

The gurdwara, while defined as the house of the Guru and a place for Sikh worship, is typical and notable for being welcoming to, and holding significance for, all immigrants from India during this early and often difficult period. Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims alike found refuge from racism and discrimination in the Khalsa Diwan Sikh Temple, which served as a religious, political, cultural, and social service centre for the entire South Asian immigrant population of the Lower Mainland during its early history.

Typical of gurdwaras across B.C., the Khalsa Diwan Sikh Temple is important for establishing sacred, cultural, social, community and political space for South Asian people in B.C. It is significant that, despite most South Asian immigrants being

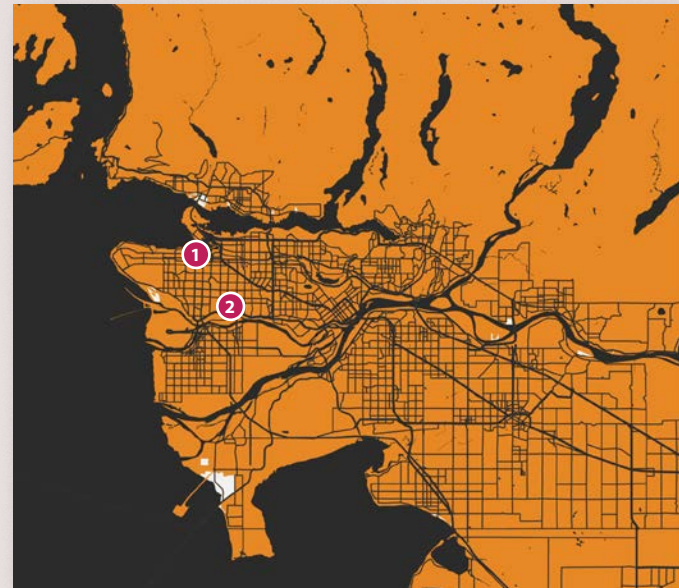
transient workers who only intended to stay in B.C. for a short time, the gurdwara grounded their presence through the creation of a spiritual space.

The gurdwara has social and historic value as a place where important political discussions and support related to South Asian immigration history took place. These include the 1907 anti-Asian riots, the 1908 anti-immigration laws, the 1913 Ghadar Movement for an independent India, and the forty-year struggle for enfranchisement between 1907 and 1947. Notably, the site was visited by Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. These discussions and events symbolize the struggles and achievements of the South Asian community in B.C. and elsewhere.

The gurdwara has historic value for its connection to the Komagata Maru incident of 1914. Its members advocated for the rights of the passengers of the Komagata Maru, a ship carrying South Asian migrants, held in Vancouver Harbour for two months, to be welcomed ashore and encouraged to immigrate.

Designed by William Henry Archer, the original gurdwara has aesthetic value for embodying the important aspects of traditional gurdwaras, such as a second-floor prayer hall, a room containing the *Guru Granth Sahib*, or sacred text, and the *langar*, or dining area and communal kitchen.

The construction of a new gurdwara and community centre on Ross Street in Vancouver and the movement of the congregation to the new space in 1970 reflects a shift in the employment patterns of South Asian workers in the city. Originally living near the sawmills along the False Creek, federal government changes to immigration regulations in 1967 resulted in a large expansion of South Asian settlement in South Vancouver. The Sikh community was now concentrated along south Main Street and Marine Drive in South Vancouver,



Map data: Google, 2021

(1) Location of the original gurdwara on West 2nd Avenue in Kitsilano. (2) Location of the new gurdwara and community centre on Ross Street.

near the Punjabi Market and industrial and other employment opportunities near the Fraser River.

The Arthur Erickson-designed Ross Street temple is notable for its modern interpretation of a traditional gurdwara but is connected to the original through a mosaic tile artwork brought from the Second Avenue building and incorporated into the design.

Consistent with its principles and beliefs, the Khalsa Diwan temple on Ross Street continues the Sikh tradition of assisting others. Actions such as providing temporary shelter for Vancouver's homeless demonstrates its continued social and cultural value to the South Asian community and beyond.

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Historic Sites of Significance in BC

Paldi

Near Duncan, Vancouver Island

c.1908

Historic Place

The community of Paldi is a former sawmilling town located in the Cowichan Valley 11 kilometres northwest of Duncan on Vancouver Island, B.C. The historic place is the location of a gurdwara (a temple or place of worship) that is still in frequent use by the community, a water tower remaining from the earlier sawmill operation, and several residences.

Values

Paldi has historical, cultural, social and spiritual value as evidence of South Asian Canadian participation in the early development of B.C., for its history of economic and cultural importance derived from South Asian Canadian success in the lumber and sawmilling industries, and for its continued importance to South Asian Canadians on Vancouver Island and across the province. Originally known as Mayo, postal authorities approved the name of Paldi for the settlement in 1936, chosen in honour of many of its workers' home village in the Punjab region of India.

With settlement beginning around 1908, Paldi is significant because the community became the centre of the South Asian Canadian forest industry in the Cowichan



Valley in central Vancouver Island between the time of its establishment and the closure of its sawmill after a devastating fire in 1945. It is representative of the settlement patterns of early twentieth century immigration during which South Asians, primarily Sikhs from the Punjab region of northern India, began arriving in B.C., just as the forest industry was expanding to become a dominant force in the provincial economy.

With its original exclusively male population, Paldi is a reminder of the exclusionary legislation of that time, the 1908 *Continuous Journey Regulation*, which effectively halted most South Asian immigration to Canada and isolated the pioneers who had arrived between 1904 and 1908. Paldi evolved into a vibrant village beginning after World War I, when the ban on new arrivals from India was lifted and South Asian women

were legally permitted to immigrate. With its community hall, school, company store, post office and housing for families, Paldi is recognized for being a close-knit company town with communal social, cultural and economic support.

Paldi is significant because of its long-standing economic influence as a source of employment and livelihood for the South Asian community on Vancouver Island and throughout the province, and as a symbol of the role South Asian Canadians played in the development of the lumber and sawmilling industries in B.C. Due to the racially discriminatory environment, South Asian workers developed a tightly knit network of mutual support based on work and religion.

Typical of entrepreneurial South Asian workers, a financial partnership of 35 was formed, enabling the purchase of private



Historic Sites of Significance in BC

forest reserves between Duncan and Lake Cowichan, the formation of the Mayo Lumber Company in 1917, and the expansion of a multi-cultural village at Paldi to include South Asian, Chinese and Japanese Canadian and Caucasian workers.

The partnership represents the South Asian community drawing strength from its own traditions, cultural values and equal financial opportunity. The town is also remarkable for having South Asian workers employed in highly skilled positions, at a time when there was racial segregation of occupations.

Paldi has historical and social value because of its association with well-known South Asian names in B.C.'s lumber and sawmilling industries, including founders Attar Doman Singh, Mayo Singh Manhas, originally the cook, and Kapoor Singh Siddoo, a bookkeeper, whose individual enterprises evolved into forest industry giants including Doman Lumber Industries, the Mayo Lumber Company, and the Kapoor Lumber Company.

Paldi is historically, culturally and spiritually significant because of the continuing presence of a Sikh gurdwara, a temple or place of worship, that served as the centre of social and religious activity. Originally constructed in 1919, the current 1959 gurdwara continues to be used by the local congregation and is considered a pilgrimage site for South Asians from Canada, India and elsewhere.

The gurdwara continues to contribute



to the social, cultural and spiritual value of Paldi, in part through its physical structure which retains key aspects of traditional gurdwaras: the second-floor prayer hall with space for worshippers to sit on the floor, four entrance doors, the Sukh Aasan (a room containing the 104-year-old Guru Granth Sahib holy book), and the langar, which includes a dining area and communal kitchen. The second-floor veranda along three sides of the building is representative of pioneer Sikh temples in B.C., permitting direct access into the prayer hall.

In keeping with the multi-cultural aspects of the community, the Sikh gurdwara was joined by a Japanese Buddhist temple in the mid-1920s.

Paldi is considered an evocative and

iconic place by members of B.C.'s South Asian Canadian community because it provides a sense of history and meaning for present generations and embodies the respect they feel for earlier generations who got their start in the community. As the place in B.C. where many early South Asian immigrants found homes and careers in forestry and sawmilling, it provided social, cultural and economic stability for several generations of South Asian Canadians.

The values found in the community of Paldi and its citizens—hard honest work, giving back to the community, and accepting all people—have enabled South Asian Canadians to become significant contributors to the cultural, social economic and political history of B.C.



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Historic Sites of Significance in BC

Gur Sikh Temple

33089 South Fraser Way Abbotsford, B.C.

C. 1911

Historic Place

The Gur Sikh Temple is a simple rectangular, gable-roofed building of wood-frame construction with a false-front façade that faces the street and has an open second-floor veranda with columns on three sides. It is located on a one-acre property in the centre of the city of Abbotsford, B.C.

Values

The Gur Sikh Temple has historic, cultural, social, spiritual and aesthetic value, particularly for its association with early Sikh pioneers in B.C. and because it is the oldest, remaining Sikh Temple in the western hemisphere.

Constructed in 1911 and officially opened in 1912, the gurdwara, or Sikh temple, is significant as a testament to the pride, vision and steadfastness of the Sikh pioneer community in the early 20th century and remains a symbol of their collective goal of

community-building and rights advocacy despite the explicit racism and discrimination they faced. It is also a representation of the hard work and tenacity of the first Sikhs who arrived in the Fraser Valley in 1905 from India's Punjab region to work on farms and in forestry. Early support from the Abbotsford community was demonstrated by acts such as the donation of local timber by the Abbotsford Lumber Company where a number of the men in the Sikh community worked.

Typical of gurdwaras in other parts of B.C., the Gur Sikh Temple has always provided sacred, cultural, social, community and political space for the Sikh community through its main function as a religious institution.

The temple has aesthetic and architectural value for embodying through its built form a mixture of traditional Sikh building practices and adaptations particular to conditions in B.C. With its frontier vernacular building style, the Gur Sikh Temple is unlike



Map data: Google, 2021



Historic Sites of Significance in BC

any other gurdwara in the world, with all of the elements of a traditional Sikh gurdwara adapted to conditions in B.C.

These local adaptations are found in elements such as the building's wood-frame construction, gable roof and false front; all similar features of commercial and institutional buildings in B.C.'s frontier towns of the era.

At the same time, the building encompasses Sikh building traditions, religious beliefs and practices. Key elements of a Sikh gurdwara are integrated into the structure, including the second-floor prayer hall with traditional space for worshippers to sit on the floor, four entrance doors, the Sukh Aasan a room containing the Guru Granth Sahib, or sacred text and living quarters for the Granthi, or spiritual reader of the text.

The langar, or dining area and communal kitchen where the free, vegetarian communal meal was prepared and eaten, was open to all and served to all visitors without discrimination based on religion, caste, gender, economic status or ethnicity, an affirmation of the Sikh tradition of equality. The second-floor veranda along three sides of the building permitting direct access into

the prayer hall is representative of other pioneer Sikh temples in B.C.

Continued social and cultural value is found in the careful 2007 restoration of the temple by its governing body, the Khalsa Diwan Society of Abbotsford, to ensure its ongoing use as a centre for prayer and congregation for the Sikh community and to preserve the history and memory of the Sikh pioneers who arrived in B.C. over a century ago.

The Gur Sikh Gurdwara gained additional commemorative significance in 2002 when it was designated as a National Historic Site by former Prime Minister Jean Chretien. This

designation was awarded in part for the building's historic value as the oldest surviving example of the temples which formed the religious, social and political centre of pioneer Canadian Sikh communities.

Today, the Gur Sikh Temple is significant as a place for conversation and community-building in the face of ongoing racism, ignorance and stereotyping, and for serving its current function as a Sikh heritage museum. The museum was opened during the building's centennial in 2011, as a place for all citizens to research, understand and experience Sikh history.

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Historic Sites of Significance in BC

Mahal Cranberry Farm

5780–5800 No. 7 Road Richmond, B.C.

c.1911, 1949

Historic Place

The Mahal Cranberry Farm, operated by Mahal Farms Ltd., is a 73-acre property of mixed farming (cranberries, vegetables, and nursery stock) located within the Agricultural Land Reserve in East Richmond, B.C. The historic place includes the early 1900s George Rathburn farmhouse.



Values

The Mahal Cranberry Farm has historical, cultural, aesthetic, economic and scientific value as the enterprise of three generations of South Asian farmers in British Columbia.

Operated by Kalvinder and Lavina Mahal since 1949, the Cranberry Farm has historic and cultural value for exemplifying the strong connection between the South Asian community and the agricultural industry in B.C. South Asian Canadians have made significant contributions to agriculture and food production in B.C.'s economy,

an industry that reflects their hard work, ingenuity and expertise.

The place is noteworthy as a farm that has been continuously operated by one family for nearly 70 years, and is one of the few remaining early farms representing the contribution of the South Asian farming community, and other immigrants, to Richmond and its agricultural industry.

A pioneering farming family, the arrival of the first generation of Mahals in 1908 is important for the connection to an influx in immigration from the South Asian community in the early 20th century. The family represents those early South Asian immigrants who came from the rural farming classes in their home countries to the then Township of Richmond, a community where many South Asians first worked when arriving from India. Easily accessed from Vancouver, South Asian Canadians picked berries, cultivated potatoes, or worked in the agricultural fields in Richmond until they were able to purchase their own farms or find work in the nearby Fraser River sawmills.

The Mahal's commitment to the cultivation of cranberries has historic value

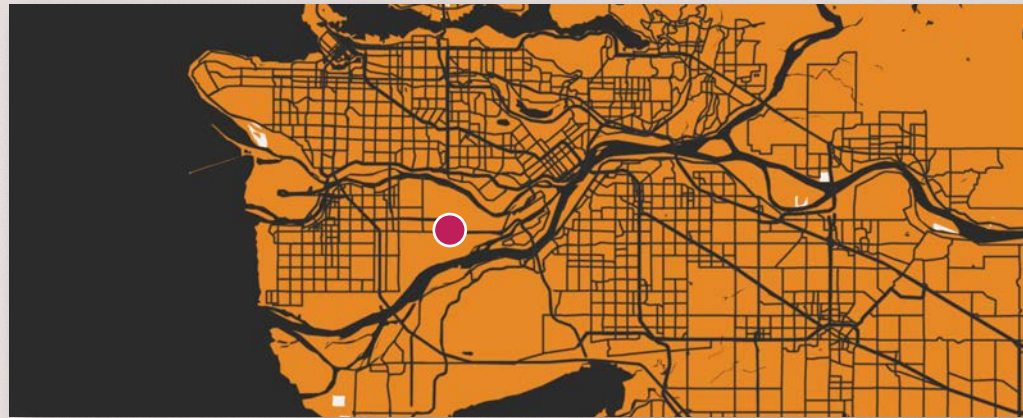
for its connection to a crop that has been continuously grown and thrived in the peat bogs of East Richmond since the 1920s. The family is one of a handful of Richmond cranberry growers supplying 90% of the total Canadian production of a crop that has become an agricultural and economic symbol for the city.

Constructed c.1911, the original Rathburn farmhouse has historic and aesthetic value because it is one of the few remaining early farmhouses that illustrate a typical Richmond farm of the early twentieth century that were characterized by a large farmhouse with an associated barn and outbuildings set in an agricultural landscape. The house is an Edwardian-era gable-front house, a style prevalent in B.C.'s Lower Mainland prior to World War I, a common style of building at that time that represents the everyday lives of farmers or the middle class.

In addition to their contribution to the continuing viability of agriculture in Richmond, the Mahals are committed to the protection of the Rathburn House from demolition, relocation and exterior modification.

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Map data: Google, 2021



Historic Sites of Significance in BC

Guru Nanak Mining and Trust Company Building

1742 West 2nd Avenue Vancouver, B.C.

c. 1912

Historic Place

The historic place is the site of the former Guru Nanak Mining and Trust Company Building at 1742 West 2nd Avenue in Vancouver, B.C., now an area of newly developed businesses, studios and retail shops.

Values

The former location of the Guru Nanak Mining and Trust Company Building has historical, cultural and social significance, primarily through its association with its founder, Sant (Professor) Teja Singh. Teja Singh was a revered Sikh teacher, scholar and translator of the Sikh sacred texts. Educated in Britain and the United States, Teja Singh provided invaluable religious and political leadership for South Asian pioneers in B.C. in the early years of immigration prior to World War I. Arriving in Vancouver in 1909 at the behest of the local South Asian community, Teja Singh pioneered efforts, through the establishment of the Trust Company, to fight for South Asian Canadian justice in B.C., at a time when discrimination against South Asians was at its height.

It is notable that the company had its origins in the Khalsa Diwan Society Gurdwara, an important Vancouver Sikh temple, at 1866 West 2nd Avenue, which was a place for South Asian religious activities and



Map data: Google, 2021

community gathering. The company moved its operations to the nearby location at 1742 West 2nd Avenue in 1912. Both the gurdwara and the new company offices were located in an area near False Creek, a part of Vancouver favoured by South Asian immigrants due to its location near the sawmills and other wood processing companies that dominated the False Creek basin, and where many South Asian Canadians were employed.

The Trust Company was important because it was established as a reaction to the Canadian government's discriminatory immigration laws against South Asians. Policies such as the Continuous Journey Regulation enacted in 1908 were designed to stop all immigration from India. Under the regulation, immigrants seeking entry had to come to Canada by continuous journey with through-tickets from the country of their birth or citizenship, an impossibility at that time. Through the Trust Company, Teja Singh also sought to change the negative image of South Asians in the eyes of the citizens of B.C. and to support the South Asian community in its quest to bring their wives and children to Canada.

The Trust Company has historic and social value because it secured the economic welfare of the local South Asian Canadian community by organizing unemployed South Asians into an incorporated company of landowners.

Based on the Sikh principles of hard work, sharing and brotherhood, its directors,



including prominent local Sikhs Bhag Singh (president) and Atma Singh (secretary), sought investments in farmland, mining companies, and real estate, such as its purchase of a large tract of land in North Vancouver to be used for market gardening. It is also important for its recruitment of prominent Sikh community members as directors and employees, further heightening is legitimacy and success.

Sources

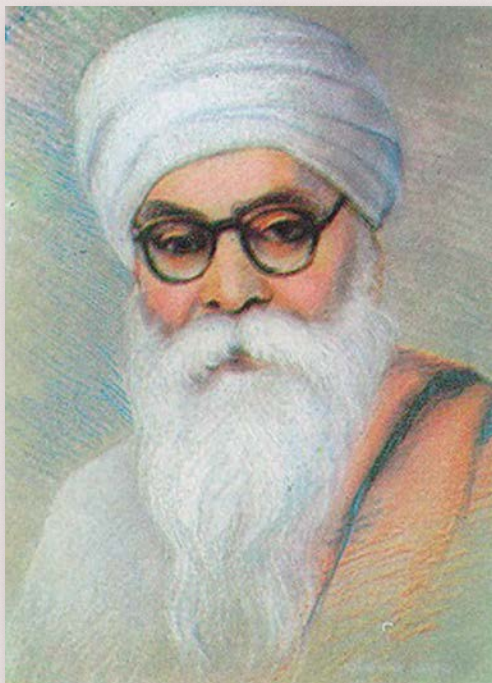
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Historic Sites of Significance in BC

Topaz Avenue Sikh Gurdwara

1210 Topaz Avenue, Victoria, B.C.

Original 1912, rebuilt 1969

Historic Place

The Topaz Avenue Sikh Gurdwara is a two-storey, square-massed temple with a gable-on-hip roof, tall front stair, second-story verandah, dome, and ornamental entry gates. It is set on top of a hill at Topaz Avenue and Blackwood Streets in central Victoria, B.C. Situated at a high point of land, the building is surrounded by a stone and metal picketed wall and has panoramic views across the city.



Values

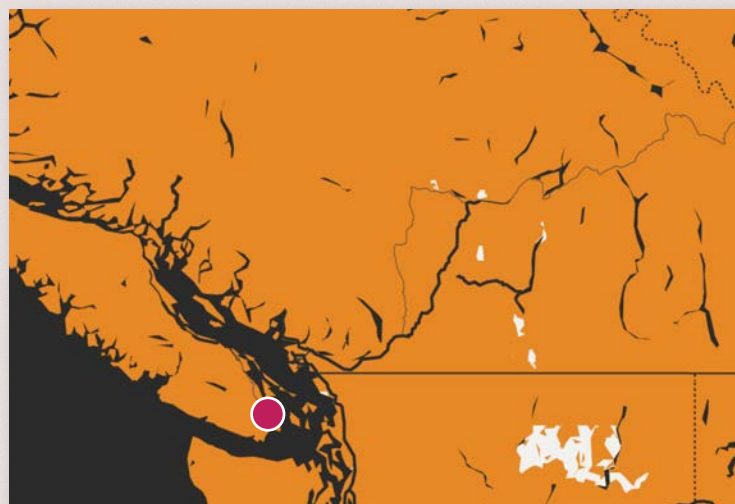
The Topaz Avenue Sikh Gurdwara has historical, cultural, social, spiritual and aesthetic value, particularly for its association with early Sikh pioneers in B.C.'s capital of Victoria.

Originally constructed in 1912 by the Victoria Khalsa Diwan Society and the third gurdwara established in the province, after Vancouver and Abbotsford, the Topaz Avenue Sikh Gurdwara has historic value for representing the hard work and tenacity of the first South Asian pioneers who arrived in the Victoria area in 1904. Typical of many South Asian Canadian immigrants, many found work in Vancouver Island's growing

forest industry, and in nearby lumber mills along the Gorge Waterway. South Asian Canadians in other Vancouver Island communities remember the gurdwara as an important part of their lives upon their arrival in B.C.

While the original 1912 brick and wood building at this location was a traditional design by architect H.S. Griffith, the current gurdwara building, constructed in 1969, has aesthetic value for representing a modern interpretation of the gurdwara while retaining the key aspects of traditional design. These include the second-floor prayer hall with traditional space for worshippers to sit on the floor, four entrance doors, the *Sukh Aasan* (a room containing the *Guru Granth Sahib*), *langar*, or dining area and communal kitchen. The second-floor veranda along three sides of the building is representative of some pioneer Sikh temples in B.C., permitting direct access into the prayer hall.

The gurdwara, meaning "the doorway to the guru," has historic and spiritual value as a place of worship and as a community gathering space, both historically and today, for those in the South Asian community. The early temple offered South Asian community members a place to practice their faith, connect with others, and receive the spiritual and emotional support needed to retain their faith while enduring the racism and discrimination against South Asians prevalent in B.C. during the first half of the



Map data: Google, 2021

20th century. The temple was also important as a place where members practiced the age-old tradition of *langar* in which travelers and pilgrims of all faiths and stations in life could rest here and be given food.

Social value is found in the fundraising efforts of the community to build the new gurdwara. Many of the men associated with the Khalsa Diwan society travelled to solicit donations for the project, using their influence as successful businessmen and community leaders to convince businesses such as BC Forest Products and Imperial Building Materials to donate money based on the relationships, they had formed with the Sikh community over time.

The Topaz Avenue gurdwara has cultural value for the 2012 celebration of the 100th anniversary of its founding, an occasion for commemoration by the South Asian community in Victoria, Vancouver Island and the province. The centennial offered time for reflection about the growth and achievements of the South Asian community since the founding of the original gurdwara.

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Historic Sites of Significance in BC

Burrard Inlet, Coal Harbour, Komagata Maru

Vancouver, B.C.

1914

Historic Place

The historic place is comprised of both the location in Vancouver's Coal Harbour in Burrard Inlet where the ship *Komagata Maru*, carrying potential South Asian immigrants from India, was detained at anchor for over two months, and the site of plaques, artworks and a commemorative installation in nearby Portal Park in Coal Harbour that memorialize the *Komagata Maru* incident.

Values

The location of the *Komagata Maru* incident has historic, cultural, social, and spiritual values for South Asian Canadians because it symbolizes the hardship endured by 376 South Asian Canadian immigrants affected by the detainment of the vessel that lasted from May 23 to July 23, 1914. Denied entry into the country, with its passengers were forced to stay on board for over two months while the ship remained anchored in the waters of Vancouver's Coal Harbour. The *Komagata Maru* incident has become one of the defining and resonant events in the history of South Asian Canadians in B.C.

The historic place is significant because it symbolizes the restrictive federal and provincial immigration policies in place at the time, as well as the wider context of the British Empire and its colonies, including Canada. In response to the anti-Asian riots in Vancouver in 1907, the federal government restricted all immigration from India as well as from China and Japan.

The site of the *Komagata Maru* incident is politically and socially significant because it symbolizes both a momentous

confrontation between embedded Canadian immigration policy and legitimate South Asian Canadian immigrants, and the 50-year struggle of the South Asian community in B.C. and Canada for citizenship, finally granted in 1947.

Despite their status as British citizens from India, primarily Sikhs, the South Asian immigrants aboard the *Komagata Maru* were not exempt or protected from the immigration policies put in place by the Canadian government. Politically motivated officials endeavoured to exclude South Asians from B.C. based on their colour and their race, which was a race-based violation of human rights. The ship's passengers were from the Punjab region of India, a place where they were often prosperous and educated farmers who could emigrate independently and were seen to pose an economic threat to the white working establishment in Canada.

The historic place is also valued as a reminder of the determination of South Asian Canadians to immigrate to B.C., and

the support provided by earlier South Asian immigrants and their established institutions, such as the Khalsa Diwan Society gurdwara in Vancouver.

Social, spiritual and cultural value is found in the contemporary commemoration of the incident at the *Komagata Maru* monument in Coal Harbour, erected in 1912 and designed to reflect B.C.'s commitment to respecting and honouring cultural differences and traditions. There have been other commemorations, including a museum at the Khalsa Diwan Society gurdwara on Ross Street in Vancouver and a short-term contemporary art exhibit at the Surrey Art Gallery.

Despite the multi-cultural nature of present society and a formal apology from the federal government in 2015, the historic place associated with the *Komagata Maru* event reflects the fact that racism remains an issue up to today, further demonstrating the significant historic value of this site to contemporary British Columbia.

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Map data: Google, 2021



Historic Sites of Significance in BC

Kapoor, Sooke Lake

Near Sooke, B.C.

c:1928–1940

Historic Place

The historic place is the former site of the Kapoor Lumber Company sawmill, located at near Sooke Lake at Mile-35 on the Canadian National Railway line at the point where the Canadian National Railway tracks cross Council Creek. The site falls within the Greater Victoria, B.C. watershed near the Kapoor family woodlot and Kapoor Regional Park at Leechtown and is located within the Capital Regional District.

Values

The historic sawmilling site of Kapoor has historical, cultural, social and archaeological significance because it illustrates the ubiquity and enterprise of South Asian Canadians in the lumber industry in B.C., and their cultural and economic contributions to the province.

Established in 1928, the site of the Kapoor Lumber Company operation has historic and cultural value for its economic contribution to the lumber industry in B.C. and for its association with well-known B.C. forestry entrepreneurs Kapoor Singh Siddoo and his associate Mayo Singh, director and founder respectively, of the 1917 Mayo Lumber Company.

Building on the company's success with its mill at Paldi, Kapoor and Mayo purchased timber lands near Sooke Lake, northwest of Victoria on Vancouver Island. The railway logging operation and sawmill that became the Kapoor site is important as a testament to the success of Kapoor, Mayo and other South Asians in B.C.'s lumber industry.

Typical of lumber work camps of the time, the workers lived in culturally segregated bunkhouses in a mill town that grew up adjacent to the CNR railway line. Both the



Map data: Google, 2021

town and railway station were officially named Kapoor. Operating at a time when finding employment was difficult for South Asian immigrants primarily due to economic depression—1928 to 1940—the mill was an important source of employment, housing and support for up to 300 European, Canadian, South Asian, Chinese and Japanese Canadian workers.

Both the Kapoor Lumber Company and Kapoor Singh Siddoo are important to the South Asian Canadian immigrant community, particularly in relation to Sikh immigration history in B.C. Arriving in the province in 1912, Kapoor Singh Siddoo overcame racial prejudice and legal discrimination to transform himself into a successful lumber entrepreneur, and a central figure in B.C. as a businessman, employer, community leader, and activist. He is also known for respecting and advocating for people of other cultures and their human rights.

As the location of the flourishing Kapoor Lumber Company, the historic place emphasizes Kapoor Singh's successful timber and sawmilling operation, an enterprise significant for helping South Asian immigrants get established through employment and support. It is also valued as a reminder of his work towards achieving full citizenship rights and changes in immigration regulations for South Asian immigrants.

The continued social value of the site is reflected in the creation of the charitable Kapoor Singh Siddoo Foundation, and in the Kapoor family's donation of part of Kapoor Singh Siddoo's timber holdings near the original sawmill site to create Kapoor Regional Park in 1999. Located near the former gold mining community of Leechtown, the park is dedicated to "pioneer lumberman and visionary, Kapoor Singh Siddoo, 1885–1964."

While no standing structures remain, the Kapoor sawmill site has scientific and educational value for the mining and logging artifacts - saw blades, locomotive boiler, concrete foundations and remnants of the logging railway—present in the area which, along with the second-growth forest on Kapoor Singh Siddoo's original timber lands, are tangible evidence and a testament to the industry that once flourished in these woods.

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Historic Sites of Significance in BC

Akali Singh Sikh Temple

Original location 467 & 471 East 11th Avenue, Vancouver, B.C.

1959–1983

Historic Place

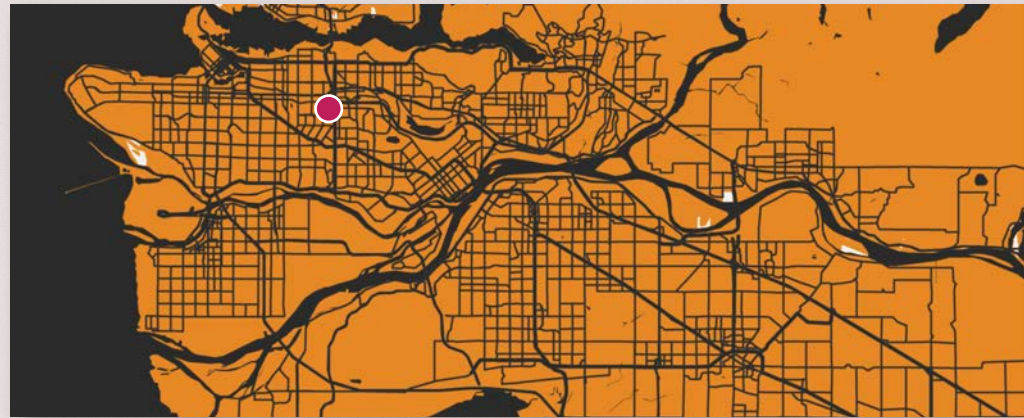
The historic place is the original location of the Akali Singh Sikh Temple at 467 & 471 East 11th Avenue, Vancouver. The Gurdwara operated there from 1959 until 1983.



Values

The original location of the Akali Singh Sikh Temple is significant for its historical, social and spiritual values, primarily for the central role it played in the cultural, social and political life of the Sikh community in Vancouver beginning in the mid-twentieth century.

Established in 1959, the original location of the Akali Singh Sikh Temple is a reminder of the importance of religious and community life in the Sikh tradition, part of which is



Map data: Google, 2021

the Sikh tradition of seva, or selfless service. The original location of the gurdwara, or door to the Guru, was the religious, social and community support centre for a large segment of the Sikh community in Vancouver between early 1959 and 1983.

Like other gurdwaras across British Columbia, the original location of the Akali Singh Sikh Temple is important because it established sacred, cultural, social, community and political space for Sikhs in British Columbia. Important community meetings took place at this location, with the temple also serving as a cultural hub where new immigrants to Vancouver found support.

While traditional gurdwaras welcomed practitioners of all religions, the original location of the Akali Singh Temple is important because it stands as a reminder of historical tensions that emerged in the 1950s between orthodox Sikhs, those who practise the fundamental principles prescribed in Sikh religious scripture and doctrine, and the non-orthodox, moderate Sikhs who favoured blending in with western culture and appearance. This was caused in part by the increase in the number of Sikh migrants, many clean-shaven and without turbans, who arrived in the early 1950s following changes to Canada's immigration laws after India's independence from Britain in 1947.

As a result of these tensions, a group

of orthodox Sikhs broke away from their previous association with the Khalsa Diwan Society in 1952 and established the Akali Singh Society in order to maintain traditional Sikh practice. The original location of the temple is significant today as a place that continued to uphold orthodox Sikh religious procedures through the new Akali Singh Sikh Society.

The original location of the Akali Singh Sikh Temple on the south slope of Vancouver is important to recognize this place for its close proximity to the sawmills of False Creek where many South Asian immigrants found employment, a working class area that embodies the humble beginnings of the South Asian Canadian community in B.C. The expansion of the gurdwara into two adjacent buildings at this site in 1974 was an indicator of the increasing growth and prosperity of the South Asian Canadian community throughout the province at that time, which necessitated a move to the current Skeena Street location in 1983.

Although the property at the original temple site is no longer owned by the Akali Singh Sikh Society, it remains an important memory of a religious and cultural hub for the Sikh community in Vancouver for almost 30 years. The gurdwara played a significant role in Vancouver's South Asian community life and representing the contributions of all South Asian Canadians to B.C.

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South Asian Canadian Historic Places

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Historic Sites of Significance in BC

Punjabi Market

Main Street between 48th and 51st Avenues,
Vancouver B.C. (also known as "Little India")

c. 1970s

Historic Place

The Punjabi Market is a four-block long commercial streetscape on Vancouver's Main Street between 48th and 51st Avenues. It is home to a variety of South Asian businesses and services including restaurants, retail stores, medical and legal services and other amenities serving both the South Asian and general population.



Values

The Punjabi Market is significant for its historical, cultural and social values, particularly through the many businesses which collectively established the Punjabi Market, and for the cultural significance of the area as a nucleus for vibrant South Asian culture and community in B.C.

The Punjabi Market is considered one of the most significant cultural and social landmarks for the South Asian community in B.C. because it evokes the customs and traditions of South Asian Canadians, and for the high emotional and historical attachment of South Asian Canadians to this area of Vancouver which promotes and celebrates their traditional culture. Bhangra music, colourful clothing and jewelry and



Map data: Google, 2021

the aroma of South Asian foods and spices evoke a particular sense of place.

A vibrant and diverse space, the market is important for being not only a place for shopping, but a venue for cultural and community gatherings. The Market has cultural value as the focal point of the annual Diwali Festival and the Vaisakhi Parade celebrating the Punjabi New Year in April of each year.

The Punjabi Market has historical value for being, in part, the result of changes to federal immigration legislation. While the area was originally populated more than a century ago by immigrant South Asian labourers drawn to the lumber industry, the significance of the Punjabi Market as a cultural entity emerged after changes to immigration regulations in 1967.

The assessment of newcomers based on skills rather than ethnicity, along with the rise of multiculturalism as official federal government policy, resulted in a large expansion of South Asian settlement in South Vancouver. Newcomers were often culturally and linguistically diverse professionals. This new community became inextricably woven into Vancouver's cultural fabric, creating a catalyst for the expansion of the Punjabi Market as a cultural entity, with its predominantly Punjabi culture, businesses, shops and services.

By the 1980s, the Punjabi Market and its goods, restaurants and services were significant as a focal point for the province's South Asian community. As South Asian

goods were difficult to find, people from all over B.C. made the Punjabi Market a destination for merchandise, services, culture and events, adding to the site's provincial significance. It became so well known that residents from other provinces and parts of the United States also made the journey to the market.

It is notable that, in 1993, the significance of the Punjabi Market as a singular cultural neighbourhood was recognized by the City of Vancouver with the installation of bilingual street signs in Punjabi and English.

Today, the Punjabi Market includes housing, South Asian retail shops and restaurants, streetscape improvements and public art. It is important for its role in the continued celebration of the Punjabi community's contribution to the city and province.

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Historic Sites of Significance in BC

Jogindar Bains Park

Lake Cowichan, B.C.

2009

Historic Place

Jogindar Bains Park is a small, triangular grassy open space located on the edge of Cowichan Lake in the small Vancouver Island logging community of Lake Cowichan, B.C. A commemorative plaque recognizing Jogindar Singh Bains is located near the park entry.

Values

Jogindar Bains Park has historic, social and cultural value primarily as a memorial to South Asian pioneer and province-builder Jogindar Singh Bains and the sawmill operation he developed at this site.

Jogindar Bains Park is significant for its association with Sikh pioneer Jogindar Singh Bains, a lumber and sawmilling entrepreneur, developer and humanitarian whose work helps represent the South Asian Canadian community's economic and social contributions to the province.

The Park is valued as being representative of the South Asian pioneer experience and their accomplishments in B.C. Arriving in the province in 1932 as a 17-year-old unaccompanied minor, Jogindar Bains found work at the Kapoor sawmill operation at Leechtown near Sooke. After first opening a sawmill at nearby Bear Mountain, Jogindar Bains developed the mill at the present site on Lake Cowichan in 1956.

Jogindar Bains' small-scale, 25-employee Lake Cowichan mill was considered a model modern operation, pioneering the use of electricity and employing primarily First Nations and South Asian Canadian workers. His enterprise eventually included building supply and hardware businesses, trucking and bulldozing operations, and the development and construction of residential housing.

The Park, along with its memorial plaque, is important for its recognition of a citizen who believed in Canadian values while cherishing his own spiritual and cultural legacy as a Sikh and South Asian. With a long record of contributions to the South Asian community in B.C., Jogindar Bains built his values on the Sikh tradition of Seva or selfless service. This included assisting new immigrants, funding efforts for South Asian Canadian voting rights and citizenship,

espousing multi-culturalism and respecting the rights of First Nations.

While the mill is no longer in existence, the Lake Cowichan community continues to value the legacy of the lumber company started by entrepreneur Jogindar Singh Bains, particularly the company's community goals. These included a commitment to cultural diversity and multiculturalism, work on repatriation with local First Nations, initiatives focusing on immigration issues, and other community endeavours of importance to the South Asian community.

The renaming and dedication of the park in 2009 is an example of the community's continuing regard for Jogindar Bains and his association with the historic place.

Sources

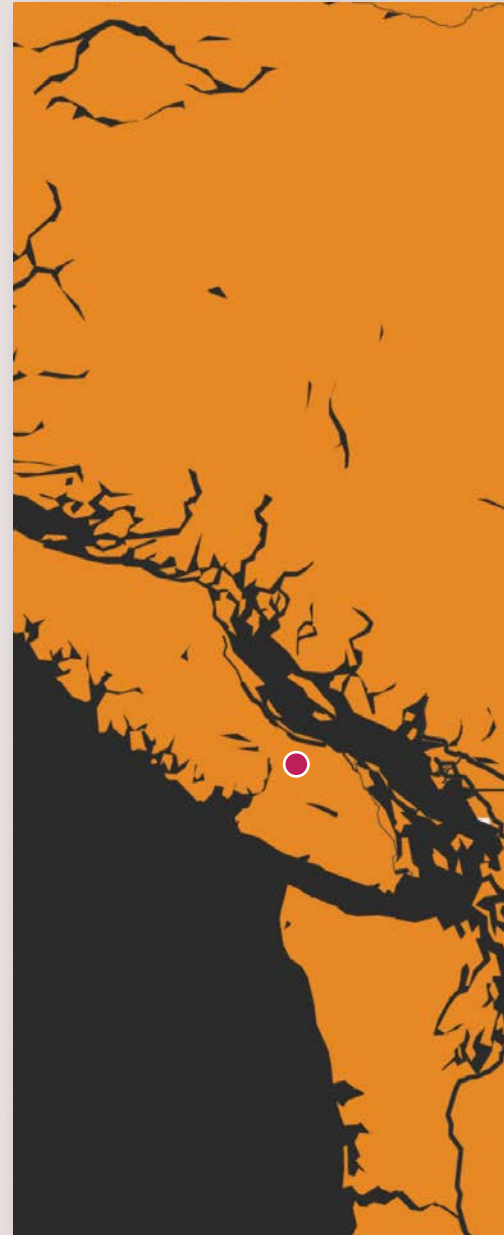
Ka'atza Station Museum and Archives, Lake Cowichan.

"April 1 for Opening New Jogindar Mill." *Lake Cowichan Leader*, Thursday March, 1956.

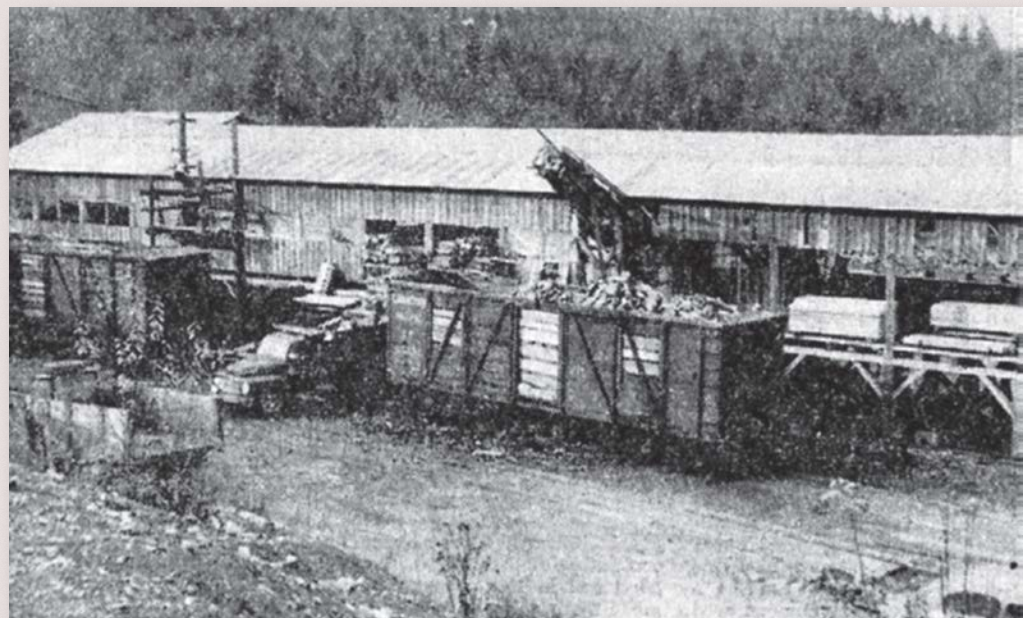
"Jogindar Sawmill Busy Lake Producer." *Lake Cowichan Leader*, Thursday November 21, 1957.

Naveen Bains. Background material for the BC 150 Mosaic Grant: Honouring the diverse cultures that have shaped this province. 2008.

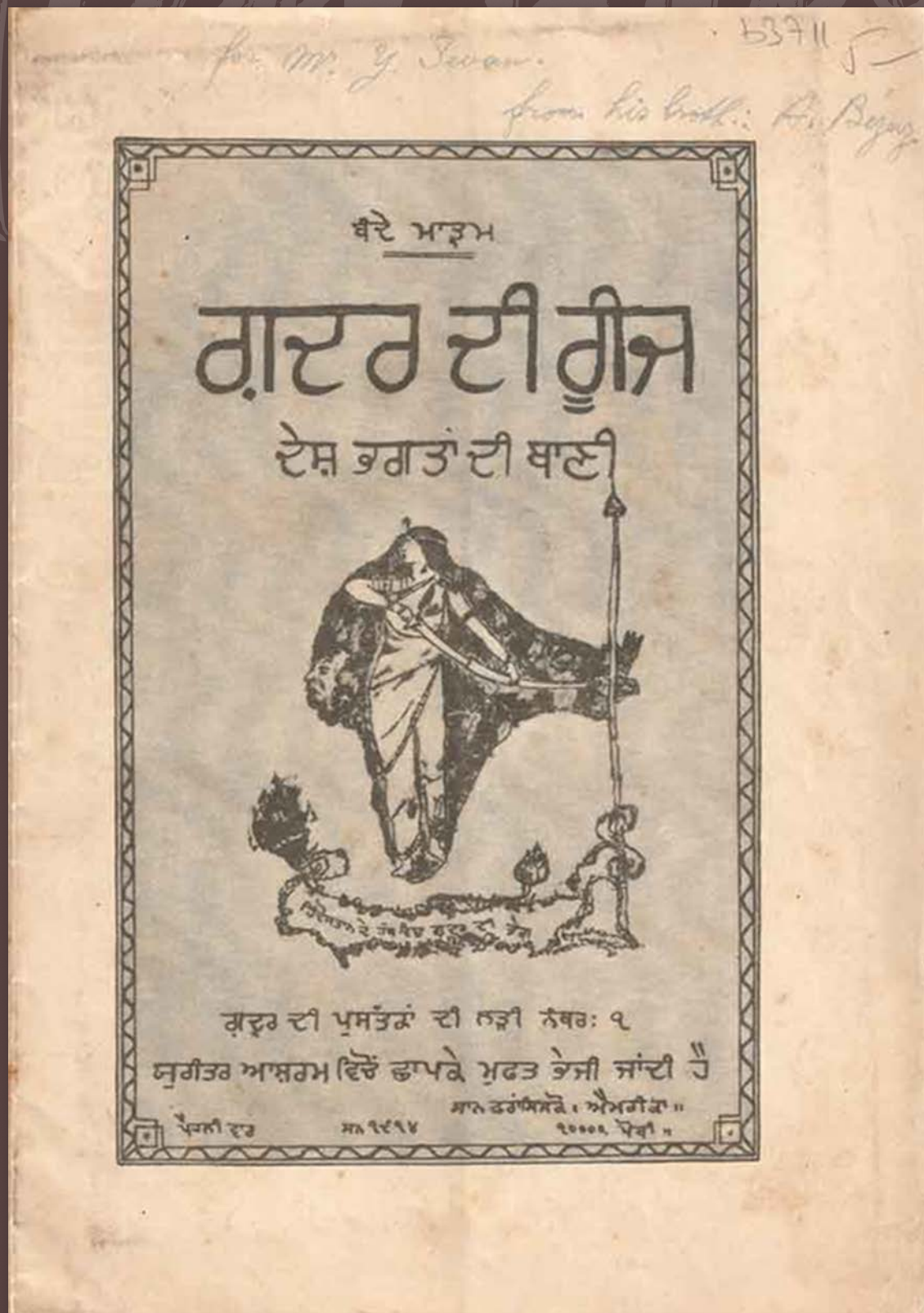
Naveen Bains. Personal communication. South Asian Canadian Historic Places Recognition Project nomination form, Jogindar Singh Bains Memorial Park.



Map data: Google, 2021



Miravation



Ghadar di Goonj, Volume 1.

Courtesy of Toronto Public Library.

Footsteps in time

The Ghadar Movement and its Impact on South Asian Canadian Women

Rishma Johal

ABSTRACT

As a revolutionary movement in North America in the early 1900's men of South Asian descent rallied together in the Pacific Northwest to fight against oppressive and racist immigration laws as well as develop a pro-national movement against British Raj overseas. The Ghadar Leher was composed of intellectuals and labourers wanting to improve people's living conditions. While women did not receive public recognition for their contributions, their influence was certainly felt across the movement. As a defining moment in Canadian history for South Asian newly arrived immigrants, Ghadar literature fails to give account to women's contributions to the cause. This chapter explores South Asian women's relationship to Ghadar through personal agency, activism and sheer determination to support the men who developed literary, political and nationalist responses to their second class conditions in North America and under British rule in India.

KEY WORDS

Ghadar, women, immigration, British Raj, colonialism, White supremacy

Academics need to consistently examine history from a new perspective and challenge its preoccupation with men by exploring how notable incidents affect women. Although, Anglo-Canadian feminists contributed to the growth of this literature after the 1960's, most racialized women's histories remain unknown, including those of South Asian women (Agnew, 2003; Manhas, 2009; Hamilton, 2005).¹ Nevertheless, despite how particular instances are documented, it is undoubtable that all women, regardless of race, have their own influence as well as have significant influence on men's lives. In the early 20th century, within Anglo-Canadian and South Asian societies, women's role were confined to the domestic sphere but, as daughters, sisters, mothers, wives,

or neighbors, they still influenced men's decisions (Hamilton, 2005; LeGates, 2001). They supported men through numerous endeavours such as the provision of necessities, cooking, cleaning, taking care of children, offering moral support, and discussing political events (Gupta, 1994; Hamilton, 2005; Handa, 2003; Naidoo, 2003). Consequently, women's absence had implications for men, which was evident during the Ghadar movement in North America and beyond.² Historical records confirm that only seven South Asian women may have been present in Canada when the Ghadarites began agitating.³ A closer analysis reveals that the Canadian colonial government's refusal to allow South Asian women to enter Canada angered and frustrated the efforts of South Asian men to be united with their

families. This rejection consolidated their support for the Ghadar movement because the exclusion of their wives demonstrated to them that they, despite being British subjects, held an inferior status than their white counterparts. This chapter suggests that the Canadian government's ban on the migration of South Asian women increased support for the Ghadar among South Asian Canadian men, and this history continues to shape South Asian Canadian women's experiences. I will first provide an overview of the Ghadar movement. I will then examine how this background affected early South Asian Canadian women and highlight their contributions towards the establishment of a local community. Finally, I will explore how past patterns persist among South Asian Canadian women in the modern day and age.

The insights of anti-racist feminism inform this study in its aim to explore South Asian women's relationship to Ghadar. Anti-racist feminists recognize the family as a refuge for women of colour in the face of extensive racism; in fact, they denounce western feminists for degrading the importance of these relationships within women's lives (Bannerji, 2000; Gupta, 1994; Hamilton, 2005; Ralston, 1991). Anti-racist feminists also acknowledge the oppressive structure that patriarchal relations pose but they explicate that the family and community become a source of strength when racism imposes greater subordination (Agnew, 2003; Bannerji, 1993; Gupta, 1994). This was evident within Canadian policies that reflected explicit gendered racism such as racist legislated immigration requirements (Gogia & Slade, 2011; Habib, 2003). This chapter interrogates secondary sources about South Asian Canadian history, the Ghadar movement, and South Asian women's experiences to form a collective narrative. There are methodological issues with conducting this type of research because there is no way to recount the opinions of those who have passed away. In addition, men who overlook women's significance have written many accounts that this chapter uses to analyze the Ghadar movement's effect on women. Yet, these facts accentuate the importance of conducting this type of study, despite methodological issues because South Asian Canadian women's stories are entirely missing in the record.

The Ghadar era is a definitive moment in Canadian history that historians remember as male oriented

and few English sources on this topic incorporate any women's perspectives. Historical accounts of the movement by Hundal (2012), Juergensmeyer (1988), Ramnath (2005), B. Singh (2001), and N. Singh (1994) fail to provide an adequate account of women's relationship to Ghadar. *A Witness to the Ghadar Era*, an interview with Kartar Dhillon is the only source that examines a woman's point of view. More recently, scholars have examined South Asian Canadian women's experiences such as Bannerji (1993), Gupta (1994), Handa (2003), Naidoo (2003), Ralston (1991), and Zaman (2006); which vary from immigration studies, psychology, sociology, and gender studies to research on inter-generational conflict. Agnew (2003) documents many of these in *Gender, Home, and Nation: A Century of Writings by South Asian Women in Canada*, yet she asserts that they do not describe the experiences of women who arrived in the early 1900's. *The Jewels of the Qila* and *Zhindagee: The Selected Stories of our First Daughters* are the only sources that provide a glimpse into the lives of early settler South Asian Canadian women (Johnston, 2011; Manhas, 2009). Furthermore, Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava's (1985) *Continuous Journey: A Social History of South Asians in Canada*, Gupta's *Political Economy of Gender, Race, and Class*, K. Sharma's (1997) *The Ongoing Journey*, and J. Singh's (1982) *The Ghadar Party: Political Expression in an Immigrant Community* portray a correlation between South Asian women's exclusion, and the Ghadar's popularity. This chapter utilizes a combination of sources in association with tenets of anti-racist feminism to examine the Ghadar movement's effects on South Asian Canadian women.

Gendered understandings have traditionally demarcated the roles and duties of South Asian men and women. Cultural beliefs about femininity pre-ordained the destiny of those born female. A woman's responsibility was primarily her home and children, particularly among Punjabi families from the upper echelons of society (Johnston, 2011; Manhas, 2009). However, in other regions of South Asia as well as the underprivileged and scheduled castes, women worked outside the home (Rai S. M., 2008).⁴ Relationships of men and women among the scheduled castes were more egalitarian due to the nature of caste oppression (Pande, 2007). Furthermore, Rai explains that the British exacerbated

the division between men and women in Punjab when they established the Zamindar System because it divided labour done for the production of cash crops from that done for the provision of food.⁵ The British added a monetary value to men's production work, while ignoring women's contributions, which further devalued their role (Rai S. M., 2008). Nevertheless, many South Asian cultures embedded forms of misogyny and sexism before the British arrived. The ancient lawgiver of Hinduism, Manu, instituted various customs that ordained female subservience.⁶ For instance, he argued that one could only obtain *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of birth and death) if a son lit their funeral pyre (Buhler, 2011). Although not all Hindus strictly followed these practises, the laws induced son preference and degraded women (Naidoo, 2003). The Sikh gurus sought to end misogyny by emphasizing the importance of women as homemakers and mothers but negative cultural perceptions about women persisted (Singh N.-G. K., 2004). In addition, among most South Asians, it was women's duty to pass on traditional beliefs and gendered customs to their children (Gupta, 1994; Rai S. M., 2008). Dhillon shares her mother's teachings, "You must remember that a woman is subservient to a man. When she is a child, she obeys her father; if he should die, then she must obey her oldest brother. When a woman marries, her husband is her master. If she becomes a widow, then she must defer to her sons" (1989). This quote portrays the secondary position that women were expected to adopt. Subsequently, South Asian women held a marginal status in comparison to men, but this should not underestimate their ability to negotiate better circumstances for themselves.

The Early Years

In 1897, Britain rejoiced as Queen Victoria completed sixty years of her reign. Of course, this was no ordinary regime; rather the Queen's diamond jubilee marked the height of the British Empire, and the highlight of these celebrations was the Indian Calvary. South Asian officers in the British army, who had served in various South Eastern colonies, travelled through Canada to attend this event. Vancouver's newspapers expressed enthusiasm to see these men through headlines such as 'Turbaned Men Excite Interest' and 'Awe-Inspiring Men from India Held the Crowds' (Buchignani, Indra,

& Srivastava, 1985). The excitement re-occurred during King Edward VII's coronation in 1903 when Canadians welcomed Indian British Army officers as they passed through the country again (Sharma A. K., 1997). More importantly, scholars acknowledge these officers for initiating a substantial movement of Punjabi men to Canada, but it was mainly poor financial circumstances that impelled their movement (Basran & Bolaria, 2003; Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985; Singh J., 1982). These men informed locals in their home country and colonial settlements about economic opportunities on the behest of many labour companies (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985; Singh B., 2001). Employers that required cheap labourers recruited Indians by falsely advertising about opportunities in Canada (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985). As a result, the first South Asian migrants to Canada were composed of men searching for a better life, free of the colonial yoke.

Many South Asian men already worked in British colonies for the British Empire in countries such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, or Singapore before moving to Canada (Basran & Bolaria, 2003). Ninety-five percent of these immigrants came originally from Punjab, a region that expands across current day northern India's East Punjab and Pakistan's West Punjab — a large region that was partitioned in 1947 by the retreating British Raj (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985). These men found work on the railroad alongside Chinese and Japanese migrants or in the lumber mills (Basran & Bolaria, 2003; Singh N., 1994). Contrary to the beliefs of Anglo-Canadians who regarded them as a subordinate, disposable labour force, the South Asian men that came to Canada were proud British officers and considered themselves British subjects (Johnston, 2011). Discrepancies among the perspectives of South Asians and Anglo-Canadians, regarding the political status of South Asians fuelled dissonance that accentuated support for the Ghadar movement among South Asians.

The colonial Canadian government had always held a strong desire to remain predominantly Anglo-Saxon — 'White Canada' — and legislated immigration policies barred the entrance of other racial groups. Initially South Asians succeeded in migrating to Canada only because the government was preoccupied with banning Chinese and Japanese migrants in the early 1900's

(Singh N., 1994). However, South Asian men's presence in Canada grew over the next few years and attracted negative attention (Singh N., 1994). This attention inspired legal policies that revoked South Asian men's political rights in 1907. The government disenfranchised "all natives of India"; barred them from entering specific professions, serving on juries, and buying property in designated areas of Vancouver (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985; Sharma A. K., 1997; Singh N., 1994). Authorities also prohibited racialized men from bringing their wives to Canada because they were afraid this would create a permanent establishment (Gupta, 1994). There is no documentation of women arriving before 1907 but earliest records indicate that Mrs. Sunder Singh, Mrs. Teja Singh, and Mrs. Uday Ram Joshi were present in 1910; however, there is no information about how they came (Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava, 1985; Manhas, 2009). Hence, this brief overview displays how the government imposed a subordinate political status on racialized men and women, while exalting Anglo-Canadians.

The Ghadar Movement

After living under British Raj's dominance and facing a significant amount of poverty, subservience, and destitution, anger towards the British steadily rose amongst Indians. In 1857, Mangal Pandey and the Queen of Jhansi led the First War of Indian Independence against the British. However, the British successfully and violently crushed the rebellion (Metcalf, 1964).⁷ No substantial opposition transpired again in India until 1907 based on tax increases and government repression (Singh J., 1982). The British enforced measures to arrest these activists, so many fled to the colonies (Singh J., 1982; Singh N., 1994). Coincidentally, the early migrant South Asian community in North America solidified during these years, instituting several community organizations and Sikh centres (Singh B., 2001). These centres soon became the stronghold for Ghadarism as activists that fled India joined these networks and South Asian men recognized and fought against their subordinate status in India and abroad (Sharma A. K., 1997). In 1907, revolutionaries from San Francisco published the Urdu periodical, *Circular-i-Azadi* (Circular of Freedom), which criticized British rule over India (Singh J., 1982). In 1911, one of the most

controversial leaders of the movement, Lala Har Dayal migrated to California and the movement expanded as he travelled across the west coast to consolidate support (Singh J., 1982). Taraknath Das, Pandurang Khankhoje, Sohan Singh Bhakna, and Jatindranath Lahiri actively led this movement (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985; Singh J., 1982). In addition, South Asians from Canada and the United States pledged \$2,000 to construct a nationalist publishing centre, which launched the Punjabi revolutionary newspaper titled, *Gadar*, in December 1913. Ghadarites printed and distributed over four thousand copies of this newspaper to the Indian community in North America, Europe, India, and the Far East (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985). The community openly read this periodical in Vancouver's *Gurdwaras* (Johnston, 2011). The Ghadar's Vancouver division was led by Balwant Singh, Husain Rahim, Mit Singh Pandori, Bhag Singh, Sohan Lal Pathak, Sundar Singh, and Kartar Singh — all recently arrived men (Chandra, 2003; Singh N., 1994). There were a scarce number of women in Canada at this time and no one has explored whether and how any of them participated in Ghadar activities (Agnew, 2003). The only woman scholar recognized for her active involvement is Bibi Gulab Kaur (Sainsra, 1969). She began working with the Ghadar movement in Manila, Philippines alongside her husband and continued to participate in Ghadar activities after returning to India. Gulab Kaur was in charge of the housing for Ghadarites in Lahore and she distributed pamphlets among villages (Sainsra, 1969). Overall, many South Asians in Canada were sympathetic towards this movement in the early years, but few actively joined.

The Ghadar *Leher* (movement) was more than an independence movement for it consisted of intellectuals who aspired to improve people's conditions. The outer circle of the Ghadar Party was composed of Sikh labourers from Punjab, whereas Indian intellectuals dominated the inner circle (Hundal, 2012; Ramnath, 2005). Most advocated for citizenship rights in Canada such as the migration of their wives and the vote (Sharma A. K., 1997). However, many Indian intellectuals were also concerned about sexism, poverty, and racism based on their commitment to equality. For instance, Ramnath states,

Regarding marriage, Lahiri and Dayal both advocated that any revolutionist who was already married, rather than keeping his wife at home, should encourage her to pursue education and training as an equal worker for the cause. But given the dearth of females among the California student radicals, this declaration remained rhetorical (2005, p. 22).

Theoretically, Ghadarites sought to incorporate women in the movement, but few women's names are associated with the cause, besides Gulab Kaur and Frieda Hauswirth.⁸ More importantly, historians remember Hauswirth (a student from Switzerland) exclusively for her personal relationship with Har Dayal (Brown, 1975; Hundal, 2012). Nonetheless, even after the movement collapsed, many of its leaders fought for women's rights and Dalit rights in India because of their commitment to equality (Ramnath, 2005). Conversely, most Ghadarites only paid lip service to their theoretical commitment to women's rights. For example, Dhillon explains that she married Surat Singh Gill because he appeared to be a progressive Ghadarite and promised that she could complete her education. Nonetheless, after marriage, he proved to be conservative and found ways to stop her from furthering her studies (1989). Consequently, the rhetoric that some intellectuals within the movement espoused was progressive for women, but in actuality, many Ghadarites continued to view women in terms of their domestic roles.

The Exclusion of Women and Discernment among South Asians

Discriminatory immigration policies increased support for the Ghadar movement, particularly among ex-Indian British army officers. The British had always praised their Sikh soldiers and given them preferential treatment in the Indian army (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985; Sharma A. K., 1997). In fact, no Sikhs participated in the Indian Mutiny of 1857 because British rule had benefitted them (Sharma A. K., 1997). Sikh men expected the same favourable treatment when they migrated to Canada after 1903 but they became disillusioned with the government when they saw that Sikhs had even fewer rights to migrate than other Asians (Singh J., 1982). Buchignani, Indra, and Srivastava state, "[Ghadar] had committed support among rank-and-file Sikhs, who had been politically

awakened by their harsh treatment in North America" (1985, p. 52). On October 3, 1909, these men gathered at the Vancouver Sikh Temple to burn the uniforms and medals that they wore during service in the British army (Indo-Canadian Worker's Association, 2013). Thus, the British lost their most loyal South Asian subjects and faced substantial opposition from these men.

South Asian men advocated for the removal of the prohibition against their wives' migration because they recognized women's importance. Dhillon explains how Punjabi men fared without their wives and children in North America,

They were the ones who suffered because they didn't have their families with them. They lived together on farms, the group of them; they did their cooking together. Since they couldn't own land, they lived wherever housing was available. It was camp life they lived. They set up cots for sleeping, and all the possessions were in a suitcase under their bed. They worked from sunrise to sunset, and on their one day off, they did their washing by hand. Whoever had a car he would share it with others for transportation (Dhillon, 2001, para. 33).

Dhillon explains how these men looked after themselves without women who traditionally handled domestic affairs for them. Consequently, the difficulties that they encountered in Canada induced many ex-Indian British army officers to join the Ghadar movement with fervent enthusiasm (Sharma A. K., 1997). Gupta explains,

It is interesting to note that in these early years, the banning of wives and children of South Asian immigrants from reunion with their menfolk provoked the most intense anger and fuel for political organizing in B.C's South Asian community. The men realized that without women and children, their community would remain temporary, lacking in stability and stripped of political and social rights in Canada. In this, there was a realization of the reproductive and maintenance role of women in society, which is the essence of gender ideology as it exists today (1994, p. 62).

She is referring to gender roles that South Asians and Canadians ascribe to women until this day as reproducers of the next generation. Most South Asian men

understood women's importance in relation to their traditional roles as mothers and homemakers but this arguably valued woman.

Most South Asian men's conception of women failed to be progressive by the standards of western feminists such as Firestone (1970) and Beauvoir (1949), but it was advanced for that time.⁹ Acknowledging women for their gendered position was significant. This conforms to the arguments of maternal feminists and anti-racist feminists who stipulate that women play a vital role based on their feminine position. These feminists argue that female values such as care and nurturance are necessary for the betterment of society and they should be extended to men (LeGates, 2001; Ferree & Tripp, 2006). Moreover, it is inaccurate to apply contemporary standards of women's rights to a society in which they faced extensive subordination. It was revolutionary in itself that South Asian men, who were accustomed to culturally taking women for granted, acknowledging their hard work (Naidoo, 2003; Sodhi, 2002).¹⁰ Perhaps, men's introduction to the hardships that women faced, awakened respect and understanding among them but this thought requires further research. Life was uniquely burdensome for South Asian women; they were in charge of childcare, preparing meals, taking care of elders, and completing an array of household duties (Dhillon, 1989; Naidoo, 2003; Rai S. M., 2008). In western and South Asian societies, men have constructed conceptions of work/knowledge, so a male-based framework informs these understandings (LeGates, 2001; Ralston, 1991). Rai argues that knowledge is power, and illustrates that society mainly considers men's knowledge valuable, re-establishing power within their hands. Furthermore, Rai indicates that women's understanding may be greater than men such as indigenous knowledge about seed production or herbal treatments, but it is neglected worldwide (2008). This may appear irrelevant, but it contextualizes these notions, exhibiting prejudicial conceptions of women's work/knowledge; it conveys how society devalues and ignores women.¹¹ Hence, South Asian men's recognition of women's roles and agitation over their exclusion marks an outstanding historical event.

South Asian men zealously appealed to the government to lift the ban on the migration of their wives. Sunder Singh, the popular South Asian activist,

protested, "But Christian Canada denies home-life, the birth right of each human being, by shutting out the wife of the Sikh, who is a fellow citizen of the empire" (Agnew, 2003, p. 8). On January 8, 1908, the government instituted the *Continuous Journey* policy, which stipulated those migrants could only stay if they came on an uninterrupted voyage from their country of origin (Kazimi, 2004). The South Asian community sent a delegation to Ottawa in 1913 to dispute the latter policy, yet this delegation's focus remained women through the slogan "Give us our wives and give us our votes" (Singh B., 2001, p. 118). In 1911, Hira Singh had challenged this stipulation by bringing his wife and child to Canada.¹² Officials filed a case against his family but authorities eventually granted them permission to stay as an 'Act of Grace' (Manhas, 2009). A similar situation arose when Ghadarites Bhag Singh and Balwant Singh brought their wives, Harnam Kaur and Kartar Kaur, in 1912. Hence, women's exclusion from Canada became a large cause of discontent as well as political organization among the South Asian community.

Harnam Kaur and Kartar Kaur immigrated with the political motive of setting a precedent for the migration of other South Asian women. Johnston elucidates that by migrating to Canada, "They intended to establish the right of wives to join their husbands in Canada and their purpose was well advertised among Sikhs in North America" (1998, para 2). They both travelled with their husbands and tried to enter through the United States because they failed to come on a continuous voyage. American authorities in San Francisco and Seattle denied them entry, so they had to sail to Vancouver, where a crowd of 700 supporters greeted them at the port (Johnston, 1998). The government ordered their deportation but the community agitated for the next six months and appealed to the Supreme Court (Johnston, 2011). The court allowed their families to stay, once again, as an 'Act of Grace,' but they verified that this was without establishing a precedent. Nonetheless, they had successfully mobilized the community, even if this did not produce the desired results (Sharma A. K., 1997). They fiercely opposed discriminatory immigration policies again in 1914 during the *Komagata Maru* incident but their efforts failed, concluding with the deportation of 354 voyagers.¹³ South Asian men felt consistently betrayed by the government's failure to

adopt 'Acts of Grace' as a precedent for other South Asians and after the Komagata Maru episode, many turned towards the Ghadar movement.

The Ghadar's Disintegration and its Impact on Women

Women's exclusion from this society may have consolidated extensive support for Ghadar but the movement failed because it had many weaknesses. Ghadarites accurately predicted that Britain would be in a war against Germany and they planned to initiate their struggle for Indian independence when this occurred (Juergensmeyer, 1988). However, they lacked a decisive plan. In 1914, war broke out and Ghadarites headed to India, but the British were aware of their plans and arrested them immediately and imprisoned them (Singh N., 1994). Ghadarites also lacked the finances, arms, and equipment to initiate a national revolt (Singh J., 1982). After this setback, previous ruptures within the movement based on social, cultural, and political differences among the Indian intellectuals and Sikh labourers also became an acrimonious force. Although, the group had worked past disparities before, they could no longer see eye-to-eye (Singh J., 1982). Overall, its leaders were unable to justify the loss of so many men to the community and the movement was unable to reconsolidate support.

Nevertheless, Ghadarites haphazardly sought to maintain the Independence struggle after the failure of the 1914 exertion in India. Some leaders believed that a lack of ammunitions caused their defeat and they allied themselves with Germany to acquire better weapons; but this attempt was unsuccessful as well (Singh B., 2001; Juergensmeyer, 1988). In 1917, only three of the original Canadian revolutionaries, Mit Singh Pandori, Husain Rahim, and Sundar Singh remained in Vancouver (Singh N., 1994). Minimal Ghadar activities such as the revolutionary newspaper continued, while the movement slowly disintegrated. Overall, the Ghadar's greatest contribution towards the independence struggle was its rhetorical impact on Indians, inspiring legendary revolutionaries such as Bhagat Singh and Subhash Chandra Bose (Juergensmeyer, 1988; Singh J., 1982). Subsequently, the Ghadar Party's efforts may have failed but it built the impetus for future revolutionaries and the eventual freedom of India in 1947.

The Ghadar's demise also had a significant impact on the migration of South Asian women. Whereas the community's fervour for political activism was clear at one time and the threat posed by Ghadarites real, the situation drastically changed. By 1919, half of the South Asian population had left Canada (Agnew, 2003). Although the Ghadar movement abroad collapsed, the Independence movement in India gained momentum (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985). The British recognized that the ban on South Asian women's migration to Canada had fueled dissonance before 1914 and strengthened support for Ghadar. Thus, in 1919 officials attempted to appease the community by permitting South Asian men's wives and children to migrate (Agnew, 2003). The government believed that these changes might also ease anti-British sentiments in India (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985). Additionally, authorities felt that this was better than eliminating the ban on Indian immigration altogether, while restricting their migration through other means (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985).¹⁴ The government based this policy on a patriarchal framework that allowed 'wives' to enter, acknowledging South Asian women as secondary entities in relation to their husbands. Nonetheless, the culmination of the Ghadar movement formulated a less intimidating community and the British allowed South Asian men's wives and children to enter Canada for the first time in 1919.

Whether or not they witnessed or participated in the struggle, the Ghadar marked a vital moment for South Asian women. The Sikh Pioneer website captures Dhillon's perspective from the movement's American counterpart. Similarities between these two communities, in conjunction with excerpts from the first Punjabi Canadian daughters, validate her example. Dhillon's father, Bakhshish Singh, migrated to California in 1899; her family was the first from Punjab to settle in the United States (Dhillon, 2001). Moreover, her family staunchly supported the revolutionary cause, which affected her political disposition. It also influenced her opinion about her husband, Surat Singh Gill, a Berkeley student involved in Ghadar activities (Dhillon, 2001). She states, "I idolized this man, I had been impressed from the start by his fiery speeches at meetings of the Gadar Party" (Dhillon, 1989, para 25). In fact, Dhillon wanted to join this movement,

but family responsibilities obstructed this possibility.¹⁵ Additionally, the few women that were in the colonies during the Ghadar era, returned to India with their husbands in 1914 such as Kartar Kaur and Gulab Kaur (Johnston, 2011). Rattan Atwal, Kartar Kaur's daughter-in law, explains that the British arrested Balwant Singh and he remained in a jail at Lahore, until his death (Atwal, 2009). She illustrates how difficult this was for Kartar Kaur who went to visit him from India to Pakistan after the partition of the subcontinent (Atwal, 2009). South Asian women in Canada continued to be educated about the Ghadar movement at home as well as in gurdwaras. Kapoor Singh Siddoo, a man connected to the Ghadar, avidly taught his daughters about the Independence movement (Johnston, 2011). Likewise, Nsibe Kaur Puri's father often narrated Mewa Singh's story to her (2009). Mewa Singh assassinated Hopkinson — the immigration official responsible for the *Komagata Maru's* forcible return and the arrest of many Ghadar Party affiliates (Sharma A. K., 1997). These narratives were important because they formed an integral story that the community cherished among generations. Consequently, the Ghadar's influence on women remained intact through those who passed on the legendary tales.

Women and the Making of a Diaspora

Much to the dismay of the British administration, South Asian men's belief that the presence of women would establish a sustainable population, proved accurate. Family formation among this group commenced after the government granted South Asian men's wives' permission to enter Canada (Johnston, 1998). By 1931, 172 women migrated; this was a small number in comparison to the men, but the women erected the community's foundation (Singh N., 1994). For example, in 1948, there were 644 South Asian children enrolled in school, the majority of whom were born in Canada (Singh N., 1994). Puri explains that the third and fourth [and fifth] generations of some early migrants still reside in B.C., including six generations of her family (Puri, 2009). This demonstrates the importance of early South Asian women in establishing a community and exhibits how their entry led to the emergence of a self-sustaining population, but their significance expanded well beyond their reproductive role.

The first South Asian women in North America faced various challenges but they overcame these problems with the same vigour as men who advocated for their rights to migrate. For instance, Dhillon describes the hardships that her mother faced,

I marvel at her survival as the family trekked around California and Oregon, living as they could wherever my father found work...My mother had no one, no other Indian women to keep her company, no sisters or relatives to give her a hand with the housework. She had to do it all (Dhillon, 1989, para 62).

These women also tried hard to succeed in the new environment by learning English or adopting western attire (Puri, 2009). However, most just learned enough English to do shopping or complete other small tasks (Berar, 2009; Johnston, 2011). They mainly communicated with doctors or school authorities through their children (Buchignani, Indra, & Srivastava, 1985; Dhaddey, 2009; Puri, 2009). It is also important to note that these women faced a great amount of racial discrimination. Dhillon explains that the hospitals refused her care when she was pregnant (Dhillon, 1989). Nevertheless, South Asian women refused to succumb to any social challenges, and they worked hard to overcome racism.

South Asian women helped by building networks with other women that helped confront some of these problems. The migration of a greater number of women after 1919 eliminated the alienation that many felt before this period.¹⁶ They still lacked the extensive family support that they had in India, but they adjusted quickly by forming friendships with other women (Puri, 2009). Puri states, "They all treated each other as sisters, mothers, daughters, aunts. They never differentiated friends from family" (2009, p. 51). These women also completed labour intensive tasks collectively such as making *varian* (lentil patties) (Berar, 2009). Likewise, Harvant Rai explains that women were always there for one another, especially during hard times (Rai H. K., 2009). Many of these connections lasted generations. These women candidly welcomed guests whether it was family, friends, or politicians by cooking meals and completing household duties (Dhaddey, 2009; Johnston, 2011). It was through these efforts that South Asian women established relationships among

themselves and built networks to overcome challenges on a daily basis.

In addition, South Asian women added balance to their small society through the retention of culture, language and religion which formed a safe refuge in the face of extensive racism. Women turned towards their own community as a survival strategy and became involved in gurdwara activities, organizing all sorts of celebrations from weddings and birthdays to religious occasions (Dhaddey, 2009; Puri, 2009; Rai H. K., 2009). Moreover, they re-introduced aspects of religious culture that the men had forgotten or passed up on due to circumstances. For instance, Johnston (2011) explains that Kapoor's wife, Bishan Kaur, brought spirituality back in his life by teaching him the *Japji Sahib*, a set of Sikh prayers recited in the morning. They also continued to act as the emissaries of tradition and taught their daughters to respect elders, care for the young, stay away from boys, cook, clean, and sew (Berar, 2009; Dhaddey, 2009; Puri, 2009; Rai H. K., 2009). In this way, South Asian women instituted values and a community that formed an alternate sphere of support to overcome racism.

From the Ghadar Era to Today

The Canadian immigration system viewed South Asian women as secondary to men, and originally only allowed them to migrate if their husbands or fathers were here; this pattern persists. In theory, the immigration policy today has eliminated discriminatory requirements, so women can migrate as independent applicants. Nevertheless, many South Asian women continue to migrate as dependents. Sharma states, "The woman is most likely to have migrated to Canada as a relative — dependent on a husband, a brother, a father, a son or a grandson who may have sponsored her" (1997, p. 132). Bannerji (2000) and Gupta (1994) determine that the Points System is an example of systemic sexism and racism that overlooks the reality of women's lives.¹⁷ They explain that the inclusion of criteria such as employability, education, and experience ignores the fact that many women in third world countries do not have access to these opportunities (Bannerji, 2000; Gupta, 1994). Hence, South Asian women follow the immigration standards set in 1919 and remain entities whose ability to migrate is connected to male citizens.

Community networks and coalition building remain important methods that women continue to use to overcome barriers. For example, employers often refuse to hire recent migrant women based on claims about lack of English-speaking skills and relevant experience (Gupta, 1994). Nonetheless, women have founded countless organizations to help new immigrants and old citizens such as the South Asian Women's Centre, the India Mahila Association, South Asian Women's Rights Organization, and Indo-Canadian Women's Association. These organizations offer English training, employment assistance, battered women's shelters, and other services (Indo-Canadian Women's Association, 2012; South Asian Women's Centre, 2010; South Asian Women's Rights Organization, 2012; Zaman, 2006). Moreover, South Asian women collectively oppose discrimination and engage in strikes (Gupta, 1994). Some have coalesced to confront issues across borders such as the elimination of female feticide or rape (Mamta Foundation of Canada, 2010).¹⁸ Hence, South Asian Canadian women continue to support one another, and they have furthered community-oriented activism on a global scale.

Conclusion

South Asian women have indirectly played a significant part in the circumstances that strengthened the Ghadar movement. When the British government refused to allow South Asian men's wives to migrate, anti-British sentiments surged and solidified support for Ghadar. Hence, the Ghadar era stands as an instance when men valued women for their familial, reproductive and domestic roles (Rai S. M., 2008). However, the movement's demise made South Asian women's migration to Canada plausible because the British felt that this community was no longer a threat. Unfortunately, immigration policies today still value women in relation to men. Nonetheless, notable South Asian Canadian academics such as Bannerji (2000), Gupta (1994), Naidoo (2003), and Zaman (2006) have exposed how immigration policies hinder South Asian women's ability to migrate as principal applicants. In addition, South Asian women have built a substantial support network through community organizations to counteract racism. In conclusion, the main goal of a feminist approach to history is searching for women's stories and highlighting

their contributions. Furthermore, anti-racist feminists have argued that familial and community ties form a basis of support for racialized women, and this analysis has incorporated that understanding. This chapter

made an effort to apply these insights, while analyzing the Ghadar's relationship to women and its long-term impact on them.

Endnotes

1. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* instigated the Second Wave of the feminist movement during the 1960's (Hamilton, 2005; LeGates, 2001).
2. Ghadar means revolution and it was the name of the 1913 Indian freedom movement that began in the colonies.
3. Members of the Ghadar organization are renowned as Ghadarites (Singh J., 1982).
4. They did this work in exchange for money or goods.
5. Zamindars (landholders and tax collectors) used to depend on nawabs (noblemen) for their economic survival under the Mughal Empire. The British granted property rights to the zamindars instead through the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793.
6. It is important to note that Hinduism also introduced powerful images of women through goddesses such as Durga and Lakshmi (Naidoo, 2003).
7. Mangal Pandey, a British Indian army officer, initiated this struggle after he discovered that the British greased gun cartridges with a mixture of cow and pig fat. They used their mouths to open these cartridges and Hindus revered cows, while Islam prohibited its followers from eating pork, so this infuriated the soldiers. Moreover, the British usurped the Queen of Jhansi's kingdom after her husband died without leaving an heir. Thus, these leaders' struggles combined and they revolted against the British (Metcalf, 1964).
8. Hauswirth wanted to participate in Ghadar activities but Har Dayal never gave her this opportunity.
9. Canadian society has overlooked women's importance during many points, especially their contributions as homemakers and mothers before the interference of feminists (LeGates, 2001).
10. Neelabh Bannerji made a cartoon last year for United Nations Women titled, "she is just a housewife," which highlighted the problem of women's unpaid labour. This cartoon conveyed the prejudice that persists worldwide, degrading women who are homemakers, despite the large amount of physical and emotional labour that this work entails (Bannerji N., 2013).
11. Although, this is outside the purview of this paper, it is important to conceptualize Rai's notion of knowledge and power. Rai explains how international patents over plants such as the neem tree have taken knowledge away from the hands of women who used this as a medical treatment for centuries, devaluing their indigenous knowledge, and ascribed it to predominantly male scientists from the west for 'discovering' it (2008).
12. The Canadian government ordered the deportation of Hira Singh's wife and child because they had not arrived on a continuous journey from India.
13. After the Continuous Journey policy was ordained, many South Asians sought to enter Canada, so a man named Gurdit Singh Sarhali charted a ship from Hong Kong and brought these individuals to Vancouver. He thought the community could raise \$200 per person and the government would not renew the ban on artisans and labourers. However, the Canadian government refused to allow the passengers to enter Canada and expelled the ship, despite the community's attempts at raising this amount. The British thought that those on board were Ghadarites, so when the ship returned they arrested or murdered many at the port, while others fled (Kazimi, 2004).
14. Numerous barriers continued to halt South Asian men's wives from migrating. They had to provide proof of marriage and their husbands had to live in an established residence. In fact, few procedures were set to allow these women to migrate (Agnew, 2003). They also had to conduct a medical test upon arrival (Johnston, 2011).
15. Dhillon became pregnant soon after marriage. She was also in charge of caring for her four younger siblings because both her parents passed away (1989).
16. Most women migrated after 1924 because this is when the government established proper procedures.
17. The Canadian government adopted the Points System in 1967, which hypothetically eliminated racial and gendered requirements. It based the primary impetus on skills (education and employment) for immigration. This system has altered over time but its essential character remains the same (Gogia & Slade, 2011; Habib, 2003).
18. Female feticide refers to the abortion of a fetus for being female.

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DOMINION of CANADA

MILITARY VOTERS ACT, 1917.

DIRECTIONS FOR GUIDANCE OF VOTERS.

WHO MAY VOTE.—'Military elector' means and includes every person, male or female, who, being a British subject, whether or not ordinarily resident in Canada and whether or not an Indian, has been, while within or without Canada, appointed, enlisted, enrolled or called out for and placed on active service as one of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, the Royal Canadian Navy, the Canadian Militia on active service, or the Royal Naval Canadian Volunteer Reserve, or has been, while within Canada, appointed, enlisted or enrolled as one of the British Royal Flying Corps, Royal Naval Air Service, or Auxiliary Motor Boat Patrol Service, whether as officer, soldier, sailor, dentist, nurse, aviator, mechanic or otherwise, and who remains one of any such forces or services or has been honourably discharged therefrom, or, in the case of an officer who has been permitted to resign or without fault on his part has had his services dispensed with, and every person, male or female, who, being a British subject ordinarily resident in Canada, whether or not a minor or an Indian, is on active service in Europe in any of the forces or services, military or naval, of his Majesty or of His allies.

WHO MAY BE VOTED FOR.—Only one Candidate may be voted for except in the Electoral Districts of Ottawa, Halifax, South Cape Breton and Richmond, the City and Counties of St. John and Albert and of Queens, Prince Edward Island, where two Candidates may be voted for.

Each Voter, if he is entitled to vote for any particular Candidate or Candidates, and if such Candidate is the Candidate in the Electoral District to which, in accordance with the endorsement or mark on the envelope, such ballot has been applied, may write the name of such Candidate or Candidates in the first white space. If he desires to vote for a party he may make a X in the white space containing the name of the party for which he intends to vote.

The Vote of a Voter will be applied to the place in Canada where he was last resident for four continuous months of the last year of his residence in Canada immediately preceding his enlistment. If he has not been so resident during any four months, he may apply the Vote to any place in Canada where he has at any time resided, and if he has not been resident in Canada at all he may apply the Vote to some Electoral District in Canada which he will select.

Voters are reminded when voting for a person by name that the Vote shall be counted for such person only if he is a Candidate in the Electoral District to which, in accordance with the endorsement or mark on the envelope, such Ballot has been applied, but if otherwise, it shall be rejected.

Voters are reminded that they shall only vote once in this Election.

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"Dominion of Canada, Military Voters Act, 1917. Directions for Guidance of Voters."

Courtesy of the Komagata Maru Journey website: <https://www.sacda.ca/exhibits/km/>

Footsteps in time

1907

The Era of Disenfranchisement

Satwinder Kaur Bains, Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra, Reg Wilford

This chapter is drawn from a part of the 2019 exhibit — Disenfranchisement: the Forty Year Struggle for the Vote 1907–1947 at the Sikh Heritage Museum, National Historic Site Gur Sikh Temple, in Abbotsford BC. The exhibit was curated by the South Asian Studies Institute.

It goes without saying South Asian Canadian's 100+ years of history has proven their resilience against adversity, their many successes against great odds, their political acumen against all roadblocks and their ability to move from survival mode to thriving as a meaningfully engaged community of persons and institutions. At first members of the community settled around the work available to them in agricultural communities, fishing villages, sawmill towns and mining areas. Over time, however, the community found its way across the country from Port Hardy to St. John's and everywhere in between. They built permanent sites even while their own position was precarious including gurdwaras, homesteads, farms, and sawmills. The community grew in number and influence, creating a presence that has been well recognized and acknowledged as the model minority.

As Indian migration to British Columbia increased, so did overt racial tensions which had remained nominal in the early years. In 1906, when 700 South Asians had arrived at BC, the Canadian government took notice. Furthermore, because some employers preferred to hire South Asians because they paid them less than

their European counterparts, and because they worked longer hours without complaint, many White settlers resented their small but growing presence in the economy. A great deal of racial tension and strife ensued from 1906 onwards as South Asians were laid off from work, barred from entering public facilities, evicted from their homes, physically harassed, and abused by the police, vilified in the local press, and shunned from society.

In direct response to the blatant racism and to hinder South Asian migration to Canada, the Canadian government implemented the infamous "Continuous Journey Regulation" on January 8, 1908, which decreed that all migrants had to arrive in a continuous journey at a Canadian port from his or her country of origin. Another significant regulation demanded that all incoming migrants from Asia must have in their possession a sum of \$200.00, which was an inconceivably large amount of money. In comparison, European migrants were only required to have \$20.00 in their possession.

Troubles in Canada were further exasperated by the lack of family units for men from Asia. Canadian regulations at the time restricted South Asian women and children under the age of eighteen from entering Canada, and such was the case that from the 1904 and 1920, only nine Punjabi women migrated to British Columbia. The majority of men were left alone,

without their wives and families and lived amongst themselves in compact lodgings.

In March 1907, British Columbia Premier William Bowser introduced a bill to disenfranchise all natives of India not of Anglo-Saxon parentage. In April 1907 South Asians were denied the vote in Vancouver by changes to the Municipality Incorporation Act. The federal vote was denied by default as one had to be on the provincial voter's list to vote federally. South Asians would be barred from the political process in Canada for the next 40 years until 1947 when the vote was finally reinstated after much struggle.

The impact

Many in the South Asian community protested the discriminatory treatment they faced. For example, in

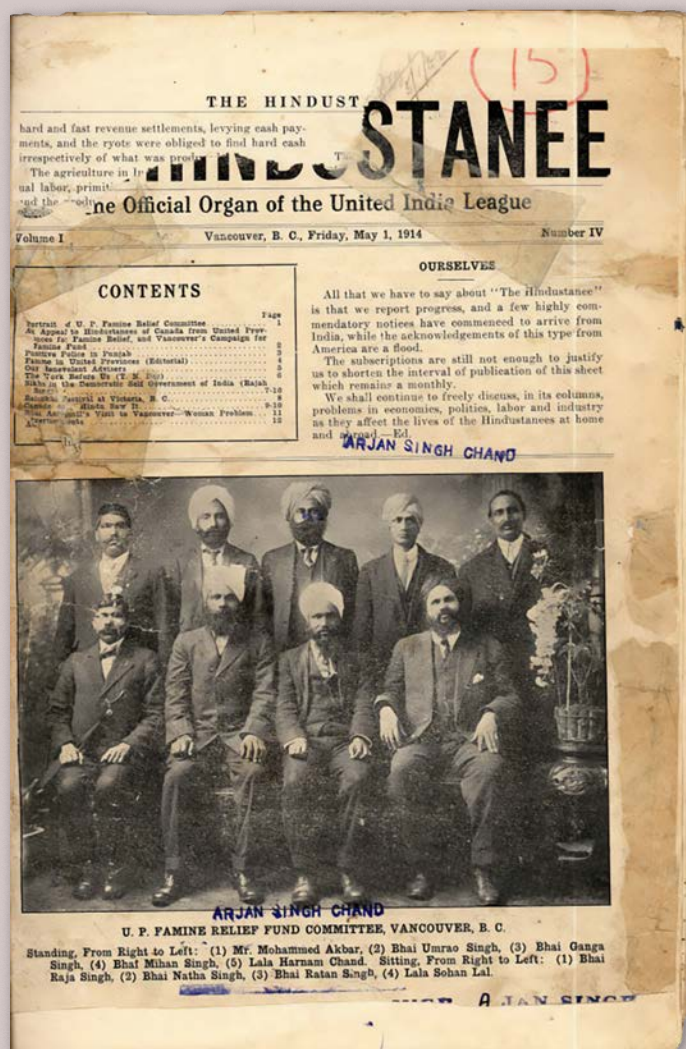
November 1909, Teja Singh and Hari Singh presented their case on the restrictions of South Asian migration while in England. Others, such as Gurun Ditt Kumar, tried to forge a unified South Asian identity through the newspaper, *Swadesh Sevak*, which was eventually censored. Bhag Singh, the President of the Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver, went to India to pressure the British government to take action. Even the average South Asian community member took to the streets in order to publicly protest their untenable conditions and by sending petitions to the Canadian, British and Indian governments.

To impress upon the govt to lift the immigration ban on women and children, the Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver and many of its management and community members worked tirelessly to send delegations to Ottawa, sought support from the British Empire, and pursued legal help from local Vancouver lawyers. But these pleas would usually fall on deaf ears and any changes were laboriously slow. The Canadian Government's methods to hinder immigration was effective as the Immigration Act that was overhauled including the Continuous Journey regulation. The amended Act now gave sweeping powers to the government to exclude people explicitly on the basis of race.

On July 30th, 1918, the Canadian Government received word from the British Ministry of Information that, "Indians already permanently domiciled in other British countries would be allowed to bring in their wives and minor children" (*Abbotsford Post*, 1918). However, the first wives would not arrive until 1921 and in that year the first Indo-Canadian child was born.

Khalsa Diwan Society

The Khalsa Diwan Society was founded on July 22, 1906, and registered on March 13, 1909. Incorporated under the name "The Khalsa Diwan Society," the first Canadian Sikh Gurdwara (meaning the doorway to the guru) was built in 1908 at 1866 West 2nd Avenue in Kitsilano. This gurdwara was the very first in all of North America and the Society itself being the oldest South Asian Society to date in the Americas. The Vancouver Gurdwara was built through the generous spirit of South Asians living in British Columbia at the time, each of whom donated a portion of their wages to its construction.



"The Hindustanee: The Official Organ of the United India League." Friday, May 1, 1914.

Courtesy of the Komagata Maru Journey website. <https://www.sacda.ca/exhibits/km/>.

During times of stress, success, challenges, or community discourse the Khalsa Diwan Society Gurdwara was a critical site. This was the site where the community gathered to advocate for the passengers on board the *Komagata Maru* and this was the site where community empowerment occurred through the poetry of Ghadar. This was the site that housed and gave sustenance to the first migrants because no one else would provide them housing or access to basic necessities.

In the 1940s the Khalsa Diwan Society served in a leadership role as South Asians fought for voting rights, and it did so in a secular capacity. The Khalsa Diwan Society had a secular role as a community centre that also served Hindus and Muslims. By the 1960s, while the main gurdwara was in Vancouver branch gurdwaras were built in Abbotsford, New Westminster, Victoria, Fraser Mills, Paldi, Mesachie Lake, and Port Alberni.

Despite the intense discrimination felt by South Asians in Canada in the early 1900's, the community still forged on as they began to solidify their permanent presence through the Khalsa Diwan Society. This Society brought South Asians together through the gurdwara institution. The gurdwaras provided a place of communal consciousness, camaraderie, and even practical help by providing food and housing to new arrivals. The Gurdwara became a site for sharing of concerns within the community, of rhetorical speeches and poetry, and for strategizing on how to overcome the racism they faced as a community. It was a communal space shared by Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims alike.

The Abbotsford Gur Sikh Temple represented a unique and powerful story reflecting Sikh migration experience in British Columbia. The first Sikhs had arrived in the Fraser Valley in 1905 from Punjab and settled in the valley by working on the farms and in the lumber industry. In 1908 local Sikhs started to build a Sikh Gurdwara in a true community effort, under the auspices of the Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver.

It would take four years of hard work and great commitment — both financial and physical to finish building it. The project was spearheaded by Sundar Singh Thandi, who along with Arjan Singh purchased a one-acre property on a prominent hill adjacent to the mill at Mill Lake where about fifty or so Sikh men worked. These men and others who worked on the farms in the area used to carry local timber donated by



"West 2nd Avenue Gurdwara." December 1943.

Courtesy of the City of Vancouver Archives, Major Matthews Collection.



"Boy taking off shoes outside the Khalsa Diwan Society Sikh Temple." March 1945.

Courtesy of the City of Vancouver Archives, Major Matthews Collection.



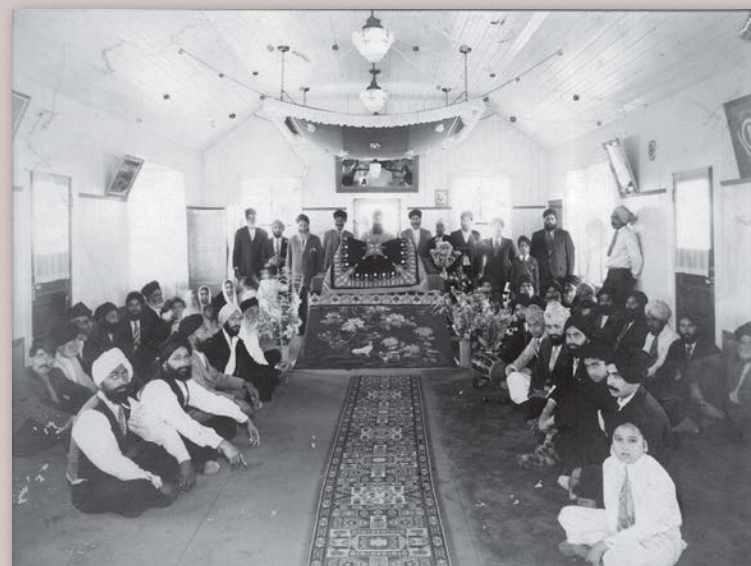
"Hillcrest Gurdwara." 1937.

Courtesy of the South Asian Studies Institute.



"Gur Sikh Temple, 33089 South Fraser Way. The sign over the stairs reads: 'Notice No person under the influence of liquor or using tobacco will be allowed in the temple.' To the left is: 'Stairway made by Sundar Singh June 25th, 1939.' To the right is: 'Temple opened Feb. 25th, 1912.'"

Courtesy of the Reach N294.



"Gur Sikh Temple, Abbotsford, BC." Date Unknown.

Courtesy of the South Asian Studies Institute.

the Tretheway family's Abbotsford Lumber Company on their backs up the hill from Mill Lake to the Gurdwara site. The temple was completed in 1911 and officially opened in the New Year.

Early Leadership

During the critical period of South Asian migration history, in the early 1900's while the larger south Asian community continued to face legal and social forms of discrimination in British Columbia, all within the colonial frame of a "White Man's Province," there were many figures in the community who attempted to better the plight of their fellow South Asians. These brief snapshots capture the stories of those figures.

Teja Singh was a highly educated and accomplished individual, after finishing his MA in English, LLB, and working at Northern Indian Salt Revenue Services under the British, he attended



"Professor Teja Singh." Date Unknown.

Courtesy of the Central Sikh Museum.

University of Cambridge, Columbia University, and Harvard University. While at Columbia he delivered a lecture on India that caught the attention of Taraknath Das and Balwant Singh. This chance meeting began his long activism and scholarly association with Sikhs in British Columbia and California.

Taraknath Das The Hindustani Association was founded in Vancouver by Taraknath Das, a Bengali nationalist in 1907. The Hindustani Association at first was devoted to improving the lives of Indians in Canada, but later it turned to overthrowing British Rule in India as part of the Ghadar movement (Bose 2020).

Guran Ditt Kumar Guran Ditt migrated to Canada in 1907. In 1910 he started publishing a monthly paper in Gurmukhi entitled *Swadeshi Sewak*, which was mailed to India for Sikhs in the Indian army to rise against colonial rule, until its prohibition in 1911 by the Indian Government. He was the secretary and chief spokesperson for the Hindustani Association of Vancouver.

Gurdit Singh was the central figure in the *Komagata Maru* tragedy. Gurdit Singh chartered a ship named the *Komagata Maru* in 1914 to help Indian citizens immigrate to Canada. The passengers were denied entry and the ship was forcibly sent back to Kolkata, India where the British government suspected the passengers of inciting rebellions and went to arrest the leaders of the ship. Shots were fired and nineteen



"Gurdit Singh and Son." 1914.

Courtesy of the Vancouver Public Library.

of the passengers were killed. Gurdit Singh escaped and lived in hiding until 1922 when Gandhi urged him to surrender. He was imprisoned for five years, after which he lived a long and politically active life.

Dr. Sundar Singh was born in Amritsar Punjab in 1882 and received formal medical training in Britain and entered Canada through Halifax in March 1909. He published a number of issues of the *Aryan* and the *Sansar* in English and Gurmukhi. He petitioned for immigration rights and changes to the racist laws and was a prominent spokesperson for Sikhs until 1916 when he disappeared from public view.



"Absolute Lie, Says Dr. Sundar Singh," *The Vancouver Daily Province*. April 19, 1912.

Courtesy of the South Asian Studies Institute.

Mayo Singh Manhas was the founder of Paldi, a small town in the Cowichan Valley, named by him after the name of his village of Paldi in Punjab, India. Mayo Singh started an enterprising lumber mill on Vancouver Island, and the village grew around

it, housing and employing many South Asians, Japanese, Indigenous and White labourers along with their families. He and his fellow mill owners frequently advocated for full voting rights and citizenship.

Kapoor Singh Siddoo

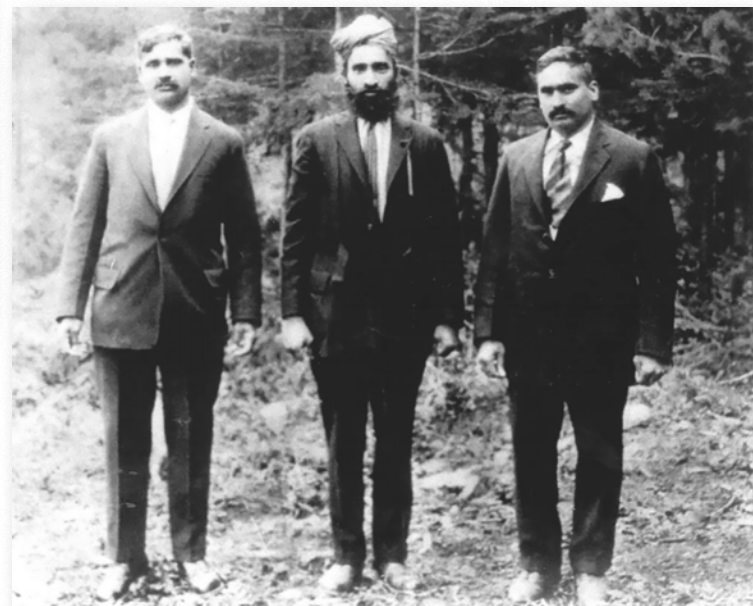
embodied the enterprising spirit of all immigrants by partnering with Mayo Singh on Vancouver Island in building a very successful lumber empire. He was also prominent in community efforts, fighting for full citizenship rights and for changes in immigration regulations in favour of immigrants from India.



"Mayo Singh Manhas & Family." Date Unknown.

Courtesy of the Mosaic of Forestry Memories.

Sundar Singh and his wife Mohinder Kaur, were affectionately known as Taya ji and Tayi ji among the community members of Abbotsford. Sundar Singh Thandi was instrumental in the construction of the Gur Sikh Temple, from purchasing the land to inspiring the Sikh community to donate money or give in-kind for the construction of the Gurudwara an to fight for the cause of the right to vote.



"Mayo Singh and Kapoor Singh Siddoo." Date Unknown.

Courtesy of the Mosaic of Forestry Memories.



"Paldi Lumber Yard." 1935.

Courtesy of the Cowichan Valley Museum and Archives.

Husain Rahim Husain Rahim was at the epicentre of many of the early 20th century South Asian activist movements including the *Panama Maru* case (Claxton et al 2021), the *Komagata Maru* and the ongoing battles against restrictive Canadian and BC Provincial immigration policies. Rahim, born in 1865, belonged to a Gujarati merchant caste community that had spread from Gujarat to Bombay (the centre of the Indian cotton trade), and to South and East Africa and the Far East.

Dr. D.P. Pandia Born in Madras, Dr. Pandia was a lawyer who was asked to support the South Asian community in BC after members of the community became impressed with a lecture he gave at the Eaton Centre in Victoria, BC in 1939 (Vig 2015). It was Kartar Singh (Editor of *Khalsa Herald* and *Sansar*) and Kapoor Singh Siddoo who invited Dr. Pandia to stay and help them in their struggle in British Columbia to gain immigration and franchise rights. Dr. Pandia would also be instrumental in supporting the Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver and the South Asian community gaining the right to the vote in 1947.

Survival

There were many sites of significance for South Asians in British Columbia. Many of these were sites of labour including the mill towns of Hillcrest, Youbou, Squamish, Golden, Prince George, Lake Cowichan, New Westminster, Abbotsford, Paldi, Honeymoon Bay, Vancouver, etc. Overcoming the overt racism and discrimination of the time, prominent South Asians in the community would end up purchasing their own mills and managing their own companies. However, the story of Paldi is so unique and significant to the South Asian experience in BC and Canada, that it deserves special mention.

So often we hear of the macro stories of these early South Asian migrants, but what about the personal stories, testimonies and emotional impacts faced by those men? What was it like to live for years without your wife, your partner, your children, and your loved ones because of the discriminatory policies that prevented them from coming?



"Paldi women." Early 1900s.

Courtesy of the Cowichan Valley Museum and Archives.

A poem written by Kuldip Gill (1934–2009), the daughter of Mission, BC pioneers Indar Singh Gill and Bhagwant Kaur Gill helps to convey this deep sense of loss between a husband and wife:

*Can I live this love, matching you to poetry
In Urdu, Gurmukhi and Hindi,
And have as reply only your few unlettered
Lines telling me that our children are well,
Relating my mother's love and brother's wife's whine?*

*I wait. No letters. Not even paper-love rewards.
Chained to pulling green lumber all night, dragged
Through black sleepless nights, thoughts of
Your long green eyes, your face, blaze my mind.
My children's voices cry/laugh through my dreams.
Enfeebled by endless greenchain shifts, I fear
A war, the years.*

*No passports yet? Fathom my heart's great dukh. I watch.
Droves of birds fly away together, another winter.
Come before the war, come through Hong Kong and Yokohama.
Please let me know as soon as you can.
And I will send money to Moga
To bring you, the children, across
The kala pani to Victoria.*

*Come soon. Before the war.
I'll tell you what you will need to bring:
Sweaters for the children, books,
Seeds, are hard to get. Bring yourself. Yourself,
And surma for your beautiful green eyes.*

*I am your beloved Inderpal Singh,
Who would spread flower petals for you,
And fly to you on feathers, if I could.*

—DR. KULDIP GILL, MISSION, BC



"School children in Paldi." 1945.

Courtesy of the Cowichan Valley Museum and Archives.



**"School children in Paldi. Herb Doman is back row, 5th from the left."
Date Unknown.**

Courtesy of the Cowichan Valley Museum and Archives.

In late 1906 Mayo Singh Manhas arrived in Canada and started to work as a lumber stacker at a sawmill near Abbotsford. By 1917 Mayo Singh had moved to Vancouver Island where he acquired the defunct Island Lumber Co., which was located in the Cowichan Valley. He moved machinery and equipment to the site, which later became known as the village of Paldi. A camp was established, and logging operations began in 1918 when Mayo Singh invited three Japanese men whom he had worked with in Chilliwack to come to Paldi to work for him.

As the lumber mill's business expanded, so did the community of Paldi, becoming a mixed community of people including South Asians, Japanese, Chinese and people of European descent.

By the time South Asian women were allowed to join their families in Canada in the 1920's, Paldi was

equipped with a successful mill, its own company store, bunkhouses for workers and housing for their families. A school had been established in 1921 and in two years earlier, the second Sikh gurdwara on Vancouver Island was constructed in Paldi (the first one had been built in Victoria in 1912). A Japanese temple was eventually constructed on the site as well. South Asian and Japanese children attended language classes at their respective temples after attending the formal school. The community grew steadily and even through the great depression despite the fact that the mill temporarily closed down from 1931–1933. At its peak, Paldi had a population of 1,500 and became capable of supporting its own high school. The community of Paldi challenged the racism of its time and stands as a testament to the agile and persevering nature of South Asians and their solidarity with other marginalized groups.

The Path to Victory in the fight to earn the Vote: 1930s & 1940s

During the first part of the 1900s, South Asians in Canada persevered and accomplished a great degree of success despite facing extreme hardships in the form of a racist political and social environment. However, without the right to vote, and with ongoing immigration restrictions South Asians were not able to enjoy the full benefits of rights afforded to Canadians at the time. And so it was that during the 1930s and the 1940s, the South Asian community in Canada focused its efforts and resources towards winning the right to vote.

1932 –

The CCF, Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, was founded in 1932 in support of the Asian right to vote and would figure prominently in applying the necessary political pressure to improve the lives of South Asians in Canada.

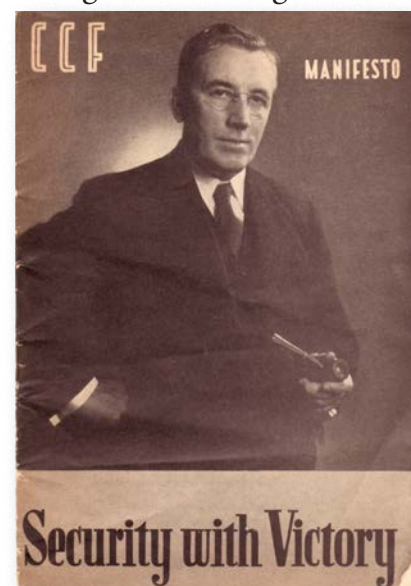


"Towards the Dawn!" Election visual for Saskatchewan's Cooperative Commonwealth Federation. 1930.

Courtesy of Rosetown and District Archives M. Paul fonds.

1930s (Canada) –

During the 1930s, there were significant changes in the attitudes and practices of key labour unions, such as The Canadian Trades and Labour Council, who would begin to liberalize their racial policies, including a move to support the Asian (Chinese, Japanese and South Asian) right to vote.



"The Honourable Major James William Coldwell, leaders of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation Party from 1942–1960.

Date unknown. Image courtesy of "Next Year Country" a Saskatchewan Socialist News Blog

1930s (India) –

As India moved forward in a clear path towards independence, earlier concerns about the international effects of anti-South Asian discrimination were revived greatly as Indian independence approached.

1933 –

Sir Atul Chatterjee in London began agitating and petitioning for positive change in discriminatory

legislation at the Federal level. Prime Minister Richard Bedford Bennett responded to claims that he had no basic objections to South Asians having the right to vote. He maintained that a change in attitude in British Columbia was the major obstacle to this change.



"Sir Atul Chandra Chatterjee."

1925. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.

1935 –

The struggle returns to the provincial level and the key battleground of British Columbia. In BC, the Liberals and the CCF began to debate the issue of franchisement. Clive Planta (Liberal, Peace River) attempted to put forward a motion in the BC legislature reaffirming the disenfranchisement of all Asians in the province. This motion was attacked by Harold Winch of the CCF (Vancouver East) and the motion was ruled out of order. These political skirmishes would continue until 1938, when the new 'Dominion Elections Act' was proclaimed and yet it did not reinstate the federal vote for Asians.

1939 –

British Columbia, the Liberal party issued a revision of its Election Act and contained all the discriminatory clauses of the previous act. Additionally, the outbreak of world war in 1939 did not moderate government position on the vote. William Lyon 'Mackenzie King', Long-serving Prime Minister of Canada, was yet unwilling to take the issue under consideration during the first years of World War II.



"Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, the tenth Prime Minister of Canada." 1947.

Courtesy of the Dutch National Archives.

1939 –

The South Asian community in British Columbia enlisted the services of Dr. D.P. Pandia, an Indian



"Dr. D.P. Pandia." Date unknown.

Courtesy of the Vancouver Sun.

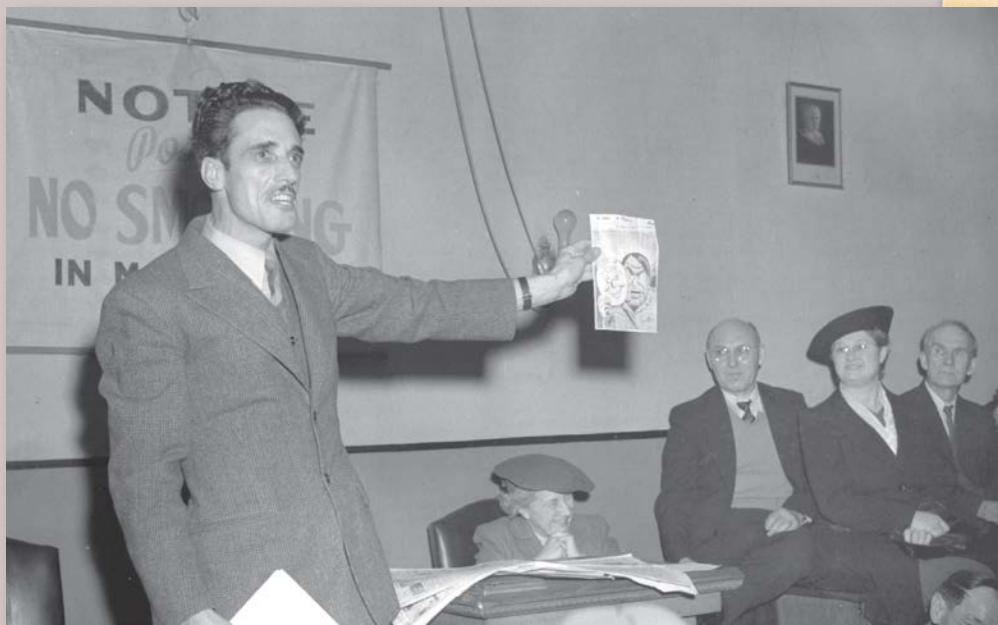
lawyer and former secretary to Gandhi, who would travel to Ottawa to petition for the plight of 'illegal' South Asian immigrants living in British Columbia. The Federal government agreed not to deport any illegal South Asian immigrants who were willing to come forward and register.

1942 –

Through the efforts of Kapoor Singh Siddoo, Mayo Singh, and Kartar Singh Hundal, H.S.L. Polak, a long-time associate of Gandhi, was brought to Canada to continue to petition politicians at both the federal and provincial level. Polak corresponded with Prime Minister Mackenzie King who agreed to an eventual change in federal legislation. However, in January 1942, Polak met with BC Liberal Premier, John Hart (BC Premier from 1941–1947) who remained unwilling to consider the question of provincial franchise. Later that year, Polak received word from Prime Minister King that King would not consider the vote in light of the imminent removal of Japanese Canadians from coastal BC.

1942 (India) –

The British agree to grant India Dominion status after the war. Mackenzie King became interested in the constitutional evolution of India and for the rest of the war

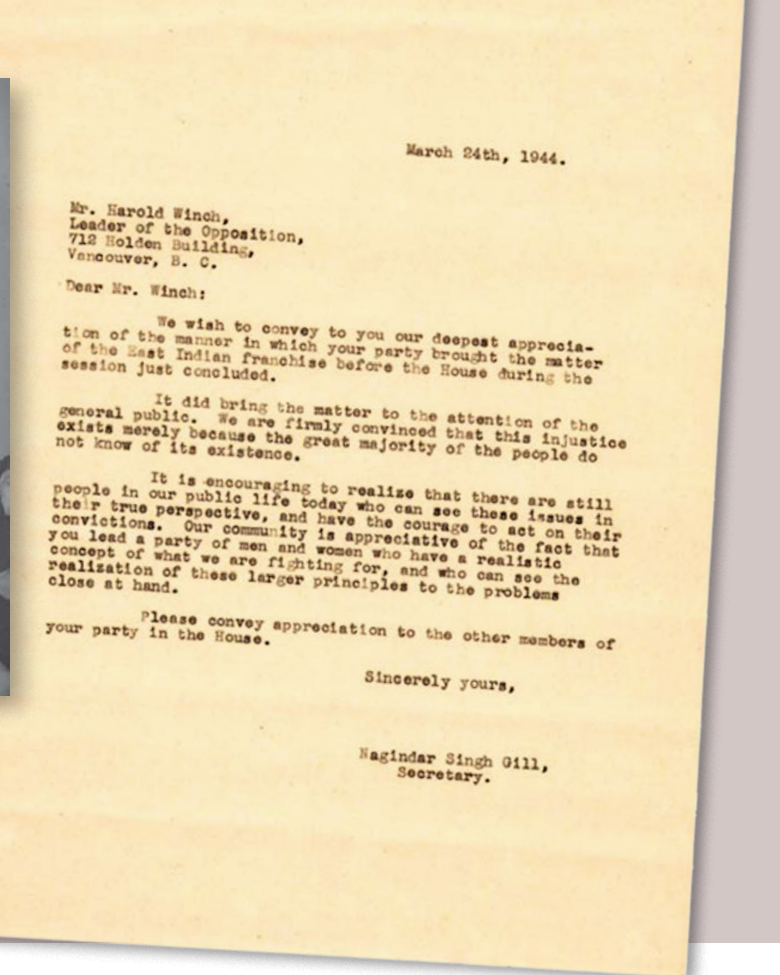


"Harold Winch at a CCF meeting." Date unknown.

Courtesy of the Vancouver Public Library.

"Letter from Naginder Singh Gill to Mr. Harold Winch." 1944.

Courtesy of the Komagata Maru Journey website.



attempted to lobby the British government to accept Indian independence. Even so he remained reluctant to grant South Asians in BC the freedoms he so vigorously advocated for South Asians in India.

1943 –

In March, 1943 a 12-man delegation was sent to Premier John Hart to argue for the vote. Among the members of this large and influential delegation were leaders of the Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver, including Naginder Singh Gill, Sir Robert Holland of Victoria BC, Harold Winch of the CCF and Harold Pritchett, district president of the International Woodworkers of America. This delegation also brought with them representation of the commitment of South Asians to Canada with World War I with the presence of veteran Bahoo Singh and two Sikh men enlisted in the Canadian Army — Phangan Singh and G.S. Badal. The delegation made a further point of demonstrating South Asian Canadian commitment to Canada in the form of several hundred thousand dollars in war bonds purchased by members of the South Asian Canadian community. (This figure would reach \$496,730 by the end of World War II.) Nonetheless, Premier Hart refused to act until the war was over.

1943 –

"No Vote–No War" Despite the lack of commitment by Premier Hart to take action, the community continued the fight by applying pressure at various levels of government and business influence. One particular means of bringing attention to their plight was through opposition to military conscription on the grounds that a country that did not allow its citizens to vote, could not ask them to fight in the war.

In British Columbia, the South Asian community found support for the "No vote–No War" policy through Elmore Philpot — a Canadian war veteran, politician and journalist, who was then managing editor of the *Vancouver News-Herald*.

However, rather than take action on the legislation restricting South Asians from voting, the Federal government instead simply declared that South Asian Canadians were 'exempt' from military service. This was not the desired nor intended outcome of the proponents of franchisement for South Asians, and the fight for the vote would continue.

1944 –

Prime Minister Mackenzie King, facing a federal election and not wanting to alienate voters by supporting South Asian franchise, was not willing to entertain the right to vote and further contention on the issue arose

"Nagindar Singh Gill speaks at a meeting in the Sikh Gurdwara Office at 1866 West 2nd Avenue.

1946. Courtesy of the City of Vancouver Archives.



at the provincial level when Labour Minister George Sharratt Pearson proclaimed in a racist rant in the provincial legislature that:

"The Hindu is not helping us to maintain the standard of living we have set up in the province. There is nobody in the province as unreliable, dishonest and deceitful as the Hindus. They break every regulation we have...we are justified in excluding them from the full rights of citizenship."

Pearson's remarks sparked the Vancouver community to send a delegation to him and to the provincial Attorney General demanding an apology — sadly, no apology was given.

1944 –

The South Asian community begins to work with the Chinese community to create a unified front in the struggle to gain the vote. During the war years, the Chinese community also adopted a "No vote–No war" stance.

1945 –

The CCF presents a resolution in support of provincial franchisement that is narrowly defeated in the legislature. However, as a result of this effort, all Chinese, Japanese, South Asian and First Nations who had

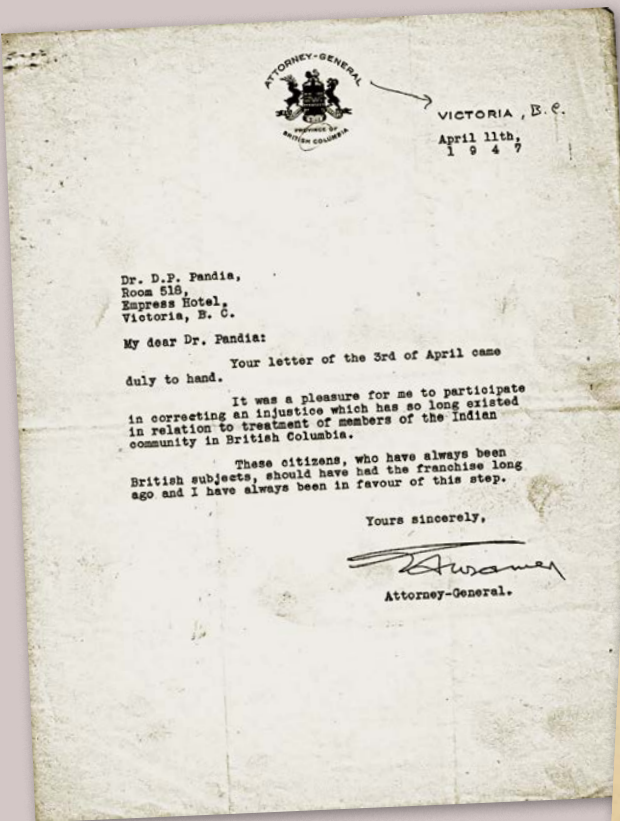
served in World War II were granted the provincial right to vote, indicating a change in racial attitudes at the parliamentary level. Specifically, as Canada participated in the formation of the original United Nations Charter, it was clear that Canada's denial of the Asian right to vote was in direct contradiction to the U.N. Charter.

1945–

Mulk Raj Ahuja, India's trade commissioner to Canada protested the treatment of South Asians in Canada. Ahuja received support in his protest with P. Kodanda Rao (of the influential 'Servants of India Society') who travelled across Canada and spoke in direct opposition to the racial restrictions imposed on South Asians in British Columbia and across Canada.

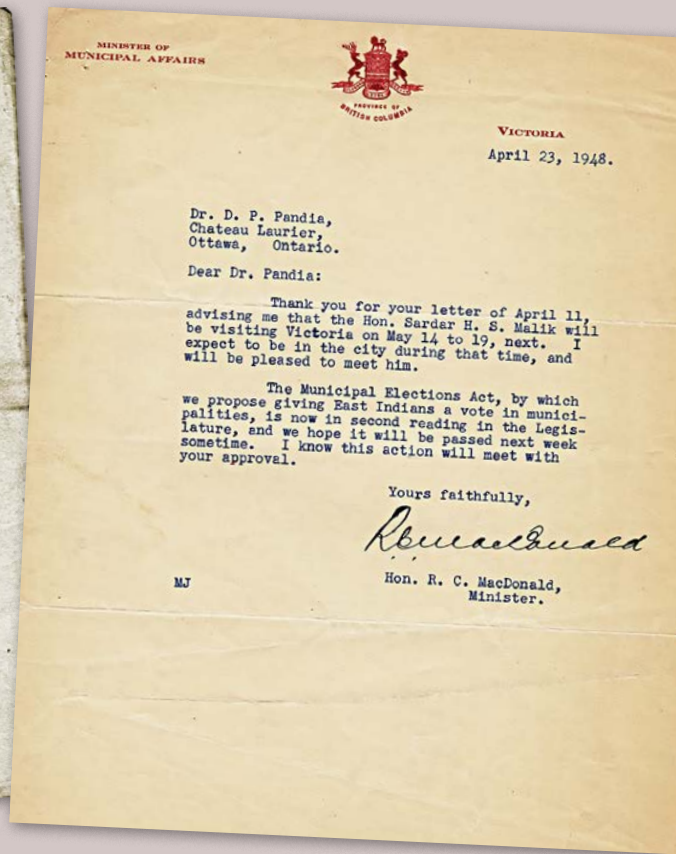
1946 –

Konanda Rao and Dr. Durai Pal Pandia visit the Director of Immigration in Ottawa regarding the vote issue. In this year as well, Kapoor Singh, Kartar Singh, Ishar Singh, Naginder Singh and Gurdit Singh meet with the British Columbia Elections Act Committee and continue to apply pressure towards granting the right to vote.



"Letter from Gordon Wismer, Attorney General of British Columbia, to Dr. Pandia. April 11, 1947.

Courtesy of the South Asian Studies Institute.



"Letter from the Honorable R.C. MacDonald, Minister of Municipal Affairs, to Dr. Pandia." April 23, 1948.

Courtesy of the South Asian Studies Institute.



"Hardit Singh Malik as a young man." 1917.

Courtesy of the India Times.

1947 –

In February, at the federal level, Jawaharlal Nehru applies pressure in Ottawa which bolstered a positive vote towards franchisement at the legislature. Provincially, the Elections Act Committee in BC draft recommendations that are embodied in Bill 85 which amended the Elections Act by deleting Chinese and South Asians from the list of disqualified persons.

1947, April 2 –

The amended bill to make changes to the Elections Act in British Columbia comes to the floor and is passed unanimously. The provincial vote in British Columbia is won. With the provincial vote automatically came the federal vote and the end of the accompanying legal restrictions on South Asians in Canada. However, the municipal vote and the immigration ban remain outstanding issues.

1947, September –

At the bequest and lobbying of the South Asian community to several mayors, Mayor Percival Edward

George of Victoria put forth a resolution to ask the legislature to change the Municipal Elections Act to allow South Asians the right to vote. The resolution was moved by Mayor Jack Loutet of North Vancouver and passed with only one dissenting vote (cast only because the resolution was not extended to First Nations people).

1947, October –

Vancouver City Council was subject to the same lobby efforts and resulted in the Vancouver Incorporation Act be amended and changed in the similar manner as the Municipal Elections.

1948, May –

Hardit S. Malik, India's first High Commissioner to Canada and a proud Sikh, takes up his official post in Ottawa, signifying the end of the battle for South Asians in their fight for the franchise.

A Brief Timeline of Dr. Durai Pal Pandia's Life & Work

1906, June 26

Dr. Pandia was born in a small village in Madras, India called Tirunelveli.

[ca. 1920]

Finishes his early education in India and goes to London in the late twenties to study law at the Inner Temple and study for a Ph.D. in Economics at the London School of Economics.

[ca. 1930]

Works as a secretary in the Harijan movement in South India. During a conference in Bombay he meets the head of the Indians Overseas League.

1939, May

Begins a cross-country speaking tour on behalf of the Theosophical Society on his first visit to Canada.

Meets Kapoor and Kartar Singh Hundal at the Orpheus Lodge of the Theosophical Society.

1939, early July

Ishar Banns leads a small delegation (backed in part by Kapoor and Mayo) of Sikhs to Ottawa to meet with Pandia to engage his services in their immigration and disenfranchisement plight. In their party are Naina Singh Kondola, a long-time Punjabi interpreter for the CPR, and Battan Singh Dhoot. They immediately arrange to meet with Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King.

“King, of course, was thinking of the larger implications of any negative story about Sikhs. War now appeared close at hand, and he and his officials were conscious of the threat that Sikh disaffection had presented to the British in India during the First World War. Pandia had a sketchy sense of King’s past experience with the Sikh community. Which went back to a one-man royal commission that King had conducted in Vancouver in 1907 after an anti-Asian riot. In fact, King had recommended the measures that Canada adopted in 1908 to stop immigration from India. But what Pandia read in King’s face was respect and sympathy, qualities that turned out to be genuine.”

From Hugh J.M. Johnston’s *Jewels of the Qila: The Remarkable Story of an Indo-Canadian Family*.

1939, late July

Dr. Pandia begins to discuss specifics with the Director of Immigration, Frederick Charles Blair. Pandia also lobbies members of parliament from all three political parties and begins to publicize his story through press and radio. Pandia petitions for an end to deportations and Blair wants an assurance that the community will stop bringing in illegal immigrants: they are unable to see eye to eye on their respective points.

Approximately 250 South Asian immigrants are facing deportation for entering Canada illegally (mostly entering under false pretences in the 1920s). Dr. Pandia successfully lobbies the Canadian government into permanently halting the deportation proceedings and passing an order-in-council to allow the persons in question to register and remain in Canada, contingent on good behaviour, on compassionate grounds. Though allowed to remain in Canada as residents these men are denied citizenship until 1946.

1939, September

Canada joins the war effort. Secretary of State for External Affairs, O.D. Skelton writes to Blair to advise that it is time to resolve the relationship with Canada’s Sikhs, and reminds Blair of the *Komagata Maru* incident. Within days of receiving this letter, Blair stops investigations and deportation proceedings against South Asians, legal immigrants or otherwise.

1939–1946

Dr. Pandia travels and advocates for South Asian immigrants in other countries. He assists a number of Indian immigrants in California facing similar deportation problems as those in Canada. He is also able to assist the communities and hundreds of deportation orders are cancelled.

1946

Dr. Pandia returns to Canada. He is asked to assist in efforts to enfranchise South Asian immigrants in British Columbia. An amendment to the British Columbia Voting Act in 1907 bars South Asian Immigrants from voting.

Dr. Pandia is also asked to assist the South Asian immigrants he had assisted in 1939 to register to be

allowed to remain in Canada in their petitions to be recognized as Canadian citizens. This is granted in August of 1946, after the Canadian Citizenship Act is passed.

1947

Indian and Chinese immigrants are enfranchised.

The Canadian Citizenship Act comes into effect.

The Provincial Elections Act is amended to grant Indo-Canadian and Chinese immigrants the vote in federal and provincial elections.

The Association of B.C. Municipalities meets and passes a resolution supporting granting Indo-Canadian immigrants the right to vote in municipal elections.

The Provincial government passes an amendment to

allow Indo-Canadian immigrants to vote in municipal elections.

1949

Visit of Jawaharlal Nehru, first Prime Minister of India after independence. He had always supported Dr. Pandia's efforts in regaining the franchise.

1954

Dr. Pandia formally immigrates to Canada, and continues to provide legal services to the South Asian community.

1999, May 6

Dr. Pandia passes away.

European Women's Right to Vote

The right to the vote was a struggle faced by other sets of communities beyond South Asians. As part of a grander narrative against cis-het white male histories, these stories offer insight into the struggle for the vote amidst European women, Chinese and Japanese Canadians. For Chinese and Japanese Canadian histories — the shared experiences with South Asian Canadian experiences, as well as the divergences and layered complexities, are an important piece of British Columbian history.

After the Conquest, British North America was divided into Upper Canada and Lower Canada. The Constitutional Act of 1791 gave white persons who owned land the right to vote. In Lower Canada (present day Quebec), this included women; in Upper Canada (present day Ontario), this did not include women.



"Nellie McClung on the far left, Mrs. R.R. Jamieson and Mrs. Emily Murphy, in a photo taken on the day the women's suffrage bill was passed." 1917.

Courtesy of the Royal BC Museum Archives.



"The executive of political equality league of Manitoba." 1916.

Courtesy of the Winnipeg Free Press Archives.

In 1840, Upper and Lower Canada were united into the Province of Canada and in 1849 women's right to vote was taken away. At the time of Confederation in 1867, women did not have the right to vote.

Women were extended the provincial vote beginning in 1916:

- Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta 1916;
- British Columbia and Ontario 1917;
- Nova Scotia 1918;
- New Brunswick and Yukon 1919;
- Prince Edward Island 1922;
- Newfoundland and Labrador 1925;
- Quebec in 1940;
- Northwest Territories 1951.

However, this enfranchisement excluded all non-white women from voting in either federal or provincial elections.

In order to ensure a victory for his party, in 1917 Prime Minister Robert Borden



"Penny Teskey, aged 21, casting her first vote." 1965. Courtesy of the Toronto Public Library.

introduced the Wartime Elections Act, allowing female relatives of men serving overseas to vote in federal elections. At the same time, the government passed the Military Voters Act, by which women serving in the Armed Forces or as nurses could vote in federal elections.

In 1918 the federal vote was extended to all women who were British subjects and 21 years of age.

Women of colour were not allowed to vote provincially or federally until 1948, when racial categories began to be gradually removed from voter eligibility.

In 1960 the vote was extended to First Nations women.

Finally, the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms granted the right to vote to all Canadian women over the age of eighteen.

Japanese-Canadian's Right to Vote

The first Japanese immigrants referred to as the "Issei" arrived between 1877 and 1928. Most settled in British Columbia and pursued jobs in fishing, farming, and millwork.

Canada restricted Japanese immigration in 1908 after the Vancouver

Anti-Asian riots in 1907 and again in 1928 after Japanese fishing licenses were revoked.

In 1916 Japanese Canadians enlisted for Military Service in Alberta during World War I. BC politicians lobbied to refuse enlistment in fear they would then acquire the vote.

In 1920 the Japanese Canadian veterans of WWI are given hope for the Provincial franchise, but many groups in BC reacted negatively to extending the franchise to the Japanese Canadian veterans. This lobbying forced the government via Premier Oliver to withdraw its amendment to the BC Elections Act that would have granted Japanese the provincial vote.

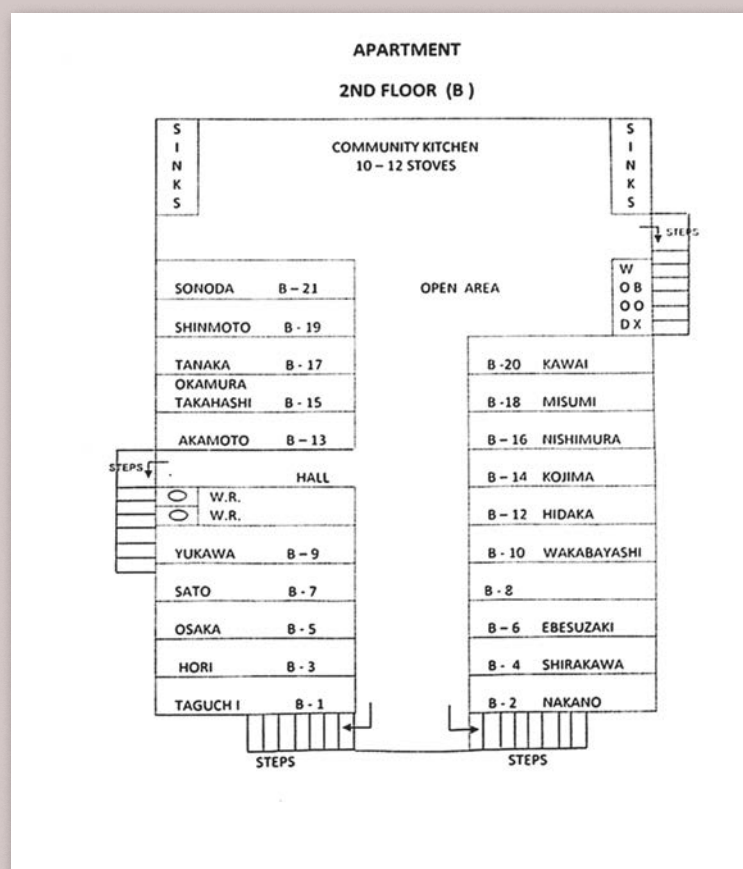
In 1931, the veterans group sent leaders to the legislative assembly in Victoria to lobby for the vote and won

by a slim margin. These were the first Asians to win the vote in British Columbia.

In 1942, following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and Hong Kong, all Japanese Canadians were registered by the RCMP and declared enemy aliens. The

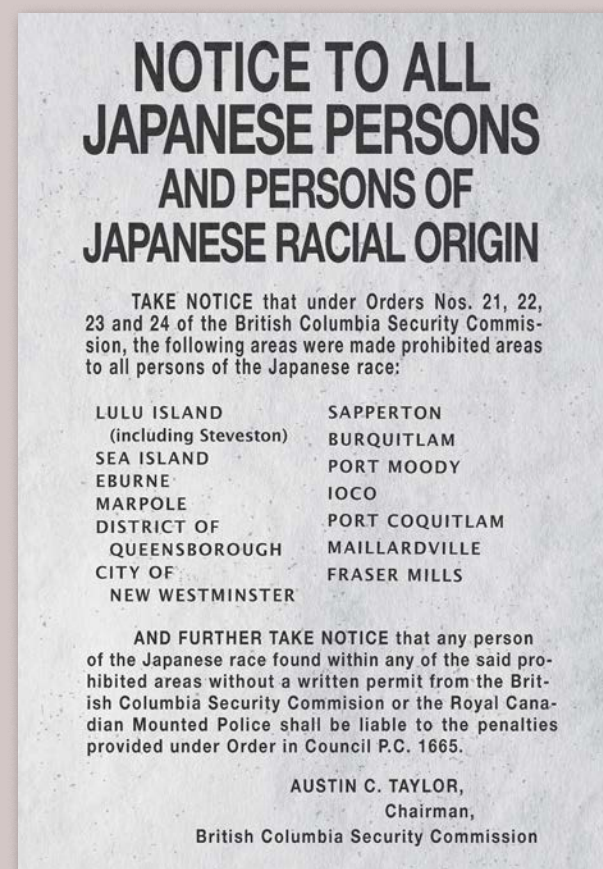


"Young girl in a classroom in a Japanese detention camp." Date unknown. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.



"Floorplan of a Japanese internment camp near Hope." Date unknown.

Courtesy of the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre Archives.



"Notice distributed throughout British Columbia." 1942.

Courtesy of the University of Washington Library.

Government used the War Measures Act to remove all Japanese Canadians from the Pacific Coast and send them to internment camps, sugar beet farms and road camps. All of these families had their properties seized and businesses sold at a fraction of the actual value.

At the end of the war, the war measures was extended by enacting the National Emergency Transitional Powers Act in which the Japanese Canadians were given the choice of deportation to Japan or moving east of the Rockies. Before the Order in council could be rescinded in 1946, almost 4,000 people had already been deported.

Chinese-Canadian's Right to Vote

The first Chinese immigrants started arriving in Canada during the gold rush around 1858.

After British Columbia entered Confederation, its legislature began enacting laws that discriminated against Chinese. The first such law was passed in 1872 and denied them the franchise. The legislature also amended the Municipal Act and the Vancouver City charter to extend the denial of the franchise to municipal elections. Politicians consistently employed

In March of 1947 an appeal was made to Prime Minister King in which the Japanese demanded the liberty of movement, the right to vote and compensation for losses from the internments as well as Canadian citizenship to those who had been deported to Japan.

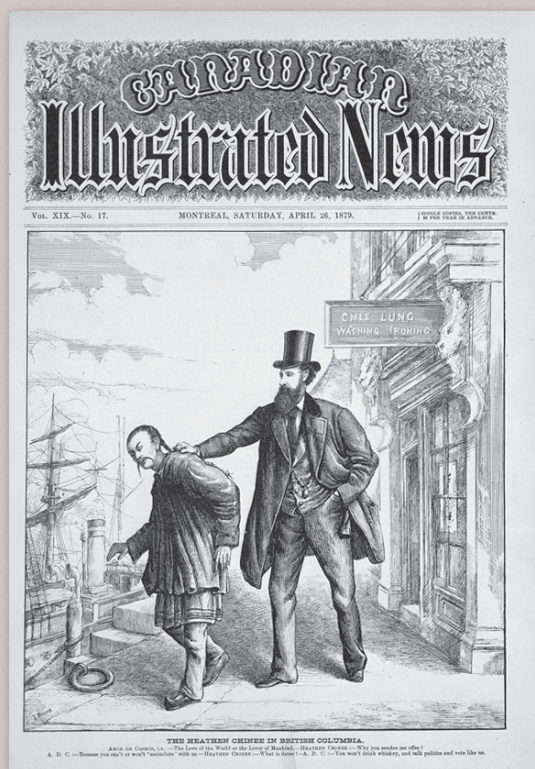
Japanese Canadians received the right to vote federally and provincially in 1948.

In 1949 all people of Japanese heritage living in Canada became enfranchised citizens and free to reside anywhere in Canada as all restrictions are lifted.

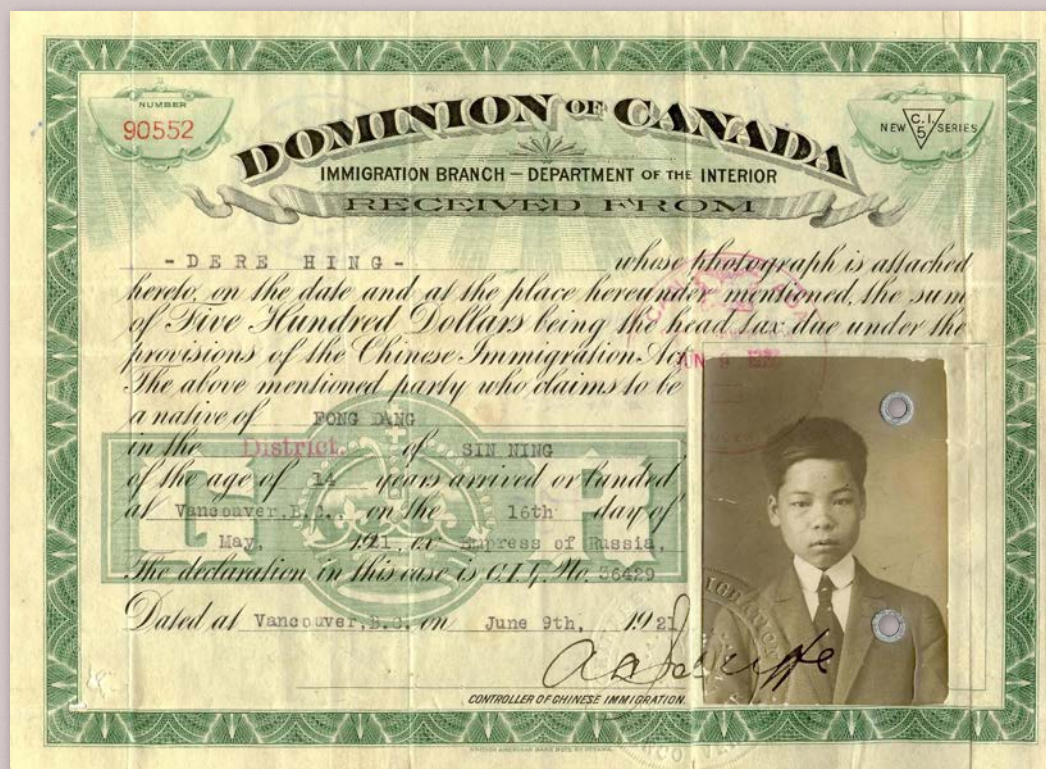
anti-Chinese rhetoric and legislated racism to rally voters for their cause.

On the Federal level, the Electoral Franchise Act (1885) explicitly denied Chinese the right to vote.

Between 1880 and 1885, over 15,000 Chinese workers were brought to Canada to build the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) through the Fraser Canyon. The Chinese were paid less and often did the most dangerous jobs. Many lost their lives due to accidents, cold winters, malnutrition and disease. The death toll was



"The Heathen Chinese in British Columbia" from the *Canadian Illustrated News* magazine. 1879. Courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.



"Chinese Head Tax Certificate." 1921.

Courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.

so high that a saying went: "there is one dead Chinese man for every mile of that track" west of the Rockies.

Upon completion of the CPR, the federal government enacted the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885, imposing a \$50 fee called a "Head Tax" which was later increased to \$500, the equivalent of two years of a labourer's wage in 1903.

In 1923 the Federal government passed an exclusionary Chinese Immigration Act which denied entry to Chinese immigrants.

Before 1923 when new Chinese migrants arrived at Canadian ports in Victoria and Vancouver, they were detained in the Federal Detention Hospital and Immigration Facilities for days and sometimes even weeks until they passed medical screening and paid the head tax. The living conditions in these rooms were deplorable.

The outbreak of World

War II was a pivotal point in the Chinese Canadian history. Despite the discrimination and obstacles, the Chinese proved their loyalty by joining the military for Canada. In honour of their bravery, the Chinese soldiers were granted Canadian Citizenship during the Second World War.

In 1947 the exclusionary Chinese Immigration Act was lifted and the same year Chinese-Canadians were granted the right to vote.



"Chinese immigrants working on the construction of the CPR." 1883. Courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.

Migration



Sikh cremation at Tod Inlet, 1907, as it appeared in the *Canadian Courier* magazine. Courtesy of Bonnycastle Dale Photograph.

Footsteps in time

Deep and Sheltered Waters: the History of Tod Inlet

David R. Gray

ABSTRACT

This is a story of a fascinating place: Tod Inlet, near Victoria, BC. From the original inhabitants of the Tsaaartlip First Nation to the lost community of immigrant workers from China and India, from a company town to the development of parkland the wealth of history in this rich area reflects much of the history of the entire province. The story of Tod Inlet and its community's spans from Vancouver Island to the BC coast north of Ocean Falls, south to California and east to Golden BC.

KEY WORDS

Tod Inlet, cement plant, Indian labourers, Sikhs, Hindoos, Victoria, BC.

Searching for the Sikhs

It was through the discovery of a single photograph in Canada's national archives in 1978 that I first learned the Chinese were not the only immigrant workers at Tod Inlet. The photo of a Sikh cremation ceremony at Tod Inlet in 1907 opened a whole new chapter of the story for me.

From Mary Parsell's memoirs I learned of the arrival of 40 "Hindu" workers at Tod Inlet in 1906, and the effect of this new cultural contact: "To us they were strange looking company of men with their long beards and their strange head coverings. They used to stare at the women as if we too were something quite different being without veils. In the evenings they used to gather in the field at the back of our house and sing sad and mournful songs." What Mary was hearing was the Sikh devotional and communal singing called "kirtan". Normally sung in the Sikh temple or gurudwara, these songs are not necessarily sad or mournful. Kirtan can

be done anywhere Sikhs may gather when there is no gurudwara.

At this time in Canada, all immigrants from India were called "Hindu," regardless of their religion. This was not just common practice but official policy: in 1907 amendment to the Provincial Election Act, the legislative assembly of the province of British Columbia declared that "the expression 'Hindu' shall mean any native of India not born of Anglo-Saxon parents and shall include any person whether a British subject or not." In fact, many of the men described were of the Sikh faith.

The discovery of the one photograph was tantalizing, but initially led me nowhere. I could find no other reference to the Sikhs and there were no personal names. Hoping to learn more, I ventured to the Victoria gurudwara on Topaz Avenue. There the Granthi — the reader of the Holy Book — directed me to the elders' house, where I met Amrik Singh Dhillon. He recalled

We acknowledge with thanks for permission from the Royal BC Museum (2020) to include an expert from the book.



Gurditta Mal Pallan passport photo.

Courtesy of Rupee Pallan.

for me the stories of friends of his father who worked at the cement plant, and gave me the names of their descendants.

Meeting Amrik was the beginning of a long search that slowly and steadily brought to life the story of this unique group of immigrants. He told me about the two ships that brought South Asian immigrants to Victoria and Vancouver in 1906. The people remembered the ships they arrived in not by the ships' names, but by the number of South Asians on board: they called them "the 700 boat" and "the 800 boat". These ships were the CPR trans-Pacific steamers *Monteagle* and *Tartar*.

Records at the gurudwara show that the *Tartar* brought a large number of people from Jandiala village (in the Jullundar district of Punjab), including Hurdit Singh Johal, Sadhu Singh Johal, his uncle Diwan Singh Johal, Partap Singh Johal and Takhar Singh Johal. All of these men worked at least briefly at the Vancouver Portland Cement Company plant at Tod Inlet.

In this group also were Hardit Singh and Gurdit Singh (Dheensaw), from the village of Moron in the Punjab. Hardit and Gurdit Singh originally used Moron, the name of their village, as an identifying name. This was changed to Dheensaw at the request of their children when the meaning of the word in

English was pointed out. (It was only in the 1940s and 1950s that the use of Singh as a last name, a traditional Sikh practice, began to be replaced by using the name of their home village and keeping Singh as a middle name.)

Jeet Dheensaw, son of Hardit Singh, shared with me, in an interview in 2007, the stories of their travels he had heard from his mother: "Why my father and uncle left India . . . to get a better life, which they didn't know they were going to get. They were very frightened and scared. They had heard stories of a vast land, open spaces, and just opportunities to do something . . . more than just living in the village, are quite industrious and adventurous . . . get itchy feet I guess, that's what they had in them."

Sometime before August 1906, the first group of Sikhs came to work at Tod Inlet, primarily as labourers, some likely as stokers and firemen for the plant's furnaces and kilns. The *Nanaimo Free Press* of September 4, 1906, reported, "Hindus are now employed at the cement works at Tod Inlet. If their immigration is allowed to proceed with, it will not be long before they become as serious a competitor as the Chinaman." The only first-hand account of the arrival of a group of Sikhs that I have found comes from a

Why They Came: The Story of Davichand

Some of the men who came to Canada from the Punjab after 1904 were recruited by Canadian Pacific Railway agents in Hong Kong and Calcutta (Kolkata). Others were encouraged by individuals who may have seen immigration as a means increasing their own incomes, such as Dr. Kaishoram Davichand. He was a Hindu Brahman doctor who had come to Canada in about 1904, with his young son and his wife, then said to be the only Hindu woman living in Canada. At an exhibition in Seattle, Washington, in 1905, Davichand and his son were offering “eastern palm reading” to visitors.

By 1907 he was encouraging immigration from his home country. He seems to have had an arrangement with several sawmills in the Vancouver area to supply men to work in the mills.

As well as writing to villages where he was known or had relatives, he also sent tickets to men in these villages to encourage them to emigrate.

In July 1906 the *Vancouver Daily World* reported that Davichand had gone to Victoria in response to a letter from the Vancouver Portland Cement Company who wanted him to get “a number of Hindoos to work for them.”

With encouragement from both individuals such as Davichand and companies like Canadian Pacific, immigration from India expanded until there were some 5,000 Sikhs in Canada by 1908. Most of them came in 1906 and 1907. The people who immigrated were mostly Sikh farmers and landowners, all from the same area of Punjab. In fact, many came in groups from the same villages.

1960 radio interview with Gurdit Singh Bilga, recorded by Laurence Nowry and held in the archives of the Canadian Museum of History.

In 1906, when Gurdit Singh Bilga was only 18 years old, he heard about this new country called Canada, which was open to people from India. When he heard that you could earn a dollar a day, equivalent to three rupees, a great daily earning in India, he decided to make the trip. When he arrived in Victoria in October 1906, there were more than a thousand people from Punjab already in Canada, and many were unemployed. The job situation was particularly bad in Vancouver and Victoria. He described his visit to Tod Inlet: “When we landed in Victoria, I heard there is a cement mill about 20 miles from Victoria. There is one of our friends, who is come from our village, he was a foreman over there. So we, about 30 or 40 people, go to that cement mill.” They learned that people working there were getting a dollar and a quarter a day for 10 hours of work. “So . . . my friend tried to the mill owner, if they could hire some more people. But unfortunately, is another foreman beside my friend, and some his friends coming the same ship as we coming. They went to the mill owner, they offer, they can supply the man for dollar a day. So, he get the job, we been refused.”

The second group of Indian immigrants, mostly Sikhs, came from Jandiala in the fall of 1906. Among them was Gurditta Mal Pallan, a letter writer. He came straight from India with five or six people, male friends who travelled together on a ship from Calcutta (Kolkata) to Hong Kong. There they changed to a CPR ship headed to Victoria and Vancouver.

Mukund (Max) Pallan told me about his family history in a series of interviews in 2007 and 2008: “And my father, Gurditta Mal Pallan, came to Canada in 1906 with a group of people from the same village, Jandiala, where he used to live. Actually five people started together. They decided to come to Canada because a few of their friends, they were already here—they wrote back and said, ‘Come on over. It’s a big country, lots of jobs, and you will be happy here.’”

Victoria businessman Mony Jawl told me about his grandfather: “Well, my grandfather Thakar Singh emigrated from the village of Jandiala in the state of Punjab, in India, to Canada in 1906. He came with a group of others who were asked to come out to provide labour at the lime quarry at Tod Inlet. My understanding is that there were at least 10 or 12 people that were required and they were recruited from the village where my

grandfather lived. They came to this country together, to work there.”

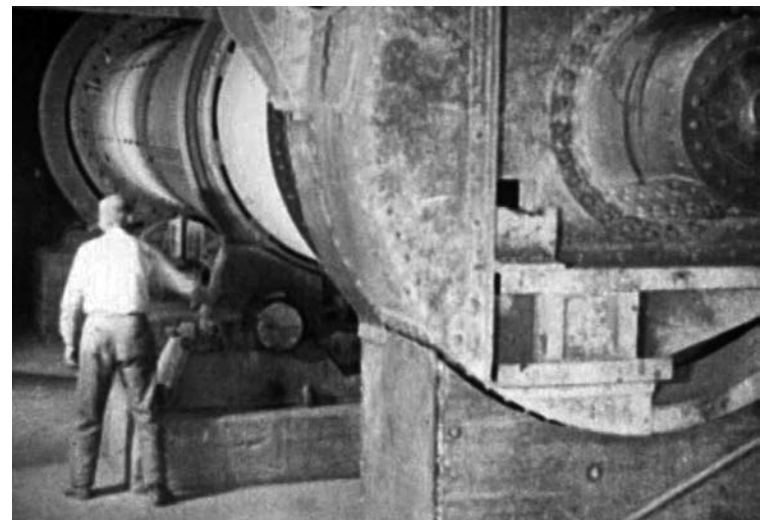
Jawl’s sister, Jeto Sengara, of Vancouver, also shared stories of Singh’s arrival in Victoria: “I remember when my grandfather Thakar used to tell us stories . . . about when he first came to Canada. They didn’t know where to live and there was no place to go. There was no temple at the time, so they pitched tents right where the Empress Hotel now is. And the group of men that had immigrated with my grandfather, they pitched tents there. There were mud flats there, and that’s where they live and slept . . . My grandfather walked all the way up to the cement plant by Butchart Gardens.”

When G.L. Milne, medical inspector and immigration agent, was making inquiries in 1907 of some firms that had employed “Hindoos,” he contacted the Vancouver Portland Cement Company. He reported that the company “spoke rather favourably of them as they were a competitor with the Chinese who were inclined to strike for higher wages at times, and by their presence kept the wages at the usual rate of \$1.50 per day.” Milne also referred to “another peculiarity of the Hindoo, they are divided into numberless ‘Casts’ which is a great hindrance of their being employed in numbers.”

But Milne was not well informed about the Sikh and the Hindu religions. His conclusion that “the Emigration of a large number of Hindoos into this country would not be desirable” was based on a lack of understanding of Sikhs and of the Indian caste system and was illogical at best. Sikhs, of course, have no caste system; even if they had, it is hard to see how this would have affected their usefulness as workers. Those who employed them described them as hard workers of good character. That good character, and the ability to withstand hard work and long hours, would be necessary in the harsh conditions inside the cement plant.

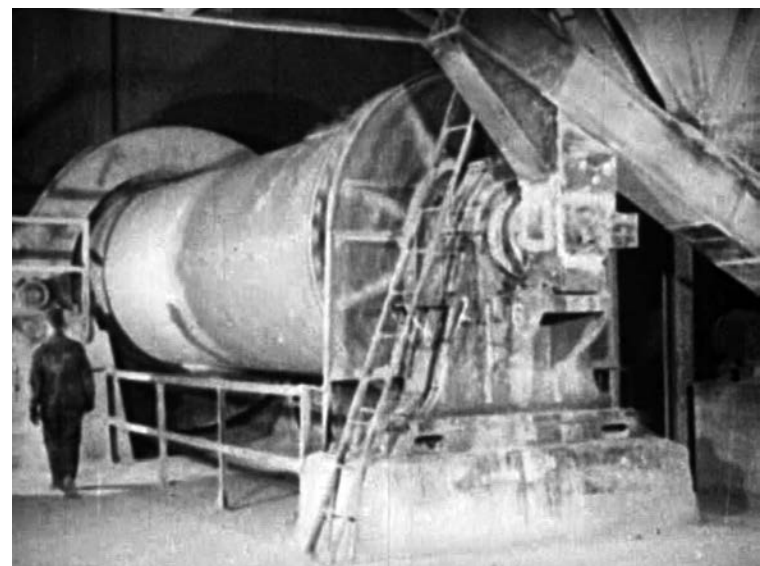
Inside the Cement Plant

At the beginning, the cement plant at Tod Inlet had a powerhouse attached to the mill room with a battery of five tubular boilers fired partly by wood and partly by slack coal, which generated the steam necessary to run the plant machinery. “Slack coal” refers to small or inferior pieces of coal that burn at high temperature,



The dryers in the plant.

Source: still from *The Manufacture of “Elk” Portland Cement*.



The Ball mill.

Source: still from *The Manufacture of “Elk” Portland Cement*.

suitable for use in burning limestone—especially in cement factory kilns that process limestone.

Norman Parsell remembered that in the early days of the plant, before the switch to electrical power, the plant used steam engines of various sizes, some very large. “They had a large block of coal-fired return tubular boilers and the firemen and stokers were mostly East Indians.” When the plant was operating at full capacity, there were 11 engines to keep in order. A large Corliss steam engine drove the main power belt that operated the mill. There were smaller engines for individual phases of cement making. Norman’s father, engineer James Parsell, would move from one to the next, checking them when on duty.

Mary Parsell told a story in her memoir of a potentially fatal accident in the mill: “One night when my husband was on duty in the engine room, he was

walking around to the various machines to see that each one was functioning properly . . . As he walked past the door opening into the mill he saw Fred Chubb standing pale and dazed looking, clad only in a suit of underwear. Upon enquiry as to what was the matter, Fred pointed to the huge fly wheel spinning around and around and said, 'I have just been around on that.' He had caught his sweater sleeve on a set screw and in a second he was caught up and whirled around. I do not know how many times he was carried about on that wheel but I know that his sweater was almost reduced to its original yarn and his new overalls were in ribbons. It was a miracle that he survived. Yet, with the exception of a few bruises and scratches, he was unhurt. Recently he was telling my son about this incident and he said that my husband took off his coveralls and gave them to him to wear."

John Hilliard Lewis wasn't so lucky. Working in the mill room on a mould for the cement piers, he ducked under a moving belt while going down into an excavation. He was struck on the head by the blots holding the ends of the belt together. He died the next day from a fractured skull, according to the *Victoria Daily Times* for December 4, 1905.

The largest and most complicated building in the cement plant was the mill room, where the large cylindrical crushers, rollers and kilns transformed the raw limestone and clay into cement.

When the men in the limestone quarry had finished loading the tram carts, they pushed them down the rails to the mill room, the first of the plant buildings. The tram-lines ran over a line of separate storage bins of raw clay and limestone, and into the crushing plants. The clay and limestone were carried separately on the tram-line and went on different paths into the plant.

The rough limestone rock was sent first into a crushing plant known as a Gates crusher. From there the crushed limestone was discharged into a rotary dryer, a hollow, wrought-iron cylindrical shell 1.5 metres in diameter and 13 meters long. The dryer rotates on tires, with a slight inclination

down from the feeding end. It was heated in part by hot waste gases that were fed back from the kiln into the dryer. These gases passed into the lower end of the dryer, meeting the crushed material and drying it, then passed out to the upper end into a separate brick chimney stack that was 19 meters high. As the cylinder revolved, the crushed material travelled through the dryer and was discharged automatically.

The crushed and dried limestone then passed from the rotary dryer into a screw conveyor, which carried horizontally to a bucket-elevator. The elevator fed the partially crushed limestone into the Krupp ball mill, a horizontally revolving iron shell about two metres in a diameter and two metres long. In the mill, which was lined with a heavy chilled-iron screen, were round steel "cannonballs". As the mill revolved, the cannonballs rolled over and through the crushed limestone, grinding it to the fine texture. From the Krupp mill another screw-gear raised the fine limestone and deposited it into a storage bin capable of holding 50 tons.

The clay arrived at the plant over the same tram-line as the limestone, but went directly into a Potts disintegrator, where a pair of rollers with revolving knife-like teeth disintegrated the clay. From there it passed into the same dryer into which the limestone was fed. The dryer was used alternately for limestone or clay as required. The clay, already fine enough and needing no further grinding in the Krupp mill, went directly from the dryer to the ground-clay stock bin, located beside the ground limestone bin.



Manufacturer's plate from a 1908 roll mill at Tod Inlet.

Courtesy: David Gray



Looking into the kiln at the lumps of forming cement as they tumble with the rotation of the kiln.

Source: still from The Manufacture of "Elk" Portland Cement



Adding gypsum to the limestone powder.

Source: still from The Manufacture of "Elk" Portland Cement

Gypsum

Gypsum is a sedimentary rock formed from the evaporation of salt water. It is found in large deposits worldwide at sites where there has been evaporation of sea water. A mineral containing sulphur and oxygen, in its massive or solid form it is called alabaster. As well as being important for making quick-setting building cement, gypsum is also used in the manufacture of plasters (including plaster of Paris) and plasterboard. Some of the gypsum brought to Tod inlet from Alaska probably came from the Pacific Coast Gypsum mine, on Chichagof Island, Alaska, near Juneau in the Alaska panhandle.



Loading bags of cement on the wharf at Tod Inlet in 1907.

Bonnycastle Dale photograph. Courtesy of Kim Walker

At this point the materials, which until this point had been treated and handled separately, were mixed. The men weighed the desired amount of both limestone and clay and gradually discharged the materials into a horizontally placed screw conveyor, which thoroughly mixed the two ingredients. From an elevated hopper bin, the mixed materials were fed down into two tube mills for further mixing and grinding.

The tube mills were iron tubes about 1.5 metres in diameter and 7 metres long, lined with hard flint stones embedded in cement. When the tube was rotating, larger round flint pebbles would roll over and through the ground limestone and clay, thoroughly mixing and

grinding the materials. Next, the materials were fed into the rotary kiln, a horizontal iron tube mounted on rollers, 2 metres in diameter and 22 metres in length.

The noise in the plant must have been deafening. A contemporary account of a visit to a cement mill described the noise as the material was fed into the rotary kiln as "a rattle and din much resembling the discharge of musketry". Difficulty with hearing, if not outright deafness, must have been a constant risk for the many workers who spent 10 hours a day, if not longer, in the mill.

The kiln, lined with firebrick, was heated to a temperature of 2,700°F (1,482°C) by the burning fine, dry

coal dust. As the kiln rotated, the crushed limestone and clay slowly passed through and were fused together by the heat, forming the “cement clinker” that when pulverized would become cement.

To break up large clumps of clinker without entering the kiln, workers fired a large kiln gun through the open door. The additional noise, as well as the heat the workers would endure the kiln door even briefly open, is almost unimaginable.

The hot gases from the kiln were directed to the large central chimney stack. The first main stack at Tod inlet was made of brick and stood 26 metres tall. Some of the hot gases were conducted back to the rotary dryer, providing enough heat to dry the incoming clay and limestone, and probably heating the building beyond comfort as well.

Next, the red-hot clinker went into the rotary cooler, another revolving iron cylinder about 1.5 metres in diameter and 5 metres long. The rotary cooler was sent on an incline, and as cool air was let in, the clinker cooled as it moved down the tube. When the clinker was cool enough to permit handling, it was mainly the Chinese and Sikh labourers who screened out any large clinkers and broke them up with sledgehammers.

Jeet Dheensaw relates his family memories of the work: “it was hard, dusty, breaking rocks, like breaking rocks and stuff, nothing by machinery. . . . They never had any machinery there.”

After the cement left the cooler, the workers added gypsum to the mix. Gypsum was a necessary ingredient that acted to slow the setting time of the cement. The company had to bring gypsum in from various sources: Vancouver, Alaska, California, even France.

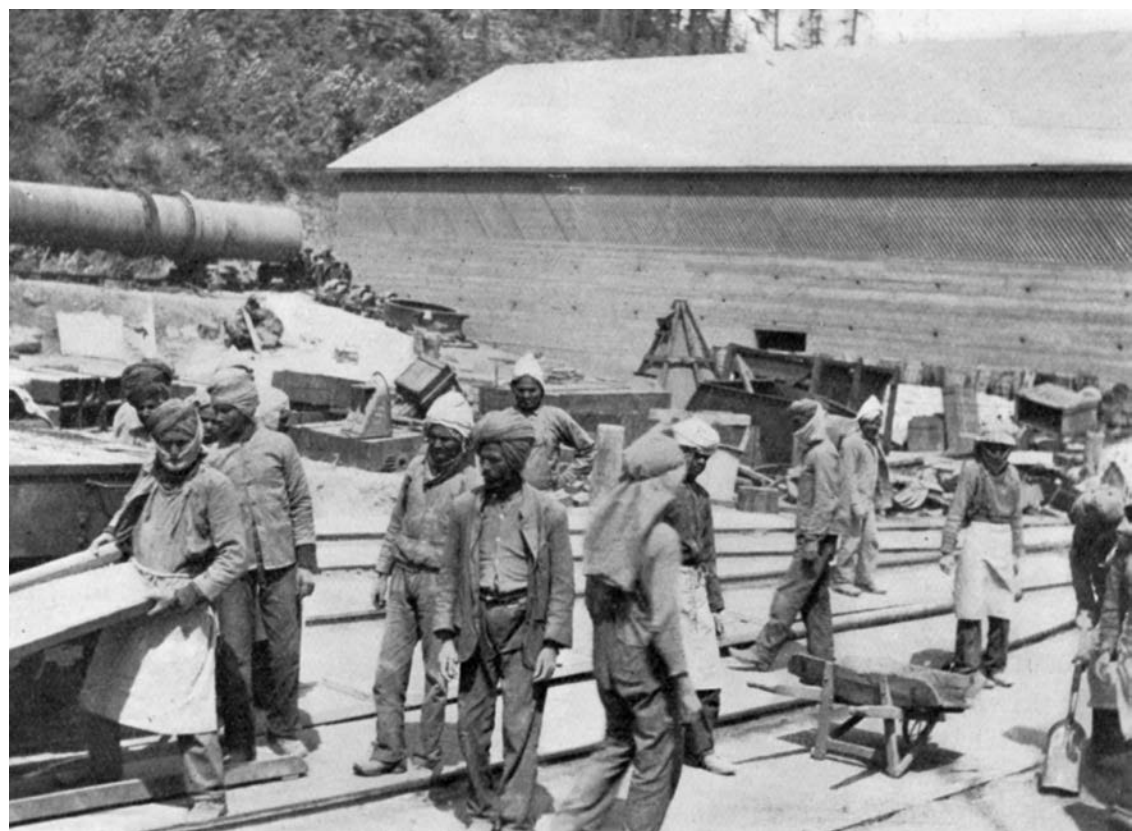
After being broken up by hand, the combined material was fed into a

Bonnet ball mill, 1.5 by 2.5 metres in size, where it was partially crushed. From the Bonnet mill a screw conveyor took the material to another tube mill for final crushing to the level of fineness required for the finished product.

From the tube mill the cement went into storage bins in the adjoining stock house to await sacking. From the bins, men poured the cement into 87.5-pound (39.7-kilogram) sacks for storage or shipment. A bag warehouse and sack cleaner room provided more storage and workspace for handling the sacks. The new method of shipping 87.5-pounds of cement in burlap sacks was based on the old barrel system: four 87.5-pound sacks weighed 350 pounds — the same as the old “barrel” of cement.

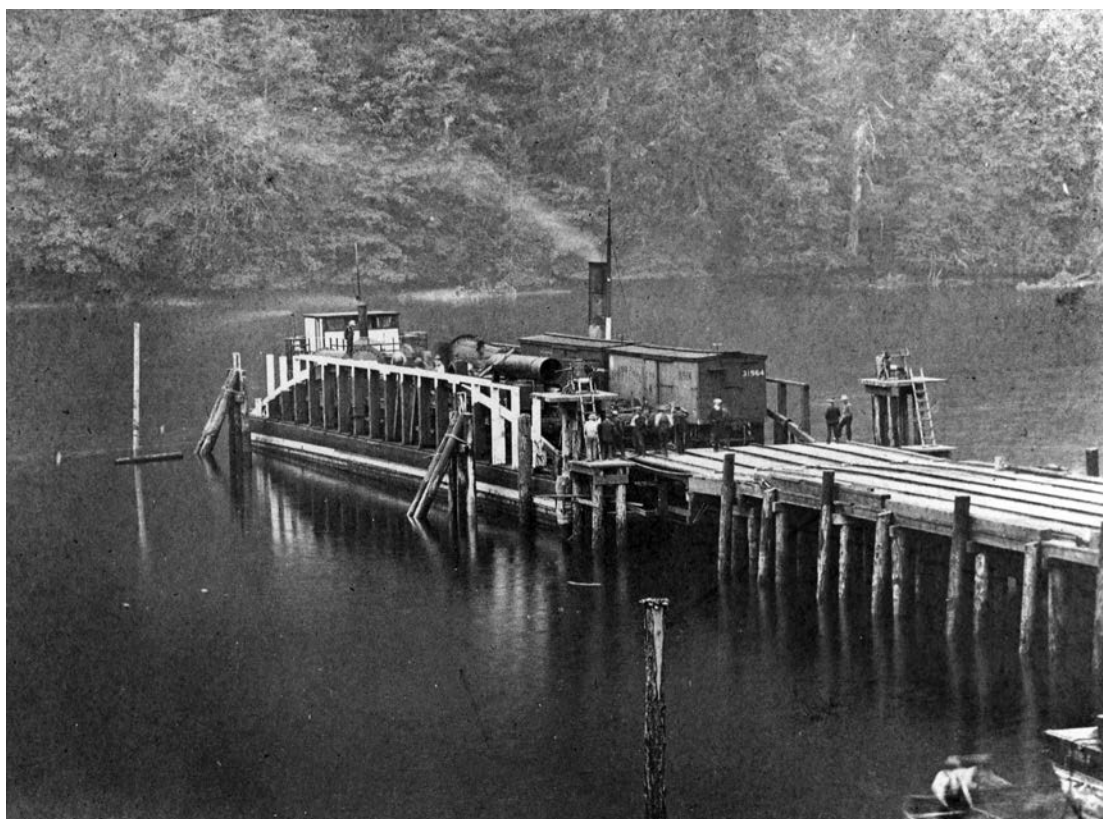
Health and Safety: The Dangers of Dust and Heat

Gurditta Mal Pallan’s first job at Tod Inlet was to fill the 87.5-pound bags with cement powder and carry them half a block to a waiting scow. He was a strong man and could handle the heavy work easily, but the dust compromised his lungs, so he looked for another job. By Christmas of 1906 he had moved to downtown Victoria and found work with BC Electric installing



Sikhs at the Tod Inlet wharf with scarves around their necks to combat the cement dust, 1907.

Bonnycastle Dale photograph. Courtesy of Kim Walker.



The Tod Inlet wharf with barge and tugboat unloading machinery for the cement plant, 1906–1907.

Courtesy: David Gray collection, from BCCC photo album.

streetcar tracks, working 10-hour shifts for 10 cents an hour.

One of the newspaper reports relating to the Sikhs of Tod Inlet was a somewhat sensational article that appeared in the *Victoria Daily Times* in August 1906.

Under the headings of “Hindus are in Great Distress” and “Being Cared for by City Until Decision is Reached as to Their Disposal,” the article starts with “Hindu Invaders have struck Victoria.” The writer describes how 15 Sikhs had left the employment of the Vancouver Portland Cement works at Tod Inlet, walked to Victoria and camped on Fourth Street without tents or food. When concerned citizens appealed to the mayor of Victoria, police constables brought the Sikhs to the patrol shed at city hall. The reporter gives us one of the few written descriptions of the early immigrant Sikhs and their belongings: “Heavy brass basins here and there and a large black pot of rice are the only evidences of food. . . . Only one speaks even imperfect English. He is an old man, a former member of one of the Sikh regiments and bears on his breast an imperial medal for one of the Chinese campaigns. . . . They attempted to work at Tod Inlet, but could not stand the dust. Complaints of bronchitis and throat troubles

seem to be the chief cause of their quitting.”

Gurditta Mal Pallan told his son Max about how the people at Tod Inlet did indeed get sick: everyone, he said, was coughing from the coal and cement dust. No precautions were taken officially, but the Sikhs tied extra clothes around their necks to cover their mouths and noses. It was mostly the Chinese workers who unloaded the coal. The resultant silicosis was especially fatal in combination with tuberculosis.

A May 1909 story in the *Victoria Daily Times* headlined “Chinese Fireman Dies Suddenly” describes the fate of fireman Joe Do Yen, who

suffered a heart attack while working in the boiler room and collapsed on a pile of coal. He was found by his friends but was beyond medical help. His body was taken to Victoria, where he was to be buried in the Chinese Cemetery at Harling Point, between Gonzales Bay and McNeill Bay.

The special firebricks used to line the kilns were of different sizes, shapes and places of manufacture and were imported both from Vancouver and Scotland. They had to be replaced periodically as they became worn out or broken. Pat van Adrichem, who worked in the kilns at the Bamberton cement works, described for me the process of replacing the firebricks. The men working with the kilns watched for red areas on the outside metal of the kiln where heat was coming through, indicating faulty bricks. When such areas were spotted, workers were sent into the kiln to pull out and replace the bricks. The only bricks sometimes retained were the larger bricks at the end of the kiln. Although they waited until the kiln cooled down before entering, it was still hot enough in the kiln that the workers would get blisters on their feet, even through their boots. Workers used picks, bars and mattocks to remove the hot bricks, which were all keyed in together.

As they cleared one side out, the operator would revolve the kiln slightly to allow loose bricks to fall and the men to get at another area. At Tod Inlet they loaded the loose bricks into wheelbarrows to get them out of the kiln and dumped them at the shore or used them as fill.

The Cement Plant Complex

By 1905, the company was making cement piles to support the structure of the wharf where equipment and supplies were unloaded. These giant piles were pointed at one end, with a metal pile-shoe to facilitate driving them into the seabed with a piledriver. When the wharf was extended, sometime after 1907, these new, long-lasting piles were driven into the sea floor in a long L-shaped pattern.

The coal to power the cement mill was unloaded from barges and carried directly up to the coal house on a conveyor belt from the wharf. The coal house was situated directly beside the mill room on the west side.

Beyond the coal house and slightly apart from the mill were the other major company buildings — the blacksmith shop, the machine shop and the office building.

The blacksmith shop was a one-storey concrete building east of the mill house. There the blacksmith and his assistants created the ironwork needed for the plant and took care of tools, machines and even horses. Bill Ledingham was the first man in charge of the blacksmith shop, followed by Douglas J. Scafe. The equipment in the shop included a large forge and a round bellows made of wood and leather.

To the east of the main plant outbuildings were four other smaller buildings — the laboratory, the cookhouse, the larder and small storage shed — and the larger two-storey bunkhouse.

The small wood-frame chemistry laboratory stood



Exterior of the company laboratory.

Courtesy of BC Archives A-09160

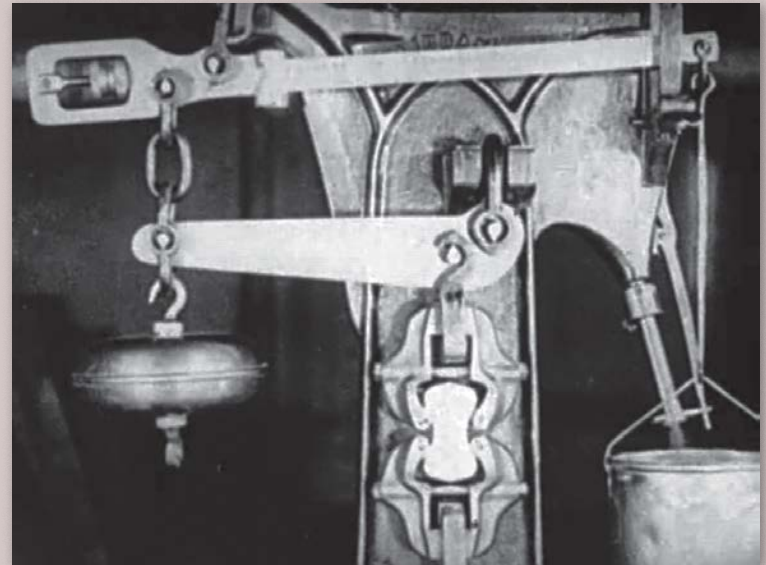
between the plant and the cookhouse. It was in use by July 1905. The first chemist was Mr. Highberg; the second, Adolph Neu, later took up residence in Tod Inlet with his family. The chemist took samples from the kilns, slurry tanks and ball mills several times daily to ensure the quality of the cement. The large kilns had lidded holes through which samples could be taken. Because the raw limestone was of varying quality in the quarry, the finished cement also varied in quality depending on its internal chemistry. As the test results were received, adjustments could be made in the mixing process.

Adolph Neu had been the head chemist at the cement plant at Colton, California, in 1903. In May he was demonstrating the apparatus for testing the tensile strength of cement at a street fair in San Bernardino. In October he had been issued a patent for a new oil burner that produced a higher and steadier heat than those used previously. In June 1904, he left the Colton



Taking a sample of the cement.

Still from the film *The Manufacture of "Elk" Portland Cement* (BC Archives AAA A6718, 1963), presented with permission of the Lehigh Hanson Cement Company.

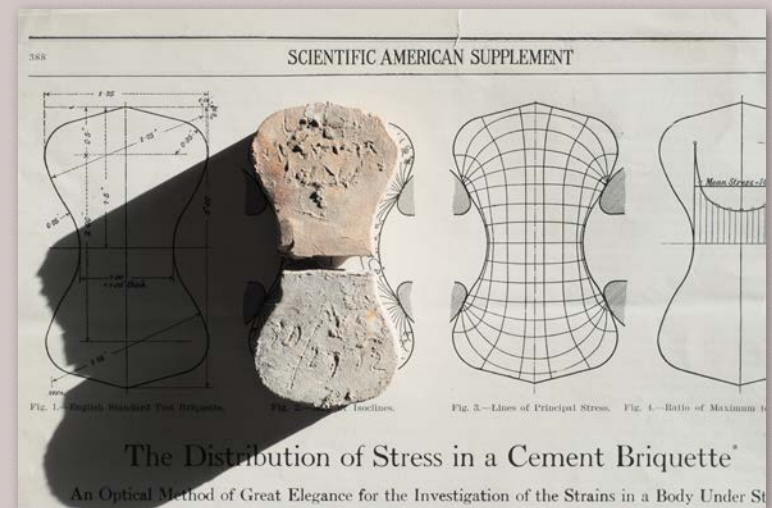


The cement testing machine.

The Manufacture of "Elk" Portland Cement (BC Archives AAA A6718, 1963), presented with permission of the Lehigh Hanson Cement Company.



Older, cookie-style cement briquettes from the shore of Tod Inlet.
Courtesy of David R. Gray



A newer cement briquette from Tod Inlet, on top of an illustration in *Scientific American Supplement*, 1913.
Courtesy of David R. Gray



Broken cement test briquettes on the shore.

Courtesy of David R. Gray

plant to accept a position with the Hudson Cement works in Hudson, New York. One wonders if perhaps Butchart, searching for an excellent chemist, had found him at a competitor's laboratory.

Mary Parsell noted that "each batch of cement was always very carefully tested in order to retain the high standard required." Jennie Butchart and her two teenage daughters sometimes assisted Mr. Highberg in the testing of the cement at the laboratory.

The cement was tested in two ways: the sand test and the tensile test. The sand test required that 95 per cent of the cement powder pass through a mesh with 10,000 perforations per square inch. In the tensile test, a square inch of cement had to withstand a force equal to 450 pounds.

Cement samples were moulded into briquettes shaped like a solid figure eight or a short dog bone, three inches long, one inch thick and an inch wide at the narrowest point, and were stamped with a date or number for identification. These were kept underwater for five weeks before testing. The rounded ends of the briquette were clamped to the cement tester, and a small pail on the beam end was slowly filled with lead shot until the sample broke. Tests in 1905 showed that the Tod Inlet cement could withstand a strain of 950 pounds, much higher than the industry standard. Other apparently handmade briquettes found on the shore of Tod Inlet near the plant, shaped like a cookie or sand dollar, 7.5 centimetres in diameter, with numbers inscribed by hand, were probably used for the first rounds of testing as the plant was coming into operation.

The cookhouse was where the single men who lived in the bunkhouse had their meals. Several Chinese men worked for the company as cooks, either on the company ships or in the company cookhouse. The cooks grew vegetables and raised livestock, mainly pigs. Pat van Adrichem, a



Oil painting of horses in the company barn at Tod Inlet, 1924, by Joseph Carrier (1850–1939).

Carrier family collection. David R. Gray photograph.

former gardener at Tod Inlet, remembers seeing corrugated tin used in the village to keep the pigs enclosed, and pig skulls were certainly numerous in the old Chinese midden above Tod Creek.

When Mary Parsell first arrived at Tod Inlet, she had some difficulty getting used to the necessity of ordering food once a month to come in on the company boat. When they ran short, the "Chinese cook would sell us one loaf of bread but he never looked too pleased when



The cement barn in 1960s.

Courtesy of David R. Gray

we asked for it. After all, he had a large gang of men to feed and both he and his helpers worked hard.”

The company built a large two-storey concrete bunkhouse for the single men, halfway between the plant and the village of wooden company homes where the married men lived with their families. When the men’s bunkhouse was built, it included a large room at one end that the company allowed the villagers to use for recreation, including card games and parties.

A dam was constructed on Tod Creek in 1904 or 1905 to create a reservoir from which to pipe water to the cement plant and village. The chairman of the Victoria Fish and Game Club spoke to Robert Butchart in 1905 about the dam obstructing fish from reaching Prospect Lake from Tod Inlet. At the time, Butchart promised to construct a fish ladder, but if it was built at all, it did not last long and it was never effective.

Once the mill began operations, large quantities of coal were burned in the boiler room, creating huge amounts of ash and cinders. The ash and cinder residue was initially used for surfacing on the roads and paths that led from the mill to Lime Kiln Road. Some was also used in the construction of the plant buildings. With his team of horses and dump cart, the company teamster, Billy Greig, the son of the former lime burner, carried the excess to the shore in front of the bunkhouse. There he dumped it over the banks of the inlet, extending both the steep banks and the shoreline below. The company horses were kept in the concrete stable that stood between the family houses and the Chinese village.

The post office for the new village of Tod Inlet was located in the two-storey company office building, just east of the cement plant. In 1904, local businessman Wilfred Butler’s offer to deliver mail to Tod Inlet was accepted by the postmaster general, and the community had received its official name. Mail service to the Tod Inlet Post Office began on May 1, 1905. Butler’s job was to collect mail at the Keating Station of the Victoria & Sidney Railway each morning (except Sunday) and deliver it to the new post office “with dispatch.” He was then required to get the return mail from Tod Inlet to the Keating Station by 5:54 p.m. to catch the Victoria-bound train.

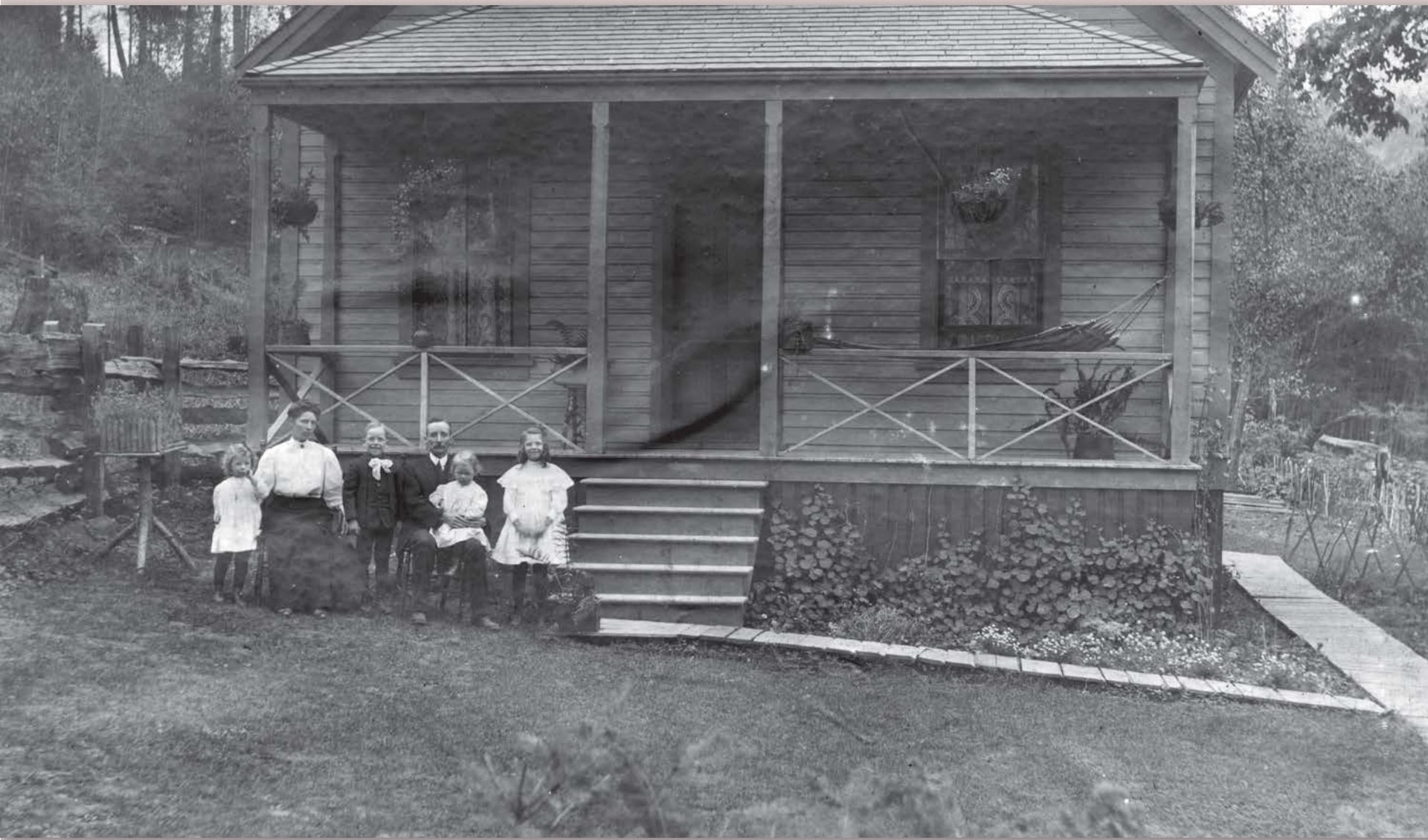
The post office opened in the office building on the same day mail service began, with H.A. Ross, treasurer

of the Vancouver Portland Cement Company, as postmaster. When the first directory entry for Tod Inlet appeared in the *Vancouver Island Directory* for 1909, it listed an assistant postmaster: W.E. Losee, superintendent of the cement plant.

The postal service wasn’t the only way of communicating. The city directories for Victoria from 1910 on describe the Tod Inlet connections to the telegraph system by road: “Stage connects twice daily with V. & S. Ry. at Keating which is the nearest telegraph office distant 272 miles.” The first telephone in Tod Inlet was not installed until 1910.

The local maps of 1905 show Lime Kiln Road reaching the shore of Tod Inlet at the site of the new village. Maps based on topographical work done in 1909 show both the road leading to Tod Inlet and other smaller roads leading to Butchart Cove and the Fernie farm, as well as a loop through the cement plant, and a longer road across Tod Creek to the southeast. This road leading east from the Tod Inlet community and south across Tod Creek towards Durrance Lake first appears on a 1909 map, and it is also shown in 1911 and 1921. (The lake itself is man made, designed as a source of water for the industrial works at Tod Inlet.) A house marked between the hills is probably the house known locally as the Beetlestone cabin, owned by John Beetlestone, an early farmer of the area. The 1911 census also mentions Lime Kiln Road, under the name of Cement Works Road.

Gus Sivertz, a local columnist in Victoria, described what it was like to travel to Tod Inlet down Lime Kiln Road in the early 1900s: “One reached Tod Inlet by the simple expedient of boarding the old V & S railway at Victoria, riding its dusty and swaying carriages to Keatings and transferring to a stage coach—really! It was a wonderful ride in strawberry time and if one was reasonably fast afoot he could jump down at a hill, leap a fence and snatch a handful of sun-ripe strawberries and race ahead to catch the stage before the horses started to trot down the next slope. At Tod Inlet the driver held his team hard and his foot was pressed down on the brake as the stage seemed to want to override the horses on the last steep incline.”



The Parsell family at their New House in 1906.

Courtesy of Norman Parsell.

The Settlement of Tod Inlet

Tod Inlet quickly became a thriving community. As the plant was built and the beginning of production loomed, the arrival of new personnel and their families and the hiring of large numbers of labourers began to create a rugged pioneer community.

In May 1905 Mary Parsell and her three children took the Victoria & Sidney Railway to Keating Station, where they were met by a man driving a horse-drawn buggy. On their way to Tod Inlet they passed just four houses along Keating Cross Road. The Lime Kiln Road down to Tod Inlet ran through dense bush and then down a long, steep hill. “I felt extremely nervous as we continued going down and down. At last we reached home, a tent twelve feet by twenty feet with board floor and boarded sides two feet high.” Wilfred Butler II, who ran the stagecoach as a teenager as soon as he was able to handle the horses, found it a challenge holding the brakes on the long hill down to Tod Inlet.

The tent, the Parsells’ first shelter, was the former home of superintendent Losee’s family and included a leaky lean-to kitchen with a cookstove. The tent was close to the active quarry, and before each round of limestone blasting, quarry boss James Thompson or one of his men would warn Mary to take her children a safe distance away. The small pieces of flying rock that frequently hit the tent did little damage, but “one day a huge rock landed just beside our dwelling and if it had been a direct hit, there would have been plenty trouble.”

In the fall of 1905, the Parsells were able to move into one of the newly built houses along the road leading to the Chinese quarters. Within a year there were seven more houses, all built by Thomas Tubman, a local carpenter and builder contracted by the cement company. After their tent dwelling, a newly built house in the village seemed deluxe to Mary Parsell. It was also significant to the community. In 1910, during the construction of a new cement plant on the west shore

of Saanich Inlet, the manager of the British Columbia Telephone Company came to Tod Inlet looking for a suitable place for a telephone to be installed. The most suitable place turned out to be in the Parsell house.

While living in the village, Norman Parsell and his sister Ella walked to the West Saanich School in what is now Brentwood, “a long walk for six-year-olds, especially in the rain.” In those days much of their route was just bush. The distance was about three and a half kilometres, and it would have taken the children close to an hour to walk. The original school had been built in 1880 at the corner of Sluggett and West Saanich Roads. A new school, still only one room with a pot-bellied stove and outhouses, opened in 1908 and operated until 1952. There were lots of children in the village, and all went to West Saanich School.

The Parsell family moved to a second house at the top of the upper row of houses, by the gate, to get away from the aerial tram-line that often spilled limestone from the overhead buckets. They stayed there until 1912. In that year they bought six acres about a kilometre and a half up Lime Kiln Road from the village, beside the Pitzer family property, and built a new house. The Pitzers were farmers, a large and friendly family who had lived there since 1891. As Norman Parsell put it, “a nicer family would be hard to find.”

The *Vancouver Island Directory* for 1909 lists 31 residents of Tod Inlet. As usual, the immigrant labourers were not listed, though their presence was recognized: “nearly 200 Orientals located here.” Peter Fernie, retired, and John Beetlestone, farmer, are the only two men listed who were not associated with the cement industry. By 1910 the cement plant was described as employing 250 men, of whom only 32 were listed in the directory. The Canada census of 1911 lists 368 employees of the plant: 239 workers living in the Chinese camp, 63 in the “Hindu Camp,” 56 in the bunkhouse and 10 men as heads of families in the village.

Henderson’s 1913 directory only lists 25 men, 21 of whom were employed by the cement plant—mostly the married men of the village.

The others were Herbert Hemmings and Frederick Simpson, farmers; Hugh Lindsay, a gardener for the Butchart family; and Robert Hunter, keeper of the small store at the top end of the village.

The social life at Tod Inlet was created from within,

mostly by the wives and children of the cement company employees. It was an important part of life in the isolated community, keeping morale high in families and giving a sense of community belonging.

Dances and card parties were held in the cookhouse dining room, with permission from the plant manager, William Losee. Everyone attended these events. The cook would make a large cake as a contribution. Mary Parsell remembered Billy Greig, the company teamster, taking a dozen or so residents to dances at the Saanichton Agricultural Hall in the hay wagon.

Although there has never been a church in Tod Inlet, Sunday services were held in the community for about a year and a half, beginning about 1909. The church services and Sabbath school took place in the kitchen of the Parsell home, with the Reverend Frederick Letts as minister. When the West Saanich Hall was built in 1911, the Tod Inlet residents held services there. They then moved to the new Sluggett Memorial Church the next year in what is now the village of Brentwood Bay.

The Chinese labourers lived apart from the other workers in a group of roughly built dwellings above Tod Creek. The road to the Chinese quarters passed between the rows of new houses that were constructed in 1906–1907 for the white employees and their families. The Chinese labourers mostly built their own houses. To Norman Parsell, the houses always looked makeshift, but they seemed to withstand the elements. Most of them had few windows, and they always seemed to be dark inside. There were no wives or families in that part of the village.

Four to six men lived in each house, but they ate together in one large building. Gardener Alf Shiner remembered them using a large communal pot. Dem Carrier, who grew up at the inlet, used to take fresh cod up to the village to sell. He remembers most vividly the smell of incense and the clutter in the houses; the village was “pretty ramshackle, pretty poor living structures: low, dark, dingy. Terrible place to live, really.”

The Parsell family often had Chinese friends come to their house in small groups for lessons in English. Norman remembered the names Wong, Fong, Sam and Wing among them.

At Lunar New Year, the Parsells visited the men who worked for James in the furnace room and were given gifts of firecrackers, ginger and lychees — and always

Chinese lilies for Mary, whose friendship they particularly appreciated. She felt a real sense of trust between them.

It is unfortunate that we have no accounts of life at Tod Inlet from the Chinese workers themselves. Those who do tell the stories of the relations among the races at Tod Inlet from a white perspective remember them as excellent, even as anti-Chinese riots were taking place nearby in Vancouver. Chinese labourers were not popular then in Canada, and in some areas of British Columbia, anti-Asian racism was rampant — and at times vicious.

Another impact of the poor working conditions, along with the laws and regulations that prevented family from joining the immigrant workers, may have been the use of alcohol and opium by the overworked and lonely men. After the Chinese village was abandoned, the area where it had stood was identifiable by the abundance of various liquor bottles: rice wine, gin, whisky and beer from around the world. Also conspicuous were the tiny, fragile glass bottles or vials known as opium bottles, and the ceramic bowls of opium pipes. Several stores in Victoria's Chinatown were still legally selling opium in 1905: Shon Yuen & Co., at 33 "Fisgard" Street, and Tai Yeu & Co. were listed in Henderson's Directory for Victoria as "opium dealers," and Lee Yune & Co. as "opium manufacturers." The use of opium was not banned until 1907. As opium poppies grow well in Victoria, it seems that some workers chose to grow their own rather than buying from the sources in Victoria.

When Dem and I walked through the old Tod Inlet village area in 2007, we stopped at a circular cement ring with a hole in the middle, in front of the old bunkhouse foundation. "The flagpole was in the centre here, where you see the hole in the ground. The whole garden was raised up, it was full of poppies, which we always assumed to be opium poppies.... Our parents told us to stay away, don't handle them, but of course



The "Hindu Town" at Tod Inlet, showing the living conditions of the Sikhs at the plant. In other archives the photo is titled *An East Indian Farm, Tod Inlet, Saanich*. The two-storey Chinese bunkhouse is just visible in the background on the right.

Courtesy of BC Archives A-09159.

we did. We used to take the heads off, get the milky substance all over our hands. ... I'm sure they were opium poppies, and obviously grown by Chinese people."

Max Pallan also remembered stories about the use of opium from his dad, Gurditta Mal Pallan. "The Chinese loved opium. It helped them work, gives them stamina and strength. My dad tried it too, but then he got sick. He threw the tin away: 'I'm not going to use it.'"

The Sikhs at Tod Inlet had a separate kitchen and bunkhouse from the Chinese workers. In 1907 the Sikh bunkhouse was described as "a small one-storey bunk house, some seventy feet by forty."

Jeet Dheensaw, son of Hardit Singh, who arrived in 1906, remembered his mother's stories of the Sikhs living in shacks with dirt floors, using cardboard for insulation and flour sacks as blankets. Material possessions were virtually non-existent. There were few



The Sikh brick ovens at Tod Inlet in 1968.

Courtesy of Alex D. Gray

houses, and the men slept four or five in one room. She said the men had no raincoats at first, and they got used to working in the rain, as they did not want to spend their wages on new clothing. They preferred to use “old stuff” left behind by others over spending money on new things.

Jeet remembers, “My dad and my uncle, that group of people, used to just have shacks there, working and staying in shacks, making their own food and living on dirt floors. In winter it got bitter, so they used to put planks down, but that’s all. They survived. When something fell down, they just added up another board or something and stuffed newspapers, whatever they could get their hands on, if nothing else mud even, just to keep the elements away. There was nothing, no beds, no tables and chairs.”

One man was assigned to do the communal cooking for the Sikh community, and each worker gave one day’s wages to the cook each month. One of the men who prepared the food in exchange for money was named Katar. Katar Singh was a blood relative of Hardit and Gurdit Singh, known as “Uncle” to Jeet Dheensaw and remembered as very strong. The Sikhs at Tod Inlet apparently followed the tradition of using two cooking fires side by side: one for cooking lentils and vegetables, the other for cooking chapati (flatbread) on a steel plate griddle. Norman Parsell and the other young boys living at Tod Inlet often watched the Sikhs

cooking their chapati on an iron plate over an outdoor fire and were often invited to join the meal.

Lorna Pugh (née Thomson) told me a story of her father, Lorne Thomson, and Claude Butler Sr., hunting up in the Partridge Hills above the inlet in about 1910 and being caught by the darkness. They decided to stay the night up there rather than run the risk of going over one of the cliffs in the dark. When they came down at dawn the next day, they came out of the woods opposite the Sikh village: “After crossing Tod Creek they approached the Hindu campsite, where the Hindu employees of the cement company lived. The cook offered them tea, for

which they were very grateful. The water was heated in a large brick trough, and the cook dipped his finger ... into the trough to test the temperature of the water before giving them their tea.... It was hot and helped them to continue on their way home.”

There are remnants of two brick structures near the trail that branches off from the main trail in what was the Chinese village. These are typical of Indian cooking ovens and are the only physical evidence of the Sikh community that remains there today.

Amrik Singh Dhillon of Victoria heard stories from his father, Bachan Singh, about the details of the life of his friends, Gurdit and Hardit Singh (Jeet Dheensaw’s father), both workers at Tod Inlet.

They ate mostly beans, dal or roti, though they also made pancakes, and drank tea. They used lids from food cans as cups, and made serving utensils from a can on a stick. At that time, a 50-pound sack of flour cost one dollar, butter was 25 cents a pound, and beans 5 cents a pound. The men chewed the ends of willow tree branches to make improvised brushes for cleaning their teeth.

Gurditta Mal Pallan told his son Max how the Sikhs at Tod Inlet walked six kilometres up to the Prospect Lake Store to buy groceries. Two men would go every two weeks or so by turn. He said they carried the food, clothes, socks and dollar bottles of whisky back in a kind of tub on their heads. They also walked to

the nearby farm to buy chickens and eggs. The Sikhs carried water from the creek in two large buckets, each at the end of a pole carried over the shoulder. Baths were taken only once a week. A committee arranged the finances for purchase of food and supplies and computed each man's share at the end of the month. In general, anyone visiting from India and hoping for a job was fed free for a month. For newcomers, after the first month, expenses were paid by a sponsor until they got a job.

Max Pallan also recalled his father's memories of their day of rest from the early days of the cement works in 1906: "Every Sunday, just about every Sunday, Mrs. Butchart, she used to have a, just like open house, all the workers from the cement mill, and she used to serve tea. They made a special trip to go to the Butcharts' residence and look around in her garden, which was very small at that time... but still Mrs. Butchart came out herself and greeted everybody and said 'Hello,' and served tea there in the garden. My dad and other friends who came from India were very excited that a rich lady like that was giving that much time to the workers and to the foreigners."

In 1907 there was a very serious outbreak of typhoid fever at Tod Inlet. Tod Creek, which provided the community's drinking water, flowed through miles of open ditch on its way from Prospect Lake, and during the summer became seriously polluted. The company soon switched to drawing drinking water from a spring located just east of the houses at Tod Inlet. Water from the creek was still used for the cement plant and for irrigation, and the use was heavy enough that no surplus came over the dam at what is now Wallace Drive.

Loading and Shipping Cement

For its first few years of operation, the Tod Inlet plant steadily increased production of cement, and its capacity rapidly doubled.

As well as working in the quarries and in the plant itself, the Chinese and Sikh workers also loaded cement for export. In the very early days they may have unloaded and loaded large barrels of cement onto barges or scows. Later they would have been involved in pouring the cement into sacks for shipping, carrying the 87.5-pound bags of cement onto the barges or ships for export and unloading the various incoming cargoes,

including the gypsum from the United States and elsewhere needed in the cement-making process.

Victoria physician and Sikh historian Dr. Manmohan Wirk shared with me what he had learned about the working environment of the Sikhs of Tod Inlet from his patients (and his wife, whose father, Gurdit Singh, worked there): "Their job was to unload the supply ships. . . . And then they had to load the cement in bags onto the barges, which then took off to distribute them elsewhere. But they described it as very dirty work — their beards were always white with cement. That's the way they put it. When you hit their beard, cement flew off."

Max Pallan also described for me what he knew about his father's work: "It was just common labour. He worked as a common labourer, loading the scows. They used to carry bags on their backs, or when the ship or the scow wasn't there, then they were just filling the bags, and getting ready for the shipment when it came. It was common labour."

Among the reasons noted by the Department of Mines for Robert Butchart establishing the cement plant at Tod Inlet was the suitability of the inlet for marine transport. Tod Inlet is a natural harbour, deep enough for large ships to load cement directly for transport up and down the Pacific coast. It is also sheltered enough to allow the use of scows or barges towed by tugs.

There was only one hazard to navigating Tod Inlet: a rock outcrop on the channel bed near the narrow mouth of the inlet. A black can buoy was moored at the spot to mark the potential danger.

When the first outward shipment of cement from Tod Inlet was made in April 1905, it was carried by the barge *Alexander* and towed by the tug *Albion*. The *Alexander* was built in 1875 as a side-wheel paddle steam tug and had a storied but short career in British Columbia waters. The tug was ahead of her time, too large and expensive to operate profitably. With her engines removed she was converted to a barge. The first shipment from Tod Inlet consisted of 5,000 barrels of cement in sacks to Victoria and Vancouver.

Butchart's first ship purchase for the cement company, also made in April 1905, was the former sealing schooner *Beatrice*, built in Vancouver in 1891. At the time of purchase she was being used to carry



Looking along the Tod Inlet wharf with workmen, bystanders, and unloaded machinery for the cement plant, 1906–1907.

Courtesy of author's collection, from BCCC photo album.

gunpowder to ships at the naval yard in Esquimalt. Butchart bought *Beatrice* for \$625, and it was said at the time that the copper sheathing her sound hull was itself worth more than that. The company purchased three scows at the same time, all four to be used either to stockpile cement or to carry it while pulled by tugboats.

Cement from Tod Inlet was first used in such projects as the BC Electric Railway Bridge in Vancouver, and for sidewalk construction in both Vancouver and Victoria. By 1906, cement from Tod Inlet had been used by the cities of Vancouver, Victoria and Nelson, and by such companies as the West Kootenay Power and Light Company, the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company, the Western Fuel Company of Nanaimo, the Britannia Smelting Company and the British Columbia General Contract Company.

When the City of Victoria asked for tenders for cement for use in building city sidewalks in 1909, the R.P. Rithet company offered Vancouver-brand Portland cement at \$2.40 per barrel of four sacks and an alternative tender "of 10,000 barrels, Tod Inlet manufactured cement, at \$2.55 per 350 pounds, delivered." Unreturned sacks would be charged at 10 cents each.

The cost of a single 87.5-pound sack of cement in 1909 was 64 cents, about \$14.60 in 2020 dollars. In

2020, the cost of a 40-kilogram bag of Portland cement is still about \$16.

From 1906 to 1910 several small coastal steamships, not owned by the cement company, carried cement from the wharf at Tod Inlet to various ports on the coast. The demand for cement was so great that the ships could not keep up. In those days, newspapers still carried "shipping news," announcing the comings and goings of both passenger and freighting vessels. Two examples from many in the *Vancouver Daily World* refer to Tod Inlet cement: "The freighter *Belfast* is at No. 4 shed today, discharging a cargo of Vancouver Island cement from Tod Inlet" (February 21, 1906); "The *Henriette* had 250 tons cement from Tod Inlet" (November 18, 1907).

Belfast carried 700 barrels of cement from Tod Inlet to New Westminster in 1907. *Trader* was also carrying cement in 1907 — one of her loads of 4,000 sacks got wet and was therefore unusable. It had to be returned to the plant as the damage could not be assessed properly on the ship. In 1909 she made several trips with cement destined for the BC Electric Railway Bridge. *Cascade* carried 4,000 sacks of cement to Vancouver in May 1907 and February 1909. *Belfast* and *Trader* both carried cement in 1910, as well.

The loading of cement was not without its hazards. When the steamer *Vadso* was at Tod Inlet loading cement in September 1909, a deckhand who was helping to close the hatch accidentally fell into the hold and died from a broken neck.

The Cremation of Tar Gool Singh

In April, 1907, when Tar Gool Singh, one of the Sikh labourers died, probably of tuberculosis, his cremation sparked much interest among the residents of Tod Inlet and Victoria. Although it was not the first Sikh cremation in Canada, it was certainly the best documented at the time. Articles in the *Victoria Daily* on April 12 and April 20 provided detail on the cremation ceremony.

In the *Times* articles, titled “Weird Ceremony at Tod Inlet” and “the Sepulture of Tar Gool Singh”, we learn for the first time the names of four Sikhs who lived at Tod Inlet: Tar Gool Singh himself; Bishua Singh, his brother; Malooh Singh, “the priest”; and Sundah Singh, described as the headman or leader of the Sikhs.

Dr. Manmohan Wirk commented on the typical Sikh cremation ceremony, in reference to the Tod Inlet cremation photo, in his book on the history of the Sikhs in Victoria. “After the body has been washed and dressed in new clothes, a platform of dried wood is erected. The body rests on the bier, and after accelerants (clarified butter) are spread, the funeral pyre is lit by the eldest son, while prayers for the deceased are recited...At the cremation ground, before the wood pyre was lit, the Sikh ardas and liturgical text...were recited for the peace of the departed soul”.

The cremation was an event unusual enough to warrant national coverage. The *Canadian Courier* of Toronto (June 15, 1907) published a photograph and commented, “More than a month ago, there died a Hindoo labourer at the Tod Creek Cement Works, near Victoria, BC. The body was cremated in the adjacent woods, and two of the bones were sent back to the family in India, while the rest of the ashes were strewn in the waters of Tod Creek”.

The photographer Bonnycastle Dale’s notebook for April 1907 has only a reporter’s shorthand

abbreviation of what he learned about the Sikhs of Tod Inlet, it does give us a rare outsider’s glimpse into the origin of a community that has not official written history: “Hindoos-Sikh-Native police-Hong Kong good men-told good times now man send letters back and no more come-try new country-speak poor English-gentlemanly-many very dirty-some Mad men write say come: CPR say no more ticket-many Munity men...Afghanistan medal not mutiny-A leader is first sent out to new countries and his report decide the men.” On the back page of his notebook, he recorded that there were “120 Chinamen, 40 Hindoos, and 50 Whites” working at the cement plant.



Sikhs in prayer (ardas) prior to the lighting of the funeral pyre at the cremation of Tar Gool Singh, April 1907. Bonnycastle Dale photograph.

Courtesy of Kim Walker



The cremation after the funeral pyre was lit, 1907. The man in the white shirt behind the smoke is said to be Wilfred Butler. Bonnycastle Dale photograph.

Courtesy of Kim Walker

Identity



The courtyard of the Ismaili Centre, Burnaby.

Courtesy of the Ismaili Council for British Columbia.

Longing and belonging

A Portable Pluralism

The Ismaili Muslims in British Columbia

Taushif Kara

ABSTRACT

The Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims, or the Ismailis, are a diverse and globally dispersed community united in their interpretation of Islam and in their allegiance to their *Imam*, His Highness the Aga Khan. The Ismaili community across Canada exemplifies the breadth of this wider global diversity in many ways, and British Columbia itself is now home to Ismailis from across Central and South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. While recognising this immense internal diversity, this chapter narrows its focus to the histories and legacies of those Ismailis with roots in the Indian subcontinent, especially those who arrived in the province either as refugees or as immigrants from East Africa in the 1970s and afterwards. The chapter emphasises that such communities brought with them a portable and dynamic sense of pluralism, one that is at the very heart of their tradition and continues even today. I suggest that it was this portable and flexible approach — one delinked from territory — that enabled the community to migrate across the Indian Ocean and later, from post-colonial East Africa to Canada. In the specific context of British Columbia, I show how the Ismaili community enacted and elaborated this pluralism in two particular ways. First, through the notion and practice of *seva*, or service, which they invoked initially to uplift and strengthen their community from within but later extended to the broader community. Second, through architecture and the built environment, which continues to be a crucial form through which Ismailis articulate their relationship to the varied contexts in which they reside.

KEYWORDS

Ismaili Muslim, Islam, pluralism, *seva*, volunteerism, architecture

When Rossbina Jessa first arrived in Canada in the fall of 1972 it was very, very cold. At the age of sixteen, Jessa and her family hurriedly boarded a plane along with countless others also fleeing their homes and their livelihoods in Uganda. Their flight departed from the airport at Entebbe and touched down some 18 hours later at a military base in Montréal, where the passengers disembarked and were offered food, blankets, and winter

coats. Jessa recorded her experience of this very journey in a short essay published the following year in the pages of *The Vancouver Sun*, recalling how that moment was “the first time” she had seen such “beautiful furry coats.” She also distinctly remembered exiting the plane to take a much-awaited breath of relief:

Though the night was cold and drizzling I didn’t feel it. I inhaled my first Canadian air as I stepped out of the plane, and right then knew everything

would turn out well. The long air journey had ended but there was the journey of new life to begin now! (Jessa, 1973, p. 43)

The next morning the travellers continued on their journey, only to be dispersed across the country. Jessa and her family ended up in Vancouver, partly because they had some relatives already living there. Others had connections to, or links with, similarly unfamiliar places: Toronto, Calgary, Ottawa, Edmonton, Saskatoon. Many, however, did not, and were randomly assigned by immigration officers to their new cities; those who had not already been separated from their extended families in Uganda would likely experience this in Montréal. Others who were not accepted directly into Canada in 1972 were to spend a year or more living in refugee camps in Europe, waiting while a decision was reached about their future.

After Jessa and the others who were directed towards British Columbia reached their final destination, they were taken to a small motel in Vancouver's west end to rest for the night. The next few days and weeks were to be spent searching for employment. But when they arrived at what was then called the Department of

Manpower and Immigration for their job interviews, "dressed up with suits and ties," they were met with confusion. John Halani, whose family had traded in textiles back in Uganda, (Halani, 2015) recalled in a recent conversation just how out of place they must have seemed:

... the lady at the counter said 'Why are you all so well dressed up? We have jobs lined up in warehouses.' And I told them that we are business people; we are looking for jobs in the offices. They were a bit surprised. (Carman, 2012)

Introduction

The condensed narrative above — or some version of it — broadly parallels the one recalled by Ismailis rendered stateless who arrived in British Columbia in the months following their expulsion from Uganda. Earlier that year, an army general named Idi Amin, who had obtained power through a military coup, announced in a radio address that Uganda's "Asian" population was unwelcome in that country, and would thus be required to leave the country within 90 days. In the wake of this unexpected announcement, many were in utter disbelief. While their roots may have indeed been in the Indian subcontinent, those now deemed "Asian" had in fact been living in Uganda and across the region since at least the late nineteenth century. Some had come to work for and with the British empire, either as clerks and administrators in the colonial state, or as indentured labourers recruited to build the railway. Others,

however, like those from the Ismaili community, came from peripatetic Gujarati merchant groups — like the Khojas, Bohras, and Baniyas — and their presence in what would only later become the post-colonial nation states of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania

"While their roots may have indeed been in the Indian subcontinent, those now deemed "Asian" had in fact been living in Uganda and across the region since at least the late nineteenth century."

long predated that of the British. Their expulsion and subsequent arrival in this country marked, as Shezan Muhammedi has observed, "the largest group of non-European and predominantly Muslim refugees to arrive in Canada before the official creation of a formal refugee policy in 1976." (Muhammedi, 2017, p. 1)

Most, however, thought Idi Amin's expulsion order would apply only to more recent arrivals or to those with Indian or British passports, not those who had already obtained or applied for Ugandan citizenship. Many in the Ismaili community — whose history in British Columbia is the subject of this chapter — had already been advised by their previous *Imam*, Aga Khan

III (1877–1957), to do precisely this. As early as 1951, he instructed the community living across what was then colonial East Africa to stop “calling yourselves Asians,” directing them instead to declare loyalty to the varied contexts in which they happened to live:

Whatever country you choose to live in, work for it, mix with its people, achieve its outlook... In Africa the day will come when the people of that vast continent will want to know who the foreigners are and it is the people who have made the country their home who are going to have the best opportunities in that country. For that day, prepare yourselves. I don't like the idea of calling yourselves Asians in Africa... (Aga Khan III, 1951, p. 1278)

Despite this, however, and their varied claims to belonging in post-colonial African nation-states, the community along with countless others who had come from the subcontinent were classified as part of some monolithic “Asian” minority and expelled. In her 1973 essay for *The Vancouver Sun*, Rossbina Jessa described, with the characteristic austerity of an adolescent observer, the significant ramifications, material as well as psychic, of this expulsion for those affected by it:

Once chucked out of Uganda Immigration, labelled “Non-Ugandan” after having been born there and lived all their lives, the people panicked. What of their businesses? Their land, buildings, homes? They were not sure where they wanted to be; they wanted to be in Uganda and anywhere else at the same time... My family decided that sooner or later all of the Asians would have to leave. We had lost confidence in Uganda. If the army went so far as to rob our mosque, God's property, what of us? (Jessa, 1973, p. 43)

Many in the province's Ismaili community, to which both Jessa and Halani belong, might share this particular history or resonate with it in some way. But it is by no means the only story, nor is it necessarily the one that defines the community. The Shia Imami Ismaili Muslims, or the Ismailis, are a diverse and globally dispersed community united in their distinctive interpretation of Islam and in their allegiance to their present *Imam*, Aga Khan IV (b. 1936). While the Ismaili interpretation is just one of many diverse Muslim traditions, it is distinct for its emphasis on the living institution of the *Imamat* — a continuing

and hereditary line of spiritual and material guidance embodied in the figure of the *Imam* — as well as its emphasis on the esoteric dimensions of Islam. The Ismailis in Canada exemplify the community's global diversity in many ways, and British Columbia alone is now home to Ismailis from across the world. While Ismaili communities from Africa like those mentioned above began to settle in British Columbia as early as the 1960s, they were joined in the decades that followed by Ismailis from Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and India. More recently, the community has welcomed and indeed continues to welcome those coming from Syria and other parts of the Middle East as well. Each of these communities has its own distinct history and unique traditions, all of which would be impossible to address adequately in the space of this chapter. But it is this significant and indeed dynamic internal variety, to which I will return in the conclusion to this chapter, that makes the Ismaili community in British Columbia so unique. For historically and today they have a composite sense of identity that is not necessarily tethered to any particular geography or locale; their diasporic “homeland” in other words, is not so simple to pin down either in space or time.

The itinerant life of one individual — likely the very first Ismaili to arrive in British Columbia — is illustrative of exactly this. In 1910, Husain Rahim (1865–1937) disembarked in Vancouver not from Africa but from Japan, by way of Honolulu. Born into a Khoja family in India — where he lived before spending over a decade in Kobe — Rahim's peripatetic life, while in many ways exceptional, was in fact typical of Khoja merchants at the time. In Canada, Rahim was politically engaged and briefly edited a newspaper for the province's South Asian community, *The Hindustanee*, and successfully fought against his own deportation in a highly publicised trial. In 1914, he was an active member of the shore committee advocating on behalf of the passengers of the *Komagata Maru*. (Mawani, 2018)

While Rahim may have been the first Ismaili to arrive in British Columbia, this chapter will focus mainly on the histories and legacies of those Ismailis who arrived in the province from East Africa in the latter half of the twentieth century. To be sure, there is substantial internal diversity within this group as well. Many arrivals in the province can be linked directly to

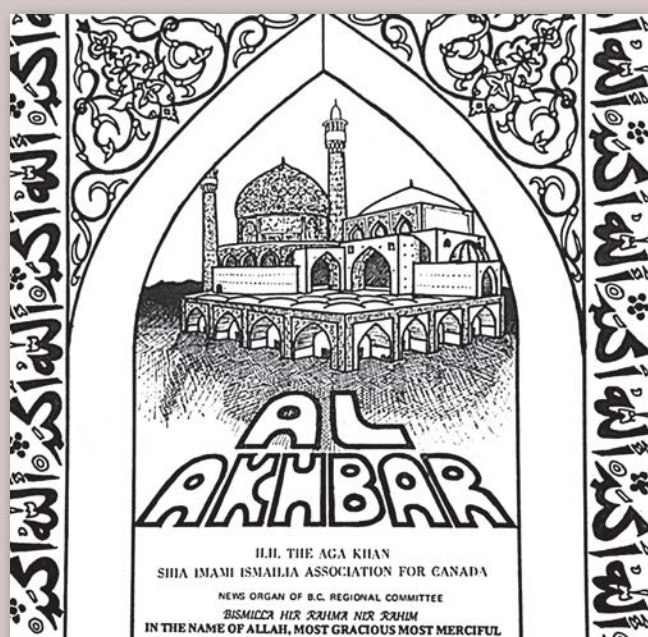
the forced migration out of Uganda in 1972, but those coming from places like Tanzania, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, and the Congo left for different reasons. Some feared that their governments might treat “Asian” minorities in similar ways and fled in anticipation, while others came as immigrants following a landmark change in Canadian law in the 1960s. Many who arrived during the 1950s and 60s tended not to be traders and merchants but were professionals like doctors and lawyers. By 1968, the number of Ismailis across Canada numbered less than a thousand, with the community existing in small groups scattered across major cities like Vancouver, Toronto, and Montréal. According to the Ismaili scholar Azim Nanji, who was one of these early migrants himself, “by and large these groups expected to remain a fairly small, isolated community in North America.” (Nanji, 1983, p. 156) Following the Ugandan expulsion, however, the population of Ismailis had increased to well over ten thousand. Today, a sizeable community of Ismaili Muslims continue to live across East Africa.

Ismailis in British Columbia as across the country tend to be held up as a Canadian immigration success story. Whether in media representations or at the level of public discourse, their presence is usually seen in light of their real or imagined position as a “model minority,” a status attributed either to their economic and political successes, or indeed to their increasingly visible presence as “modern” Muslims in the context of heightened racism and Islamophobia since 9/11. The reasons offered for this status tend to be their entrepreneurial nature and ability to practice thrift, or more commonly vague notions of their “liberal” or “moderate” Islam. In other words, the perceived success of the Ismaili community in Canada is usually seen as the result of their apparent willingness to give up certain “traditional” ways of life and uncritically adopt liberal values. Whether they are celebrated or critiqued for having “embraced” modernity in this way, fusing it with some reified notion of “tradition”, or staging what one researcher called an “Ismaili Muslim exceptionality,” the modernity they are said to have apparently embraced is always assumed to have come to the community from *without*, either due to the powerful legacy of colonialism or as a result of their assimilation into the liberal state. (Habib, 2016; Bhimani, 2019)

In this chapter, I push back against this common and in my view misleading assumption. I argue instead that their story has very little to do with some external “modernity” that was either imposed upon or embraced by the community, and far more to do with their distinct intellectual and ethical tradition, one which cannot necessarily be reduced to categories like “liberal” or “moderate” Islam, categories which are themselves not given distinctions but products of the colonial archive. (Devji & Kazmi, 2017) Their consistent emphasis on pluralism, though it undoubtedly resembles and even parallels the logic of Canadian multiculturalism in many ways, should not necessarily be seen as an imitation of it.

I suggest that in the specific context of British Columbia, the Ismaili community enacted and elaborated this pluralism in two main ways. First, through the idea and practice of *seva*, or service, which they invoked initially to strengthen their community from within but later extended to their broader societies. Second, through architecture and the built environment, which continues to be a crucial aesthetic and material form through which the Ismaili community globally articulates their relationship to the varied contexts in which they live. By describing notable community events such as the *World Partnership Walk* and spaces like the Ismaili Centre in Burnaby, alongside oral history interviews and speeches, this chapter hopes to stitch together a layered history of the Ismaili community in British Columbia from 1972 to the present day.

In my view, the examples offered here are illustrative of the intimate connection between the community’s intellectual and ethical tradition and the more tangible *expressions* of that tradition. But in line with my wider argument, such examples have been entirely portable and indeed flexible, meaning that they are not necessarily fixed to a particular context or locale, nor have they been static through time. In many ways even the notion of a reified “tradition” passed down through generations is an inadequate description, for Ismaili thought valorizes not some uncritical inheritance of the past but rather advocates for its annulment and constant renewal. (Devji, 2014) As Aga Khan III poignantly observed in his memoirs: “Ismailism has survived because it has always been fluid. Rigidity is contrary to our whole way of life and outlook.” (Aga Khan III, 1954,



Library

We hope that most of our *Jamat* [community] members have visited our library but just in case you have not done so, it is located on 845 Burrard St. The library carries literature on Islam and Ismailism.

Subject titles related to the history and philosophy of our religion can be found. In addition, there are Guajrati novels for the senior members of our *Jamat* and in the Reading Room you will find both local and foreign magazines, so come on over and browse around!

From *Al-Akhbar*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (October 1976)

p. 185) If there was a seismic shift during this period it was primarily one of context. If during a primarily imperial nineteenth century Khojas like Husain Rahim might have lived a life delinked from any one territory or geography, the increasingly territorial and indeed racialized nationalisms of the twentieth century made their position as future national subjects in places like East Africa both uncertain and precarious. A change in times as well as a change of place, then, demanded the Ismailis to restate and rethink their pluralism.

Though as we shall see these rearticulations tended to be expressed in various context-specific ways, their spirit is by no means limited to that particular expression and might in fact be taken up in a variety of ways and spaces. This is partly because, as I have already mentioned, many in the Ismaili community were already a diaspora; in previous centuries their ancestors had travelled across the Indian Ocean, from the Indian subcontinent to the coast of Africa, and it was only from there that they left for Canada. This inspired what we might call a fundamentally portable and flexible subjectivity that placed its emphasis not on some fixed understanding of a static and singular “homeland” but rather understood that such a notion could travel alongside the community itself. While this reading might seem initially like a belittling of their undoubtedly difficult and even traumatic experience of forced migration, it will become clear from the recollections of

many in the community that their rapid adjustment to new environments was intimately linked with and even made possible by this portable sense of pluralism. They responded to the rupture of movement, in other words, by drawing on their inherited ways of knowing and being. While it is tempting to limit their story, as many have, to the broader arc of Canadian multiculturalism, such a reading would perhaps strip away and even mute the unique intellectual history of this community, who precisely because they were already on the move, managed to craft a sense of being that could be resituated anew even amidst tragedy.

Walking the Walk

In 1919 — now over a century ago — a group of Ismaili Muslims from Gujarat, in what was then British India, founded a small voluntary association dedicated to serving their community. The organization, which eventually came to be called the *Ismaili Volunteer Corps*, was just one of many similar voluntary associations that would emerge across the subcontinent in the early twentieth century, organizations established by many different communities for different reasons. Some, like the *Servants of India Society* (est. 1904), were set up in order to strengthen incipient anti-colonial and nationalist movements, while others hoped to provide services and even offer protection to those who might have otherwise been denied this by the colonial state. For

the *Ismaili Volunteer Corps*, this ranged from helping those affected by torrential flooding in the Kathiawar peninsula in 1927, as well as tending to the injured and homeless during the Second World War. (Mawani & Velji, 2012) But while the context of its formation was undoubtedly colonial, the spirit of the *Ismaili Volunteer Corps* (IVC), drew as much on the Ismailis' inherited notion of *seva* as it did on liberal conceptions of civic service.

This idea of *seva* or service has a long and complex history across the varied intellectual traditions of the Indian subcontinent and is in many ways analogous to the notion of *khidmat* in Islam, which generally means service, but can also refer to benevolence and kindness.

While in the past the object of *seva* as well as the myriad forms it might take has certainly ranged, what has always been crucial is its entirely detached or rather finite nature. What this means is that any given act of *seva* must be seen as virtuous or ethical in its own right, regardless of the ends or effects it might produce. Quite apart from more conventional understandings of volunteerism and even philanthropy, which is usually made legible because it serves a particular instrumental goal or defined purpose, *seva* in its classical articulation expects no tangible or material reward. In this sense, it is fundamentally delinked from fixed understandings of time, for it can be taken up at any moment and in any form.

I should clarify that this broad notion of *seva* is by no means unique to the Ismaili community and can be found in Vedic scriptures like the *Bhagavad Gita*, as well as in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, which is of great importance in the Sikh tradition. Likewise, there are several verses of the Qur'an which refer to the necessity of *khidmat*. For the Ismaili community, however, the enunciation of *seva* is absolutely central to how they

live their faith, and thus forms the basis of their many institutions and programmes in British Columbia. When the first Ismailis arrived in the province, for instance, their *seva* took a more immediate and effable form; individuals like John Halani assisted newcomers in the community no matter where they came from in securing basic needs like housing and employment while others took on more unanticipated but nonetheless necessary

tasks — they set up a specified program for providing relief and assistance for families in the community who were grieving the loss of their loved ones.

Many joined the IVC upon arrival in the province, which of course seemed only natural, for as a portable institution it had already traveled with them

“Quite apart from more conventional understandings of volunteerism and even philanthropy, which is usually made legible because it serves a particular instrumental goal or defined purpose, *seva* in its classical articulation expects no tangible or material reward.”

from India to Africa and there was no reason it could not be taken up from their new homes in Canada, too. Some began teaching groups of children and youth in the community about their history and heritage, while others tended to the gardens of their *Jamatkhana* spaces or helped to prepare delicious foods like *biryani* and *sherbet* for special occasions. Others — only a few years after their arrival in 1976 — started up a printed newsletter called the *Al-Akhbar* in order to keep members of the community, both settled and new, updated and informed, as well as a more literary magazine called *Hikmat*, meaning “wisdom,” which was intended to offer a forum for intellectual reflection. The former, which is still in circulation today, was run on an entirely voluntary basis and provided an important anchor and mode of communication for Ismailis across the province.

These varied circuits of *seva* eventually coalesced into more formalized institutions such as the Ismaili Council for British Columbia, which serves as representative of the community and manages its secular



Ismaili Civic volunteers supporting Habitat for Humanity in Vancouver, 2019.

Courtesy Ismaili Council for British Columbia.

affairs, as well as the Ismaili *Tariqah* and Religious Education Board, which oversees matters of faith, all under the guidance of the Aga Khan. But when one takes a step back from this complex network of institutions, what emerges is a remarkably holistic and encompassing understanding of the community itself and its distinct needs, whether during periods of celebration or in more difficult times. More recently, for instance, the community has started to provide services for those struggling with their mental health. Though its meaning and form can and has taken many different forms, the idea of *seva* is at the very heart of how the Ismailis understand and live their faith and was thus vital to the resilience of the community during its early settlement in the province, not only for those receiving assistance but for those *giving it* as well. Reflecting on precisely this, Shelina Dilgir — a community member who now lives in Vancouver and undertakes several forms of *seva* herself — mentioned what it was like to grow up surrounded by *seva*:

While growing up in Canada, I watched with amazement and curiosity the generosity of time, resources and talent my parents and members of our Shia Ismaili community voluntarily gave to newcomers to the country — those who needed mentoring or help finding jobs or even members who lost their loved ones and required assistance. This service wasn't demanded or expected of us, but you couldn't help but want to be a part of this cadre of unique volunteers who selflessly gave back and expected nothing in return. It was a part of our tradition, which had started from the rural parts of Africa, Asia and even the Middle East and spread to cities like Edmonton, Toronto, Los Angeles and Sydney. (Dilgir, 2013)

When Dilgir asked her mother what motivated such dedication, she replied by citing her own receipt of such service from the Canadian Red Cross upon her arrival in the country as a refugee from Uganda. “Thirty years later,” Dilgir recalls, “my mother still speaks with passion and emotion about the impact these volunteers

had on her, and how their actions contributed to her efforts to become a Red Cross volunteer years later.”

What this anecdote reveals is an important but sometimes obscured dimension of *seva*. That is, while its impulse and ethical contours might be rooted in the Ismaili tradition, its possibilities are by no means bounded by or confined to the community. In the first decade of their settlement, efforts were of course directed towards addressing the basic needs of the community itself. But by the middle of the 1980s, the Ismaili community in British Columbia — as throughout the country — had established a more secure presence, and the meaning and context for *seva* began to shift.

In 1985, a group of Ismaili women gathered a crowd of about a thousand at Vancouver’s Stanley Park to walk — in this instance, the length of the seawall — in order to draw attention to and raise funds towards the mitigation of poverty across Asia and Africa. The women themselves had of course come from the very places to which they were hoping to draw attention, and in this way had a deeply personal connection to, if not a direct knowledge of, the material conditions they were seeking to alleviate. The women managed to raise the not-at-all modest sum of \$55,000 for the Canadian arm of the Aga Khan Foundation — which was then based in Vancouver — in what became the inaugural World Partnership Walk. Since its founding nearly four decades ago, the Walk has raised more than \$120 million towards the alleviation of global poverty and has expanded across the continent, taking place simultaneously in most major cities in Canada and several in the United States, too. The Aga Khan Foundation, which is now based out of Ottawa, continues to work with and alongside Global Affairs Canada as well as local institutions in order to realize the aspirations of that group of women several years ago.

It is tempting to read the World Partnership Walk either as a charitable endeavour or even as a noble example of altruistic, grassroots philanthropy. But what makes the Walk so interesting as a venture is that it relies almost entirely on volunteers. From fundraising activities to its administration and organization, down to the preparation of food at the event itself, it has been and continues to be made possible only because of the tireless labour of thousands of individual volunteers.

Many of course come from within the Ismaili community and see their participation in the Walk as part of their broader *seva*. But others, and increasingly so, are drawn from outside the community. This is no doubt because they see the power of the cause, but also because *seva* as an idea, despite its distinct history and enunciation, resonates in a formidable way with the Canadian ethic of civic service. Precisely acknowledging this in his 2014 address to the Canadian parliament, Aga Khan IV observed that:

This Canadian spirit resonates with a cherished principle in Shi’i Ismaili culture: the importance of contributing one’s individual energies on a voluntary basis to improving the lives of others. This is not a matter of philanthropy, but rather of self-fulfillment, ‘enlightened self-fulfillment.’ (Aga Khan IV, 2014)

Indeed, very much like the history of *seva* and the notion of “enlightened self-fulfillment” described by the Aga Khan, it is worth noting that the “walk” as a form of drawing attention to a particular cause also emerged in the context of colonial India. We might even trace its proliferation to a figure like M.K. Gandhi, who, as part of his broader political philosophy of *satyagraha*, undertook several campaigns of large-scale walking in order to interrupt the course of everyday life in a nonviolent yet visible manner. Not only did Gandhi himself rather successfully draw attention to various causes in a rather well-known way, he hoped to convert the very act of walking — a mundane yet democratic aspect of life — into a form of political action. (Nair, 2018)

The Architecture of Community

One of the most immediate and indeed potent problems for the nascent Ismaili community in British Columbia, at least in its formative years, had to do with the *architecture* of their community. By this I am referring to physical spaces and the built environment but also to much, much more. Those who had come from East Africa, for example, had in that context an elaborate and extensive network of bureaucratic institutions and associations, as well as many literal sites and spaces of belonging. When they arrived in Vancouver, however, they had neither the institutions nor the spaces to ground their community, and in many instances, they were quite literally left in a liminal or transient state.



Young participants celebrating the 35th anniversary of the World Partnership Walk in 2019 in Vancouver's Stanley Park.

Courtesy Ismaili Council for British Columbia.

Rossbina Jessa's family for example, like many others, stayed in a single room at a small motel on Vancouver's Robson Street when they arrived in the province, and left for something more permanent only after they secured employment. But architecture is about far more than permanence or shelter, for it can and often does provide a material manifestation of otherwise ineffable ideas; it seeks to transform the invisible into something visible. This section explores the conceptual importance of architecture to the Ismaili community in British Columbia by narrating the unique history and rearticulation of one particular space: the *Jamatkhana*.

While the most well-known site of Muslim prayer today is likely the *masjid* or the mosque, Muslim communities have throughout history built and used sacred as well as secular spaces of various kinds. Sufi *dargahs* (shrines), mausolea, gardens, and *khanaqas* (hostels) exist alongside mosques of varying styles and forms; and all continue to be central spaces in the architecture of Islam. Many Ismaili communities conduct their prayers in a space called the *Jamatkhana*, or *khana* for short. The name itself is a compound word, made up

of two terms: *jamat* meaning community or gathering, and *khana* meaning home or abode. It literally translates as: the home for the community. As its name signifies, and like many religious spaces, the Ismaili *Jamatkhana* does not only serve as a space of prayer or worship but also as a site of social gathering, knowledge exchange, and community care. Many of the *Jamatkhana* spaces across East Africa and South Asia for instance are located near schools, libraries, and hospitals run by the community; others are just steps away from community housing complexes. Another, albeit more antiquated name for the *Jamatkhana* space is the triad phrase *guru* — *gat* — *ganga*, which references the multivalent, threefold nature of the space. The first word (*guru*) sees it as a space for guidance from the *Imam*; the second refers to the *ghat* or gathering of the community; the third, *ganga*, refers to the Ganges — a sacred river in India which continues to be an important site of pilgrimage for millions. This latter description is particularly relevant, for by referring to their *Jamatkhana* space in this way and indeed by elevating it to the level of a pilgrim's site, the Ismaili community in



Aerial view of the construction of the Ismaili Centre, Burnaby in April 1983.

the Indian subcontinent sought to detach the notion of pilgrimage from a distant or faraway place and thus diffused its sacred quality. In other words, the *Jamatkhana* as an architectural form in its own right, subtly recognizes the potentially sacred quality of *all* geographies to the community, regardless of location, for its threefold purpose could be taken up in any context.

Over the past few decades, the Ismaili community has built several *Jamatkhana* spaces across the province and the country, all of which try to resonate with and reflect the urban contexts in which they are situated, while also conveying elements of the unique Ismaili aesthetic and intellectual tradition. Undoubtedly one of the most significant of these is the Ismaili Centre Vancouver, located close to the boundary of Vancouver and Burnaby, which was completed in the summer of 1985. Three years prior, in 1982, the Aga Khan laid the foundation stone for this ambitious new project, which grew out of his Silver Jubilee commemorations that same year. After that ceremony, which took place less

than a decade after the first Ismailis had arrived in the province, one community newsletter made the following reflection:

Less than 10 years ago Burnaby as a city, and British Columbia as a province of Canada, were almost unknown to the hundreds of Ismailis who had come to the plaque-unveiling ceremony of the first specially designed Ismaili Jamatkhana in North America. To them, as to Ismailis throughout Canada, this was a particularly significant occasion... (*Newsletter*, 1982)

As the author recalled, the space was to become the first permanent, purpose-built site for the Ismaili community in the province and the country. Prior to its construction, the community in British Columbia had gathered in gymnasiums, commercial buildings in Vancouver's east end — one of which was located on Ontario Street, and even in the basement of a local family restaurant called the *Black Cat*. Farouk Noormohamed, an Ismaili architect who would go on

to help design several *Jamatkhana* spaces around the lower mainland, recalled this early elasticity of architecture in an interview with the community magazine, *Hikmat*:

As new immigrants to Canada, we concentrated on the minimum: having a place to pray with a rudimentary library and a few religious education classrooms. Many of the buildings were rented schools, converted office spaces, and, in some cases, warehouses that provided large spaces that were modified to meet the community's religious needs. (Hirji, 1991, p. 32)

Such “unadorned, makeshift facilities” were notable precisely for their lack of permanence, which made them perfectly suited to the community's dynamic and flexible presence in its early years in British Columbia. As the community grew and changed, however, so did their spaces. This remarkable sense of adaptability, as well as a willingness to make space for community in spite of significant obstacles speaks to my broader point about some of the continuities between their diasporic history and its renewed meaning in the contemporary context of British Columbia.

Yet as Noormohammed notes, despite this noble sense of portability, such spaces lacked the cohesive and integrated quality of previous *Jamatkhana* spaces, which were always nestled within a wider milieu of community institutions and services. As they began to settle, however, he observed that “we began to question our community environment and to focus on providing a quality of life that is as rich as our community life in East Africa.” (Hirji, 1991, p. 33) What eventually came to be called the “Ismaili Centre” in Burnaby was meant not only to tether community to their new environment and to address the material problem of a lack of dedicated space, but also to restate the vibrant and multivalent purpose of the *Jamatkhana* itself. The building stands as one of a handful of similar spaces around the globe to carry this unique designation, which singles out the space as something *more* than a space of worship or community centre. Together with its siblings in London, Lisbon, Dubai, Dushanbe, and most recently, Toronto, the Ismaili Centres is meant, in the words of the Aga Khan, to be an “ambassadorial building” where the Ismaili community might formalize its outreach commitments to the societies within

which it is situated. Since its opening over 25 years ago, the Centre in Burnaby has hosted musical concerts and performances, visual arts exhibitions, public lectures, debates, galas, and many different festivals, all in addition to serving as a site of regular prayer for the Ismailis. One community member, Saida Rasul, recalled in a recent conversation how its opening decades ago was a “significant milestone” and a moment of great pride, for it could now be a place to share the Ismaili ethos and “articulate our values and beliefs.” (Rasul, 2021)

Like the very idea of the *Jamatkhana* itself, the unique design of the Ismaili Centre merits some closer analysis. Its chief architect was Bruno Freschi, also known for designing Vancouver's geodesic dome (now *Science World*) for the 1986 Expo. Freschi himself was keenly aware of the paradox between the community's need to ground itself in a new context, while at the same time the need to give credence to its much longer tradition of transcending both time and place:

The *Jamatkhana* was to be a sacred place, a living foundation, and a site of encounter for a newly settled people. The Centre also included secular spaces, reflecting the inextricable bond between the spiritual and the material worlds.

In the prayer hall, the architectural narrative is absolute and complete, thus freeing one to go beyond the physical place and seek the spiritual. This is the paradox of sacred architecture: the complete realization of a material presence in order to transcend it. It is in this sense that the architecture expresses a belief that “one goes in to go out.” The search for the sacred transcends the architectural narrative.

Empathic architecture is essentially about creating a real place for personal and civic encounter, a place of welcome and opening to the other. Just as sacred space seeks to free a person to transcend the physical and move towards a spiritual encounter, so too the Ismaili Centre seeks to act as an iconic place for the civic encounter. (Freschi, 2013)

At the opening ceremony, Canada's Prime Minister at the time Brian Mulroney joked that only in a place like Canada could “a French speaking Prime Minister of Irish origin from Quebec” open “an Ismaili Centre in British Columbia, designed by an architect of Italian Catholic origin.” (Mulroney, 1985) But it was not only in Canada that architects were drawn from outside

the Ismaili community to design its spaces; the British architect Hugh Casson designed the Ismaili Centre in London while a pair of Egyptian architects, Rami El Dahan and Soheir Farid, worked on the Ismaili Centre in Dubai. This is because the Ismaili Centres are meant to exist in constant dialogue or what Freschi called “civic encounter” with their respective contexts, aesthetically as well as conceptually.

Though not always designated as official Ismaili Centres, new *Jamatkhana* spaces which serve similar purposes continue to be built in the province. Most recently, the community celebrated the opening of a new *Jamatkhana* in Richmond which replaced its former location: a repurposed warehouse off that city’s No. 3 Road. Plans are now underway for an exciting and unprecedented project for the Ismaili community in British Columbia in the form of a large, multi-generational social housing tower constructed in tandem with a new *Jamatkhana* in downtown Vancouver. The current *Jamatkhana* sits in a small building off Vancouver’s Davie street, first built in 1972, and now seems somewhat out of place amidst the city’s high-rise, glass structures. In addition to hundreds of social housing units, the new tower will include a “prayer hall on the second level, reading room on the third level, social hall and recreational space on the fourth level, and learning centre on the fifth level that opens up to an outdoor amenity space on the podium rooftop.” (Chan, 2020) Though perhaps unprecedented in a context like Canada, this holistic juxtaposition of multiple facets of community life — prayer, gathering, and knowledge exchange — have a much longer history for the Ismailis.

Conclusion

The very same year that a small group of women inadvertently started the World Partnership Walk in

Stanley Park, and the Ismaili Centre in Burnaby was opened to the public, Ahmad Wali arrived in Canada from Afghanistan at the age of 10. Wali, who left with his family in 1985 during the height of the Soviet invasion, was, like so many before him in British

Columbia’s Ismaili community, fleeing political turmoil in his home country. Now a pharmacist, Wali initially worked with First Nations and rural communities across the province before running for parliament as a New Democrat in the 2015 federal election. (Pablo, 2015) Every year, Wali and his family, along with the Ismaili community more broadly, celebrate *Nowruz*, which marks the spring equinox and signals renewal and regeneration. In Persian, it literally means

“Though perhaps unprecedented in a context like Canada, this holistic juxtaposition of multiple facets of community life – prayer, gathering, and knowledge exchange – have a much longer history for the Ismailis.”

“new day.” (Premji, 2021)

While there were of course many things Wali was unable to bring with him from Afghanistan, the *Nowruz* celebration itself is remarkably portable, and he noted that its impulse and spirit can be recreated with only a few small details:

It is the traditional food, the music, the children playing, the families enjoying meals together, and friends that make celebrating *Navroz* unique and memorable... It is amazing how a celebration with a bit of spice, music and family can trigger our senses and memories. (*The Ismaili*, nd.)

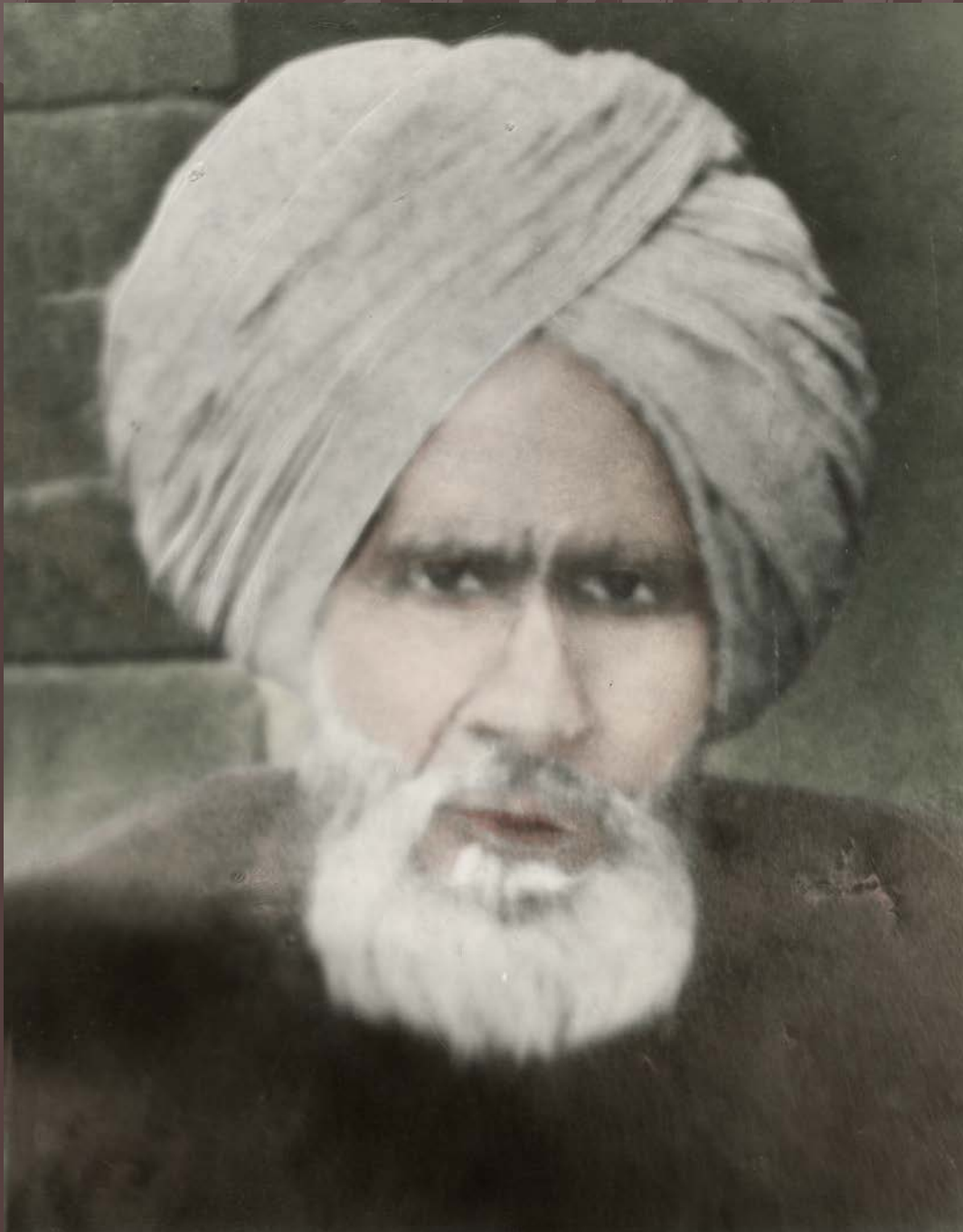
In this chapter, I have shown how despite its significant internal diversity and variety, the Ismaili community in British Columbia invoked its unique ways of knowing and being in order to make space for itself in a new home. Quite apart from struggling to reconcile some static notion of tradition with an equally limiting idea of modernity, the Ismailis consistently called upon their own dynamic set of ethics and ideas in order to resituate their community in its new context. Whether by displaying the multiple valences of *seva* to assist

newcomers or by marshalling the unique power of architecture to ground their community in space, the

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Identity



Sharaf Din.

Source: Sabir Family personal collection

Longing and belonging

A Colonial History of Displacement

Sarah Beaulieu

ABSTRACT

British colonial rule of the Indian subcontinent was driven by an ideology set on creating and maintaining a sense of social and racial inferiority for its Indian subjects. The results included economic exploitation, poverty, malnutrition, disease, and significant cultural upheaval. Further divisions based on religious and ethnic lines were encouraged by the British, increasing both self- and group-consciousness, often with disastrous outcomes. My paternal ancestry originates in the northwestern region of India, and as a direct result of colonial rule, numerous family members were not only uprooted but also separated multiple times through displacement, indentured labour, and forced migration. This chapter follows the journey of six generations of my family from India to Kenya, Uganda, Pakistan, and England, prior to their permanent settlement in Canada. Through the lens of my father, Munawar Sabir, I explore the struggle for identity when subjugation prevents a person from calling any single place home.

KEY WORDS

Colonialism, India, Indentured Labour, Forced Migration, Displacement, Identity

Introduction

British Crown rule of the Indian subcontinent took place from 1858 to 1947, when Partition divided British India based on sectarian lines into two independent dominion states: India and Pakistan (Fisher-Tine & Mann 2004). However, India's history of colonization begins much earlier, with the East India Company taking control a century prior. My family's ancestry was rooted in the northwestern region of India, until Partition forced a mass exodus into the newly created East and West Pakistan. Displacement, however, was not new to my family. While owning land in Jalandhar, an ancient city in the northern Indian state of Punjab, they had also lived and worked in East Africa prior to Partition, voyaging back and forth between these continents over a period of 60 years. This chapter

examines the historical movement of six generations of my family — resulting from colonialism through displacement, indentured labour, forced migration, and eventually immigration — to shed light on how my father arrived and began life anew in Canada. While my paternal roots begin in India, my family's incredible journey traversed four continents and five countries, between India, Kenya, Uganda, Pakistan, and England, before they finally settled in the heart of the Fraser Valley, British Columbia, Canada.

A Brief History of India's Colonial Period

India's colonial history is extensive, beginning with European seafaring powers (Dutch Republic, England, France, and Denmark-Norway) establishing trading

posts in the early 1600s, while the Mughal Empire was at its peak (Robb 2011). However, the collapse of the Mughal Empire in the 1720s, along with the weakened state of the Maratha Empire caused by the third battle of Panipat in 1721 led to significant instability amongst newly created Indian states and independent rulers, leaving them vulnerable to European manipulation and subsequent colonial rule (Rawlinson 2006). Great Britain and France continued to vie for dominance over India during the 18th century through both proxy Indian rulers and direct military intervention (Robb 2011). However, the defeat of Tipu Sultan in 1799, who was allied with the French, weakened France's position (Hasan 2005). This allowed Britain's swift expansion over the Indian subcontinent in the 19th century, and to its both direct and indirect control over most of India by the mid-19th century. British India contained the most populous and valuable parts of the British Empire, with access to raw materials, trade routes, and cheap labour, becoming known as the "jewel in the British crown" (Reid 2016).

The East India company (EIC), established in the 1600s, monopolized over half of the international trade market during the mid 1700s and early 1800s (Robins 2012). In 1757, the company governed the early stages of the British Empire in India, presiding over large areas of land with an independent army composed of both British troops and native soldiers (Robins 2012). The military arm of the EIC, initially formed to protect the company's workforce and assets, quickly evolved into a private corporate military organization used to gain geopolitical power to aid in commercial expansion. As a result, the EIC became the most powerful military force in the Indian subcontinent, exercising continuous power until the Indian Rebellion of 1857–58.

For numerous political, economic, social, and religious reasons that included British social reforms and harsh land taxes, tensions had been mounting for decades between Indian citizens and the EIC, with the latter remaining oblivious to the impending insurrection. The mutiny lasted more than a year and was finally violently suppressed when Britain sent reinforcements to India. Following this event, the British Crown commenced its colonial reign over India, bringing the East India Company to an end (McNamara 2018).

Family History

The earliest documentation of my family's history begins in the eighth century, when the Khalifa of the Muslim empire at Baghdad dispatched Mohamed Bin Qasim, his son-in-law, to lead an offensive against the Raja of Debal in the coastal town of Sind. The Raja of Debal was obstructing the coastal trade routes of Muslim merchants from the Persian Gulf to the Indian coast and Sri Lanka. After the Raja's defeat, Bin Qasim continued north along the Indus River, conquering all lands up to Multan. A contingent of shepherds and their flocks followed Bin Qasim's conquests and provided food for the military. For unknown reasons, the Khalifa in Baghdad lost faith in Bin Qasim and recalled him. To avert a revolt, Bin Qasim's devoted army of 3,000 was prevented from returning to Baghdad with their families. Consequently, the general's army and shepherds remained in the area around present-day Multan, and Multan's main occupation became sheep herding. The Arabic word for shepherd is rahi, which over time evolved into arain or Ariyan, my family's tribal name.

Just over a millennium later, territorial skirmishes began anew, with the Great Game between Russia and Britain over Afghanistan beginning in the 1830s and the Anglo-Sikh wars in the 1840s. At some point during this period, my great, great, great-grandfather moved his family, including my great, great grandfather, Akbar Shah (born in 1828) north-east to the land between the Doaba Satluj and Beas rivers. They first settled in Mahuwal, a small village on the Great Trunk Road. However, somewhere between 1836 and 1846, Maharani Jindan, the youngest wife of the Maharaja Ranjit Singh, approached them to cultivate her jagir (freehold land) three miles from Mahuwal, between Nakodar and Noor Mahal. She would further entice them with the offer of additional land, which they accepted, and their new village became known as Nawa Pind Araian Da — more recently, Nawa Pind Shonkia Da, located in Nokodar, a tehsil (township) in the city of Jalandhar and the province of Punjab.

Prior to Partition, Nawa Pind would remain the only Muslim village in the surrounding area, with the majority of the villagers being Araian Muslims. After Partition, the entire village (with the exception of villagers residing in East Africa at the time) would be displaced to Pakistan. By the early 1900s, Nawa Pind was

regarded as a very modern pind (village), even when compared to towns and cities established by British India. The majority of the buildings were brick with modern facilities, and the streets were also brick paved. Oral histories note that when Akbar Shah was nearing death, he travelled to the tomb of Nizam Uddin Ulia, a Sufi saint, in Delhi and spent his remaining life in prayer. When he passed, he was buried amongst the disciples of the saint at his graveside, still one of the most sacred Islamic sites in India.

Colonial Railway History

India's Railway

India's colonial railway construction began in the 1850s as a joint commercial and military undertaking and remained so until the end of Crown rule on the Indian subcontinent. The railways were built and owned by private companies and businessmen, supported by the British government. The railway lines acted as conduits to and from the ports, lowering the cost of transportation and making raw materials such as cotton more accessible to English merchants. Conversely, British manufactured materials such as cotton textiles were then sold back into the Indian market.

The abundance of unskilled Indian manual labourers — men, women, and children as young as ten — enabled companies to maintain large profit margins. Often, entire families were employed. Families who specialized in construction labour, known as waddars, were used heavily by railway companies. These families would relocate, supported by the railway companies, as the railway line progressed (Satya 2008: 73). Between 1859 and 1900, an average of 180,000–220,000 labourers were employed per year, 125–155 persons per mile of track (Satya 2008: 73). Strikes were common, and resistance movements were directed at private companies who perpetuated low wages and oppressive working conditions. Colonizers' deep-seated racial prejudice and class system prevented unskilled labourers from moving outside the realm of manual labour into more skilled work and management positions.

East Africa's Railway

Following the colonial success of the railway in India, the focus shifted to East Africa, where the race to build

a continuous rail line between southern and northern Africa was in full swing. The competition was fierce between Britain, France, Portugal, Germany, Spain, and Italy, and the scramble for control over the continent resulted in the invasion, occupation, division, and colonization of the majority of Africa. With this, formal European control of the continent increased 80% between 1870 and 1914 (Hill 1976). In 1896, the British were determined to construct the Kenya–Uganda railway, the objective being to connect the Port of Mombasa with the east coast of Lake Victoria (Hill 1976). East African indigenous tribes were hostile, and the prospect of using local African labour to build the railway line did not seem promising. Importing Indian labourers, now highly experienced in railway line construction, became the solution. Following the abolition of the slave trade in the early 1800s, British indentured servitude became a substitute and a means to transport Indian labour to British colonies until the 1920s. Beginning in 1896, Britain sent over 30,000 Indians to Kenya and Uganda. Known derogatively as “coolies,” Indian workers signed five-year contracts that guaranteed a small wage and promised a return passage home at the end of the contract (Hill 1976).

From India to Africa as an Indentured Labourer

Sharaf Din, Akbar Shah's son, was born in 1858 in Nawa Pind, and the family continued to work as labourers, stone masons and in agriculture (page 120). Sharaf Din went on to have four sons — Fazal Mohammed, Fateh Mohamed, Khushi Mohamed, and Ghulam Sabir (my grandfather) — and two daughters, Fatima and Aisha. As the story has been recounted, in 1896, Sharaf Din travelled into Nakodar, the administrative town for the locality, to answer a government summons. By nightfall, he had not returned to his village. He simply disappeared.

It emerged that Sharaf Din owed 2,000 rupees to moneylenders, who often took advantage of illiterate farmers, lending money at interest rates of 100–200%. Sixteen days after he had disappeared, his family received a postcard from Bombay. Sharaf Din wrote that through a recruitment drive taking place the day he was summoned to Nakodar, he was now heading to “a faraway land, in a country known as Africa.” He would work as a labourer, constructing the railway

line between the Port of Mombasa and Nairobi. There was no mention of when he would return, but he was confident that he would be able to repay his debt to the moneylenders. As it turned out, his wife and small children were without him for five years, farming the land and living off the small sums he was able to send back home.

The rail line that Sharaf Din would help construct was known as the “iron snake,” alluding to a prophecy attributed to the Masai and Kikuyu tribes of Kenya, and as the “lunatic line” by the British Parliament, due to the rising costs of construction and the numerous road blocks the engineers encountered along the way (Hill 1976). In contrast to India’s relatively flat geography, East Africa’s terrain ranged from coastlines and mangrove swamps to broad plains, hills, mountainous regions, and the Great Rift Valley. The region also brought hostile tribes, wild animals such as rhinos and elephants that sometimes charged the trains, man-eating lions, mosquitos, flies, and swarms of locusts and caterpillars that caused low railhead adhesion, or “wheel slip,” on the tracks (Hill 1976). Of the 31,983 “coolies” brought from India in 1896, 16,312 returned home at the end of their contract, 6,454 were severely injured, 2,494 died, and 6,724 remained in East Africa (Hill 1976).

The working conditions for the labourers on the lunatic line were treacherous, with injuries and deaths daily occurrences. It is said that four deaths occurred for every mile of track laid (Hill 1976). In addition to deaths from the back-breaking work came the Tsavo lions, two large man-eaters that stalked the railway camps over a period of nine months. It is estimated that the lions killed 135 workers; the exact number will never be known, since only the Indian deaths were accounted for (28); officials did not keep records for the local Africans working on the railway, who were regarded as lesser humans than their Indian counterparts (Hill 1976).

At the time of the attacks, construction had been underway on a railway bridge over the Tsavo river. Thousands of workers, mostly Indian, were spread out in camps over an eight-mile stretch of the rail line. The two lions stalked the camps in the evening, pulling sleeping labourers from their tents. As the months progressed, the lions became more brazen, entering the

camps by day, evading thorn fences, traps, poisoned bait, and campfires. As the attacks increased, hundreds of men fled from the site, halting construction of the bridge. Lieutenant-Colonel Patterson, a British soldier hired to supervise the railway construction, eventually shot the two lions. The first lion, shot twice, measured nine feet eight inches from the tip of its nose to the tip of its tail and stood three feet nine inches high. Twenty days later, the second lion, shot six times over an eleven-day period, finally succumbed to its injuries. It measured nine feet six inches from nose to tail and stood three feet 11.5 inches tall.

In England, one of my great-uncles is the keeper of several of the first Tsavo lion’s claws. As the story has been passed down, one evening, one of the two lions entered the train station, where the station master and signalman were located, and charged at my great-uncle. He barricaded himself behind a desk and swung a knife at the lion each time the lion swiped at him. The lion eventually retreated into the thick brush, a few digits short. Lieutenant-Colonel Patterson did not believe my great-uncle when he recounted this event; however, when the first lion was shot several days later, he was found to be missing several of his claws.

Patterson tells a similar story in his book *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo* (Patterson 1907):

Some little time before the flight of the workmen, I had written to Mr. Whitehead, the District Officer, asking him to come up and assist me in my campaign against the lions, and to bring with him any of his *askaris* (native soldiers) that he could spare. He replied accepting the invitation, and told me to expect him about dinner-time on December 2, which turned out to be the day after the exodus. His train was due at Tsavo about six o’clock in the evening, so I sent my “boy” up to the station to meet him and to help in carrying his baggage to the camp. In a very short time, however, the “boy” rushed back trembling with terror, and informed me that there was no sign of the train or of the railway staff, but that an enormous lion was standing on the station platform. This extraordinary story I did not believe in the least, as by this time the coolies — never remarkable for bravery — were in such a state of fright that if they caught sight of a hyena or a baboon, or even a dog, in the bush, they were sure to imagine it was a lion; but I found out next day that it was an actual fact, and that both

stationmaster and signalman had been obliged to take refuge from one of the man-eaters by locking themselves in the station building. (Patterson 1907, p. 48)

Further confirmation of this account comes from an article written in *The New York Times* in 1972: “Two lions on platform. Train approaching and signalman up water tank. Lions no let him down. I very nervously frightened and secure in office. Cannot give ‘line clear’ signal to oncoming train. Please arrange matters own personal satisfaction and dispose of lions who greatly bane my existence” (Hollander 1972). It has always angered my family, as I’m sure it did many of the descendants of these Indian labourers, that the British continuously described them as cowardly. These men were forced, or at the very least coerced, into coming to Kenya to labour and were not provided with any means to protect themselves. I have no doubt that carrying a rifle, as the British did, would have considerably boosted their bravado.

Returning Home, Debt Repaid

My great-grandfather Sharaf Din, now in his fifties, returned home in 1901, paid off his debt to the money-lenders, and began cultivating his land again. At some point during his time as an indentured labourer in Kenya, he was promoted from coolie (paid 12 rupees per month) to stone mason (paid 45 rupees per month). Had he remained a coolie, it would have cost him 15 years of his life to pay off his debt. Coolies began applying for jobs as stone masons during the Tsavo bridge construction (Patterson 1907) and given that Sharaf Din was there at the same time as the man-eating lions, this is likely when he shifted labouring positions.

At the end of his five-year contract, Sharaf Din, no longer an indentured servant, continued traveling back and forth between the continents, taking independent railway contracts in Kenya, including the construction of the Nairobi Railway Station. Upon each return home, he would invest in additional farmland. With his profits, he was also able to send two of his sons, Fateh Mohamed and Ghulam Sabir, to university in India. Both eventually had successful careers with the Kenyan railways; upon retirement, Fateh Mohamed would receive the Queen’s medal of honour for his service. After the first generation of indentured labourers, the

work on the African railways became more profitable than remaining in India, and nearly every household in Nawa Pind had a family member who had migrated to East Africa. As the men returned home, they began making improvements to their households and also to the village proper — replacing mud plaster exterior walls with kiln-fired bricks or building entirely new structures. The kiln-fired bricks were a time-saving strategy that allowed them to spend more time on agriculture, increasing profits and enhancing the quality of life in the village.

By the mid-1920s, Sharaf Din, his four sons, and his daughter Fatima were well established in Kenya. His daughter Aisha, now married, remained in India. No longer regarded as indentured labourers, railway workers were allotted three months off and permitted to return to India every four years, where they would invest in more land and visit with the family left behind. My grandfather, Ghulam Sabir, born in 1907, migrated to Kenya in 1927. By the 1920s, the British government had divided Nairobi into three sections: the British on one side of the river and the Indians and Africans in separate locales on the other side. After this division, my grandfather and his three brothers purchased an acre of land and built six stone houses in the Indian section of the town, four on the front street and two on the back street. The family resided in one of the homes and rented the remaining five, with the monies earned from rent divided monthly between the brothers and their families. Only one residence was ever needed between the four brothers, since most often at least three and their families were travelling with the railway as construction continued through to Uganda. During these long stays, they were provided with railway quarters, similar to army barracks.

My grandfather Ghulam Sabir began with the British railway as a clerk, and with his university education was able to move up into management, human resources, and finally, an accounting position. He was soon promoted to bursar and would travel by train, provided with his own bogie and guards to protect the coffers, visiting each station and paying the labourers lined up on payday. He went back to India around 1930 to marry my grandmother, Sardaran Khanum. They then returned to Kenya, where they would remain until my grandfather retired around 1958–59. Ghulam

and Sardaran had four children, all born in Nairobi: Hamida (1931), Anwar (1932), Munawar (my father 1935), and Sureya (1939).

Ghulam's career meant that he and his family traveled continuously around Kenya and Uganda. In 1938–39, when my father was three, they lived in Jinja, Uganda for a year, where Ghulam was responsible for the construction of the railway bridge. Then toward the end of 1939, the family travelled to their home in India for a visit. Working together as they had done in Nairobi, the four brothers (Ghulam, Fazal, Fateh, and Khushi) built a similar compound with red bricks, containing four homes around a central courtyard. Sharaf Din lived in a home nearby, while both Fatima and Aisha lived with their spouses and children on the same street.

As they reached Nawa Pind, World War II broke out, and since Ghulam was considered an essential service worker for the railway, he was immediately sent back to Kenya. My father, siblings, and grandmother would remain in Nawa Pind for nine months, awaiting safe passage back to Nairobi. During his time in Nawa Pind, one of my father's fondest memories was following his older siblings and cousins to school. Sitting outside under a bodhi tree, he would learn his multiplication tables through song and recitation in Urdu and Punjabi. Although only four years old during this trip, he can still remember the melody that accompanied his mathematics recitation. By the time he entered kindergarten, known as Substandard 1 and 2 in Kenya, he was already ahead of his class. Before the age of six, when he first began to learn English, he was fluent in the Indian and Arab languages of Punjabi, Urdu, and Arabic, as well as the native Kenyan languages of Swahili and Kikuyu.

In 1940, with safe passage finally arranged, the family silently set sail home to Nairobi, accompanied by two British destroyers, protection against the German U Boats. During this passage, my Uncle Anwar, then seven, was playing recklessly by the ship's railing and almost fell overboard. My father remembers the cries for help and commotion when a group of passengers found him hanging from the railing, seconds away from being engulfed by the sea, and quickly pulled him to safety.

WWII would leave an imprint on my father's

childhood. With British Kenya, concerned about an advancing Italian army, flying bombers over Nairobi, the family dug a bomb shelter in their front yard and covered it with a mbati (Swahili for tin roof) for protection. My father also recollects trading rationed food items, such as butter and sugar, snuck from the family food stores, for wooden carved toy soldiers that Italian PoWs were excited to trade. The memory that likely left the deepest imprint, however, was when his maternal grandfather disappeared in 1945 on a return journey to India. The hushed whispers of concern in the family home discussed how he had set sail on a dhow, since steamships were occupied by the war effort. One evening, a family friend, who was a radio broadcaster from Nairobi and also a soothsayer, came to visit. As the family was recounting their concerns, the man placed soot into a dish, mixed it with oil, and began to say a prayer. He then asked my father to look into the dish and describe what he could see, but my father, not able to focus, did not see anything. His older brother then tried and described seeing their grandfather sitting under a palm tree on an island. Of course, this did not make any sense to the family, and thus the activity ceased. A few months later, the family received a second visit from the same soothsayer, and the activity was repeated. My uncle then saw his grandfather looking out the window of a train. Four days later, the family received a telegram from Nawa Pind, stating that their grandfather had been shipwrecked on the island of Socotra in Yemen and had had to wait several months for another ship to take him back to India. The train on which my uncle had seen his grandfather during that second visit was the one from Bombay to Jalandhar. He had been missing for six months.

By the time WWII ended in 1945, my father and his family were residing in Eldoret, and the school marked the end of the war by the principal raising the Union Jack flag. They remained in Eldoret for two years before relocating to Mombasa in 1947. Mombasa remains a key entry point for shipping cargo into Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania and the present port's construction began in 1896, under the British Protectorate, to discharge railway line construction materials (Kenya Ports Authority, n.d.). Looking out the window from the top floor of his classroom, my father had a clear view of the ocean, where he often spotted large shark fins cutting

through the port's waterways — but this didn't stop him from sneaking down to swim with the fish in the corals.

Although the war was over, life would only remain uneventful for a few short years. At the beginning of 1947, their parents left my father and his older brother with their Uncle Fateh Mohamed and travelled back to India, leaving in January and returning in April. The chaos of Partition had begun. Numerous extended family members voyaging to India around the same time would become stuck and unable to leave, witnessing the horrors and bloodshed, eventually becoming lost in refugee camps and not able to return until after the storms of Partition had subsided.

Background to Partition

Partition was not a sudden event but one instigated and fueled by more than a hundred years of British colonialism. The British encouraged the division of colonial subjects based on religion and ethnicity. Separate bathrooms were provided for Muslims and Hindus at railway stations, and separate electorates for different religious communities began in 1909, increasing self- and group-consciousness along with rigid boundaries (Brass 2003).

In 1885, the Indian National Congress (INC), dominated by a Hindu majority, was formed, spearheading the Indian Independence Movement. When Britain attempted to divide the state of Bengal (1905) along sectarian lines, the INC protested, and the Muslim League was formed (1906) in an effort to ensure the rights of Muslims during future independence negotiations (Khan 2017); the INC supported a unified India, since Hindus, being the larger population, would have held control over any democratic form of government. The Muslim League's primary interest was avoiding the risk of Muslim marginalization in an independent Hindu-Muslim state. Given these opposing views of what independence should look like, the British colonial government attempted to pit the groups against the other and create further division. However, both groups remained united in favour of independence from Britain (Brass 2003).

During WWI, the INC and the Muslim League supported sending one million Indian volunteer troops to fight on Britain's behalf. Both groups felt this

support would lead to independence from Britain after the war had ended, but this never came to fruition (Khan 2017). Pro-independence protests continued to intensify after WWI, and in April 1919, the British army entered Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar and opened fire on unarmed protestors, killing more than a thousand. As news of the Amritsar massacre reached the farthest points of India, previously apolitical citizens came to support the INC, the Muslim League, and independence (Brass 2003).

Indian Independence Act of 1947

WWII served as a catalyst for India's fight for independence. The British Raj had contributed 2.5 million volunteer soldiers to the Allied campaign, and by the time the war had finished, Great Britain was bankrupt and unable to maintain its colonies across the empire. By February 1947, with the British government's change-over from Winston Churchill's Tories to the Labour Party, a proposal was made to grant India independence by June 1948. Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of British India, encouraged the Muslim and Hindu leaders to form a united country, but with the country falling into further chaos, Mountbatten understood this would never be possible. Hence, he agreed to the formation of two separate states (Khan 2017). With the provinces of Baluchistan and Sindh already having Muslim majorities, Mountbatten proposed that this would become the new state of Pakistan, while the two disputed provinces of Bengal and Punjab would be divided, creating both a Hindu Bengal and Punjab as well as a Muslim Bengal and Punjab on the eastern and western borders of India. When both the Muslim League and the INC agreed to the proposal, the date for independence was moved up from June 1948 to August 15, 1947 (Brass 2003).

The Radcliffe Line

The next phase, delineating a border between the two states, was a nearly impossible task, with Muslims occupying two northern regions on opposite sides of the country and a Hindu majority occupying the region in between. To further convolute matters, within the northern regions, members of both Hindu and Muslim communities were mixed together, along with other minority groups: Sikhs and Christians. Sikhs had

appealed for a nation of their own but were denied. The Punjab region was fertile and wealthy and contained equal populations of Hindus and Muslims; with neither group willing to surrender this valuable land, religious hatred intensified (Chatterji 1999).

Mountbatten appointed Cyril Radcliffe, a British judge, to delineate the border separating the two countries. He had been chosen because he was regarded as nonpartisan and thus could be neutral; however, he had little understanding of the regional tensions, nor did he have experience with adjudicating such disputes. In addition to these drawbacks, he was given only five weeks to set the border. The rough border plan was presented on August 14, 1947, and by August 17, the Radcliffe Line had been officially published. Mountbatten favoured expediency over precision and focused his attention on protecting British interests rather than on the state of lawlessness that was about to ensue. The lack of a clear strategy for a safe transition of people resulted in property loss, death, and destruction (Chatterji 1999).

Numerous issues contributed to confusion over the new border. Very few had access to the Radcliffe Line publication, and illiteracy would in any case have prevented many from understanding it. Within a matter of weeks, 14 million were displaced from their homes, and the subcontinent quickly descended into riots and violence. Partition triggered one of the bloodiest upheavals in human history. Hindus and Sikhs fled Pakistan while Muslims fled India, and the “blood trains” carrying refugees between the two states were attacked by militant and mobs along the route, arriving laden with corpses (Chatterji 1999).

My Family’s Experience through Partition

At the time of Partition, my father’s grandfather, Sharaf Din, along with aunts, uncles, cousins, and a sister, were residing in Nawa Pind. As mentioned above, there was much confusion over where the border would change. Nawa Pind was a small Muslim village encircled by three Sikh villages within a three-mile radius, and the family mistakenly thought they were now a part of Pakistan. With limited outside communication, each individual locality had to gauge the severity of their precarious situation. In the two months before Independence Day, the horrors of Partition escalated,

with one majority district or neighbouring village attacking another of the opposing religion. The villagers remained locked indoors, and at night, village patrols guarded the narrow streets and shouted at each other to stay awake and vigilant. The shouts, meant to scare their adversaries, would also notify fellow villagers that they were still alive.

One evening, a group of Sharaf Din’s Sikh friends and tenants from Uppal came to warn the family that Nawa Pind was going to be attacked the following day; they were unable to help, as this was an outside militia group intending to burn Muslim villages. Hence, the family gathered their valuables and any material memories of a life about to be quickly erased, hastily packed everything into ox carts, and fled to a refugee camp in Jalandhar, 20 miles away. Although fortunate not to have been attacked en route to Jalandhar, many family members still experienced the horrors of seeing the mutilated remains of dead Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs lying on the roadsides as they traveled by foot or by train, seeking refuge (Chatterji 1999). One of my uncles, now in his seventies, only recently identified his trauma as PTSD, something that continues to affect him today. At the camps, numerous refugees succumbed to the plague, typhoid, and cholera, my father’s cousin dying of the third. The family remained in the refugee camp, which came under attack by militias, but then were rescued by Maswood, Fateh Mohamed’s son. He had brought with him the British army to take them over the border to the safety of the Lahore refugee camp in the Dominion State of Pakistan.

One might wonder how an Indian was able to summon the British army to rescue his family. As a young boy in Kenya, Maswood was swiftly recognized as an academic. His uncles, including my grandfather, pooled their resources to send him to Kings College in London. When WWII broke out, he served with the British army and was part of the evacuation of Dunkirk. He had also fought in North Africa, and when in Egypt, he worked for British intelligence. He arrested an Egyptian soldier secreting national intelligence to the Germans, who turned out to be Anwar Sadat, later the president of Egypt. After all of this success, Maswood was finally considered fit for commissioned service and was sent to India to be trained. He became a second lieutenant in the Indian army, and

GOVERNMENT ASIAN HIGH SCHOOL, NAIROBI

THE VISIT OF THE LADY MARY BARING.

PREFECTS

1952



VANGUARD STUDIO

GOVERNMENT ROAD, NAIROBI.

SITTING (L. to R.) P. S. Benawra, Mr. R. V. Bales Mr. G. S. Amar, The LADY MARY BARING, Miss Janisch, Rev. J. Gillett, Mr. R. C. Patel
(Head Prefect) (A.D.C.) (Principal) (Asst. Director of Ed.) (P.E.O.) (Vice-Principal)
STANDING FIRST ROW: (L. to R.) Zaheer-ud-din, Aftab Butt, Dharam Pall G., Virendra, Chottubhai, Mohd Afzal, Homi Mistry, Rabinder Singh,
Mukhtar Beg, Mohd Munawar,
STANDING SECOND ROW: (L. to R.) Mohd Aslam, Rajinder Kapoor, Jagjit Singh, Satya Vrat, Hasmukh, Harshadrai, Satbachan Singh.
STANDING THIRD ROW: (L. to R.) Parkash Chand, Ajit Singh, Saroop Singh, Wali Mohd, Surender Singh, Gurmeet Singh.

Government Asian High School, Nairobi, 1952—Munawar Sabir second row, far right.

Source: Sabir family personal collection

as WWII came to an end, he was promoted. As captain of India's Eighth Regiment, his first task in 1947 was to locate the family patriarch, Sharaf Din, the remaining family, as well as the Eighth Army Regiment's families. He was permitted to take 100 army trucks and a company of armed soldiers to scour the various refugee camps, bringing each family to safety in the newly vacated lands in the Dominion of Pakistan.

Land distribution in Pakistan was based upon what they had lost in India. Sharaf Din was initially offered land in Daska, a district of Sialkot, next to Kashmir, but he rejected the offer as the land was not suitable for wheat crops. Hence, the family settled into a small village with no name, only the number 86A6R, in the district of Montgomery, later renamed Sahiwal. Sharaf Din, now in his late nineties continued to farm with one of his sons and his son's family until he passed away

in 1960. The remaining family, after receiving their land settlement in Pakistan, began to migrate back to Kenya. My father, who had remained in Kenya during Partition, recalls that at one point, there were five to seven families living in their small Nairobi house, where each family would remain until they found work and had purchased their own homes.

As my extended family was journeying to Kenya amidst the chaos of Partition, my grandfather Ghulam was sent to work in Nakuru and Eldoret, leaving my 12-year-old father and his older brother to live with their uncle until my father completed Grade 12 (see above).

My grandparents would eventually return to Nairobi in 1952. The academic year in Kenya consisted of cycles of three months of schooling followed by one month of vacation. My father and his brother would spend the

holidays with their parents, wherever Ghulam's railway job had taken him. His children were provided free second-class train passes, and sometimes even first-class tickets, to visit their parents and extended family residing in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania.

Childhood Memories of Africa

The holiday trips and schooling years brought many adventures, and my father fondly recalls a number of his boyhood escapades. When he was five, he was sent to stay with his first cousin and his wife, who were living in a surveyor's tent in the Kijabe countryside of Kenya. As a surveyor for the British railway, his cousin was tasked with straightening a particularly windy and troublesome portion of the rail line. Although Kijabe had a beautiful hot spring, my father's favourite childhood experience was at Lake Kikuyu, now named Ondiri Swamp and unfortunately severely polluted since the time of the British protectorate. The lake was covered with reeds floating on peat that could hold the weight of a person, and he remembers being able to "walk on water" as he and many others, even the local cattle, crossed the lake. Today, children cut the peat and swim underneath Kenya's only quaking bog, mindful not to lose sight of the light above lest they drown (LARMAT, 2016).

At the age of 12 in Nakuru, my father and his brother would pack a picnic of Kraft cheese sandwiches and Coca-Cola and bike to Lake Nakuru, ten miles from their home. On one of these picnics, as they were cycling down the red dirt path toward the lake, my father noticed a large log in the middle of the path that began to move. Distracted, he fell off of his bike just meters from it, and by the time he righted himself it had fortunately disappeared. He was extremely lucky, since pythons were known to swallow young children whole in Kenya.

During these formative years, he was also privileged to attend several guest lectures at his school by Louis Leakey, the prominent paleoanthropologist and archaeologist renowned for his important discoveries at Olduvai Gorge. Then in his final years of schooling, he joined his class to climb Mount Kenya in Grade 11 (1951) and Mount Kilimanjaro in Grade 12 (1952). His first cousin Saed, an aeronautical student in England, along with his friend John Busing, an experienced

mountaineer from New Zealand, had travelled to Kenya to climb Mount Kenya. My father's teacher, seizing the opportunity to ascend with an experienced climber, had his class of students join the expedition. With 80 shillings provided by his anxious parents, my father purchased the required gear — an old military uniform, including warm coat, socks, cobbles for his hiking shoes, and a rucksack onto which his mother had sewn a strap — while John Busing taught the class how to knit their own wool gloves for the journey. The trip took three weeks, with the main food staples being baked beans and other tinned foods. Condensed milk mixed with cold stream water became their refreshing liquid sustenance. The climb, although challenging, took place without incident, but the most frightening moment transpired during their descent, when a herd of elephants crossed just yards in front of them. They stood very still, hoping to avoid a charge. As the elephants moved on, oblivious to the shaking schoolboys, the class took a collective sigh of relief. The climb up Mount Kenya was so successful that the class then ascended Mount Kilimanjaro in another three-week trek, the following year.

The Mau Mau Uprising and the Kenyan Africanization Plan

Disruption would hit once again during the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya between 1952 and 1960, the most violent and protracted insurrection against colonialism. Some of the world's richest agricultural soils were located in Kenya and thus were coveted by the British. However, settler success was largely based on the availability of land, cheap labour, and capital. This led to the economic marginalization of the Kikuyu tribe as settler expansion continued to reduce their landholdings, and their attempts to gain political rights and land reform through government channels were unsuccessful. The arrests of Mau Mau suspects often took place behind my father's home, mere yards from their house.

In 1963, Kenya became independent from Britain; Indians, along with Europeans, were given two years to become Kenyan citizens and surrender their British passports. Then, on the heels of the Kenyan Africanization Plan in 1964, the government began to replace non-citizens with citizens in key areas of the economy (Wa-Githumo 1991). Hence, if you were not

an essential service worker in the years leading up to 1964, you were likely to be out of work. My grandfather had been the last immediate family member to leave Kenya, in 1958, and it was becoming difficult to rent out the houses on the family compound, since the majority of Indians, and now Pakistanis, were leaving. Eventually, the compound was sold for 100,000 shillings, a fraction of its value only a few years earlier. In addition, the monies from the sale of the compound were withheld in a Kenyan bank for many years before Ghulam and his brothers were finally able to receive their payment.

Early University Years

My grandfather Ghulam Sabir could only afford to send one of his sons to university in England but could afford to send both sons to university in Pakistan. Hence, upon graduating Grade 12, my father was uprooted to Saiwal, Pakistan in April 1953. After the modern village in Nawa Pind, his grandfather and uncles were now residing in a village without electricity and only a hand pump to access water. My father would never feel at home in this new village, so vastly different from his childhood upbringing in Kenya. After living with his grandfather for a few weeks, he travelled to King Edward Medical College and roomed with his cousin. There he would study first-year courses independently before registering in September for second-year studies at Government College in Lahore, skipping first-year university altogether. During his third year, he transferred to Forman Christian College receiving his first degree, majoring in zoology, chemistry, and English, followed by a five-year medical program at Nishtar Medical College in Multan (see photograph page 132). With his parents continuing to reside in Nairobi, he would spend his holidays in Saiwal with his grandfather Sharaf Din, and his uncles and cousins.

England

Immediately upon graduating from medical school, he left for England on December 3, 1961. Something I did not know about my family history until writing this chapter was that my family never had a last name. It was not part of our culture and not necessary until my father was required to apply for a passport to travel



Munawar Sabir, early University years. Source: Sabir family personal collection

to London. At this point, he took my grandfather's name "Sabir" as a surname. In England, he remained in a Pakistani hostel for six weeks while applying for residency positions and was invited to six interviews. However, he only attended the three interviews that were along a train route: in Scunthorpe (gynecology and obstetrics), South Shields (gynecology and obstetrics), and Carlisle (general surgery). The pay was similar for each of these positions (20 pounds per month), and he eventually settled in South Shields, as the resident quarters seemed most appealing to him. The position was for six months, and he received one night off per week, along with every third weekend. He remained in South Shields for another year after receiving a job as junior house surgeon in general surgery, and then senior house surgeon. He next moved to Lewisham and took a job as registrar at St. John's Hospital, after which he became the resident surgical officer at the same hospital.

In 1963, when Kenya received independence from Britain, my father was forced to give up his Kenyan citizenship, as he was now living and working in England. Loss of citizenship in the country where he was born and raised, and that holds his fondest childhood memories, was a painful example of identity erasure, rooted in a deep colonial history. During the same year, he

SPEER'S CHEMICAL SOCIETY
FORMAN CHRISTIAN COLLEGE LAHORE
1955-56



ZAIDIS & Co.

Chairs :—Mr. Nasirud Din Ahmad,	Prof. Zahirud Din Babar,	Abid Qureshi,	Prof. Ghulam Abbas,	Aslam Randawa,	Dr. R. M. Ewing,	Munawar Hashmi,
" Mr. R. M. Chester,	" Prof. K. M. Iqbal Raza,	" Sultan Mahmood,	" Akhtar Hamid,	" Prof. Mumtaz Ahmad,	" Dr. R. M. Ewing,	" Munawar Hashmi,
Head of Dept.	(Advisor).	(Vice President).	(Asst. Secretary).	(Secretary).	(Principal).	(President).
Standing 1st Row :—Faqir,	Azhar,	F. R. Chaudhary,	Nayab,	Majid,	Aftab,	Waheed,
" 2nd Row :—Zaidi,	Zia,	Asad Chaudhary,	Iqbal,	Akram,	Rafiq Afzal,	Rafiq Chaudhary,
" 3rd Row :—Arif,	Malik Akbar,	Manzoor,	Zafar,	Javed,	Safdar,	Zafar.

Munawar Sabir, President of the Speers Chemical Society. Forman Christian College, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan, first row, center.

Source: Sabir family personal collection

met and married his first wife, Pat. Ironically, prior to meeting my father, Pat had worked as a nurse in India, personally treating Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Pat and my father moved to Hereford in Muchburch, where he took an assistantship, eventually moving to Wolverhampton to become an orthopaedic registrar. At this point, tiring of the training jobs and feeling well experienced, he began working in family practice in Edmonton, London, where he remained for six years while also working as a clinical assistant in orthopedic surgery at Barnett General Hospital. During this time, they purchased their first home, in Enfield.

Meeting the Queen

Likely stemming from the historical racism and inequity experienced by my father and his family, he joined the Human Rights Commission, initially as a committee member, and later was nominated chairman of the commission's Employment and Housing section. Between 1969 and 1973, he challenged discriminatory practices in the workforce, within universities, as well as

in the rental housing market. During this same period, he also received a call from the British Home Secretary, as he had been recommended to the Liquor Licensing Commission in 1970. Both of these commissions were extremely prestigious, with notable names on the committees: Lord Errol, Graham Hill (a two-time Formula One world champion), Lord Shepherd (former Governor of Hong Kong), Simon Phips (Bishop of Horsham), Sheila Black, James John (Headmaster of Harrow), and Professor Prest, from the London School of Economics. Following his seat on this commission, he wrote a ground-breaking paper on alcoholism and legislation. Through his work on both of these committees, he was invited to two of the Queen's Buckingham Palace Garden Parties (1971 and 1972), where she recognized and rewarded individuals for their public service. On each occasion, he stood in line to be personally thanked by Queen Elizabeth. This was not, though, his first time seeing her. In 1952, Queen Elizabeth had visited Nairobi as Princess Elizabeth and was staying at the famous Treehouse Hotel when she received the

news that her father, King George VI, had died. My father's class was sent, as loyal subjects to the Crown, to wave the Union Jack flag at the Nairobi airport upon her arrival in Kenya. I cannot help but think that he must have held many conflicting feelings when attending these events. On the one hand, he would have felt so much pride at being acknowledged for the important work he had done; attending the Garden Party was a great honour. On the other hand, here was the woman whose bloodline was responsible for all of his family's colonial oppression and suffering.

Moving to Canada

On a visit to Toronto, Ontario in 1972, my father fell in love with Canada, and he and Pat decided to relocate with their children. He applied for immigration and a family practice position, and an opportunity to purchase a practice in the Ukrainian town of Hafford, Saskatchewan presented itself. The family arrived on November 23, 1973, ready to begin their new adventure, but tragedy struck on November 29. After attending a farewell dinner for the departing doctor, the family was driving back to their hotel in a blizzard when they were struck by an oncoming vehicle. My father's life changed forever — in a split second, his wife and children were gone.

My father continued to work in Hafford, and in 1975, he met my mother, a young nurse of Ukrainian, French, Irish, and German ancestry. A skydiving accident in Prince George, British Columbia had caused her to be in a full leg cast for many weeks and forced her to move back home to heal. However, never one to sit still, she approached the matron at the Hafford hospital, looking for nursing work. There, they serendipitously met and then eventually married. In 1978, they moved to Winnipeg, Manitoba when he accepted a residency position to specialize in orthopedics and began working at the Winnipeg Health Sciences Centre, St. Boniface Hospital, as well as the Children's Hospital, while my mother worked at the Misericordia Health Centre. By then, they had four young daughters: Shamma, me, Roxanna, and Laila (Figure 5). When my father completed his residency in



Ghulam Sabir and Sardaran visit Munawar and Eva Sabir in Canada in 1983. Backrow left to right: Sureya (Munawar's sister) and husband, Eva Sabir, Ghulam and Sardaran Sabir. Front row: Roxanna, Laila, Shamma and Sarah (Munawar and Eva's children).

Source: Sabir family personal collection

orthopedics in Winnipeg and flew to Vancouver for his graduation, he became immediately excited that B.C. was not snow covered, remaining green even in the dead of winter. Having grown up by the equator, he was not fond of the cold Saskatchewan and Manitoba winters, so they decided to move to B.C. In 1982, we arrived in Abbotsford, where we have remained since. At the time, my parents were only one of two biracial couples in the Fraser Valley, something that drew many a curious glance and whispers. My father's practice grew immediately, as he spoke numerous languages and drew Punjabi- and Urdu-speaking patients from over a hundred miles away. In 1988, my parents fell in love with an acreage with rolling hills that reminded my father of his home in Kenya; they christened it Ngong Hills, after the peaks in a ridge along the Rift Valley, southwest of Nairobi. After all of the places my father had lived, it was Africa that continued to tug at his heart.

Returning Home

In 2012, we travelled to Kenya as a family — my parents, my sisters, two sons-in-law, and my three-month-old son. Throughout my childhood, Father had told us his many adventures and longed for the red earth where he was born. We visited many of the places he had lived and travelled to before leaving Kenya permanently at the age of 17, including a childhood school

and the train station where my grandfather and other family members had worked. And although Nairobi had changed considerably during the almost 60 years since he had departed, in an incredible feat, he found his way back to his childhood home. He stood in front of the gate and knocked, and when the owner arrived at the gate, he explained that he and his siblings had been born in their house. They welcomed him back into the home to look around. This was a moving moment for my entire family. Until now, Kenya had been this far-off place in oral history, and now, here we were, standing in front of the stone house that my great-uncles had built and where my father had been born, a place where my family had ended up through indentured labour and back-breaking work. I now understood a part of myself like never before.

During this same trip, my father also visited his childhood friend Mukhtar, who had travelled to England for medical school but then returned to his home in Kenya for work. They spoke for hours after not seeing each other for many years, and at the end of the evening, my father walked with him out of the hotel where we were staying. They walked so slowly, side by side, arms behind their backs, still talking and reminiscing. How much they had to say after so many years, and in the end, they promised to see each other again. As I watched them walk down the path, two old and very dear friends, I wondered whether they ever would, but it was not meant to be, as Mukhtar passed away in 2020, before another visit could be had.

Returning to Ancestral Roots

In 2020, at the age of 85, my father decided that it was time to visit his ancestral roots in India. He had not returned since his first visit at the age of four. My parents toured around most of India, during the time of Donald Trump's visit. Here in Canada, watching the news and reading about all of the ethnic conflict taking place once again in a country so divided, we were becoming more concerned for their safety by the day. My father was trying to locate the village of Nawa Pind without any idea of how to get there, carrying with him only fleeting childhood memories and the knowledge that it was somewhere between Nakodar and Jalandhar.

They hired a taxi, and on the way to Jalandhar, he described the location to the driver as best he could.

The taxi driver stopped every few blocks, exiting the car to inquire with anyone on the street who might know something about Nawa Pind's location. Then, as they rounded a corner, arriving at a Sufi shrine, the driver jumped out and inquired once again of three people on motorbikes. They responded with excitement that my parents had arrived and then jumped onto their bikes and asked the taxi to follow, guiding them the few hundred metres into the village. They brought them to a gurdwara, and my father suddenly remembered that there had been a mosque in the same location. One of the men stated that this gurdwara had previously been the mosque and that his father was now the granthi (ceremonial reader of the holy text). They then invited my parents into the temple, where they visited and had tea. During the conversation, my father described a large bodhi tree, where he remembered having mathematics lessons as a four-year-old. They then drove him to the tree, the largest of its kind in the village. As he stood there under his childhood tree, he commented to another man, also standing there, that it would be an ideal spot for a treehouse. The man, a Sikh engineer, told him that he was in fact in the process of constructing a tree house for his grandchildren. During this conversation, my father told him how he used to sit under this tree when he went to school, and the man asked him where his house was located. My father turned around and pointed across the street to where his family home had been. Stunned, the man told him that he now owned the house and immediately invited my parents back to visit. At the house, nothing had been altered with the exception of updated paint. As he stood in the courtyard of his childhood home, reminiscing and still in shock at this chance meeting, the man's wife came out of the house. After hearing who they were and why they were there, she said, "But I thought that the people who owned this house before Partition were Muslim," and my father answered, "Yes, we were." She immediately opened her arms and embraced him.

My mother had recorded this chance meeting on her phone and immediately played it for us children when they returned. Watching my father's serendipitous journey home through the lens of the camera almost felt like we had taken the journey with them. More incredible was watching all of the people in the village who embraced my parents. There may have been

conflicts in other parts of India, but here, in this village, Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus were not just coexisting, they were friends, as they had been prior to British meddling. My father said that he has never felt so at home as he did in that moment, standing on the same ground where his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and so on had stood.

Conclusion

Although we share a common ancestry from the Middle East to India, the descendants of Akbar Shah are now citizens of Pakistan, Kenya, Britain, Germany, Spain, the United States, and Canada. Today, my immediate and extended family, along with the friends they grew up with in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda — comprising Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu faiths, and each following their own exceptional journey — have serendipitously ended up together again in the Fraser Valley. I and my sisters, the first generation born in Canada, have been fortunate to remain part of such a close-knit community whose historical ties run so deep. Much upheaval occurred and many sacrifices were made so that each subsequent generation could have a better life.

Colonialism caused racial divisions, ethnic conflicts,

and a class system that not only uprooted my family but also separated them many times over. Indentured labour sent my great-grandfather to an unknown land to complete arduous labour to pay off a debt that should never have been. Colonial greed and the looting of India resulted in poor working conditions and poverty, forcing many in my family to continue working in East Africa. Partition caused further upheaval in one of the bloodiest conflicts in recent history. Kenyan independence forced my father to choose between Kenyan and British citizenship, knowing that ethnically he would never be either. What role does identity play when there isn't a single place that one can ever truly call home? The Kenya of my father's childhood was no longer, India's ancestral roots were erased by Partition, and Pakistan, a place allotted to Muslims by the British, did not hold any familial history. Perhaps it is in such moments of upheaval that one decides to form new roots.

As I conclude this chapter, I reflect upon the many times that my family has been asked *What are you?* or *Where do you come from?* "Have a seat," I answer, "it's going to be a long story."

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COLONIAL EMIGRATION FORM No. 44.

31094

MAN'S
EMIGRATION PASS.

HEALTH CLASS.

Depôt No. 227

For Ship

PROCEEDING TO FIJI.

No. 222

Govt. Government Emigration Agency.

21, GARDEN REACH.

CALCUTTA, the 12/3/1906.

PARTICULARS OF REGISTRATION, { Place, Calcutta
Date, 26.1.06
No. in Register, 250.
NAME, Abdul.
Father's Name, Jaffer.
Age, 22.
Caste, Mussalman.
Name of Next-of-kin, Abdul Rehman, Cousin.
If married, name of Wife, -
District, Poona.
Thana, Do.
Village, or Town & Mahalla, Do.
Bodily Marks, Scar near left shoulder.
Occupation in India, Cultivator.
Height, 5 Feet 4 Inches.

CERTIFIED that we have examined and passed the above-named Man as fit to emigrate; that he is free from all bodily and mental disease; and that he has been vaccinated since engaging to emigrate.

DATED

The

1906

M.D., F.R.C.P.,
LIEUT-COLONEL, I.M.S.
Depôt Surgeon.

Surgeon Superintendent.

CERTIFIED that the Man above described has appeared before me and has been engaged by me on behalf of the Government of Fiji as willing to proceed to that country to work for hire; and that I have explained to him all matters concerning his engagement and duties. This has also been done at the time of registration by the Registering Officer appointed by the Indian Government.

DATED

The

1906

1906

Govt. Government Emigration Agent for FIJI.

PERMITTED to proceed as in a fit state of health to undertake the voyage to

FIJI.

DATED

The

12/3/1906.

Protector of Emigrants.

N. S. & Co. Printers, Calcutta. 1300-1-1906.

Indo-Fijians: Our long journey Home

*“How many generations does one have to live
in a place to be allowed to call it home?”*

– DR. BRIJ V. LAL

Rizwaan S. Abbas

ABSTRACT

The Indo-Fijian community has a complex history and heritage. Coming to the Fiji Islands as indentured labourers from India between 1879 and 1920, these *Girmitiyas* were forced to reevaluate their place in the world while simultaneously rebuilding their culture and maintaining their traditional and religious practices in a harsh colonial environment. Finding no place in India, Girmitiyas created a unique Indo-Fijian culture in the tropical South Pacific through their shared struggle for respect and acceptance.

This chapter introduces the history of indentured labour in Fiji and its effect on Girmitiyas, explaining the obstacles faced during and after indenture. It explains how the Indo-Fijians shaped the economy of Fiji but despite this, were never accepted as equal citizens. Due to their enduring struggle for respect and equality, the Indo-Fijian people of today, much like their Girmitiya ancestors, left Fiji in search of a homeland where they would be accepted in society. Coming to Canada, the Indo-Fijian people have finally found a land where they are equal citizens with the opportunity to flourish as a culture. It is my hope this chapter will help Indo-Fijians better identify with our shared history and heritage and help readers understand and appreciate our unique Canadian Indo-Fijian culture.

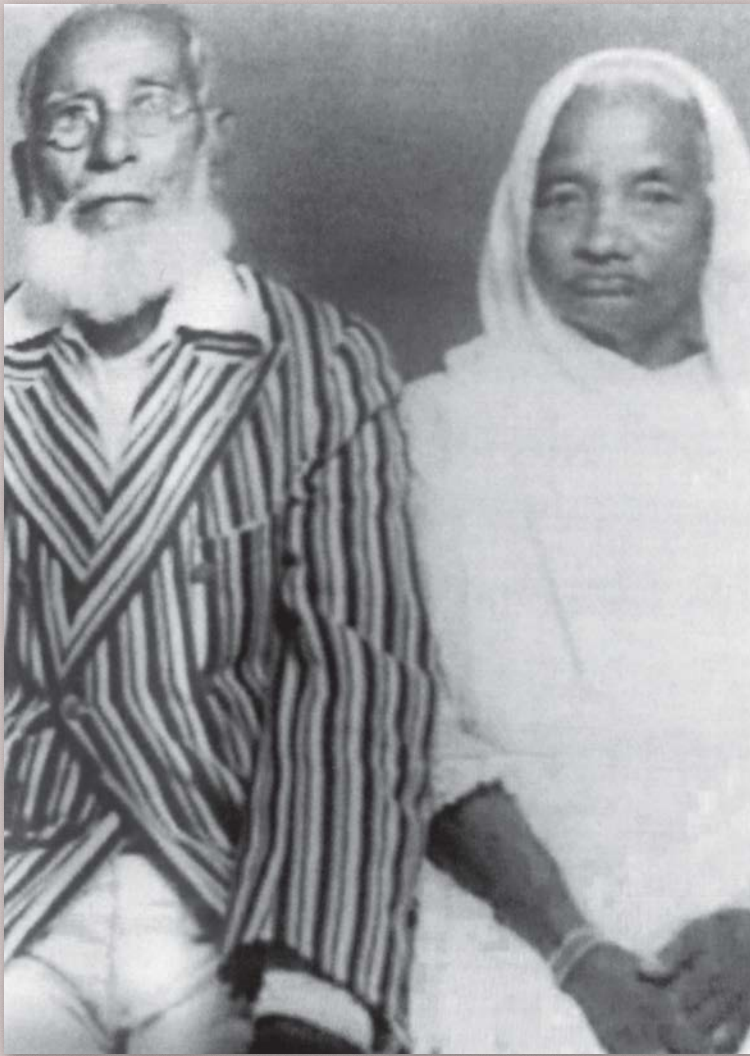
KEY WORDS

Indo-Fijian, Fiji Islands, Girmitiya, girmit, indentured labour, Sparwood, Surrey, resiliency, work ethic, dedication, colonialism

Introduction

My Great-great-grandparents were *Pathans* from Peshawar living in a free India a century before colonial partition separated our people along religious and perceived racial lines. Moving freely along the Himalayan foothills and through the fertile lands of the *Punjab*

they settled in Makha, a bedroom suburb of the growing town of Mansa where my Great-grandfather, Abdul Gaffur Khan was born. Probably not much later in his life, after moving to Allahabad with his family, he met and married his wife, my Great-grandmother, Azima, and from there, the story of my family and our people



My Great Grandparents; Abdul Gaffur *Dadda* and Azima *Daddi*. My entire lineage on my Father's side can be traced back to these two Girmitiyas.

Personal collection

deviates from those familiar with the history of India and its citizens.

In the late 1800's, Abdul Gaffur *Dadda* and Azima *Daddi* embarked to Calcutta beginning a journey to Fiji which forever changed their view of themselves, their place in the world, their cultural beliefs and ways of life. Beginning with five years of what can only be best described as *narak* (hell), Girmitiyas transformed the landscape of a small South Pacific island and emerged on the other side as a unique culture of Indo-Fijians; a culture of people who retained their traditional beliefs while incorporating new customs from this strange new land they were sent to.

Finding a place in Fiji was not an easy task. Indo-Fijians found themselves marginalized and exploited along racial lines. Despite their constant battle for equality and respect (the uniting vein of struggle throughout our history), Indo-Fijians took it upon

themselves to find new lands to call home. My *Ubba* (Father), Mohammed Abel Abbas, born and raised in Balata, Tavua, Fiji Islands, immigrated to Canada searching for a better future for himself and his family. I cannot help but appreciate the similarities between *Dadda's* search for a better life and *Ubba's*. *Ubba* came to Canada with only \$20 in his pocket, and with my *Ummi* (Mother) Harun Nisha Abbas, built a new life for themselves in British Columbia. My parents ensured my younger brother Rishaad and I retained our traditional Indo-Fijian values, language, culture, and religion despite us being the only Indo-Fijian Muslims in Sparwood. Moving to Surrey, I had the opportunity to experience the full gambit of the Indo-Fijian culture and over the past three decades have witnessed our people grow into what is now one of the four largest Indo-Fijian diasporas in the world, the others being California, New Zealand and Australia (Australia 2017; Census 2016, New Zealand 2013, USA 2000).

Although unique, my family's story does not differ greatly from the other Indo-Fijians living in British Columbia; most of us are descendants of Girmitiyas. This chapter will explore the history of Indenture in Fiji and the struggle of the Girmitiyas while exploring how their resiliency gave life to the Indo-Fijian culture. It will then discuss my experiences as an Indo-Fijian in British Columbia and how we have finally found a land we can call home.

History of indenture in Fiji

The Fiji Islands are a chain of approximately 245 tropical islands located in the South Pacific, 3,000 km east of Australia and 1,000 km north of New Zealand (Sanadhya 1914). Inhabited by Indigenous Fijians of Melanesian descent, this island seems as far as one could get from India.

In 1874, after prolonged settlements by British colonialists, the UK reluctantly accepted Fiji's requests for cession but following "Imperial Policy", expected Fiji to live on its own resources (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a). One of the caveats for cessation was that colonialists could not disturb the Indigenous Fijian way of life, meaning they could not become serfs for planters (Gillion 1958; Moynagh 1981; Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b). Moreover, Indigenous Fijians saw no benefit in leaving their own homes and land to do manual labour

for colonialists for paltry pay (Gillion 1958). Fiji's first governor, Arthur Gordon, a champion of indentured labour, decided on sugar cane as the main export crop for the Fijian economy, inviting the Australian-owned Colonial Sugar Refinery Company (CSR) to establish the industry (Gillion 1958; Narsey 1979; Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b). Vancouver's own B.T. Rogers (of Roger's Sugar fame), controlled the Vancouver-Fiji Sugar Company and until 1973 (when they left Fiji for good), the refineries ran the colony's economy (Gillion 1958; Ali 2004b).

Previously governing Mauritius, Gordon had first-hand experience with the Indian indentured system (the direct response to the abolition of slavery) and to meet the needs for cheap labour, adopted the same framework in Fiji which was employed in Mauritius, Trinidad, British Guiana, the West Indies, Natal and Malaya (along with other French, Dutch and Danish colonies) (Sandhya 1914; Gillion 1958; Ali 2004b). In self-defense, Gordon argued that the population density of India, its rampant poverty, and it being part of the British Empire made Indians ripe for the pickings (Ali 2004b). The colonialists considered indenture as a road to the social and economic advancement of India's poor and low castes but they did not anticipate the social chaos and personal disorganization it would produce (Gillion 1958).

As a result, the British Empire began shipping indentured labourers to Fiji in 1879 (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a).

Coming from India

A rapidly growing Indian population forced people to move to Fiji for work, or due to family quarrels, the desire for adventure, or the death of parents, while others left because of debt, or the burden of their caste (Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b; Jinna 2004). The tale told was that Fiji offered impoverished Indians the opportunity to make a new and better future for themselves (Gillion 1958; Ali 2004b). Most were young cultivators or herders and younger sons, but all were searching for a security that India could not offer. These people showed remarkable courage and self-respect by leaving their known world in search for a better life across the *Kaala Paani* (Black Waters) (Gillion 1958).

Indentured emigration created a '*coolie*' class of labourers separated by race whose role in society

was purely economic and nothing more (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a). In the social hierarchy of Fijian society Europeans were at the top, Indigenous Fijians somewhere in the middle, and *coolies* at the bottom (Sanadhya 1914; Ali 2004b). Servitude was enforced under an "agreement" specifying the pay, accommodation, basic provisions, typical working conditions and work (related to the cultivation and manufacture of agricultural products), a workday of 9 hours/week and 5 hours on Saturdays with Sundays and public holidays off, and the remuneration of 1 shilling a day for men and 7 pence for women...far more than one could earn at home (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a&b). Recruits were given the option to return at their own expense after 5 years or for free after 10 years of servitude (Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b). But this 'agreement' — or *girmity* as this albatross was referred to by *Girmitiyas* (Indentured Labourers of Fiji), had significant gaps between what was written on paper and practiced on the ground. In short, it was slavery (Lal 2004b).

Girmitiyas first introduction to treachery was through the wily *arkati's* (recruiters) who took advantage of villagers' gullibility and ignorance by painting glorious pictures of indentured life filled with tales of easy work, quick money and a promise for a better future (Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b). Many *Girmitiyas* were taken from pilgrimage centers like Banaras, Allahabad and Mathura and *arkati's* duped the underage and vulnerable, offering assistance before kidnapping some who were lost or separated from family (Gillion 1958).

Demographics of the Girmitiyas

A total of 60,965 *Girmitiyas* departed for Fiji between 1879 and 1920 (IBID). Approximately 70% were adults between 20–30 years old and 18% were children between 10–20 years old (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b). Only 5% of the population consisted of 'elders' aged 30–40 years old (IBID). There was also a large disparity of 3 men to 1 woman departing for Fiji (Ali 2004b). Recruiting women was difficult since their physique was not to the standard required for indenture, yet their work was just as demanding and they worked just as hard (Gillion 1958). Most women came as members of a family but some were widows with children, women whose husbands had left, young brides with insufficient dowry, or domestic hands who

were no longer needed (Lal 2004a). Rather than be left prone to mistreatment in their vulnerable lives, these courageous women chose the unknown in Fiji for security (Sanadhya 1914).

Approximately 75% of Girmitiyas sailed from the North Indian depot in Calcutta emigrating from the poorer districts of Bihar and the United Provinces while the rest, after 1903, sailed from the southern depot in Madras hailing from the poorer districts of Malaya and Ceylon (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b). Amongst the ~50,000 Hindus were a diverse caste of Agriculturalists, Artisans, *Jatts*, *Thakurs*, *Rajputs* and *Pathans*, while *Brahmins*, although not actively recruited, were falsely registered as *Thakurs*, often with the addition of 'Singh' to their names (IBID). From the south, the 'Naidus' were traders or cultivators (*Balijas*), and the 'Reddis' and 'Nayars' were predominately cultivators (*Kapu*) (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a). Fewer Muslims departed for Fiji. Approximately 6,200 Muslims, travelled from Calcutta in the north and ~1,000 from Madras (Ali 2004b). Northern Muslims were either *Pathans* or 'Khans' (*Sheikhs*) with less identifying as *Moghul* or *Syed* while southern Muslims were *Mopilla* (Ali 2004a&b). People also travelled from Jullunder, Hoshiarpur, Ludhiana, Amritsar, Ferozepore, Lahore, Ambala and Rohtak with a number of Bengalis, Nepalis, and Afghanis as well (Gillion 1958).

In the depots, everyone was forced to sleep in the same room, eat together and congregate — all of which were Indian social taboos (Sanadhya 1914; Ali 2004b). Many refused to eat for fear of being stripped of their caste but hunger made them relent and thus caste and status were replaced by the *coolie* class (Ali 2004b). The caste system did not die a natural death. The indenture system systematically violated caste orders forcing Girmitiyas into a new reality through no decision of their own (Sanadhya 1914). Girmitiyas could no longer go home for fear of being shunned and rejected (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958; Ali 2004b; Prasad 2018).

At the depots, Girmitiyas were shepherded past registering officers and magistrates (Gillion 1958). It must have been quite intimidating standing in court and not only meeting a European for the first time but hearing the English language as well. *Arkatis* had already coached Girmitiyas to please the *sahibs* by responding with "yes sahib" when asked, and thus, 165 people every

20 minutes were ushered past the magistrate like sheep (Sanadhya 1914). Signing thumbprints to their *girmits*, these brave souls embarked on an unknown journey without knowledge of the distance to Fiji or the hardships that lay ahead (Sanadhya 1914; Lal 2004a).

Sailing to Fiji

In the 41 year period of gimit, eighty-seven ships transported 60,553 Girmitiyas (including births and deaths at sea) to Fijian shores (Gillion 1958; Ali 2004b). The first ship from Calcutta landed in 1879 (the *Leonidas*), the first from Madras in 1902 (the *Ellbe*), and the last in 1916 (the *Sutlej V*) (Gillion 1958; Ali 2004a&b). These ships are bookends for a period which forever changed a group of people, a landscape and a culture.

Ships sailed for 3 months (30 days after the use of steamers in 1904) transporting ~700 people per sailing (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a). With them, *Girmitiyas* brought the *aam* (mango) to Fiji (Gillion 1958). Migrants were forced to live together and were given tasks as cooks, cleaners or guards, were allotted a 1.5-ft.-by-6-ft. area for personal space and were given dog biscuits to eat that were so hard they had to be soaked in water and broken by fists (Sandhya 1914; Lal 2004a; Prasad 2018).

Arriving in Fiji, Girmitiyas were met with fear and uncertainty, and vice versa, upon meeting Indigenous Fijians (Sandhya 1914; Ali 2004b). Indigenous Fijians feared losing their ancestral lands while the government feared solidarity amongst the ethnic people so as per British policy "of divide-and-rule", the colonial government stoked Indigenous Fijian fears with the idea of a *Little India* in Fiji while Girmitiyas were threatened with imprisonment upon entering Fijian villages (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a; Naidu 2004; Ali 2004b; Prasad 2018). As a result the two communities grew isolated in silos hindering ethnic interaction, causing ignorance and prejudice (Lal 2004a).

Work and life in Fiji

Upon landing in Fiji, Girmitiyas were quarantined before being allocated like slaves to plantations, with no consideration for family or kinship ties (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a). Most people worked as field workers, but some were domestic servants, stablemen, hospital staff, watchmen, water carriers, gardeners,

sirdars (supervisors), or policemen (IBID). Early settlements were in Rewa and Navua in the southeast (Lau, Lomaiviti, Taevuni & Cakaudrove) and in Ba and Rakiraki in the northwest (Rarawai, Ra & Tavua) but as cane settlement spread to Labasa and Lautoka (Nadi, Nadroga, and Colo West), so did the Girmitiya population (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a).

Hookworm, dysentery, and anemic fever were common but *girit* wreaked the most havoc on Girmitiyas who faced brutality, violence, debauchery, poverty, degradation, moral disintegration and cultural and social chaos in Fiji (Lal 2004a). In India every person had their place but in Fiji, Girmitiyas were only *coolies*, disposable cogs in a profit-driven system (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a).

The Girmitiyas barracks (*'coolie lines'*) were situated in 2 rows of 8 rooms, in the shadow of the overseer's bungalow, housing either 3 single males, or a family of 4 (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b). Rooms had dirt floors, no windows, and walls leaving an opening at the top between quarters for ventilation (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b). This 10-ft.-x-7-ft. cell was a Girmitiya's kitchen, living room, bedroom and storehouse (Sanadhya 1914; Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b). Living conditions were even more cramped and sooty when women cooked, and during the rainy season the soggy earthen floor attracted flies and mosquitoes (Ali 2004b). Life was miserable and the *coolie lines* were crowded, dirty and ugly (Gillion 1958; Ali 2004b).

One of the saddest and most depressing sights, if a man has any soul at all, is a coolie "line" in Fiji. Vice, wickedness, and abjectness abound. Personal filth is ever in evidence, and life seems to have turned rancid. Coarse, evil looking women throw their jibes at criminal-faced men, or else quarrel with one another in high, strident voices, accompanied by angry gestures. Little children, naked save for a sacred piece of string, sores, and flies, play cheerlessly in the squalid places. The beholder turns from the scene debating whether disgust or pity is uppermost in his mind. — Brij V. Lal (2004a)

By 3–4 AM *sirdars* begin loudly waking Girmitiyas for the day (Gillion 1958). The maligned *sirdars* were promoted to supervisory roles either through their own wiles or through favour from overseers who needed them for communication, to enforce instruction, assert

their will, and demand obedience (Sanadhya 1914; Ali 2004b). After breakfast, Girmitiyas prepared lunch before gathering their tools to march up to 2 miles to work (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a). Girmitiyas were lucky if they earned their full pay and it was common to not be paid at all for trivial offences (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a). Girmitiyas were assigned full-day tasks such as digging or clearing drains, planting, weeding, thrashing, cutting or loading cane, feeding horses, milking cows, or keeping the roads, bridges and tramlines serviceable (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b). Those unable to complete their work had their wages garnished or were beaten and flogged (IBID). If the strong finished early, they helped their weaker brethren since finishing early simply meant more work the next day (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958; Ali 2004b).

Pregnant women received only 3 days off before and after birth, but most went to work right away (IBID). Women brought their newborns into the field and at some plantations, untrained nurses posing as nannies tended to the young (Sanadhya 1914). Infant mortality rates were high due to syphilis, improper feeding and an insufficient supply of milk, poor sanitation, and the inability of mothers to properly care for their children while working (Gillion 1958). Children ran wild without structure or schooling and were put to work by the age of 15 (sometimes earlier) (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958). *Sirdars* and overseers often meddled with female Girmitiyas claiming *'le droit de seigneur'* — the legal right to have sexual relations with subordinates (Sanadhya 1914; Ali 2004b).

The justice system did not extend to *coolies*. Girmitiyas who went to complain to police were subject to further violence, excessive overtasking, sanitary work, prosecutions, or refusal of privileges upon their return (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958; Lal 2004b; Prasad 2018). On the other hand, Girmitiyas could be fined, or imprisoned for paltry offences such as using insulting language, disobedience, desertion, absence from work, or for not completing their daily tasks (Gillion 1958). Furthermore, barristers threatened to withhold services for more money, often no-showed, showed up late enough to lose, or simply sided with the defendants (Sanadhya 1914). If by chance an overseer or *sirdar* was convicted, they were simply relocated (Gillion 1958; Kelly 2004).

At times, having no official channels for voicing their complaints, Girmitiyas resorted to handing out their own version of '*Kaala*' justice, murdering overseers or *sirdars* with little care about the death sentence they just handed to themselves (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958; Chandra & Chandra 2004; Lal 2004a). The brutality of *girmity* changed Girmitiyas and although most overcame it, some did succumb (Lal 2004a). On average, more suicides occurred in Fiji than any other British Colony at the time (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b). The anguish and emotional scarring of these people can never be underestimated.

In the evenings, Girmitiyas stretched their paltry food rations and often starved or depended on the '*khula*' (free Girmitiyas who had completed their servitude) for food (Sanadhya 1914). Many suffered from a myriad of illnesses due to the lack of nutrients and poor food, and improper sanitation leading to absence from work, which led to reduced pay, and the cycle of oppression continued (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958, Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b).

Women devised means to deal with the disproportion of the sexes and some out of pity and some out of greed, agreed to provide to small numbers of men (Lal 2004a). Or, several men kept a single woman for 'domestic help' (IBID). Eventually women would marry and bear children but the casual polyandry became a major source of tension in the lines and the cause of many suicides and murders (Sanadhya 1914; Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b). Women's moral values were constantly under assault in the cramped barracks where the short walls between single men and couples gave little privacy and marriage unions were constantly bombarded leaving women perpetually insecure (Lal 2004a; Ali 2004a&b).

(Women) arrive to this country timid, fearful. The life of the plantation alters their demeanor and even their faces. Some looked crushed and broken-hearted, others sullen, others hard and evil. I shall never forget the first time (seeing) indentured women returning from their days work. The look on those women's faces haunts me. — Ms. H. Dudley, Missionary (Sanadhya 1914)

The loss of Indian elder's collective knowledge and wisdom meant Girmitiya communities no longer had *panchayats* (local tribunals) in Fiji to lay down

rules, impose penalties, decide disputes or maintain systems of accountability (Gillion 1958). Thus, since behavioral rules and caste distinctions could no longer be enforced, old habits and worldviews were fractured (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a). When men failed to reassert old patriarchal structures, they blamed women for their misfortunes but in this freer society, Girmitiya women had more control over their own income thus more power and independence (Lal 2004a). As religion lost its central position, it enabled women to have more individual initiative (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a).

The plantation system was designed to undermine stable families. Religious marriages (the only ones Girmitiyas knew) were not recognized in colonial law and widows had no spousal rights (Sanadhya 1914; Lal 2004a). Despite this, marriages created lasting bonds across religious and caste lines and women raised their children in their husband's faith while simultaneously retaining their own (Chandra 1971; Lal 2004a; Ali 2004a). These broad-minded and devoted women were our first teachers and role models, perpetuating Hindu and Muslim faiths and cultures while preserving them in Fiji to this day (Lal 2004a).

Girmitiyas understood that *girmity* was not a life sentence and enterprising individuals performed whatever roles were required, although *Brahmins* and *maulvis* were mainly religious figures (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a). For some, migration liberated them from a cycle of poverty, while others enjoyed the camaraderie and lack of social restrictions and responsibility (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a). The mingling of men and women of different ages, social, economic, and religious backgrounds and languages sparked a new Indo-Fijian identity rooted in a shared backdrop of *girmity*, resiliency, and perseverance against the highest of odds (Lal 2004a&2012).

Social activities were reserved for weekends when Girmitiyas visited *khula* bazaars, cultivated leased lands or visited friends in neighboring plantations and settlements (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b). They played *bujhauni* (a game of riddles), *kabaddi*, football (soccer) and *kushti* (wrestling) to maintain morale (Lal 2004a). A lack of *tabla* players gave rise to a unique *Qawwali* sound highlighted by the *dholak*, and Girmitiyas played other traditional instruments such as the *khajadi* (hand drums), *dandtaal* (a percussion instrument shaped

like a tall staff with a hooked end), and the *tambura* (tambourine) (Mayer 1973; Lal 2004a; *Ustad C. Khan*, personal communication, November 23, 2021). Ceremonies such as the *chattai* celebrating the 6th day of a baby's life and the *moodan* where a newborn's head was shaved after a week, were joyous occasions with hosts offering meals to gift-bearing guests attending in their finest clothing and jewelry (Lal 2004a). There was plenty of tobacco, *paan* (betel nut) and *ganja* (marijuana) available during social gatherings but the most popular pastime was drinking *nangona* (kava root), the ceremonial drink of the Indigenous Fijians (Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b).

Religion

Girmit could not break the spirit of Hinduism, Islam or Sikhism in Fiji as Girmitiyas adapted their religious practices to create their own unique chapters in the long history of these faiths (IBID). Religion helped Girmitiyas form tightly-knit groups acting as one entity to support their interests (Jayawardena 1966; Ali 2004a; Kelly 2004; Lal 2004a). Festivals were useful for taking annual census counts for socio-religious visits, invitations, and arranged marriages (IBID). The colonial government limited festivals to only 2 per year—*Holi* and *Moharram* while the small Christian population (~1.17%) mainly from the Syrian Church in Malabar and Roman Catholic Church in South India were eventually absorbed into the congregations of the converted Indigenous Fijians (Kelly 2004).

The colonial government caricaturized festivals as heathen, dangerous and disorderly but they were predominately rituals of resistance, sending messages of hope and redemption while releasing Girmitiyas from their *coolie* roles (Lal 2004a; Kelly 2004). Hindus and Muslims alike participated in aggressive acts of 'play' while identifying with martyrs in epic confrontations of good over evil (Kelly 2004; Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b). It is easy to see the parallels between these commemorations and the Girmitiyas struggle (Lal 2004a). Young, illiterate Girmitiyas, separated from their faiths due to a lack of sacred places, maintained ties to their culture through festivals (Kelly 2004; Lal 2004a). Those who knew a little about their religion preformed their duties the best they could, but the absence of learned

individuals facilitated an emotional, egalitarian and non-intellectual moral order (Lal 20004a; Ali 2004b).

Hinduism

On the morning of *Holi*, participants gathered at temples to offer *ghee* (clarified butter) and sweet-smelling wood before performing songs and speeches (Kelly 2004). Bands of women showered unpopular overseers and *sirdars* (and others) in urine, feces and red fluid representing blood, while popular people were drenched in perfume or sprinkled with talcum powder (IBID). In the evening, Girmitiyas congregated at *melas* (carnivals) and mingled while musicians played and sang into the night (IBID).

Another popular festival was the *Ram Lila 'tamasa'* (play) addressing themes of good versus evil, enduring human sacrifice, and the virtues of righteous conduct in the face of adversity while stressing the obligations of duty, loyalty and honour (Lal 2004a). Girmitiyas fought as innocent victims of circumstance in the army of *Lord Ram* versus the evil demon-king *Ravan* (IBID). Indigenous Fijians enthusiastically played on *Ravan's* side while effigies of *Ravan* (wearing European clothes) were torched at the climax (Lal 2004a; Kelly 2004). Other Hindu ceremonies included fire walking by South Indian Girmitiyas and Diwali which gained its present popularity much later (Kelly 1988; Lal 2004a).

Islam

Moharram (Teejah) was a Shi'a festival, adopted by Sunnis but without Shi'a rituals (Lal 2004a). Commemorating the assassination of Hassan and Hussain (the grandsons of the Prophet), devotees built large, elaborate models (*tazias*) of the martyrs and paraded them while ritually sword fighting through the streets (Lal 2004a; Kelly 2004). On the climax of the 10th day, a funeral procession accompanied by drums and sad, mournful songs paraded *tazias* to the seaside where they were discarded in the water (Lal 2004a; Ali 2004a&b). Male devotees, praying, crying and singing, worked themselves into a trance while women took vows and gave donations in anticipation of blessings (Lal 2004a; Kelly 2004). Similar to *HoIi*, *Moharram* commemorated tragedy and attempted to explain a world in which good was temporarily thwarted by evil and the virtuous eventually prevailed (Lal 2004a).

Moharram helped retain the Islamic culture amongst the minority Muslims but lost its prominence by the late 1920s as the festival became more commercialized and the Sunni orthodoxy began to assert its dominance (Kelly 2004; Lal 2004a; Ali 2004a&b). *Moharram* is now celebrated by only a small groups of Indo-Fijians.

Other popular festivals included Ramadan, *bakr'id* (*eid-ul-adha*) and *milad-un-nabi* (*uemon nabi*) or *milad* as it is popularly known (Ali 2004a&b). Ramadan was near impossible to observe during *girmmit* but some Muslims did fast and hold prayers for *eid-ul-fitr*, the feast marking the end of Ramadan (IBID). *Bakr'id* was celebrated quietly amongst those who could afford to buy a sacrificial goat or cattle, and *milad* was initially performed by families in small groups but with added vigour after the arrival of Muslims from Madras (IBID). *Milad* gatherings were important events in the history of Islam in Fiji as they assembled Muslims and helped keep their *iman* (faith) intact (IBID).

Learning about Islam, its prayers and values, celebrating its festivals, and reciting the Quran in Arabic were part of a Muslim's educational experience (Lal 2004a). A Muslim's primary identity was tied to their religious identity and knowledge in one's faith perpetuated both (Ali 2004a). Parents felt a religious duty to educate their children and mothers played an indispensable role as teachers without whom there would be no Islam in Fiji today (IBID). It is a great achievement that the minority Muslim communities survived in Fiji despite the upheaval of *girmmit* (Ali 2004a&b).

Schools / Education

Christian Missionaries made little inroads in Fiji since Girmitiyas could not reconcile their treatment by colonialists with the concept of a "fair and just Christian" (Sanadhya 1914; Naidu 2004; Kelly 2004; Weir 2004). But they did appreciate the value of an education and since Girmitiyas were denied access to government-funded "white-only" schools, they relied on Missionary Schools for education (IBID). Although overseers preferred uneducated Indo-Fijians so as not to "spoil them as labourers", Girmitiyas religiously devoted their time and energy into ensuring their children received the education they never attained (Gillion 1958; Ali 2004a). Early schools were temporary community establishments based on local

leadership and initiative but in 1897, Ms. Hannah Dudley, an Australian missionary, first opened a school and orphanage in Suva and the next year the Marist Brothers opened a Christian multiracial school in the suburb of Toorak (Gillion 1958, Naidu 2004).

It was not until the last years of indenture, due to pressure from Indian and British governments, that the colonial government began to actively educate Girmitiya's children (Gillion 1958). But the government did not accommodate the demographics and opened schools in main centers while Girmitiyas lived scattered along the countryside, and taught English while Girmitiyas desired vernacular schools (Gillion 1958; Ali 2004a&b). To this day, in Fiji and abroad, Urdu is still spoken in formal Islamic meetings, social gatherings and speeches (IBID). Girmitiyas resorted to raising their own funds to build schools and religious buildings and by 1917 established and maintained 12 schools of their own and by the 1930's there was a school in every Indo-Fijian community (Sanadhya 1914).

Hindu and Muslim Girmitiyas lived in harmony, intermarried, helped during ceremonies and festivals and raised money for religious building and schools alike (Ali 2004b). Their traditional beliefs and values helped them survive *girmmit* and as Girmitiyas finished their 5 years of servitude and began forming free settlements, the Indo-Fijian community began to flourish (Lal 2004a; Ali 2004a).

Fight for equality

As population centers grew, *panchayats* re-formed and began officiating formal meetings but the colonial government, nervous of Indo-Fijian crowds (never losing a fear of rebellion) passed ordinances criminalizing the congregation of more than five Indo-Fijians (Gillion 1958; Kelly 2004). In all instances of protest, the leaders were singled out and punished in order to humiliate and intimidate the "*coolies*" yet Indo-Fijians still protested and leaders still emerged to shape the new Indo-Fijian society (IBID).

Pundit Totaram Sanadhya (1876–1947) was an important leader and critic of the indenture system and the first to crystalize the concept of an 'Indo-Fijian' (Gillion 1958; Prasad 2018). Originally from Ferozabad, Sanadhya registered as a *Thakur* in India and served his *girmmit* in Nausori before marrying an Indo-Fijian



Pundit Totaram Sanadhya — The first leader to galvanize the concept of an 'Indo-Fijian'.

Personal collection



(Doctor) Manilal Mangalal — The first South Asian barrister in Fiji.

Personal collection

woman and leasing a small plot of land in Wainibokasi (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958; Prasad 2018). Sanadhya was a *Brahmin*, and a self-taught *Sanātani* pundit who preached to Indo-Fijians throughout the island (Gillion 1958; Prasad 2018). When barred from entering plantation grounds, he loudly sang *bhajans* at the gates, where many people came to listen as he spoke to them about their ordeals, discussed their hardships and offered guidance and support (Sanadhya 2014; Prasad 2018). Pundit Sanadhya also wrote letters to Mohandas Gandhi on behalf of the Indo-Fijians to raise awareness of malpractice and to ask for an Indian barrister (Prasad 2018).

(Doctor) Manilal Mangalal (1881–1956) came from Mauritius on August 27, 1912, and upon his arrival in Suva, hundreds of Indo-Fijians gathered to greet him (Sanadhya 1914; Prasad 2018; Lal 2004a). The curious colonialists and reporters from *The Fiji Times*, unaware of the magnitude of the events unfolding, excitedly ran

about trying to ascertain what was transpiring (Gillion 1958). Manilal became the first South-Asian barrister to practice law in Fiji and much to the chagrin of the justice system, practiced with a vigor towards ending *girmit* (Gillion 1958; Kelly 2004). Manilal, educated in England and fluent in English was a formidable foe:

He was energetic, buoyant, frank, fearless, socially unorthodox, simple mannered, almost a free thinker. He had a cheerful disposition and an impressive demeanor and donned a European suit and a defiant-looking crimson coloured turban. He was quick to avenge an insult to his people and ready to unsheath his sword. Not the sword of steel but that of Duty in defense of their honour. — Kenneth Gillion (1958)

Much to the collective sadness of Indo-Fijians, Pundit Sanadhya immigrated to India on March 27, 1914 to care for his elderly mother but upon departing, was convinced by Manilal to take with him, the cause of

ending *girmit* (Sanadhya 2014; Prasad 2018). Sanadhya made many speeches and held rallies describing the Indo-Fijian ordeal and eventually he moved into Mohandas Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram in Gujarat (Sanadhya 1914; Prasad 2018). He was also the first Indo-Fijian to publish a book; "*Fiji Desh Mein Mere Ikkish Warsh*" ("My 21 years in Fiji"), released in 1914, which was widely circulated (but banned in Fiji) and printed in many different languages (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958; Ali 2004b; Prasad 2018). The book appealed to the government and intellectual community of India by educating the people about *arkatis* and the horrors of *girmit* (IBID). Pundit Sanadhya increased the pressure on an already stressed indenture system which by the 1910s was sending more indentured labourers to Fiji than any other colony and Mangalal and Ms. Dudley exasperated the situation by sending articles from Fiji (Gillion 1958). Indian Nationalists finally began to see the colonial hypocrisy where Indians were being happily accepted as indentured labourers but vehemently denied rights as British Subjects (such as in the case of the *Komagata Maru* in 1914) (IBID).

Despite attempts by the Governor of Fiji to bury scathing reports about the treatment of Girmitiyas, Pundit Sanadhya, Charles Freer Andrews (an Anglican priest and missionary), and Indian Nationalists: G.K. Gokhale, Mohandas Gandhi and Pundit M.M. Malaviya were successful in putting a stop to the indenture system (Gillion 1958; Kelly 2004; Ali 2004b). On March 20, 1916, a motion was accepted in the Imperial Legislative Council (of India) urging the abolition of the indentured system, by March 12, 1917 all recruiting ceased, and on January 1, 1920 all indentured contracts were cancelled (Gillion 1958; Ali 2004b).

I would argue that Indo-Fijians should celebrate January 1st, our Emancipation Day, rather than May 14, the day the first *Girmitiyas* landed in Fiji and were put in shackles.

Life after Indenture

Approximately 40% of the original Girmitiyas returned to India, where many were abruptly tossed aside as outcasts and some, opted to return to Fiji (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958; Prasad 2018). A wholesale repatriation would have been disastrous for Fiji's economy so to

combat that, the colonial government halted sailings to India and enacted ordinances restricting movement out of Fiji (Gillion 1958; Prasad 2018).

However, many Indo-Fijians remained due to kinship ties or economic and social aspirations and it is from them, whom we are descended (Ali 2004a). Some settled in new urban areas but most settled in *bures* (traditional Indigenous Fijian grass huts) or shanty's along the countryside wherever they could find suitable land for agriculture (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a). There was little incentive to put up better houses on leased land for fear of being kicked off, especially *after* the houses were built (IBID). Many owned a cow for milk and farmed sugar cane, rice, maize, pineapples, tobacco or vegetables to sell in neighborhood markets which provided a communal meeting place where bonds were forged between neighbors (Gillion 1958; Trnka 2004; Lal 2004a).

Indo-Fijians began forming large family units to meet agricultural needs giving way to greater individualism, independent incomes, and occupational and educational mobility; all welcomed signs of change (Mayer 1954; Lal 2004a; Ali 2004b). Since Indo Fijians already equated hard work with success during *girmit*, in a capitalist society, they began creating economic niches by doing whatever was required to obtain income (Gillion 1958; Ali 2004b). Girmitiyas felt that regaining their *izzat* (self-respect) after *girmit* was a principle of their equality and they sought it through obtaining material possessions (Ali 2004b).

Despite their success, Indo-Fijians still faced racism. Colonial merchants bought European goods first and Indo-Fijian goods only at prices far less than market value (Sanadhya 1914; Gillion 1958). Moreover, Indo-Fijians could not import or export their own merchandise and relied on colonial brokers who charged hefty markups (IBID). But by the 20th Century, the Indo-Fijian work ethic began outcompeting European planters and by 1914 Europeans were being driven out, and were completely out of business by 1925 (Gillion 1958; Knapman 1987).

Indo-Fijians took a firm hold on commerce by 1904 after Gujarati artisans and traders began immigrating to Fiji as barbers, bootmakers and tailors from Navsari and Surat, as goldsmiths and silversmiths from Porbander, Jamnagar and Jetalsar and as grocers, drapers, and

laundrymen; the ‘*Patels*’ from Baroda State, Nadiad (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a; Prasad 2018). The Gujarati community remains mainly urban-based and largely self-contained, maintaining close ties to relatives and their caste customs abroad (Lal 2004a).

Indo-Fijians found political voices and moral and spiritual guidance through leaders such as Pundit Sanadhya and Maulvi Murtaza Khan and others who derived their authority from the Indo-Fijian community rather than colonialists (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a). Religious and educational organizations established schools, *masjids*, temples and *dharmashalas* (rest houses), while social organizations established consistent weekly competitions and a sense of community amongst teams and fans, and political and economic associations represented Indo-Fijians as political groups (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a).

From the outset, the Indo-Fijian community worked towards creating viable and anti-colonial political voices and institutions and our struggle for rights has consumed Fijian political history (Kelly 2004). Indo-Fijian communities simply wanted the ability to earn a livelihood and expected from society, the respect, equality and justice afforded to other British Subjects (Prasad 2018). The colonial government’s fear for their loss of control, on the other hand, ensured that Indo-Fijians were always treated as *coolies* by causing continuous tumult in their lives (IBID).

Indigenous Relations

Fiji’s economy has long been described as a 3 legged stool consisting of European capital, Indigenous land and Indo-Fijian labour (Lal 2004a; Trnka 2004). But this analogy fails to address the power imbalance providing Indo-Fijians with the shortest leg. Although Indo-Fijians were encouraged to remain in Fiji as farmers, they were unable to purchase land which remained the property of the Indigenous Fijians (Gillion 1958). Indo-Fijians leased directly from Indigenous Fijians but in 1911 the colonial government restructured the leasing system requiring applications to be made directly with them, further fracturing race relations (IBID). Playing on the Indigenous Fijian fears of dispossession, the colonial government warned that if the Indigenous Fijians were not careful, the Indo-Fijians would “take over their lands, change their way of life (and interfere) with

their social and cultural practices” (Lal 2004a; Prasad 2018). Although at the beginning of *giriti*, Indigenous Fijians were sympathetic to the hardships of Giritiyas and the two groups interacted, government mandated separation and propaganda ensured that Indigenous Fijians remained critical of Indo-Fijian intentions (Gillion 1958).

While Indo-Fijians were building communities and establishing a new ‘middle class’, Indigenous Fijians were confined to their deteriorating communal villages and were kept completely out of the economic circle (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a). As a result, the two communities began regarding each other with unconcealed contempt and disgust (Gillion 1958). Moreover, during lease renewals, government organizations further victimized Indo-Fijians by demanding “New Lease Consideration” payments above the existing lease payments (Lal 2004c; Gillion 1958). The tragic irony of this demand is that the very people who made the improvements to the land were now being required to pay for those improvements a second time, or risk losing their homesteads (Lal 2004c). Many Indo-Fijians were unable to afford such costs and lost their land while many others lived in squalid conditions, refraining from upgrading their homesteads out of fear of unaffordable payments (IBID). Approximately 80% of the land leases have not been renewed displacing Indo-Fijian families who had lived on the same land for generations to squatter’s villages located on the outskirts of towns (IBID). Without land ownership, Indo-Fijians will never enjoy long-term security in Fiji and will always be forced to start over, repeating the cycle of their Giritiya forefathers (Lal 2004a; Lal 2004c; Naidu 2004).

When Indo-Fijians did manage to establish strong political voices, they were silenced. In 1977 the Honourable Siddiq Moidin Koya was elected as the first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister but he was usurped by the incumbent with the assistance of the Governor General (Prasad 2018). Ten years later on May 14, 1987, after a coalition party led by Dr. Timoci Bavadra offered appropriate representation for the first time, an obscure army colonel orchestrated a *coup d’état*, ousting the newly elected government (Lal 2004a; Ali 2004a; Kumar 2004; Chandra & Chandra 2004; Prasad 2018). A subsequent attack four months later outwardly

encouraged sympathizers to terrorize Indo-Fijians as many settled old scores while Indo-Fijian leaders were round up and jailed (Kumar 2004). People were victimized through horrific crimes; rapes, beatings, lootings and seizures of property (IBID). Indo-Fijians were unabashedly shunned as outwardly racial government programs approved grants and soft loans to exclusively Indigenous Fijian endeavors and rampant corruption constructed glass ceilings for Indo-Fijians which drove many out of the country (Naidu 2004; Jinna 2004; Lal 2004a).

Eventually democracy was restored, and history was made on May 19, 1999 when after a landslide victory, Mahendra Chaudhry was appointed as the first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister (Kumar 2004; Prasad 2018). But before his first term even ended, once again a government sympathetic to Indo-Fijian interests was overthrown by force (Trnka 2004; Kumar 2004; Naidu 2004; Ali 2004a). But during the 1999 *coup d'état*, the perpetrators unashamedly called for an outright ban of Indo-Fijian political rights and demanded we leave Fiji all together (IBID). Ironically, a third *coup* in 2006, led by Commander Josaia Voreqe “Frank” Bainimarama offered Indo-Fijians equal citizenry for the first time (Lal 2004a; Prasad 2018).

Since the *coups*, over 100,000 Indo-Fijians (~10% of the population) have emigrated, taking with them, Fiji's best, brightest and most talented citizens (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a; Lal 2004c; Naidu 2004). Indo-Fijians never felt a sense of belonging in Fiji; always being treated as a *vulagi* (visitor) rather than a citizen despite earning that right through *girit* (Naidu 2004; Trnka 2004). The pride of an Indo-Fijian was replaced by despair and dejection as a sense of being at home in Fiji was overtaken by a desperate desire to leave (Lal 2004a). It's tragic to think that after toiling for over 140 years, Indo-Fijians are still being questioned about our loyalty to Fiji when all we ask for is the recognition of the rights and contributions of our *Giritiya* ancestors (Trnka 2004). The history of *girit* has not been taught in schools in Fiji and without the knowledge of our history, successive generations of Indo-Fijians have been unable to assert our rightful place in Fiji and the passage of time has virtually absolved the colonial government from accounting for their indenture crimes (Prasad 2018).

Conclusion

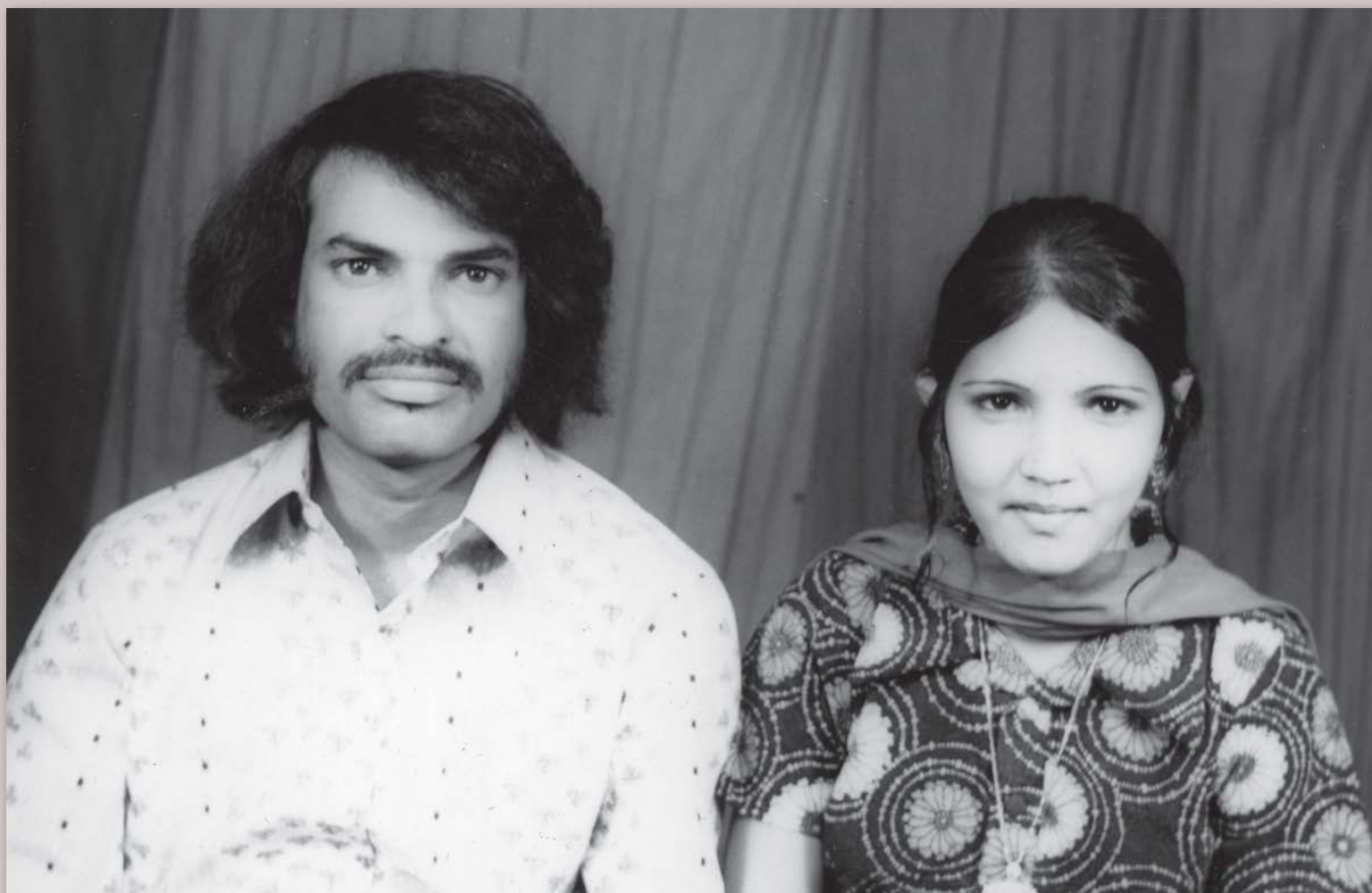
Girit forged an Indo-Fijian culture vastly different in physical appearance, social behavior, thinking and world view from those in India (Lal 2004a). *Giritiyas* lived in a complex world full of turmoil, tension, uncertainty, greed and curiosity, where new experiences posed problems requiring creative responses, where a new vocabulary had to be learned, an unfamiliar geography explored, new terrain mastered, and new social relationships established (Lal 2004b). *Giritiyas* responded by modifying their behaviors and through incorporating old traditions with new pragmatic practices, they gained greater independence (especially for women) and greater religious harmony (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a). Indo-Fijians have wider ranging friendships across caste and religious lines, enjoy a more relaxed island lifestyle, and are egalitarian and unconstrained by traditional ritual protocols and procedure (Lal 2004a). Indo-Fijians inherited the cultural attributes of resilience, perseverance and hard work from our *Giritiya* ancestors who through their blood, sweat and tears, transformed a South Pacific backwater into the most prosperous and progressive nation in the region (Kumar 2004; Prasad 2018).

Indo-Fijians were judged by their merit and the enterprising and industrious greatly improved their lot in life through ambition and hard work (Gillion 1958). When it was realized that salvation lay through western education, Indo-Fijians changed their attitude to capitalize on a new path to achievement, filling the market with lawyers, doctors, accountants, teachers, nurses, clerks, and factory workers (Ali 2004b; Prasad 2018). But unfortunately, they were forced to flee after the *coups*. *Girit* is not an irrelevant past — ordinary men and women accomplished extraordinary things and as we travel to distant lands once again to start anew, we carry with us, the attributes of our *Giritiya* ancestors (Gillion 1958; Lal 2004a; Kumar 2004).

British Columbia

Sparwood

Since the 1960's, well before the first *coup*, Fiji had seen a steady exodus of Indo-Fijians searching for a better future and a permanent home abroad (Kumar 2004). In 1969, Raj Esudasan, Stan “Mani” Pillay, Steven “Badraiya” Narsaiya and Ram Chandar all from Tavua,



My parents. Mohammed Abel and Harun Nisha Abbas.

Personal collection

boarded a Greyhound bus heading to a small community nestled within the Elk Valley, in the southeastern tip of British Columbia. Unable to secure jobs in Vancouver, they heard of opportunities being offered by Edgar F. Kaiser at a new coal mine in Sparwood.

By 1973 word of the available jobs reached Tavua and my *Barka Ubba* (Father's older brother), Mohammed Yakub, headed for Canada followed by Ubba and his friend Satya Sami. Back then, a visa was not required so Ubba simply bought a plane ticket and boarded a flight to Canada. I recall him telling me stories of how he used to hold his heaving chest and cry, missing his parents, 11 siblings and numerous nieces and nephews whom he had left behind.

Ubba secured a job as a shovel operator with Kaiser Resources and soon afterwards purchased his first home. At 25 years old, my father accomplished something his ancestors were unable to do before him and many are still unable to do now. Three years later, in 1976, Ubba travelled back to Fiji and married Ummy and brought her to their homestead. Since they were

both from Tavua, I have a sneaking suspicion that Ubba had plans to marry Ummy for quite some time. Ummy came to Canada as a 19 year old, the youngest of 10 siblings and similar to Ubba was in for a culture shock, mingling with people of European descent for the first time.

I was born in 1977 in a rickety old hospital in Michelle-Natal, the old town adjacent to Sparwood. My mom recalls how the building swayed on particularly windy days. In 1981 my brother Rishaad was born in the new Sparwood hospital. For the next 12 years this little mining town was our home. I cannot think of a better place to grow up. Small town Canadiana exposed me to country music, ice hockey and "farmers" but also enabled me to experience Western, European, Punjabi, Christian and Hindu cultures from a very young age. Living in a small town of 5,000 people (at that time), our exposure should have been limited, but I was fortunate to have friends from many different ethnic backgrounds. We had no other choice but to get along and I still keep in touch with many of my childhood



My Dad at the Crowsnest Pass circa 1979.

Personal collection

friends. I vividly remember a 12 year-old me seeing Steven Mosher's parents kiss for the first time while I was at his house for dinner. Being from an Indian culture, these types of displays of affection were very taboo.

Although my closest friends were mainly Punjabi Sikhs, the Brars; Dampy and Kiki, the Heers; Amar and Kam, and their sister Sarb and the Sekhons; Herman, Robbie and Vick, I would be remised if I did not mention my dear friends Ron Ivanco, Morley Cruikshank, April Decker and Christopher LeRoy. My friends transcended race, religion, creed and colour. I would like to think my childhood was no different than that of any other Canadian boy, but I was always reminded of my differences. Growing up, I remember being called "*Paki*" a lot. This term confused me more than that offended me since I was not from Pakistan. I am sure Ubba also faced his fair share of racism but he never outwardly talked about it. Ubba would come home from work and comment about people's ignorant remarks regarding turbans or the colour of our skin but he never went into detail. Our old neighbours, though, used to make their feelings very clear and would target our house every Halloween. Year after year they threw eggs at the "*Paki's*" house, and Ubba would clean it up. As I got older I wanted revenge, but my dad was right, violence does not eliminate violence.

As I entered high-school I began to realize that I was even more different than I had originally thought. I recognized that my South Asian friends, although they looked similar to me, were from a different culture. In Grade 8, when a new student came from Punjab, my friend Amar taught our classmates how to say "hi" in *Punjabi*, but "*sas-recall*" was not the same as the "*kaise hai*" that I was used to at home. Furthermore, when Apache Indian released his breakout single titled "*Arranged Marriage*" describing Sikh wedding rituals through a mix of reggae and Punjabi beats and lyrics, I began to understand that I indeed did not share the same culture as my friends. But my parents, like our Girmitiya ancestors before them, ensured that we retained our

language, values and religious beliefs despite us being minorities within a minority. I am wholly grateful for their dedication, resilience and hard work; traits handed down by our Girmitiya forefathers.

Retaining our culture and language was not as difficult an endeavour as one would think. The Elk Valley was home to a relatively large population of Indo-Fijians and surprisingly, many had ties with Tavua. Along with the original four (Esudasan, Pillay, Narsaiya and Chandar) and their families, Govind and Vidya Reddy were the first Indo-Fijians to settle in Elkford, BC in 1970 and Govind Uncle was responsible for helping at least 20 Indo-Fijians immigrate to Canada. Although he was working at the local mine for only \$2.75/hr., he paid for the expenses of many of his family members until they could stand on their own two feet. Elkford was also home to Chandar and Indra Naidu and their children Irene and Ivan, Shiri Ram and Roop Mala, Saga and Susan Reddy and their kids Sam and Sanjay, Poni Raj and Prem Lata, Wati and Moe Ratudradra, "Fiji Joe", and Kamla and Purnima Prasad and their kids Rodrick and Jessica. These are only a few of the Indo-Fijian families from Elkford whom we used to visit on a regular basis. We all spoke the same language, ate the same foods and shared the same history and future working in the coal mines. We were bound

by language, history and social practices, not by religion (Connell & Raj 2004).

But in Sparwood, I had a very special relationship with the Samy/Nand family. After coming to Canada with Ubba, Satya Uncle settled in Fernie, BC but his family came soon afterwards and lived right next door to us. Appal and Nagamma Samy, whom I affectionately called “Aaja” and “Aaji” (grandpa and grandma) emigrated with their children Bindu Nand, Samuel Samy, Christopher Nand, Florence Samy, and Christina Samy. All but Bindu Uncle and Satya Uncle went to Sparwood Secondary School and when I eventually started to go there myself, I felt a sense of belonging and connection with the school and community whenever I saw their graduation photos hanging in the halls. Our Indo-Fijian roots run deep in Sparwood. Christopher Uncle eventually became the President of the local mining union and Ubba, after becoming the Senior Truck Operator at what was now called Westar Mine, was the first person of South Asian descent to operate the Terex Titan which at the time held the title of the “Largest Dump Truck in World”. I am especially proud of my father for this.

By 1987, the population in Sparwood swelled as even more disenfranchised Indo-Fijians fled Fiji as refugees after the first *coup*. I remember many social gatherings in Aaja’s basement where the men spent their evenings drinking and playing *bhajans*, *qawwalis*, hymns and Bollywood songs. Like artists in Fiji, they played the *dholak* and often sang the latest popular songs from back home. As a child I remember sneaking downstairs the day after; the pungent smell of stale beer and the sight of Pilsner cans strewn about is indelibly etched in my mind.

But despite the similarities with my neighbours, we were the only Indo-Fijian Muslims in Sparwood (the other family, the Mohammeds, were from Pakistan). It was Ummi who took it upon herself to ensure we retained our religious beliefs and identity. She taught my brother and me how to read the Quran in Arabic, how to pray 5-times a day and explained to us why we only ate *halal* foods and never pork. Just like the brave



My younger brother Rishaad standing in front of the Terex Titan in Sparwood.
“The Largest Dump Truck in the World!”

Personal collection

women of *girit*, despite being constantly bombarded by outside influences, Ummi ensured that we retained what it meant to be a Muslim. Every time I pray or read the Quran, she no doubt receives blessings for her resiliency and dedication.

By the 1990s, hip-hop culture began taking a foothold in mainstream media, and movies such as “*Boyz in the Hood*” and “*Juice*” popularized being a person of colour. My South Asian friends and I, being the *defacto* people of colour in Sparwood, embraced the hip-hop culture with full vigour. The derogatory term “*Paki*” was now replaced with the derogatory term “*N-word*” and those same neighbours who used to throw eggs at my house now wanted to be our friends. But in 1993, after the closure of the coal mine, my family and I moved to Surrey.

Surrey

Surrey was a culture shock for a 15-year old me. Coming from a high school with only 500 people where I knew everyone (and everyone knew me), I was thrust into Queen Elizabeth Sr. Secondary School where I knew none of the 2,000 students. Moreover the groups here were not the same as the groups in Sparwood. There, we all got along, mainly due to proximity since we saw each other every day. But in Surrey, the South Asian groups were further refined. Punjabi Sikhs not



The first of our family to immigrate to Canada. From left to right: My Mom, my Dad, my *Barka Ubba* Mohammed Yakub and my *Barki Ummi* Shera Yakub. The kids were all born in Canada. From left to right: my baby brother Rishaad and my cousins Farisha and Imran Yakub.

Personal collection

only kept separate from the Indo-Fijians, but the kids who were born in Canada did not associate with the immigrant kids; “dippers” they were called. This was something I was not prepared for. In Sparwood, we all shared the same background, being coal mining families, but in Surrey there were categories of people whom I didn’t even know existed. Although I may have treated everyone the same, they did not do that in kind. For my final 2 years of high school I did not know where I fit in, and often if I came to school too early, I would hide in the washroom out of fear of being branded a loner since I could not relate to anyone and did not have any friends.

Family life on the other hand, was quite the opposite. If my parents felt a culture shock moving to Sparwood, they felt right at home in Surrey. *Barka Ubba* had moved to the Lower Mainland many years earlier and subsequently many Indo-Fijians immigrated to settle in Surrey, especially after the 1987 *coup*. Many members of my large extended family lived in Surrey as well, so we

had a very large Muslim Indo-Fijian contingent. After 15 years of living as a solitary Indo-Fijian Muslim, I finally witnessed my culture in full bloom.

Our family friend Irshaad Ali’s wedding was the first Indo-Fijian Muslim wedding I attended and for the first time I saw how all the community members congregated to cook meals for the week-long festivities, participated in the *mehndi* and *haldi rasums* (events) conducted a *nikkah* and *mou-dikhao* (when the bride is revealed to the groom’s family), and celebrated at the reception. Unlike more typical South Asian receptions, there is no music or drinking at Muslim festivities and often the men and women are separated behind a *pardah* (veil). So people come to pay their respects to the families of the bride and groom and to eat! I also, for the first time, went to the *masjid* and performed *Jummah* (Friday afternoon) prayers and *Tarawih* (night) prayers on the evenings of Ramadan and celebrated *eid-ul-fitr* and *eid-ul-adha*. Never before did I have the opportunity to buy new clothes for Eid, or visit other

Muslim family's homes to share in the Eid feasts, or hand out parcels of ritually sacrificed meat from house to house, nor did I ever have the pleasure of reading the morning Eid prayers.

Life for my parents in Surrey was not easy despite having a large network of relatives and a well-established Indo-Fijian culture to fall back on. Upon moving here my parents worked as janitors and no doubt Rishaad and I were dragged in to help as well, and of course, we did not get paid. Oh how I loathed mopping floors! But eventually my parents bought their own business in Delta, BC and operated *Lee's Coin Laundry* before, in their middle age, they sold the business and started new careers. Ubba began working in the cedar industry and became a cabinet maker while Ummi went back to school to become a Health Care Worker. I believe their example and ability to constantly redefine themselves is why I never settle for the status quo.

After 15 years in Sparwood, secluded from other Muslims, I didn't quite grasp the ideologies behind the ceremonies we practiced and I often found myself more an observer of the activities occurring around me rather than a practitioner of my culture. I followed the rituals (although I didn't understand them) but I identified early on in my tenure in Surrey that the lifestyle my relatives were living was different than the one I was used to. Thankfully my parents helped me retain aspects of my culture so I could "talk the talk" (pun intended) but I never fully felt comfortable in social settings. Perhaps I didn't feel "Indo-Fijian" enough.

I believe observing my culture was the reason I became an archaeologist. Unfortunately in my 20's I assumed there was nothing to study in my culture since there was little information about my ancestors or where we came from. So I focused on studying Northwest Coast Archaeology at Simon Fraser University instead. For the next 20 years I navigated the world of Consulting Archaeology and gained much experience in cultural and heritage studies. Oftentimes I was the only South Asian in my field and I was definitely the only Indo-Fijian. Repeatedly I would relate my field experiences with the observations I was making in my own culture and often found myself asking "why" we did things the way we did. One of the difficult aspects to grasp in Indo-Fijian culture is the intertwining of religion and culture. Much like other

Indian cultures, Indo-Fijians identify through religion since it is easy to recognise a Muslim, for example, by the moustache-less beards or the Urdu words in their vernacular. But it is much more difficult to separate the *mehndi rasam* in a wedding or a *chalisa* (praying for the deceased for 40 days after their death) as cultural practices stemming from our Girmitiya ancestors. Oftentimes in Canada, Orthodox Muslims are quick to discard Indo-Fijian cultural practices, chalking them up as religious abominations stemming from the influence of the Hindu populations in Fiji, when in reality, these cultural adaptations are the reason Muslim Girmitiyas were able to retain Islam and not be swallowed by the majority. The fact that Indo-Fijian Muslims still exist is a testament to the resiliency of people like Abdul Gaffur Dadda and Azima Daddi. Denying their resiliency and dedication would be a travesty.

Looking back on my experiences as a Consulting Archaeologist, I realize that for many of my colleagues and co-workers, I was the first (and often only) person of South Asian descent they had ever spent extended periods of time with. I would have thought that being of a different cultural background amongst archaeologists would lead many people to be inquisitive of my background but more often than not I was again reminded of how different I was. Archaeologists spend a lot of time together while in the field and at times, upon entering a room, I felt like I was not privy to the conversations that had occurred. Nonetheless, I enjoyed my time with my friends Olivia Donaher and Arran Ferguson.

Although I loved archaeology as a discipline, I could not find a passion for what I was studying. I thought preserving archaeological sites was a "noble cause" but I kept searching for a deeper meaning in my work. I originally decided to become an archaeologist thanks to my Grade 7 Social Studies teacher, Ms. Edie Holland, who at Mountain View Elementary School, introduced me to early man (*Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus*), so I decided to chase this love further and travelled to the UK to pursue my Master of Science degree in Paleoanthropology and Paleolithic Archaeology at the University College London (UCL). The idea that people were on this earth long ago who looked like us, but were not quite like us, captured my imagination. I graduated from UCL with Distinction and



My graduation commencement at UCL with my Mom and Dad.

Personal collection

am especially proud to forever link my name with Mohandas Ghandi and Nelson Mandela as fellow alumni.

But upon returning to Canada I soon realized that I was still missing my passion as I bounced from Consulting, to Museum Studies at the University of Victoria and then museum work, before my dad got sick. Ubba died after three months of a short illness in 2020. Due to COVID protocols, I could not visit him until his final few days. In my 40's, I was finally able to sit with my dad at the hospital and properly explain to him what exactly I do as an Archaeologist, since Ubba didn't quite grasp the concept. It was then, while I was explaining to him how I study First Nations' culture and heritage, that I came to an epiphany,

"I should be studying my own culture and heritage...my Dad's culture and heritage."

Ubba lived the Canadian dream. He came to Canada with \$20 in his pocket and through his hard work,

resiliency and a dedication to succeed, died a millionaire. But still, to his dying day, he dearly missed Fiji... the land he was forced to leave. In the time since his passing, I have taken it upon myself to learn the shared history and heritage of our Girmitya ancestors and to tell our story through our own Indo-Fijian words and shared experiences. Many times on this journey I have asked myself,

"Who do you think you are?"

"What gives you the right to do this?"

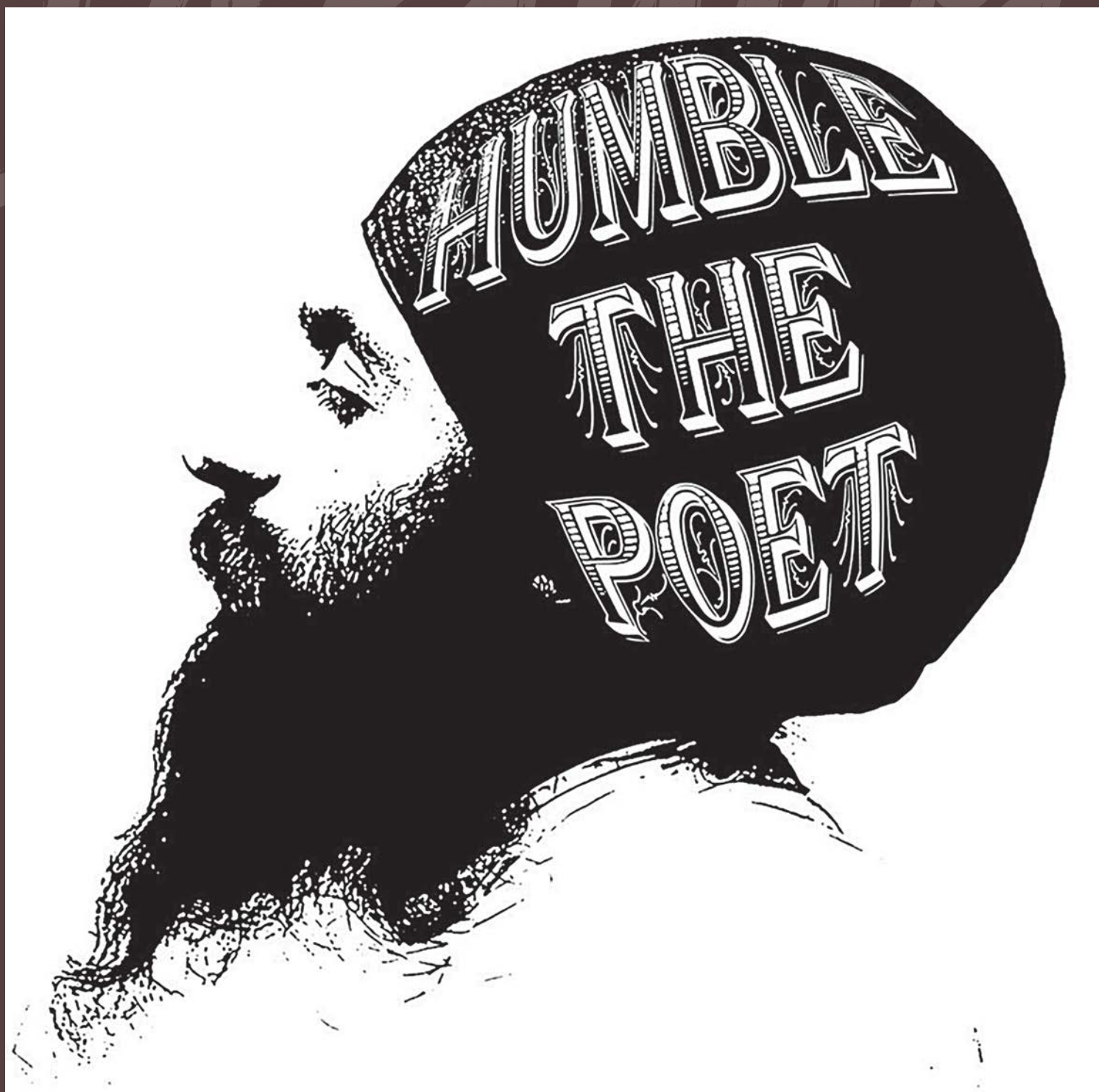
I am not quite Indian, not accepted as a Fijian, not Indo-Fijian enough, and when I walk into a room I know I am not like the rest of the Canadians around me. But my dad was born and raised in Fiji, he lived the Indo-Fijian culture, he taught the Indo-Fijian culture to me, and his story deserves to be preserved and told just as much as anyone else. Moreover, he is my Dad, his story, culture and heritage belong to me just as much as it belongs to him and no one can take

that away from me. My experiences in Canada are mine as well. I grew up a Canadian, I love my country and the opportunities it has afforded me and my family. I can now confidently say that I am a Canadian Muslim of Indo-Fijian decent and I appreciate the weight that

every one of those words carries. This is my identity and no longer do I feel like there is nothing to study in my culture. Now I walk forward with the knowledge that I follow the footsteps of thousands of ancestors behind me.

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This image created for Humble the Poet has become an emblem of his presence across social media. This image is taken from his Facebook page.

Longing and belonging

Bigger than Hip Hop

Situating Ethnicity and Heritage in the Collaborations of Humble the Poet & Sikh Knowledge

Amrita Kauldher

ABSTRACT

Artists Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge emerged within Canadian hip hop culture since 2010 on the viral platforms of Facebook and YouTube. However, their reach across North America and across the Sikh diaspora was noted, especially among Punjabi youth. Through their poetry, music and social media presence, both have constructed and destabilized notions of Punjabi-Sikh heritage and identity. Based on virtual and visual research conducted on social media from 2012–2014, qualitative interviews and lyrical analysis, this chapter is a reflection on an ethnography centered in hip hop, race, ethnicity and identity. The identities performed and articulated by both Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge address a lacuna of scholarship present on Punjabi-Sikh identity that aims to transcend labels of “World Ethno hip hop” or “Desi rap”. The outcomes of this case study explore the presence of the turban and beard within hip hop culture and the Sikh diaspora, in addition to the nuances of queer and immigrant experiences the artist occupy. This chapter shares a story of two friends, artists and the impact their collaborations made in the learning and unlearning of Punjabi-Sikh heritage. I will focus on the spoken word poem, *Life of an Immigrant* and song, *Baagi Music*, in addition to project, *UnLearn: Butterflies and Lions* and album, *Turban Sex*. As a classroom educator today, this case study has become a place holder for my presence as a South Asian of Sikh heritage in the classroom.

KEY WORDS

Sikh Studies, Race and Ethnicity, Social Media, Hip Hop, Social Activism, Social and Cultural Anthropology

Introduction

This is a story about a friendship, and a series of virtual coincidences that brought two individuals together. This is also a story about identities. Identities immersed in and inspired by hip hop culture. More specifically, this is a story about the desire to connect. Toronto artist, Humble the Poet (Kanwer Singh), and Montreal-based artist/producer, Sikh Knowledge (Kanwar Saini) have been erupting across social media, and digitizing in cyber space on multiple social media platforms

since 2010. This chapter reflects part of a story and a place in my research. The ethnography conducted from 2012–2014 is a glimpse into the creative lives of Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge, and how they respectively and collectively affirm and disrupt identity politics, particularly popular representations of Punjabi-Sikh identities in an effort to share their heritage. In my research I aim to ethnographically situate the two artists through their social media movements, a study of their performances, a review and analysis of their music

and lyrics, and through conversations that I have been privileged to have with them.

With every revisit, my position within the research continues to evolve. As do their own creative projects. This is key because I have not remained stagnant in my findings, reflections or interpretations of Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge as artists or individuals. Furthermore, I am grateful for the space this ethnography has afforded me to situate my own Punjabi-Sikh ethnicity and heritage.

Theoretical framework

In this chapter I centralize Stuart Hall's arguments from *New Ethnicities*, by way of which I have chosen to work with the concept of ethnicity for an analysis of these artists through a historical, cultural and political lens (1996, p. 446–447). It is the way politics of ethnicity focuses on difference and diversity within a given group that may initiate working beyond limited frameworks of multiculturalism that rely on a view of culture as fixed. In addition, personal interviews conducted with both artists from 2013 are referenced throughout this chapter to enhance the ethnography.

Enriching to this research is that both artists have a background in the education system. Before pursuing music, Kanwer Singh was an elementary school teacher and Kanwar Saini is a speech-language pathologist for the Toronto School Board. Much of their work comes from a place of bridging understanding. In turn, this ethnographic experience became integral to my own teaching philosophy, especially as a history and social studies educator wanting to illuminate the role of anthropology in historical thinking processes. As an educator who is equally driven by hip hop pedagogy, I have been able to use Humble the Poet's poetry in my lessons to begin investigating themes of immigration, systemic racism and racial violence in the classroom. This is an example of culturally relevant pedagogy that can especially engage racialized youth.

Virtual Connections

One of the aims of this ethnography was to analyze the ways Sikh youth were connecting over social issues and the Internet, in addition to identifying with others through music, poetry, or social media updates. More than ever, youth on social media are looking to be

heard and seen. They are looking to be heard or simply have their presence acknowledged. Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge's collaborations work within and play off this ever-growing need but are also a product of it.

Hearing these two artists create music together had me curious about how their relationship came about. Their meeting may seem surprising, yet it is a product of this digital time. Sikh Knowledge explains, "Humble and I met five and a half years ago over Facebook. He messaged me because we have the same first name, but he spells it differently. It's a funny story the way it goes. He messaged me saying, 'You're spelling your name wrong'. That's all I got. I thought that was pretty bold. 'Who is this being all cute and funny?' One thing led to another and he found out that I was already a MC/producer out in Montreal, and I didn't fuck around with the desi scene. I don't give a fuck, right? He was a spoken word artist, so he just became more comfortable with becoming an MC when he found out I was an MC. That's the way it popped off".

When I asked Humble the Poet if he would describe working with Sikh Knowledge as a creative bond, he responded, "We do not have a creative bond. We have a very, very, good personal bond. In the beginning when we didn't know each other we were working through email. We didn't particularly care for each other. We were both trying to prove ourselves . . . me probably more so, because he had already released two of his albums and worked with artists. My mind set was, 'I am better than these rappers', even though I wasn't. From there we developed a personal relationship".

Kanwer Singh stumbled upon Kanwar Saini from a desire to know how many people on Facebook shared his name. A common interest of hip hop, and perhaps seeing a familiar face, or someone that looked like him caught his attention. By sending a single message, and Kanwar replying, there was a connection. My use of the word connect, comes from Kanwer's use of the word 'connect' multiple times throughout his interview. He explained his intentions of connecting in the following way: "When I talk about the racism of wearing a head wrap, I can immediately connect with a hijabi girl. We both get it. We get it more than a Punjabi guy that doesn't keep his hair. Right? So, for me it's always been about connecting. That is how I started

my career. With *Voice for the Voiceless* (2008), problems can't be addressed with people that do not connect to the problems. People don't need an after school special; they need to hear it the way it needs to be said — realistically and honestly, and non-judgmentally. Put it out there for people to hear, so they can connect with it".

I can recall the first time I listened to Humble the Poet on YouTube. I caught a glimpse of my younger cousins watching one of his early self-made videos, *Voice for the Voiceless*, which was a compilation of images over a spoken word piece on violence in the Punjabi community. Looking back on that moment, I can reflect on youth consumption of this content, and on the beginnings of a virtual dialogue. *Voice for the Voiceless* was Humble the Poet's first attempt at connecting with the Punjabi-Sikh community, from discussing gang violence, to caste discrimination and sexual violence, he strung together well-known stories, and actual experiences of individuals affected by the mentioned issues. Kanwer began presenting his music and poetry with an idealistic approach towards "community", which he later drew away from.

Life of an Immigrant

The video to spoken word, *Life of an Immigrant* (2010), begins with Kanwer sitting in the front seat of a cab. It is a quiet evening, as the silence focuses on the surroundings of the cab, specifically the driver's seat and dash. Pulling down the visor, Kanwer opens up a map to check a route. He then picks up the radio and with vigor, recites his father's story.

Told him the grass was greener
with an endless flood of possibilities, Katrina
Watch him drown in debt
Land confiscated by the local government
So, he flies high in a jet
Plane, plain clothes just exposed him
To the harsh winters of life
And his wife won't know
'Bout the sweat soaked in the bank notes
Sent home, boy getting grown, now he starts to
groan
Stomachs rumbling
Hungry for a better life now he's stumbling
Over foreign phonetics and verb tenses
laughing at his accent
It's not an accident

That his master's in economics isn't honored
Most economic for a father
is to hop his ass in a cab,
And never bother
getting out that car or his dreams
Memorize the route
and collect the fare
It isn't fair
When they say "you don't belong here"
With your long beard
And that towel round your head
Hear what was said?
Soak up the hate
Can you relate?
Life of an immigrant.

This poem speaks volumes about the myth of opportunity abroad: articulating economic and racial inequalities, by paralleling property and economic devastation from Hurricane Katrina to measures taken by the Indian government to confiscate land from Sikh farmers; and invoking the infamous racist slur, "towel head". Taking a seat in his father's cab, as the son of a cabbie, he recounts a story familiar to many cab drivers in Canada from all ethnicities, but heavily prevalent among Punjabis— a story of violence, as well as educational and economic sacrifice.

"I remember seeing him once when I was little after being jumped. I remember him being bruised and battered. Then you go to India and you see how people treat cab drivers like shit, and I think I would never treat my dad like shit". In retrospect, *Life of an Immigrant* was Kanwer's attempt to tell a particular narrative of the realities of immigration. It is a narrative constructed to connect within the diaspora and across it. However, what Kanwer unintentionally did is interrupt the stereotype of the cabbie and honour himself as the child of an immigrant.

Actualizing the misappropriation of the cabbie requires looking at how *Life of an Immigrant* intersects with the presence of mostly South Asian Americans in popular hip hop, especially through sampling. Most hip hop critics view sampling as cultural appropriation, but scholars and music journalists dissecting cultural appropriation, know that it is not a one-way flow (Nair & Balaji, 2008). Working from Nitasha Sharma's (2010) theoretical framework, *Life of an Immigrant* gives voice to an experience unheard, words that are more powerful

than a Bollywood sample. It is also a moment for the turban to be humanized, rather than characterized or terrorized.

Initially drawing the attention of mostly South-Asian journalists or online Sikh arts and culture blogs, Humble the Poet has also been featured on MTV Iggy, the CBC, *Rolling Stone India*, and by, www.worldstarhiphop.com as “Poet of the Week”. Maybe one of the problematic results of this media attention is how is framed as the brown, Punjabi, desi or Sikh poster boy of hip hop. In a CBC music blog in celebration of South-Asian Heritage Month 2014, Humble was featured as one of the top 10 Canadian-South Asian artists to look out for.

Among the images of the featured artists, his image was accompanied by the caption, “Americans thought they were being progressive embracing a white rapper from Detroit but come up north for a real taste of diversity in hip hop” (cbc.ca, 2014). *Rolling Stone India*, in a rather condensed and confusing manner, misrepresented Humble the Poet by narrating him as a “Gursikh” rapper and MC in “Punjabi Hip Hop”, as well as a “Canadian-Desi, hip hop artist” recreating a hybrid of immigrant hip hop not just about hot chicks and gang wars (Bhatti, 2011).

MTV Iggy, an extension of MTV, launched in 2011 as a multi-platform global music brand bringing pop culture from around the world to America, featured Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge in a well-informed article by Siddhartha Mitter (2011). The artist profile page introduced Kanwer as “straight from the multicultural crucible of Toronto” and adorning “unorthodox hip hop swag”, essentially framing his turban and long beard. It is clear that a language of multiculturalism and ethnic garb attracts Kanwer’s body and talent. Regardless, to be featured on MTV Iggy was a success for both Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge.

“Better than Jay Z and Bigger than Osama...” (Mitter, 2011) was the headline for the article that critically unfolded into a tactful piece about Humble the Poet and his aims in hip hop. Without debate, it can be said that it was *Baagi Music* — a song released in 2010 by Humble the Poet, produced by Sikh Knowledge — became an instant party anthem, and to some, an anthem for Punjabi pride. This was the song and music

video that brought mass attention to Humble the Poet as it sparked the interest of fans, music critics and journalists. It also sparked a larger online following and emphasized how viral this duo is, a fact that is confirmed by how many YouTube clicks this video continues to draw. Aiming to set the record straight, Mitter interrogates the perceptions listeners and viewers may have of Kanwer Singh and Kanwar Saini, and how it is that Humble the Poet wants to be seen as part of the global family of hip hop, and not a niche artist making music for and about a specific ethnicity. In the article, Humble alludes to the fact that he aims to be bigger than Jay Z one day. “I hope one day Jay Z will be the next Black Humble the Poet”, said with much sarcasm, of course. As the article unfolded, it also touched on the social difficulties of donning a turban, whether those difficulties are labeled as bullying or racism. Kanwer stated, “If my competition now for a “beard and turban” is Osama. I will keep working until they say, wow that guy looks like Humble” (Mitter, 2011).

Baagi Music

“I made a beat called Fuck the Homophobes, and I put it up. Like minutes after I put it up, he [Kanwer Singh] asked me for that beat. That summer, me, Humble, Hoodini and Baagi spent two weeks in New York, and he wrote *Baagi*. He turned it into a Punjabi anthem. The concept of *Baagi* was an important one to highlight at the time, because it meant sovereign rebel. It was just Humble’s way to break free. He is his own person and is not defined by his look. He is a human being”.

As Kanwar described it, that was the beginning of *Baagi Music*, and the rest is what people interpreted from it. Often mistaken as Sikh Knowledge’s coming out song, there were many influences that went into the song and its viral video launch. Kanwer described, “with *Baagi Music* I was able to say what I want to say and attract people. People took it from: this is detrimental to Sikh people, to, this is the anthem for Khalistan; this guy hates Hindus; this guy hates India. It was a million and one things, and it was hilarious!”

Baagi Music (2010) was uploaded and released on YouTube and has since accumulated well over one million views. The song attracted much attention from music journalists, South-Asian culture magazines, and a large South Asian youth following. Most of Humble

the Poet's publicity came from this song, but also threw him into the categories of ethnic, Khalistani and Sikh rap.

Throw your deuce in the sky
 Five river flow, beautiful butterfly
 Big nose, big eyes
 Lids stay heavy like lines in my rhymes
 Our girls so fly
 Lovely Punjabis oh my
 Our guys stay live
 Peacock tattoos on the thigh
 This is Baagi music
 Get nice, spit tight, vibe right to it
 Straight lighter fluid
 Spark from the heart
 Make it fire, do it
 Move it, it's a grove for the mind
 Shake your behind
 Feel it in your spine
 So we walk with an arch
 and fuck Bollywood
 We aint messing with y'all
 We Punjabi
 Feel the five river flow, all in your veins we Baagi go!

....
 Some sucka ass sucka stepped up to me
 Not a real fan, just a male groupie
 Didn't know my rhymes, but still called me
 His favourite Indian MC
 I tried to reply very politely
 'Cause really at the end we all family so
 Listen little bro, let me break it down for you
 We 100 million strong, the "P" in Pakistan
 You know where I'm from, smell that rosewood son
 Home of Bhangra and Jay Sean's mom
 Toronto my heart, Punjab in my blood
 This tunes in your ear, hip hop I love
 Sweet chocolate skin, I'm not Indian
 4 knuckles to your eye, if you call me that again
 I'm Punjabi.

The song is loaded with word play, metaphors, historical and pop culture references, but also stereotypes. It is what Imani Perry refers to as exploiting the stereotype while simultaneously expressing literary skill — an important component in the Black literary tradition (2004, p. 64). Perry's research on the art, culture, and politics of hip hop, especially through lyrical analysis provides the framework for deconstructing hip hop as a Black American transnational culture. The music video



Sikh Knowledge posed in a shirt representing his queer identity. This image is taken from his Facebook profile.

adds another dimension to the lyrics. Taking place at a concert, it includes a scene where the stage is full of mostly Punjabi-Sikh artists jamming with each other and the music. In terms of visibility and stage presence, that scene speaks volumes. It is probably the first mainstream exposure of Punjabi-Sikh MCs and producers from across North America on one stage with their own individual styles — turbans or not. The location of the video then switches between a music studio and a tattoo parlor, where Humble the Poet is getting a tattoo. The visual close-up of the butterfly shaped tattoo is thematically important to Punjabi identity in this video because of what the tattoo represents. Along with many others, I was curious to know the significance.

"It's just Punjab before Partition. That is when they used to call it a butterfly because its shape. What it was, I had just got back from New York, and I was heavily influenced by all that 'I'm an African', the murals and all. And I'm like, 'I want to create a knowledge of self-kind of track'. Again, this is nothing new, when people say I am not an African American, I am an African. People don't want to be called Greek when they are Macedonian. What the Africa pendant is, I said I wanted a Punjab one".

The lyrics, 'five river flow, beautiful butterfly' speaks directly to the nostalgic geography of Punjab, which Kanwer then conflates with the stereotype of Punjabi facial features of big nose, big eyes. He then brings that line back to himself as the next line states, 'lids stay

heavy like lines in my rhymes'. Nonetheless, it is not difficult to see from the lyrics why some people may have assumed *Baagi Music* was an anthem for Punjabis.

The fact that Kanwer and his production team could spend time in the birthplace of hip hop culture and walk away with a refined sense of consciousness for nationality, ethnicity and heritage as Punjabis and Sikhs, speaks volumes not only about the absence of a critical dialogue of Sikh identity, but also its simplification and stereotypical characterization.

Baagi Music, the song and music video, were not designed by Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge to deracialize hip hop to make it their own, or to make a song about some abstract idea of Punjabi rap. Using Sharma's analysis, this song inspired by hip hop culture prompted an ethnicization of Punjabi-Sikh identity largely misunderstood and misrepresented within the larger Indian diaspora, while drawing on a model of blackness to frame the concept of marginality from a political origin (2010, p. 22). After all, the song was inspired shortly after their summer in Brooklyn. Visually and lyrically, it claimed space for Punjabi-Sikh identities rarely depicted in Hollywood, and not popularly visible outside of religious associations or comedic Bollywood representations. If hip hop as Black music inspires a claiming of political space, then this song did just that, and became a phenomenon across the diaspora.

In analyzing the lyrics, music video and social media commentary that followed the release of *Baagi Music*, Stuart Hall's work on ethnicity becomes most useful. There was a political moment when the term 'Black' was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain. 'Black' provided a means of organizing around a category of new politics of resistance among groups and communities with very different histories, traditions, and ethnic identities. As the Black experience became a singular, unifying framework, other ethnic/racial identities did not disappear, but, instead, worked alongside the Black experience. The danger, though, was the ability of the Black experience to become hegemonic over the other ethnic/racial identities (Hall, 1996, p. 441).

Furthermore, as race and ethnicity emerged under different historical and lawful circumstances around the globe, Kanwer Singh is still able to draw unique parallels. A lyric to one of his songs produced by Sikh

Knowledge, *By Any Means Necessary* (2020) begins with a revolutionary tune, repeating the phrase, "Bhagat Singh, Dudley George, Malcolm X, I Fucken' Rep". With this phrase, Kanwer parallels a Sikh revolutionary fighting British colonial oppression, an unarmed Ojibwa man shot to death by an Ontario Provincial Police sniper during the Ipperwash crisis, and an African American Black Power movement icon. This is not just a random compilation trumping so-called revolutionary thought, rather it is a socio-political strategy of representation and solidarity. Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge are working within multiple systems of representation. It's in their ability to draw parallels between ethnic and racial difference, but they begin this work by placing themselves within Punjabi-Sikh iconography and stereotypes, as seen with *Baagi Music*. What is occurring is a shift from a struggle over relations of representation to the politics of representation (Hall, 1996, p.442). The most powerful element here is having the ability to choose political affiliations and crafting oneself over social media how it is you want to be seen.

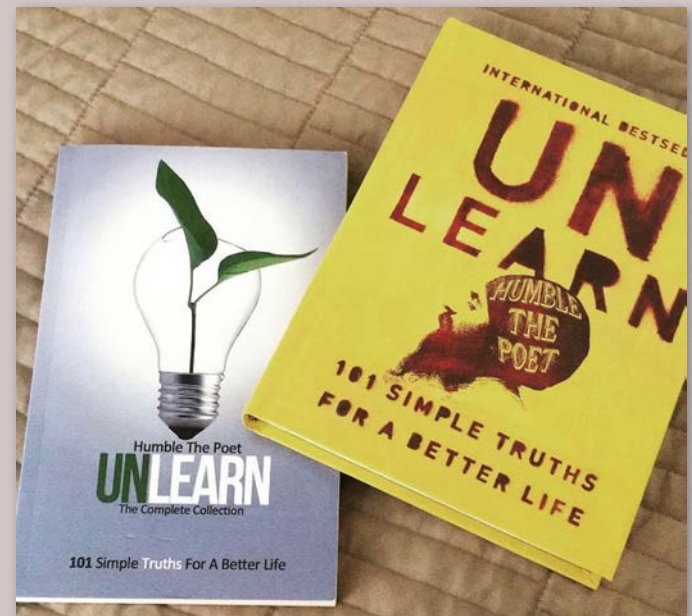
UnLearn: Butterflies and Lions

The summer of 2013 served as the climax of this research with the launch of Humble the Poet's project and self-published book *UnLEARN: Butterflies and Lions* and Sikh Knowledge's album *Turban Sex*. I consider these two events pivotal to the research because notions of Sikhi and Punjabi were articulated and digitally engineered in defining ways. This is also where I began hearing the concept of heritage more frequently, as opposed to culture or religion. Both Kanwar Saini and Kanwer Singh refer to the intertwined nature of Punjabi-Sikh identity as heritage. I, therefore, use that concept throughout this research, aiming not to fix these two individuals within the matrices of race, community, or culture, but within that of ethnicity, to help develop the thought that identities are historically situated and informed. I argue they are image-makers in the sense that they deconstruct how their bodies are read and utilize the Internet and social media to foster this play on, and interruption of, identities normally fixed exclusively in religious curiosity.

Varinder Kalra argues that just wearing a *pagh* (turban) does not enable a reading that is privileged in terms of authenticity, or is an act of representative

knowledge, but, rather, is inseparable from that of the social and political (2005, pg. 76). By creating the video *Baba Nanak* (2013), Kanwer is not coming forward as a representative for Sikhi; he is installing a vantage point given his interest and occupation in education. By applying Kalra's argument to *Baba Nanak* which Kanwer created for promotional use, Humble the Poet disfigures the act of donning a turban as a sole symbol of representative knowledge for mainstream Sikhi. Because wearing a turban has come to stand for an authentic Sikh sense of self, Humble the Poet attempts to undo what most people think of these dimensions by focusing on the basic teachings which developed what is popularly known as Sikhism. This three-minute, narrated video shows various representations of Baba Nanak from contemporary depictions of him to paintings developed during the reign of the Mughal Empire. All these images are stitched together with an aim to create a visual tool, showcasing that throughout history we have had different representations and interpretations of Baba Nanak, and although his teachings have been institutionalized, there are basic ideals within Sikh heritage based on the guru/teacher and student relationship that were originally, and continue to be channeled through verse or poetry.

This representation of Baba Nanak begins to function as a new myth or narrative. The video clip involves a historicity, which, no doubt, has gaps, but from one image of Baba Nanak to the next, he is morphed into a performance of an iconic Sikh body. This body is not religious, as it is not Humble the Poet's purpose to build on religious elements commonly associated with this figure, or to advocate for Sikhi through some sort of viral animation. Some of the nuanced statements in this video include: "An interpretation of guru that I like is *gu*, meaning dark and *ru*, meaning light...he did a lot to flip light switches on in people's heads, travelling ridiculous distances by foot...Many of the ideas he mocked have become daily practices in mainstream Sikhi...The ideas Guru Nanak Devji presented to other people of his time and geography were not common" (2013). Based on these statements, Humble the Poet is helping viewers discover Baba Nanak as an individual who had unconventional reformist ideas for his time, but was nonetheless collaborating with other teachers and was enlightened by those learning experiences.



The first edition of Humble the Poet's self-published book and second edition published by HarperOne.

This image is taken by Amrita Kauldher.

The varied stylization and repetition of Baba Nanak throughout the video is arguably an attempt to demonstrate representational practices that promote performances of a discontinuous Sikh-male body, ever-changing and constantly open to interpretation. Considering that this body is not singularly religious, the following statement made by Humble the Poet in the clip emphasizes this point: "I am grateful for being part of a heritage that places learning above all; Sikh by definition means student, and I love the fact I can fill my head to learn, unlearn and relearn every day" (2013). The description for Kanwer's self-published book, *UNLEARN: 101 Truths for a Better Life*¹, states Kanwer's previous profession as an elementary school teacher, and that he is an "MC/Spoken Word Artist with an aura that embodies the diversity and resiliency of one of the world's most unique cities". His compilation of ideas, inserted with images he personally collected, consolidates into digestible lyricism and advice which is a reflection of his aim to challenge his own biases and be a "life-long learner".

Kanwer's spoken word and social media endeavors initiate a process of normalizing Sikh identity as heritage, and not as religion or culture. In emphasizing the notion of heritage, Kanwer looks to distance the turban and a beard away from religion and aims to define it as something heavily negotiated in the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora. In a personal statement made for a promotional video during his Indigogo campaign, he sincerely stated, "On a personal level, I want to continue to promote

this image. The image of beard and turban in a positive light, and what better way to do it but simply normalize it. Put it out there for people to see. This could be one of the easiest ways to kill racism and prejudice” (UnLEARN Indigogo Campaign Video, 2013). Humble the Poet’s campaign was a success, raising about \$26,000 in two months, exceeding his monetary goal to fund both his book and album from the widespread support of his fans. This would come to be the first edition of his book, as Humble the Poet would land a publishing deal with HarperOne and release the second edition in 2019.

Turban Sex

It seems that most Sikhs or Punjabis within the diaspora are drawn to Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge, either for the love of what they do, or showing support for or identifying with representations that are not present in mass media. Even today, seeing a person with a turban in mainstream media is rare, so an artist having a stage name with the word ‘Sikh’ in it does draw curiosity. This curiosity, in fact, is what Kanwar Saini believes brings people to his Facebook page. Intrigued by his look, and maybe his political views, there is an immediate and hateful reaction by some when his sexual orientation is revealed. Often, there is a demand that he changes his name, based on the belief that being Sikh should have nothing to do with sexual expression, especially of a homosexual nature.

In a Facebook status posted on February 2, 2014, Kanwar states, “I’ve had the alias ‘Sikh Knowledge’ for longer than half my life. I will not change it because people at the *gurdwara* (temple) live in an Internet bubble and they have no idea what I do. Tooooo Baaaaaad. I heard I’m being protested at temples.” The Internet bubble he refers to is viewers blindly following his social media blogging sites, thinking his work is a reflection or promotion of the Sikh religion. This pattern would later ensue with the release of his album, *Turban Sex*.

“So, one of my sister’s is like, “how can you name your album *Turban Sex*?” I just hate that question. I said, “Did you read the narrative for the album? No, you didn’t. You didn’t even listen to the album”. She is just as informed as the most hateful person.” These were some of the thoughts shared by Sikh Knowledge

when asked during our interview how he was coping with the social backlash from naming his album *Turban Sex*. This backlash included death threats and persons angrily invading his profile on Facebook, wanting him to change his name, and accusing him of disgracing the Sikh religion. He further states his opinion that, “There is a lot of undefined morality which kills everyone . . . It’s funny . . . putting those two words together, people are saying is disrespect to the turban, and I’m like ‘Why? Why, because you are supposed to be “modest” if you wear a turban?’”

I believe Sikh Knowledge is grappling with what Kalra argues to be the turban’s place “in some halfway house between tradition and modernity” (2005, p. 77). Can the *pagh* potentially articulate to an accepted dress of a modern person, or become another fashion accessory? What was Kanwar envisioning when he created *Turban Sex*? In a Facebook post on July 13, 2014, he shared the intent of his album as “an experiment and release of creative energy from Montreal/Toronto based producer. . . Musically, this short album is an attempt to marry musical traditions of the East and West Indies, queer-subcultures, and the marginal attitudes of those adorning themselves in varied cultural garb. *Turban Sex* contains instrumentals, songs, lyrics delivered in folk Punjabi form, pan-West-Indian patois and rap.”

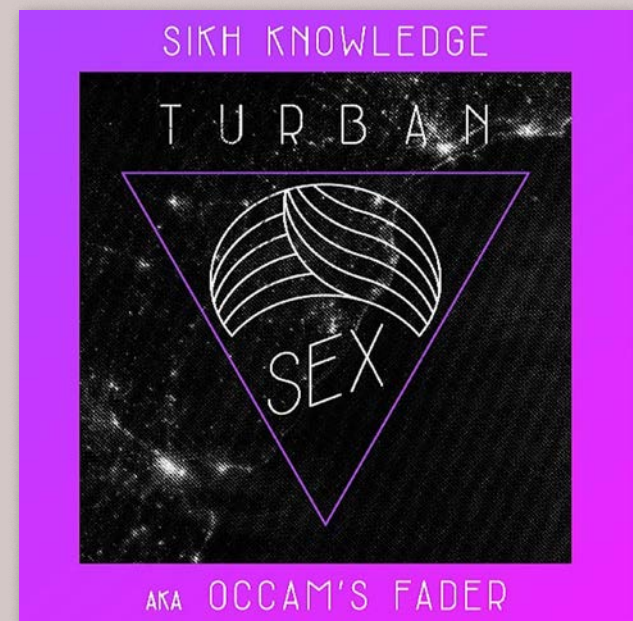
On the cover of the album, the turban is placed in an inverted triangle, imprinting it at the junction of gender and sex, and masculine and feminine desires, while at the same time internalizing self as other. Sikh Knowledge has demonstrated how the symbolic marker of the turban can be, and is, misread and misidentified in politics of race, ethnicity, religiosity and sexuality. As for exploring some of the backlash following the release of *Turban Sex*, Kanwar by no means represents that being of Sikh heritage and queer is an easy presence to assert. However, he is vocal in expressing his identities and sexuality in ways that challenge the heterosexual biases that limit presumed identities of those who are Punjabi or practice Sikhi, or the sexist undertones of reggae and hip hop music. Kanwar’s music and patois are often mistaken for cultural appropriation, especially when his intentions are not understood on a level of creative beat building and his vast linguistic abilities.

One of the multi-dimensional songs off his album *More Than Aware* is electronically crafted through a

mesh of lyrical sounds, including beautifully sung Punjabi folk, yet strings together a strong tone and bass. Ultimately, the song projects heartfelt lyrics of angst and desire and a tune for the lovers caught in the intersections of race and love. The chorus sung in Punjabi represents the emotions that cannot be conveyed or translated to English with the same depth of conviction or purpose as their original form.

...Do you know what love means to a fag like me?
 It's an intersection between race and sexuality
 I was too scared to cross it, fucken' look at me
 I can never be free, I just want to be
 My community is fucked up
 I get ostracized
 All they see is my big turban and a middle finger in
 their eye
 Look at a taste of their own medicine that they have
 ostracized
 But they love me when I'm a '84 whore in their eyes
 Were you cognoscente of this that the more out that
 I live
 The more in my family is
 And the more I have to balance
 Of course, you weren't
 My otherness is meta-social
 Like how I get love for my beard but death threats
 for my love for you
 ...Turban pon my head like a king...I nah fi give a
 fuck what you think
 Coolie boy fucken' skankin'...
 Now do you really know what love meant to a fag
 like me?
 I was able to break free from these margins like
 Humble's poetry
 Didn't come free, it came with anxiety
 That's entropy
 I was fucked from jump, like an '89
 Jordan was defending me
 Balanced in multiple worlds like Shiva's trident
 The kid ain't Hindu but speaks in allegory like
 Nanak
 I confused being underexposed for smart choices
 It's funny how the sum of us made for many
 differences
 I like to see you fly; I like to see you fly
 'Cause in my eyes baby you have everything that I
 Never really had, and you better feel me
 But you never know how I feel, I can only say it in
 Punjabi...

The *Turban Sex* launch party was a low-key event at a



Sikh Knowledge's album cover for *Turban Sex*. This image is taken from his Facebook profile.

trendy café in Toronto's Regent Park neighborhood. Sikh Knowledge played his album and introduced each song while he hosted friends and fans from many networks. The evening featured samosas, beer and dancing. He passed out condoms with a digital barcode — an appropriate act, given the name of the album and the digital nature of him as an artist. In doing so, he connected everyone to his musical press kit.

In the conclusion of his article, Kalra proposes the grand question of whether a Sikh modernity is at all possible considering that the Sikh *pagh* is so easily confused in the diaspora (2005, p.89). Perhaps that says something about the close link of the turban to a sense of Sikh identity; perhaps it argues that Sikh identity is not necessarily in a state of confusion, but always in the process of becoming. I, too, have attempted to illustrate this argument in respect to the video, *Baba Nanak*, the gendered and political statements made in *Turban Sex*, and controversy following its debut. What I find most encouraging about Humble the Poet's social media campaigns, and the courage of Sikh Knowledge to be creative with complex representations, is that these two individuals have inspired debates and dialogues on the significance and social life of the turban in the diaspora.

My hope for this research is to initiate a dialogue on nuanced identities based in Punjabi Sikh heritage inspired by mediums of hip-hop culture and social media — identities that are politically redefining themselves within and against the ethnic confinements

of multiculturalism. I see two artists who are educators in profession and intention, whose social media performance is a representation that promotes learning by means of unlearning. This case study provides a window into looking at the ways two individuals of Punjabi Sikh heritage are asserting their identities in tangible efforts to normalize, yet disrupt, the stereotypical image of a turban and beard in popular culture through sensory, cognitive and personal means.

Conclusion

To begin concluding this chapter, I'll briefly touch on an interview by Humble the Poet on UK radio show, *Know Thy Wootz*. He is highlighted as a creative member of the Punjabi-Sikh community, and I believe this is one of the most informed interviews Kanwer has given, where he welcomed listeners to hear his opinions on community, what it means for him to be a Sikh, and what he wants fans to understand about his message and music. To most it was not what they had hoped to hear. I mention this interview because of two resonating ideas spoken during the interview. With the interviewer stating, "we got one, I can listen to rap again"; and Kanwer asserting, "I reference Sikhi but I am not selling it...when people think Sikhi, they think turbans and beards" (Know Thy Wootz, 2014).

With the invitation to appear on a radio show geared towards youth exploring Punjabi-Sikh art, culture and heritage, the noteworthy and challenging ideas that Kanwer declares are: he does not believe in the idea of a common community, or is yet trying to understand the concept based on perceptions of him as a "Punjabi-Sikh artist"; he does not condone that his presence within hip hop specifically grants Punjabi Sikhs permission to listen or identify with rap or hip hop. It is not difficult to realize there is a faith-based investment in Kanwer as a visible Punjabi Sikh in the mass media. However, it may be too much of an investment for an individual, who along with friend and producer, Kanwar, seeks to actively and aesthetically challenges perceptions of community, ethnicity, race, gender and culture.

Nitasha Sharma's work is critical to my case study as a thoroughly researched ethnography on South-Asian identity and hip-hop music. Although she does not have informants from a Sikh background, that very gap creates an urgency for this research and allows a space

for this case study to develop and initiate a discussion on Punjabi Sikh ethnicity and or heritage within hip hop culture, in a post 9/11 world. Sharma's works within a larger concept of "desi", that comes from the Sanskrit word *desha*, meaning land, and advocates for a shared homeland experience amongst her informants. The concept and idea of desi erases difference and conveys a compassion for other South-Asian members — a slippery concept rather than a problematic one for Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge. Yet, Sharma claims that there is no tangible genre of desi hip hop because the sounds of the artists in her research and their roles in hip hop culture are too diverse (Sharma, 2010, p.6), nonetheless the concept of "desi" becomes a tool to begin analyzing identities that have developed from diverse histories and ethnic enclaves even among a given group. Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge do not refer to themselves as desi or even evoke a strong pride in a shared homeland experience as Indians. As previously stated, I see these artists discerning a distinct Punjabi-Sikh identity claimed upon notions of heritage that is too important to transcend.

Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge are working within multiple systems of representation. They exercise this ability by drawing attention to the tensions between ethnic and racial difference and disrupting their place within Punjabi-Sikh popular culture and stereotypes. What is occurring is a shift from a struggle over relations of representation to the politics of representation (Hall, 1996, p. 442). The most powerful element here is having the ability to choose political affiliations and crafting oneself over social media that reflects how it is that you want to be seen. An attempt to emphasize what it is to be distinctly Punjabi, as opposed to Indian, tacks in and out of a vernacular of constructions of Punjabi Sikh identity in popular culture, and new formations of it in the diaspora. As Stuart Hall stated, we are beginning to see constructions of a new conception of ethnicity: a cultural politics that engages rather than suppresses difference (1996, p. 446).

Choosing to engage with the concept of ethnicity rather than race, allows for the exploration of socially constructed identities based in heritage, language, gender, and engage with various locations of difference within a given group. Ethnicity does not operate hegemonically, but inside the notion of itself, and is

predicated on differences and diversity within (Hall, 1996, p.447). Stuart Hall further explains, “films are not necessarily good because black people make them. They are not necessarily ‘right-on’ by virtue of the fact that they deal with the black experience” (1996, p. 443–444). There is no simple strategy that everything Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge produce will be accepted by a Punjabi-Sikh community simply based on the fact that they are of Sikh heritage or Punjabi ethnicity. Is some of their fanfare based on that fact? Yes. However, when both individuals produce music or embark on projects outside of Punjabi-Sikh themes, they do attract criticism from those who do not see them as the artists and individuals they are.

This chapter began by stating that this is a story about a friendship that developed from a series of coincidences and a love for hip hop, which is reflective of the social media age driven by virtual connections. Kanwer Singh and Kanwar Saini met online and grew closer through personal bonds and a passion for creating music. Humble the Poet gained his confidence as a rapper and spoken word artist through online battle rap forums that gave him space to explore a skill and gain confidence in it. His online presence alongside producer and collaborator Sikh Knowledge is renowned with thousands of followers or fans; their music is easily

accessed on iTunes and YouTube. Both have actively participated in an Internet information phenomenon, especially in the representational appeal of social media that has diversified the interactive user experience. My initial exposure to them and research methods were based in social media platforms that I believe enhanced, rather than hindered, this ethnography’s creative approach to conceptualizing the fieldwork experience, as well as in the non-tangible, socially constructed space of the Internet.

The topics explored in this case study are bigger than hip hop, engage models of antiracism and challenge multiculturalism. The representational practices in their lyrics are powerful by taking the listener inside the notion of ethnicity itself. Similarly, where Black is recognized as a politically and culturally constructed category, so should Punjabi or Sikh. Rooted in ethnicity and heritage, Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge embark on a task to normalize the image of turban and beard, and craft moments of representational learning and unlearning that foster a deeper connection among those willing to listen and look. Both tell stories from a Punjabi Sikh heritage, through a northern vernacular, with a hip hop sound. Most importantly, both Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge are artists looking to connect.

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Identity



Balwant Sanghera and Baldev Sanghera's wedding.

Courtesy of Balwant Sanghera's private collection.

Longing and belonging

Being a Canadian

Balwant Singh Sanghera

My Birthplace, My Home, My Beginnings

It has been more than fifty six years when I set foot in Winnipeg, Canada in the midst of a very cold winter in the last week of January 1966.

When I left India for Canada in early 1966, Punjab was still in one piece. Haryana and Himachal Pradesh were also parts of Punjab, their division came shortly after in the same year, and the Green Revolution was still years away. From the border of Kashmir to the border of Delhi, it was all Punjab territory. Most of the farming was done by old means — ploughs and oxen, Persian wheels, canals, and rather primitive means. The tractors, tube wells, submersible motors and other means of modern farming were few and far between. The life of the villagers in Punjab was simple — the concept of good neighbourhood, helping each other, holistic lifestyle was largely prevalent. Sleeping on the rooftops and loud conversations between neighbours at night were the norm. Most of the households left their doors unlocked. Your neighbours, friends and guests could simply drop by without any prior notice. Cars were a rare commodity. Most of the travelling was done by bikes, on foot or on buses and trains. Similarly, life in the cities was also simple. I vividly remember frequently visiting two of the cities closest to my ancestral village.

My hometown Pharwala (near Bilga/Nurmahal) is almost equidistant from two main cities — Jalandhar and Ludhiana. My friends and I would visit both of these cities on a fairly regular basis. Fifty years hence, I still remember very clearly a lot about the cities. For example, Jalandhar's Nehru Garden aka the Company Bagh was a very popular spot for people. The bypass to Amritsar was still non-existent. The Grand Trunk

Road was cutting through the centre of the city. Movie theatres like Joti, Sant, Laxmi, Minerva were thriving. I remember watching Mughal-e-Azam at the Joti theatre on Nakodar Road during the first week of its release.

Jalandhar's Model Town with elegant kothis was sparsely populated. There were a lot of empty spaces between the city's Model Town Chowk and Model Town. Similarly, the area between Model Town and nearby Mithapur was still farmland with farm produce storage sheds. Incidentally, Mithapur and neighbouring Sansarpur, are famous as the nursery of grass hockey players of international calibre. The district courts and offices of the top city officials were tucked along GT Road between Model Town Chowk and Nehru Gardens. Near the Company Bagh, right on GT Road, alongside a number of stores and Jalandhar Central Cooperative Bank, was a shoe business owned by a Chinese businessman. For a long time, this city was and continues to be the centre of newspaper publications in many languages. Also, Jalandhar continues to be the headquarters for the sports equipment manufacturing industry. Less than fifty kilometers to the south stands Jalandhar's twin city of Ludhiana.

Ludhiana's Chaura Bazar (Wide Market) beginning from the Ghanta Ghar (Clock Tower) Chowk was full of stores, restaurants, bookshops, and a variety of other goods. I still remember a bookshop — Lyall Book Depot — where my friends and I would go at the beginning of a new school year to buy books and school supplies etc. It was like a yearly pilgrimage. Close by was a prominent restaurant. I think it was called Kailash where after our book purchases, we would have soft drinks and snacks. The movie theatres like Rikhi, Naulakha, Kailash and Society were thriving. Not far

away was the industrial hub of Miller Ganj. The railway station and nearby Civil Lines were always a hub of activity. The college row — Arya College, Government College, Khalsa College etc. were bubbling with enthusiastic students. Ludhiana was and continues to be the centre for hosiery and is appropriately called the Manchester of Punjab. It is also home of the famous Punjab Agricultural University.

Canada: New Home, New Frontiers

On my way to Canada from my hometown Pharwala in Jalandhar District I had spent a week in England visiting my friends and relatives. The flight on BOAC (which later changed its name to British Airways) from New Delhi to London was quite enjoyable and pleasant. After staying in England for a week or so, I flew from London to Prestwick on Air Canada and then on to Winnipeg for immigration and customs. When I arrived, it was the middle of winter. From Winnipeg I flew to Vancouver to join my brother, Gurbux Singh Sanghera and other family members. When I look back at those times and the current situation in Canada, I am amazed at the changes that have taken place both in Canada and in the South Asian community. It is a very different Canada than the one I experienced more than fifty years ago, as is the case for our (Punjabi Sikh) community.

Before coming to Canada, I had completed my B.Sc. degree from Punjab University. Soon after my arrival in Vancouver, my brother suggested that I should apply for admission to the newly opened Simon Fraser University (SFU) to pursue a career in teaching as this was the profession I intended to follow in Canada. This brand-new university on Burnaby Mountain had just opened its doors a few months earlier in September 1965. The university's architecture by prominent architect Arthur Erickson was just amazing. My academic session was to begin in September 1966. Thus, I had a few months to adapt myself to the new environment. A relative of mine was working in a sawmill (Selkirk Spruce Mills) in Donald, BC, about 15 kilometers west of Golden right on the Trans-Canada Highway about 800 kilometers east of Vancouver. He asked me to join him and work at that mill till the session started at SFU in September. Incidentally, it is reported that Golden was the home of the first Gurdwara in Canada built by South Asians

working who at the time worked in the local sawmill. That mill burnt down in 1927 and the workers moved to other places including Metro Vancouver, but It was a great learning experience for me to work in the sawmill in Donald prior to attending SFU.

The lumber industry in BC played a very important role in the growth and development of this province. In the 1960s and 1970s it was the backbone of BC with thousands of people working in various sawmills and related industries all over the province. A lot of small towns were totally dependent on this industry. Similarly, the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) was one of the most powerful unions in BC at that time. As a matter of fact, the lumber industry has been a boon for our community. It has provided good paying steady jobs to Canadians of Indian descent in general and Punjabis in particular since their arrival in Canada in the early 1900s.

As a keen observer of politics, soon after my arrival here, I found political developments and interactions in Canada to be very different, fascinating, interesting, and entertaining. For example, by just looking at three of our premiers between 1966 and 1986, — Social Credit's W.A.C. Bennett, his son Bill Bennett and NDP's Dave Barrett — one gets a comprehensive view of BC politics. All three of them, despite their limitations have contributed a lot to making this province what it is today. Regardless of their political affiliation, all of them have left an indelible mark in BC. Their legacies like the highway networks, infrastructure, ICBC, ALR; Expo etc. were the turning points in this province. Their vision and foresight along with the natural beauty of BC have made Metro Vancouver in particular and British Columbia in general as one of the most attractive places in the world for visitors, immigrants and investors alike.

Our early pioneers bravely faced these challenges on their own till the formation of Khalsa Diwan Society. Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver (KDS), formed on July 22, 1902, and formally established in 1907 has always been in the forefront, serving our community. For a number of years, KDS was the only organization fighting for the rights of settlers from India. It established the first Sikh Gurdwara in Canada (most likely in North America) at 1866 West Second Avenue in Vancouver on January 19, 1908. It has played a major

role in the social, cultural and economic development of our early South Asian settler community in Canada. KDS acted as a strong advocate on every major issue affecting the community. Be it supporting the Ghadar movement, helping the victims of *Komagata Maru*, fighting against racism, or getting back the right to vote, KDS was always there in the front row.

I fondly remember meeting with and listening to the speeches at the Gurdwara of some of those pioneers who blazed the trails for us. When I arrived here in 1966, I would accompany my older brother, Gurbux Singh Sanghera, to the Gurdwara on Sundays. It

was a very enjoyable experience for me to rub shoulders with some of the pioneers and our community leaders at the Gurdwara. These people were our idols who did so much for the community in a very selfless manner. This was clearly evident at election times which were mainly by acclamation. As a matter of fact, if someone was nominated for a position, he would suggest someone else for that position. Guru Nanak Dev Ji's three golden principles: make an honest living, share and meditate in the name of God Almighty — were really in action and play at the Gurdwara at that time.

DONALD — Fond Memories, Loving Community

Working in lumber/sawmills was one of the major sources of employment for Canadians of Indian descent especially till the 1980s. In addition to a large number of sawmills in Metro Vancouver there were a lot of lumber mills on Vancouver Island and the interior of BC. This was more so in small communities like Port Alberni, Lake Cowichan, Duncan, Williams Lake, Quesnel, Vanderhoof, Smithers, Golden, Mackenzie, etc. The wages for mill workers were good and employment was more or less guaranteed. Before starting my studies at Simon Fraser University in September 1966 I had an opportunity to work in a sawmill in Donald, BC, a small mill community about 20 kilometers west

of Golden on Highway 1. Thanks to Gurdial (Bill) Singh Dhami, a pioneer of our community, who had established a base in Donald a few years earlier, about thirty Indo-Canadians were employed in the local sawmill. They lived in two bunkhouses provided by

the mill management and there was a cook house close by. It seemed like one big family.

Donald had a small CPR station that was used to haul finished lumber from the mill and the Columbia River that flowed close by. The mill had two shifts — day and night and the workers on night shift would cook meals for those working during the day and the day

shift people would get meals ready for the night shift people. It was a good working arrangement. I was given the responsibility of attending to correspondence — reading and writing letters etc. to the relatives of my fellow workers in India. Also, Bill Dhami and I would act as interpreters /translators for the workers and help them with their immigration related paperwork etc. Occasionally, the Immigration officers from Cranbrook or Kamloops would visit to assist with or inquire about the applicants. All of us took good care of each other in this friendly and close family environment. This situation was similar in many other smaller mill town communities all over BC.

Friday was a special day as we would go to Golden to deposit/cash our cheques and buy groceries and other needed stuff, while a few would buy beer and hard liquor to enjoy themselves on the weekend. Weekend was the time to have fun and there were a couple of good entertainers who would entertain the rest of us. Some of us would go to swim in the nearby Columbia River while others would engage in sports and related activities and once in a while, we would have picnics together. At the mill, most of our people worked on either the green chain (the sawmill) or the dry chain (planer). Pulling lumber on the green chain was tough as the lumber was green and heavy as I learned when

“All of us took good care of each other in this friendly and close family environment. This situation was similar in many other smaller mill town communities all over BC.”

I worked on the green chain for about a week. One day, the mill superintendent found out that I was fairly fluent in English, and he needed someone to help workers on the dry chain with translating English instructions into Punjabi from time to time. So, he switched me over to work on the dry chain and I must say it was a bit easier as the boards were kiln-dried and thus weighed less. Soon I was promoted from the dry chain to the position of planer feeder which was a lot easier but was more responsible work.

While working in Donald, one of my co-workers was Jim, who was the son of the mill owner and was about the same age as me and I was surprised to learn that Jim, being the son of the mill owner, worked on the dry chain like the rest of us. So, I asked him how come he was working at the mill like us and everyone else? His answer surprised me and made me keenly aware about one of the great principles of work and work ethic here in Canada. Jim replied that the mill belonged to his dad, not him and that he was just a worker like all of us and didn't have any special privileges. He was making the same wages as us—\$2.00 an hour. Incidentally, mill workers on the coast were getting 50 cents more (\$2.50 an hour), and while today, that amount seems to be meagre, at that time it was a lot as the relative prices of goods and services were also much lower. Those few months spent in a wilderness setting working at the sawmill in Donald afforded me a very interesting and useful perspective on life in Canada. I still cherish that experience.

SFU — Education, Pathways of Learning and Growth

In order to get ready for my career in teaching at Simon Fraser University, one of Canada's newest and innovative universities, on Burnaby Mountain in September 1966, I said good bye to my friends in Donald and moved to Vancouver with my brother and his family. Working at the sawmill in Donald, BC gave me an opportunity to learn about Canadian values, culture, customs, history and traditions. This experience was very helpful to me when I started my journey towards a career in education at Simon Fraser University (SFU).

Life in Metro Vancouver for the South Asian community in the 1960s was simple yet challenging. At that time, there was not even one store totally designed to serve the Indo-Canadian community. There was an

Italian store (Famous Foods) on Hastings and Clarke that carried some of the Indo-Canadian items like flour and lentils etc. Also, there was only one Gurdwara (at 1866 West Second Avenue, near Burrard Street) run by Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver. Our community's population at that time was also fairly small. I would accompany my brother to the Gurdwara every Sunday. There, everybody knew everybody. It was a very close-knit community. Most of the members of our community were working in sawmills in South Vancouver, False Creek and elsewhere in Metro Vancouver. Things were fairly quiet and steady in the South Asian community till early 1970s when there was a huge influx of visitors from Punjab.

During my year at SFU I learned a lot about Canadian politics. In addition to its impressive architecture, SFU became famous for its radicalism. There were frequent demonstrations on and off campus on various issues and on one occasion, a large number of students went to Victoria to demonstrate at the Parliament Buildings for more funding for post-secondary education. It took a few years before things settled down at SFU and the situation became normal like other universities.

There were political clubs aligned with the main political parties. As a member of these political clubs, one could get a good grasp about the political structure and Canadian politics. Well-known personalities and political leaders would often visit the SFU campus for talks etc. Thus, it was an honour for me as a student at SFU to meet and talk to Prime Minister Mike Pearson on one of his visits to SFU and Vancouver. Meeting with Mr. Pearson was one of the highlights of my days at SFU. In addition to various clubs on campus, there was also a Model United Nations at the university. As part of this, it was a pleasure for me to travel to Portland, Oregon for one of the Model UN Conferences. Thus, in addition to regular studies at the university, there was so much more to do socially and culturally. So far as the regular studies were concerned, I found the educational experience at this post-secondary institution to be just fascinating.

Terms like tutorials, term papers, mid-term exams, quizzes, classroom participation were totally new to me. It was way different from the process of one's performance on just the final exam and the cramming

of facts and figures. Here, students were (and continue to be) encouraged to think rather than cram facts and figures. Also, the student performance did not depend upon his/her performance on the final exam only. Instead, it was spread over a number of performance indicators throughout the semester or the year. Another thing that I found strange was that some of the professors would encourage their students to call them by their first names rather than sir or madam. It was so informal. The other aspect of university education here that was quite different from the one I had experienced in Punjab was the interaction with the students by professors and Teaching Assistants (T.A's). The professors would address a large number of students in big lecture halls.

That was followed by small tutorial groups by the TAs, usually graduate and post-graduate students in that faculty. In short, it was a very different, enjoyable and a rewarding experience for me.

While thinking about my year at SFU one incident still stands out clearly in my mind. It was early November, and I was studying in the university library. The huge plaza outside the library was uncovered at that time. Suddenly, snowflakes started hitting the ground. This was the first time I had seen the snow and a snow fall. I was so excited that I put all my books away and ran outside to the plaza in order to feel and enjoy the snowfall.

More than 25 years later, in mid 1990s, I was appointed by the Provincial Government to the Senate at SFU. That appointment gave me an opportunity to see the big changes that had taken place at the university. It brought back some very pleasant memories for me of this great centre of learning on top of Burnaby Mountain. SFU has come a long way from its early years of turmoil and upheaval. SFU has gained an enviable position as an inspirational institution of higher learning over time. I still fondly cherish some of

those pleasant memories associated with SFU both as a student and as a Senator.

Notre Dame University: Into the Interior, into a close community

After spending a very exciting year at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, it was time for me to get a taste of the beautiful Kootenays in the Southern Interior of British Columbia. At that time, it was the home of a small private university in Nelson, the queen city of the Kootenays. Nelson is a lovely town of more than 10,000 people on the banks of Kootenay Lake. Notre Dame University (NDU) had students from around the globe. It was like an international campus. The faculty

was also a mix of various nationalities. It had two prominent faculty members of South Asian descent, Dr. T.S. Bakshi and Dr. Darshan Singh Sahri. However, the student population was confined to just two students of Indian heritage — I and another student from the Punjab. However, we never felt lonely, it was like a big international family. There were a number of students from Trinidad-Tobago,

Peru, Malta, Portugal, Bolivia, Columbia, Chile, and Hawaii in addition to the ones from Alberta and BC. etc. NDU later became the Nelson campus of Castlegar based Selkirk College.

Throughout the academic year at NDU I stayed in the dorms (residence) on campus. It gave me an excellent opportunity to interact with my fellow residents/students more freely. This university was the headquarters of the National Ski Team. Well-known skier and world ski champion Nancy Green; along with her other teammates were our fellow students. Incidentally, Nancy's hometown, nearby Rossland, was a very popular training ground for budding skiers. It was a pleasure for me to meet Nancy Green-Raine again in 2004 when both of us received the Order of British Columbia at the Lieutenant Governor's residence in Victoria.

“This university was the headquarters of the National Ski Team. Well-known skier and world ski champion Nancy Green; along with her other teammates were our fellow students.”



Balwant Sanghera coaching soccer at Hudson's Hope Elementary Junior Secondary School.

Courtesy of Balwant Sanghera's personal collection.



Balwant Sanghera with son at Hudson's Hope in 1969.

Courtesy of Balwant Sanghera's personal collection.

NDU also had a number of politically active students from various countries. One such student was from Iran, who became Iran's foreign minister later on. Discussing international politics with him and others was a treat. Unfortunately, we found out a few years later that this future foreign minister of Iran couldn't get along well with the rulers in Iran and was dismissed and executed. In order to capture the international flavour at the university, some of us formed an organization called Club International. I was given the honour of being its president. Under its auspices, we sponsored a number of very impressive functions and debates.

Nelson is a good example of small-town British Columbia. It had one newspaper — *Nelson Daily* — and one radio station. NDU being the only post-secondary institution in town received a lot of coverage in the media. Both of these media outlets would always welcome any input from faculty and students at NDU. The atmosphere in town was also very pleasant. The surroundings were great for outdoor activities such as skiing, swimming, hiking etc. . . . I still vividly remember our hiking trips to the lovely Kokanee Glacier Park and historic towns including Kaslo, New Denver, Silverton, Sandon. Not very far from Nelson was a very

popular Ashram nestled in a beautiful setting. I believe it is still there. Nearly every town in BC has a special place of interest. Around Nelson, it is the beautiful Kootenay Lake and the Lakeside Park. This lake is a part of the famous Columbia River system that begins in the Rocky Mountains north of Revelstoke and flows all the way to the Pacific Ocean near Portland, Oregon.

During the holidays, I would visit my brother, family, relatives, and friends in Vancouver. The trip from Nelson to Vancouver and back was another delightful experience. Small Okanagan communities such as Osoyoos, Keremeos, Oliver, Grand Forks, Castlegar were a delight to visit. It reminded me of the small villages and towns of Punjab. In the 1970s these communities also brought in a large number of immigrants from the Punjab who bought the orchards, wineries and other farmland. Now this area is booming. At the end of June 1968, I received my teaching credentials and soon after accepted a teaching position in Hudson's Hope in northern British Columbia. A few years ago, I visited Nelson again. Certainly, this queen city of the Kootenays has changed a lot since 1968. However, its charm is still there.

From Dawson Creek to Lillooet: Political Activism, Voice and Family

The winters in the Peace River part of BC were unusually cold and harsh. However, global warming and huge reservoirs behind the Bennett Dam have made this area relatively warmer now. Also, the daylight hours in this part of BC are a lot longer during the summer months. For shopping, we would go to Dawson Creek and Fort Saint John. Dawson Creek is Mile zero of the world-famous Alaska Highway. Occasionally, we had our teachers' conferences in these towns where teachers from all over the Peace region would get together for professional development and social activities. During winter months the blowing snow would really give one a good taste of the northern winters. This small community inspired me, like many others, to get actively involved in the community. I became active in the local community association and the local teachers' association. This spirit of contribution to our communities inspires me.

Early in the school year, to my surprise, I was elected vice president of our District (Portage Mountain) Teachers' Association. At Christmas time, our president, Doug Green, moved to Kelowna. On the urgings of my colleagues, I agreed to take over as president. I served in this position till I moved to Lillooet in 1973. During my and my family's stay in Hudson's Hope for five years, we always felt included, appreciated, and respected. Driving in the north especially during the winter months is another challenge. However, the challenges are minimized alongside the positives like beautiful scenery, no traffic, ample and diverse wildlife, and a lot more. I still remember travelling to Fort Saint John one February on icy roads to attend a teacher's conference with some of my colleagues. We saw 23 moose either on the road or standing or walking along the road. The abundant and diverse wildlife in the north is just amazing.

While living and working in communities like Hudson's Hope I became very aware of the vastness of this country and inter-connection and interdependency of people on each other. It makes me proud of Canada and the wonderful people who have made it as one of the most open, inclusive, multicultural, and multilingual countries in the world. This small community of some 1,100 residents tucked away in the foothills of the

Rockies in northern British Columbia gave my family and me so much love; respect and recognition that I felt quite at home.

I still remember my first trip. At the end of August 1968, when I checked in at Vancouver International Airport for my flight to Hudson's Hope to begin my teaching career there, the Pacific Western Airlines rep at the counter turned to me and said: "Mr. Sanghera, you are going to God's country. Enjoy it." He was right. It really is. I thoroughly enjoyed myself living and working in the amazing Peace River region for five wonderful years. It has been more than 47 years since my family, and I moved south. However, the Peace River Region still has a very special place in my heart.

Living and working in northern BC for five years was a very enjoyable experience for me. However, despite all of the positives of living up north, my family and I missed our relatives, friends, cultural activities and of course, our community. By 1973 our community had changed drastically. Vancouver's Main Street, between 48th and 52nd avenues, had become an attractive shopping centre for our (Canadians of South Asian descent) community. A variety of businesses had sprung up there to meet community demand. As our community grew so did these businesses and people from all over BC and tourists from other provinces and international visitors made it a point to visit the popular "Punjabi Market", as this section of Main Street became known. Naturally, my family and I also had an urge to move closer to Vancouver. However, it was a pleasant surprise for me when I received a job offer to teach in Lillooet. This small yet historic "B. C's Little Nugget" is less than four hours by car from Vancouver.

Lillooet is a historic town. It is mile zero of the Gold Rush Trail to Barkerville. During the gold rush days of 1850s, Lillooet was a flourishing community with a rich First Nations heritage, gold rush and mining history. This area's unspoiled mountains, valleys and lakes are a delight for visitors to enjoy. The Lillooet area was home to a jade mine. It is reported that in late 1950s and early 1960s, Lillooet shipped more nephrite jade worldwide than any other place on earth. Lillooet's Golden Mile of History takes one from Bridge of 23 Camels to BC Railway Station, Lillooet Museum, Mile o Cairn, The Mining Rocks, The Miyazaki House, Town Hall, Hangman's Tree Park, The Camel Barn, Ma

Murray's Old Newspaper Office and the Old Bridge. This Golden Mile through downtown Lillooet gives the visitor an impressive view of this community's historic past.

When my family and I arrived in Lillooet, we were welcomed amongst others, by members of our community. There were around 30 Punjabi families living in Lillooet at that time with the men folks employed at the local lumber mill and it was a very pleasant surprise to see them. Lillooet's mayor at that time was a member of a Punjabi settler family. Johnder Basran is one of a few Punjabis, after Mission's Naranjan Singh Grewal to have that distinction. Basran and I became good friends and worked together on a number of projects designed to serve the community. As a matter of fact, it was Basran who encouraged me to become actively involved in the community.

After spending the summer with my brother and family in Vancouver, my family and I made our way to Lillooet in order to begin my teaching job at Cayoosh Elementary School in September 1973. The town, at that time had a bustling sawmill — Evans Forest Products, one of the main employers in town. Also, there were

other major employers including BC Forest Service, BC Rail, Government Agent's Office, and Court. Lillooet is the regional centre for surrounding communities and the Indigenous community. Tucked between the Fraser River on one side and the mountains on the other, this community has an ideal and very scenic setting.

Life in Lillooet

With a tag line of "Guaranteed Rugged", Lillooet is a great place to visit where a circuitous route provides the visitor with unique views. A visitor can travel to Lillooet by taking Highway Number 1 through Hope, Yale, Boston Bar and Lytton which offers a very

impressive view of the Fraser River Canyon, the mountains and other gorgeous scenery. Soon after my arrival in Lillooet, I became quite active in the community. This included my local teachers' association, Lillooet and District Historical Society and Lillooet and District Recreation Commission. Within less than two years of my arrival in Lillooet, Mayor Basran convinced me to seek election as an Alderman (City Councillor) and it was an honour for me to be elected to Municipal Council. I was re-elected six times, usually topping the polls. This involvement gave me an opportunity to learn more about the community that would be my home for the next 17 years.

This community added another dimension to

"Working with them helped me resolve some of the conflicts that were going on between some of our Punjabi and Indigenous workers employed in the local lumber mill. I was very impressed with the Indigenous culture."

my experience. A large number of students in my school were Indigenous. This helped me connect with some of the Indigenous leaders in and around Lillooet. Some of them became good friends of mine. Working with them helped me resolve some of the conflicts that were going on between some of our Punjabi and Indigenous workers employed in the local lumber mill. I was very impressed with the Indigenous culture. This culture has a lot to offer

and from time to time I would invite Indigenous elders to my class to speak to my students about their culture and traditions.

As a member of Lillooet's Municipal Council from mid 1970s to 1990, I had the privilege of spearheading a number of initiatives including a campaign to save the Old Bridge from demolition. This historic structure, built in 1911, is a major landmark of the community. It is very satisfying to learn that this bridge continues to be a popular tourist attraction for locals and visitors alike. Also, with the support and encouragement of my fellow councillors, I had the honour of initiating and leading the yearly celebration of Lillooet Days.

The Lillooet Days festivities have transformed into Apricot Tsquam Days which is now celebrated towards the end of July.

Punjabis contributed to the community. Lillooet had thirty or so Punjabi families who would get together at our house on special occasions like Diwali, Lohri, and Christmas, etc. for celebration. On Lillooet Days, which is a special community celebration, we would all work together to celebrate. The ladies would make samosas, gulab jamans, and other sweets and delicacies. Men folks would set up a temporary plywood structure called Punjabi Dhaba and hand out plates of these delicacies to the attendees. It used to be a lot of fun. At the end of the day, all of the Punjabi families — men, women and children — would meet at our place and have a party. Celebrations like these made life enjoyable for everyone.

Like every other community, Lillooet had some outstanding citizens and two of them stood out from others. Outspoken journalist, editor and publisher of the local newspaper, *Bridge River-Lillooet News*, Margaret Murray, was an institution in Lillooet. She was well known all over Canada as a feisty journalist and it was always a pleasure to have conversations with her. She was fondly known as Ma by everyone. Her favourite quote was: “That is for damn sure”. Her editorials in the local newspaper reflected Ma Murray’s no nonsense approach to journalism and the community issues. Dr. Masajiro Miyazaki was the other well-respected figure in the community. He served not only Lillooet but also the surrounding communities as a physician for many years. I had the opportunity to serve with Dr. Miyazaki on various organizations and enjoyed listening to his stories about the sufferings of

the Japanese community. Though he was a survivor of the internment of the Japanese community during World War II to the interior, he never complained.

Dr. Miyazaki once told me that Canadian residents of Japanese, Chinese and South Asian heritage could not buy a house in their names before 1947. However, he managed to buy one of the best houses in Lillooet in one of his European friend’s name. After 1947, that friend transferred the title of the house to Dr. Miyazaki. Ironically, before passing away, Dr. Miyazaki donated that very house to the Municipality of Lillooet. Now it is being used by the entire community and is known as Dr. Miyazaki Heritage House. What a beautiful gesture on his part! Both Ma Murray and Dr. Miyazaki were nationally recognized and both added immensely to Lillooet’s glorious past and to the Canadian Mosaic.



Balwant Sanghera at Cayoosh Elementary School, Lillooet, 1973.

Courtesy of Balwant Sanghera's personal collection.

Lillooet is Mile zero of the famous Gold Trail to Barkerville. Prospectors for gold would travel to Barkerville by horse when gold was discovered there in 1850s. It was a tedious journey and one person became more creative and is reported to have brought some camels to transport goods and people to Barkerville. However, after some time he had to get rid of the camels as they would scare the horses. Also, the rocky mountain terrain was hard on their feet as the camels seem to be more suited for deserts. There are still some remnants of their presence in Lillooet. Even the new Lillooet bridge is named after the camels — it is called The Bridge of 23 Camels.

Like every other community, Lillooet too had its ups and downs. One of the two local mills closed which left a number of workers without jobs. BC Rail closed its railway station, the courthouse moved to Kamloops and the forestry industry decreased its work force. All of this adversely affected the entire community. However, the people of Lillooet are very resilient and despite losing some of its main sources of employment, the District Municipality has not only survived but also flourished in some ways. Its Sheep Pasture Golf Course, The Kaoham Shuttle between Lillooet and Seton Portage, the Fort Berens Estate Winery, fishing, hiking and gold panning are just some of the wonderful things that offer so much to the visitor. Lillooet, in a sense, is really “Guaranteed Rugged”. In indoor and outdoor recreation, Lillooet offers unique opportunities.

While living and working in Lillooet, I upgraded my educational credentials through summer schools at University of British Columbia and received my Master of Education (M.Ed.) degree in 1983. I specialized in educational psychology and earned my credentials as a school psychologist. In this context, it was quite an experience for me to travel to Kamloops for 30 Saturdays to attend UBC’s outreach classes in order to complete my prerequisites for admission to the master’s program. This was one of my cherished professional goals.

My older son Barinder graduated from Lillooet Secondary School in June 1990 and was admitted to University of British Columbia (UBC). As such, my family and I realized it was time to move to the big city. I was offered and accepted a position as School Psychologist by Burnaby School District and we moved

to Richmond in early July, 1990. It has been our home since then.

Small towns of British Columbia have their own charms. Certainly, for shopping or health and other related services, there is a need to travel to much larger communities. For example, when my family and I were in Hudson’s Hope, we had to travel to either Fort Saint John or Dawson Creek for shopping. Similarly, when we were in Lillooet, we had to travel to Kamloops or Vancouver for family functions, shopping, celebrations and other services. This is the main drawback of living in small towns. However, on the positive side, these small communities offer simple living, minimum crime, minimal driving, a wonderful environment, and a strong sense of belonging. Usually, in small communities most of the people know each other fairly well and these small communities are ideal for raising a family. Everyone feels like an integral part of the entire community.

The other difference I noticed while living in small communities is that people appreciate more the contribution of any of its members for the betterment of the community. In this regard I can relate my own experience. Since everyone is on a first name basis, the people will stop you on the street and speak their mind, even though it may not be to one’s liking at times. However, most of the time, it is usually positive. For the small-town charm, natural beauty, simple life and community inclusion, my family and I have very special attachment to this wonderful community. As an active member of this community and an educator for more than 17 years (1973–1990) including 13 years as an Alderman (Councillor), I along with my family enjoyed every moment of our experience. We have very pleasant memories of this “small town with a big heart”.

Lillooet to Metro Vancouver: Tears and Change

Leaving a community where my family had lived for 17 years and become active community members who had built strong bonds and relationships with local residents, was a rather difficult decision. After spending 23 years in three of BC’s small communities, returning to Metro Vancouver, we had mixed feelings. Although we would visit metro Vancouver frequently, this time it was different, we stayed. Moving to Richmond and working in Burnaby was very exciting and challenging.



Paul Binning, Balwant Sanghera and Sadhu Binning at a PLEA meeting.

Courtesy of Balwant Sanghera's personal collection.

Our older son Barinder was all set to start his post-secondary education at UBC. Our younger son Balraj (Bobby) began his grade 10 at Richmond High School. I would start commuting from my Richmond home to Maples Adolescent Centre (The Maples) at the intersection of Willingdon and Canada Way in Burnaby. It was quite a change from a short walk to my workplaces in Hudson's Hope and Lillooet. The Maples was run by the Provincial Health Ministry, however, the educational services there were provided by Burnaby School District at this Provincial Resource Program where I was a school psychologist for the next fourteen years.

One of the first persons to connect me with the community was Paul Binning. Paul and I had met each other in Lillooet and become friends when he brought his team of young Bhangra dancers to Lillooet to participate in the Lillooet Day celebrations. As the main organizer of this event, it was a pleasure for me to host Paul and his group. Naturally, when

we moved to Richmond, it was great to see Paul. He had been organizing a very popular Multifest in East Richmond. Paul encouraged me to get involved and I never looked back. Over the years, Paul has become like a younger brother to me and thus began my long association with East Richmond Community Association (ERCA) also known as Cambie Community Centre. I served there as a Board member, Vice President and President for many years till my retirement from the Board in 2019.

Though my family and I were away from Metro Vancouver for almost 23 years, living in this part of the province on a regular basis was quite a different experience. The demographics of Canada in general and BC in particular had undergone a major shift. Metro Vancouver had become very multicultural and multilingual during this time. The South Asian community in general and Punjabis in particular had a major presence. Over the years, Surrey had become a major centre for

our community. Surrey's Scott Road area and later 128 Street had become our major shopping, cultural and religious centres and the growth continues.

Another major development for the Punjabi community in Metro Vancouver was the start of Nagar Kirtans by our Gurdwaras. The first major Nagar Kirtan was held by Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver to celebrate Vaisakhi and the birth of the Khalsa in 1979. Free food, free drinks and other goodies for the spectators have made these religious celebrations very attractive and enjoyable. More than 100,000 well-wishers come out to enjoy themselves every year in the Vancouver Nagar Kirtan. A few years later, Gurdwara Dasmesh Darbar on 128 Street and 85th Avenue began sponsoring the Nagar Kirtans in Surrey. Soon after that, Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara on Scott Road in Surrey began celebrating the Miri Piri Divas. Now these religious celebrations have become very popular not only in Vancouver and Surrey but also all over BC and Canada. Incidentally, the latest Nagar Kirtan in Surrey held in April 2019 is reported an attendance of half a million people. It is considered to be the biggest celebration of its kind outside Punjab.

As our community has grown so have the stores, facilities, places of worship, resources, and everything else. Surrey's Scott Road and 128 Street have become our new Punjabi Markets and business centres. For such progress, we owe a lot to our ancestors and early settlers who made sacrifices and endured struggles. Today our community has become one of the most prominent, powerful, resilient and generous communities in Canada. Unfortunately, this unprecedented growth and progress has also brought with it problems and issues. These include drugs, gangs, violence, alcoholism, domestic violence, unethical and inappropriate behaviour /activities as well as the exploitation and abuse of the vulnerable members of our community. In addition to this, issues relating to international students from India in cities like Brampton and Surrey often capture headlines not only in the South Asian Canadian media but also the mainstream media.

Punjabi Mother Tongue: Past, Present and Future

During my posting as a teacher in Hudson's Hope, BC I was the only Indo-Canadian on staff of 30 or so teachers and the community. One thing I missed the most

was to speak to someone in Punjabi. Around that time, I resolved, that if I can do anything to promote my mother tongue Punjabi, I would feel greatly honoured. Moving to Richmond in 1990 from Lillooet provided an excellent opportunity for me to work towards this goal. About that time, a number of people in Richmond including Kanwarjit Sandhu, Gurdial Singh Neel, Paul Binning, Jagjit Singh Sandhu, Prem Singh, Davinder Kaur Pawa and others were encouraging our children to learn Punjabi after school. Some of the Gurdwaras, including Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver were offering Punjabi classes at the Gurdwara premises and some neighbouring schools. However, the break for Punjabi came in 1994 when MLA Moe Sihota, a member of Premier Mike Harcourt's cabinet, managed to include Punjabi as one of the six official second languages to be taught in BC's public schools. Advocates such as Sadhu Binning and Inder Mehat encouraged the government to create these policies.

Around that time, I got involved in promoting Punjabi and Burnaby South became the first public school in BC to implement Punjabi as a second language. Unfortunately, it survived there only for one year. Around that time Sadhu, Aman Pal Sara, Paul and other advocates of Punjabi language came together and formed Punjabi Language Education Association (PLEA). Since then, PLEA continues to promote Punjabi in BC's public schools, colleges, universities, and the community. It has been a great honour for me to serve as PLEA's president. During these 25 plus years of PLEA's existence there have been a lot of developments.

Over the years, Surrey has become a major cultural, religious, business, and linguistic centre of our community. Surrey's current school population of about 77,000 students has nearly 17,000 students of Punjab heritage. Thus, it was natural for PLEA to try getting Punjabi classes under way in Surrey schools. When we initially approached Surrey School officials to implement Punjabi in Surrey schools, they stunned us by asking for additional funding to implement Punjabi. In this context we brought together our community leaders and went as a delegation to enforce our children's right to learn Punjabi in their schools during school time. This was a turning point and the Surrey School Board agreed with our request and began to co-operate

with PLEA. Since then, Surrey School District has been one of PLEA's major partners in promoting Punjabi in the district. Today, Punjabi classes are under way in six elementary and eight high schools in Surrey.

In addition to Surrey, Punjabi is also being taught in Burnaby, North Delta, New Westminster and a number of schools in Abbotsford. Punjabi was started at University of British Columbia in 1985 as a result of the Community establishing a Chair of Punjabi Language and Sikh Studies and has expanded to be included in university budgets and is offered at the University of the Fraser Valley, Simon Fraser University and Kwantlen Polytechnic University. At one time, Punjabi was also being taught in communities like Kamloops, Kelowna, Terrace, Oliver, Duncan and Victoria. Unfortunately, due to lack of students or teachers of Punjabi in these communities, it is not possible to have Punjabi classes outside Metro Vancouver. However, due to the gradual increase in the Punjabi speaking population, there is a huge demand for Punjabi speakers in every area. These include city halls, hospitals, stores, businesses, and organizations.

In the 2011 census, Punjabi is the third most spoken language in Canada after English and French. However, in the 2016 census Punjabi was pushed back to fifth place as Mandarin and Cantonese moved to third and fourth places after English and French. Despite these

setbacks Punjabi continues to enjoy a very prominent place in BC and Canada. For example, at the international level, Punjabi is in tenth place with 150 million speakers spread out in more than 180 countries. It is very encouraging to note that our younger generations taking pride in reading, writing, and speaking Punjabi.

Reflection

In my life I have seen and experienced many changes. One thing I have noticed is the lack of understanding and appreciation of the contributions of Canadians of Indian descent. Our community's heritage and past history in Canada since its arrival here more than 125 years ago needs to be given more prominence. Our younger generations and relative newcomers seem to lack the awareness and appreciation about the sacrifices and struggles that our early settlers had to go through so that the following generations could enjoy the good life in this country. The South Asian Canadian Legacy project and artefacts such as this book will help with educating communities about our contributions. The proposed South Asian Heritage museum in Surrey and the work being done by various organizations like The South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley in Abbotsford should go a long way in this regard.



Judge Valli Chettiar

“When a lawyer is appointed a judge of the Provincial Court of British Columbia it usually makes news – often an article in the local newspaper. However, the 2015 appointment of one Provincial Court judge made news around the world.”

<https://www.provincialcourt.bc.ca/enews/enews-24-01-2017>

Longing and belonging

Judge Valli Chettiar: A Passion for Equity

An Interview with Madhavee Inamdar

Judge Valliammai (Valli) Chettiar's first job in Canada, as a youth, was delivering newspapers. Little did she imagine that her journey in Canada would one day make news around the world! Judge Chettiar made history on July 31, 2015, when she was sworn in as a Provincial Court judge in British Columbia. She was the first person from Tamil Nadu, a southern state of India, to be appointed a judge in Canada.

Judge Chettiar hails from Chettinad, a territory of about 1,550 square kilometers in the southernmost part of India, home to 75 villages where the Nattukottai Chettiars, also known as the Nagarathars, live. The Nattukottai Chettiars have historically been merchants, traders, financiers, and bankers, known for their integrity and philanthropy. Of note is their contribution to the building of temples, education, and healthcare in Tamil Nadu. Since the late 1960s and the early 1970s, over 5,000 Chettiar families emigrated from India, with most settling in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Singapore. Of the approximately 75 million Tamils in the world, 200,000 are estimated to be in Canada, with an estimated 20,000 in British Columbia.

In 1967, Canada introduced a "points" system of immigration, assigning "points" to factors such as language fluency, education, and job skills. The new immigration rules opened the door to skilled immigrants from many Commonwealth countries, changing the face of Canada. Immigration from South Asian countries increased dramatically between 1970 and

1979. Judge Chettiar and her family immigrated to Canada during this period.

As a child, Judge Chettiar lived in different parts of India. Her father's work as a banker took the family from city to city. Her mother was a school and language tutor, but she focused on caring for the family. Judge Chettiar feels fortunate to have had a positive and loving family that instilled in her the values of hard work, persistence, respect, fairness, and service to one's community that have guided her throughout her life.

Judge Chettiar first faced discrimination as a member of an ethnic minority when she attended elementary and high school in Hong Kong, where her family moved when she was about eight. Her parents felt it was important for their children to return to Tamil Nadu to learn the culture and to further their education. After completing high school in Tamil Nadu, Judge Chettiar commenced her undergraduate study in science before immigrating to Canada.

By the time she arrived in Canada, Judge Chettiar had already lived in two other countries, experienced their cultures, and learned to speak Tamil, Hindi, English, and Cantonese.

As first-generation immigrants, Judge Chettiar's family met many challenges. They had to start from scratch in Canada. Life was not easy. The family faced subtle as well as overt racism and discrimination. Landlords refused to rent to them, and employers did not recognize their university educations, professional qualifications, and work experience from India and Hong Kong. But the family persisted. Her father downplayed his qualifications and lowered his expectations to

obtain work for which he was over-qualified. A South Asian family welcomed them as tenants.

The family was in survival mode but never regretted emigrating. They were close-knit and offered each other support at every step. With determination and hard work, the family succeeded in their new country.

Financial and family circumstances prevented Judge Chettiar from continuing her university education at that time, but that did not stop her from pursuing her passion for learning. She completed a secretarial program at Vancouver Community College and secured a job as a secretary. She thought she wanted to become a chartered accountant, but life had charted something different for Judge Chettiar. Her job with the Department of Justice motivated her to attend a part-time paralegal program at Capilano College. She enjoyed working on complex cases as a paralegal for a private law firm. She began to dream of going to law school. She still fondly remembers how she would call for and pour over the University of British Columbia law school calendar, year after year, in the hopes of one day going to law school. After working for more than ten years and having two children, Judge Chettiar decided to pursue her dream in 1989 and applied to law school. The rest is history.

Judge Chettiar worked diligently at law school, at times with her children by her side in the law library. After graduation, she clerked for the Supreme Court of British Columbia, articulated with a large Vancouver law firm, and practised law in a variety of settings for more than 20 years. After establishing a law practice in Chilliwack, she became a partner in a national law firm, and then general counsel to an investment management firm. Before her appointment as a judge, she served as an arbitrator and mediator for various provincial administrative tribunals.

As a judge of the Provincial Court, Judge Chettiar deals with criminal, family, child protection, youth, and civil cases. She is one of about 140 Provincial Court judges who work in more than 80 locations throughout the province to hear about 100,000 new cases a year.

Throughout her career as a lawyer, Judge Chettiar lectured extensively on law and other topics. She enjoys teaching and sharing knowledge. She particularly enjoys speaking to students. She beams

with excitement when she mentions how the Justice Education Society of British Columbia organizes outreach programs in elementary and high schools for judges to speak to students. She loves interacting with them. Telling them to dream big and believe in themselves, Judge Chettiar advises students to get involved with their community, volunteer for a social cause, and appreciate the privileges they have when so many others lack those privileges.

Judge Chettiar also enjoys mentoring young lawyers. The legal profession has always been male-dominated. Research indicates that women leave the profession due to the stress of balancing work and family responsibilities. Having worked in a national law firm 20 years ago, when few women of colour in BC were partners at national firms, she understands those stresses and believes it important to promote mentorship for women of colour in the legal profession.

What has always motivated Judge Chettiar is her passion for equity, her commitment to treating everyone with respect and fairness, and her determination to give something back to the communities she lives and works in.

For Judge Chettiar, a career in law was the best avenue to pursue her passion for equity, diversity, and social justice. Throughout her career, she has been involved in equity initiatives, including as Chair of the Canadian Bar Association (CBA) BC Equality Committee and as a member and Vice-Chair of the CBA National Standing Committee on Equity. She worked on initiatives promoting awareness of equity and diversity issues in the legal profession, including development of resources such as a discrimination and harassment training video for use by the legal profession, an equity and diversity training program for the CBA leadership, and the CBA Equity and Diversity Guide (a valuable resource for law firms and other legal organizations).

Judge Chettiar is a woman of many "firsts". She was one of the first members of The Law Society of BC's Equity and Diversity Committee to be appointed in her first year of call to the Bar. She was the first Equality Committee representative to serve on the CBABC's Executive Committee. As the first Chair of the CBA Racial Equality Implementation Committee, she was in charge of implementing 60

“My life has been full to the brim with hope, excitement, challenges, successes, and some disappointments as well, but professionally I cannot ask for more. As a Provincial Court judge in Canada, I have the most interesting, intellectually stimulating, and gratifying job imaginable.”



recommendations from the CBA's 1999 Report of the Working Group on Racial Equality. She was the first woman elected President of the Canada-India Business Council (BC Chapter) and a director of the Canada-India Business Council (National). In each of these roles, she was known for providing sound and valuable advice on complicated and sensitive issues. As CBA (BC Branch) Past President David A. Paul, Q.C., in his letter to the CBA dated April 21, 2011, stated,

what particularly struck me, and many others, about Ms. Chettiar, were her sincerity and deep understanding of equality issues and her tremendous ability to bravely, credibly, effectively, and respectfully advocate complicated and sometimes highly sensitive issues.

Judge Chettiar also volunteered with West Coast LEAF (Legal Education and Action Fund), South Asian Bar Association of British Columbia, BC Council of Administrative Tribunals, British Columbia Law Institute, British Columbia Council for International Education, The People's Law School, Portfolio Management Association of Canada, Simon Fraser University, University of the Fraser Valley, Vancouver

Community College, Parent Support Services Society of BC (formerly B.C. Parents In Crisis Society), and St. Jude's Anglican Home.

She presented seminars and workshops for immigrant services organizations, universities, conferences, and CBA and Law Society events. She contributed to law reform through the BC Law Institute and CBABC. She chaired two conferences on access to justice and alternative dispute resolution. She worked on initiatives to foster improvements in the administrative justice system, including promoting and assisting in the education and training of tribunal members, statutory decision-makers, and their staff. She provided advice in the development of court interpreters' certification programs.

She was appointed to the Government of British Columbia's Asia Pacific Trade Council, India Market Advisory Group, and the Simon Fraser University India Advisory Council. She chaired many community consultations and provided advice, including recommendations on leveraging BC's comparative advantage in the flow of people and knowledge between BC and India. She provided advice on Simon Fraser University's academic, research, and community

engagement initiatives with India and the local South Asian diaspora. She provided strategic advice to advance BC's international education interests. She promoted the interests of global companies, small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as academic and government organizations engaged in the Canada-India corridor, and hosted and participated in many high-level business and government delegations. She provided advice on Asian economic development, to aid in policy development for BC.

The broader BC community benefitted from Judge Chettiar's contributions to projects aimed at preventing family violence, and abuse and neglect of marginalized members of society. She presented a series of live radio and television programs for multicultural communities. She also trained immigrant settlement workers and worked with The People's Law School and other organizations in developing educational tools with culturally appropriate content to prevent family violence. She provided advice on initiatives (such as parent support circles and education programs) aimed at protecting the safety and well-being of children and promoting the health of families, and delivery through support, education, advocacy, research, and resources to those in a parenting role.

Judge Chettiar's reach has been local, provincial, national, and international. She has made invaluable contributions to the social, cultural, and economic fabrics of her community and country. She has also made her Nagarathar community and country of origin proud.

Her contributions and accomplishments have been recognized with numerous awards. In 2004, she received the Pravasi Excellence Award in New Delhi, India for her contributions toward the socio-economic development of Canada and India. In 2008, the CBABC acknowledged Judge Chettiar's significant contributions by awarding her the Equality and Diversity Award. In 2012, the CBA bestowed upon Judge Chettiar the prestigious Touchstone Award for her outstanding work in promoting equality in the legal community. She was profiled in the 2006 and 2008 *Women in the Lead / Femmes de Tête* directories, and the UBC Peter A. Allard School of Law Alumni Profiles and the History Project.

Judge Chettiar's contributions to, and leadership in,

the legal profession have been significant and highly regarded by her peers and the community. The former Dean of the UBC Faculty of Law, Professor Mary Anne Bobinski said,

Ms. Chettiar has been able to effect real systemic change and transform the landscape of the Canadian legal profession. . . .countless organizations, legal institutions, lawyers, and students have benefitted as a direct result of her efforts.

The 2012 Chair of the CBA's Standing Committee on Equity, Aleem Bharmal, described Judge Chettiar as among the legal profession's

strongest leaders on equality and diversity issues.

Thelma J. O'Grady, Life Bencher, considers Judge Chettiar

[a] pioneer in the issues of equity and diversity in the profession, and a tireless volunteer in her profession and the community to bring about a more just and inclusive Canadian society.

Judge Chettiar is also cherished by her fellow practitioners. Jacy J. Wingson, Q.C., partner with McQuarrie Hunter LLP says,

Valli has been a catalyst for systemic change for the benefit of not only those marginalized in the legal community but also in the greater community with a particular emphasis on South Asian women.

Judge Chettiar's former colleague, friend, and mentor, Grant K. Weaver, retired partner of Norton Rose Fulbright calls her,

A friend to many. A source of strength to many. An inspiration to many. [Valli's] contribution and support for women's issues and matters related to discrimination comes from her heart. Many have benefited from her endeavours . . . [She is] a credit to the legal profession, her community, her country, to women, and to all people of colour.

Judge Chettiar enjoys sharing her passion, knowledge, and experience. She has mentored many young lawyers and others. She is a sought-after speaker at workshops, seminars and conferences, particularly on issues of equity, diversity, and social justice, and on legal topics relating to her practice areas. Saroj Ludhera, formerly of The People's Law School, said, as a prolific and

dedicated provider of legal and public education, Judge Chettiar has made an

outstanding contribution to promoting cultural harmony in the community by offering her assistance and expertise to the community who does not speak English.

Kathryn A. Berge, Q.C., Life Benchers, noted that as a legal practitioner Judge Chettiar was lead counsel in the area of wills, estates and trusts. Judge Chettiar contributed to the reform of BC's succession laws, which led to the enactment of the *Wills, Estates and Succession Act*. She was a respected and experienced lawyer, mediator and arbitrator. Ms. Berge said,

if there is one fine quality in Valli that stands out, it is the independence of thought and quality of judgment that she brings . . . Valli continues to demonstrate excellence in all that she does.

As a judge, Judge Chettiar continues to volunteer her services to the community by serving on the Board of Mediate BC, whose mission is to lead, promote, and facilitate quality mediation and other collaborative dispute resolution processes in British Columbia. Mediate BC plays an important role in improving access to justice for the people of British Columbia. She continues to interact with and inspire elementary, high school, and law students.

Judge Chettiar believes her life challenges made her resolute to achieve her dreams and to make a positive difference in other people's lives. Starting law school late in life, she had to balance her responsibilities as a lawyer with her responsibilities as a mother to two young children, and in doing so, inculcated the same values of respect and fairness in them. She said,

they grew up observing me do all this advocacy work. Without me realizing it, they too embraced the principles I was advocating.

Today, Judge Chettiar's children are highly educated, responsible, married adults with young children who have sincerely embraced equity, diversity, and inclusion in their own lives that family gatherings at the Chettiar residence now resemble a meeting at the United Nations.

Judge Chettiar says Canada is a great country where you can succeed with hard work. She believes we have made progress in advancing equity and diversity, but there is more to do. Judge Chettiar speaks appreciatively of the work The Law Society of BC and the Canadian Bar Association have done to address racial discrimination and to support equity, diversity, and inclusion in the legal profession. She is optimistic about the efforts of BC's Judicial Council to encourage lawyers from diverse backgrounds to apply for appointment as a Provincial Court judge, and the appointments that have resulted. The Judicial Council's annual reports provide detailed information about applicants' numbers and demographics.

Judge Chettiar credits her many successes not only to her hard work and dedication, but also to her family, friends, and colleagues who guided and supported her in her life journey. She is grateful to and draws immense strength from the love and support of her family.

Judge Chettiar and her husband have two children and four grandchildren. She cherishes the time she spends with them.

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Talent



Canadian Bangladeshi youth volunteers are being recognized and awarded certificates at a special event celebrating the Bengali New Year organized by the Greater Vancouver Bangladesh Cultural Association in 2017.

Photo credit: Haroon Rashid

Longing and belonging

The Canadian-Bangladeshis in British Columbia

Migration, Settlement Patterns, and Community Building

Habiba Zaman¹ and Sanzida Habib²

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a social history of the growing Canadian-Bangladeshi community in British Columbia, more specifically in the Greater Vancouver area. It is based on available published sources, anecdotal stories, and our own research with Bangladeshi immigrants in Canada. We provide a broad overview and a social history of the migration of Bangladeshis to Canada, particularly in the aftermath of Bangladesh independence in 1971. A socio-economic profile is presented focusing on employment, workplace experience, and settlement patterns of the Canadian-Bangladeshis, followed by a description of socio-cultural organizations, cultural identity, and inter-cultural experience, particularly by second generation of Canadian-Bangladeshis. Our personal journeys and experiences are shared as migration stories within the context of the growing history and culture of the Canadian-Bangladeshis in multicultural Canada.

KEYWORDS

Canadian-Bangladeshis, migration, settlements, community building, British Columbia

Introduction

The history of the migration of Bangladeshis to Canada is relatively recent compared to other major Asian communities such as the Chinese, Japanese, and Indian diaspora. The presence of a small number of Bengalis (from erstwhile East Pakistan) is reported in some literature (Zaman and Habib, 2019); however, migration of Bangladeshis to Canada effectively started in the 1970s and early 1980s. Today, an estimated 100,000 Bangladeshi immigrants live in Canada.³ We use the word “immigrant” in a broader sense that includes the legal concept of immigrant, Canadian citizens (by birth and naturalization) with Bangladeshi ancestry, students,

migrants, asylum seekers, and so on. The numbers of Bangladeshi immigrants are growing with the increasing migration annually. However, it is difficult to ascertain any number definitively from official sources as Bangladeshis are frequently lumped under South Asians in Canadian Census.

Since 2000, the Canadian-Bangladeshi community has grown significantly in the Greater Vancouver region⁴ and in other parts of British Columbia as well. As a result, one can find Canadian-Bangladeshis in almost all sectors of the BC labour market and in schools, colleges, universities, neighborhoods, “ethnic” shops, mosques, and other public places. The increasing

number of Bangladeshi immigrants has also led to the growth of new community organizations relevant to Bengali art, culture, music, language, religion, and intercultural institutions that are playing a helpful role in building the Canadian-Bangladeshi community in multicultural Canada.

Objectives and Methodology

The chapter provides a broad social history of the Canadian-Bangladeshis in British Columbia. It includes the various dimensions of the social-cultural characteristics and other relevant information such as employment, occupation, settlement, work, religion, and socio-political organizations of the community. Social history can provide a vital clue to the development of the community, the constraints encountered, and how the Bangladeshi immigrants adapted to the challenges. The description and the history should be viewed as an early (and perhaps an incomplete) attempt to highlight the unique history of Bangladeshi migrants in B.C. within the framework of Canadian multiculturalism.

Available published sources, anecdotal stories, our own research with Bangladeshi immigrants in Canada and our own experiences inform this chapter. We provide a broad overview and a social history of the migration of Bangladeshis to Canada, particularly in the aftermath of the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. We highlight employment, workplace experience, settlement patterns, education, cultural identity, and intercultural experiences, focusing further on the second generation of Canadian-Bangladeshis. Both of us also share our own personal journeys and experiences as migration stories. We both are originally from Bangladesh and migrated to Canada as graduate students. Both of us have strong ties and connections with the Canadian-Bangladeshi community in Greater Vancouver for a long period of time. For instance, Sanzida was Secretary of the Greater Vancouver Bangladesh Cultural Association (GVBCA), and the Mother Language Lovers of the World Society (MLLWS). Sanzida has been a very active member of the Bengali drama, music, and cultural groups over the past 20 years or so. Over these years, Sanzida lived in Burnaby, Vancouver, Richmond, and Surrey. Habiba taught for two years in the early 1990s at the University of Victoria and was part of a tiny Bangladeshi

community in Victoria. She moved to Simon Fraser University in 1995. Apart from teaching, Habiba was a Board member of the South Asian Network for Secularism and Democracy (SANSAD) and South Asian Film Education Society (SAFES) in Greater Vancouver for more than a decade. Finally, the chapter has benefitted from the two conferences the authors organized: first, *Canada 150: Migration of Bengalis* (Zaman and Habib, 2018)⁵ and second, *Canadian South Asian Youth* (Zaman and Habib, 2019). Materials from the two conferences have been used with due credit to the original authors whenever appropriate.

The Policy Context and Migration

The migration of Bangladeshis to Canada is closely linked to two significant factors. First, the 1967 Immigration Act of Canada removed overt historical racial discrimination and established a universal point system for potential immigrants. Under the point system, the principal applicant's age, education, training, labour market experience, and knowledge of one of the official languages (English or French) were considered for the selection of immigrants. The elimination of racial discrimination was further enshrined in the Immigration Act of 1976, which came into effect with several amendments, and with the introduction of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act in 2002. Second, the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan occurred after a ten-month bloody armed struggle in December 1971. During the Pakistan period, prospects for going abroad for people in erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) were barely feasible due to stringent bureaucratic procedures and favoritism to officials, academics, and people in West Pakistan (now Pakistan). Consequently, the Pakistanis who migrated to Canada were largely from West Pakistan. Very few people from then East Pakistan who migrated to Canada were professionals, such as, doctors, engineers, professors, and so on. In sum, the pioneers of Bangladeshi origin immigrants in British Columbia (1950–1970), more specifically, in Greater Vancouver, were professionals, and they were known to each other due to their tiny numbers.

Historically, Bangladeshis migrated under three broad categories: (a) skilled/independent category; (b) the family class category; and (c) the refugee category.

In the past ten years, a large number of the student population from Bangladesh migrated to study in both public and private universities and colleges and later earned immigrant status under the independent/skilled category. This increasing trend of the independent category has been happening for a combination of factors. First, Canadian Immigration Policy increasingly emphasizes skilled immigrants, and the criteria include education, training, and work experience in Canada. Secondly, due to neo-liberalism, the government of Bangladesh has recently adopted market-oriented policies regarding emigration/migrant labour that has facilitated migrants leaving Bangladesh without major bureaucratic hurdles. Thirdly, many younger populations in Dhaka, the capital city, attend English medium schools in British O/A Level programs as a route to enter Canadian/US universities and colleges. Finally, the expanding sources of information via the internet/webs are now helpful to potential immigrants and students for faster contacts whether it is for immigration or admission to universities/colleges in Canada. This was different in the 1980s for students seeking graduate studies in Canadian universities. The only valid source for academic information was the Commonwealth Universities Yearbook or friends/families already living and/or studying in Canada. As an example, when Habiba migrated to Canada as a graduate student at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg in 1981, the only source of information was her spouse who was already a graduate student at the University of Manitoba. In the 1980s, Winnipeg had a small well-knit Bangladeshi community, the majority of whom were international graduate students and only a few doctors and engineers were immigrants.

Profiles of Canadian-Bangladeshis in BC

As noted earlier, an estimated 100,000 Canadian-Bangladeshi live in Canada. The major concentration of Bangladeshis is in the two large provinces of Quebec and Ontario, followed by British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. A large majority of Bangladeshi immigrants thus live in Central and Western Canada, in major cities like Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Regina, Edmonton, Calgary, and Vancouver. An estimated 10,000

Bangladeshis live in BC. Of this, more than 7,000 live in the Greater Vancouver region.

Settlement Patterns and Support Services

In Greater Vancouver, one can find Bangladeshi origin people in every city and municipality — from Vancouver to Maple Ridge to the east and from North Vancouver to Surrey in the south and all over the Lower Mainland. This is different from Toronto where there is a mini Bangladesh along Danforth Street. Bangladeshi families live in all kinds of housing — for instance, apartments, townhomes, duplexes, and detached houses. A major concentration of these immigrant populations can be found in the City of Surrey, considered the hub of the Canadian-Bangladeshi community. Fraser Street in Vancouver and its vicinity has become the second nucleus or centre with a few Bengali shops and “ethnic” stores. Fraser Street is increasingly becoming a popular destination due to the “ethnic” characteristic of the area and easy access to Downtown Vancouver. The decision for housing and settlement by new immigrants often depends on the presence or absence of friends, families, and kinfolk in the chosen locality.

Generally, the Bangladeshis accommodate new arrivals for a few days and sometimes a couple of weeks and then, find affordable rental accommodation for the new immigrants as well as students. It is almost unheard of any immediate support received by newcomers from the Immigrants and Settlement Services. Typically, friends or family members receive newcomers — immigrants and non-immigrants such as students and visitors at the airport. However, new immigrants receive services from the Immigrants and Settlement Services in terms of finding jobs, language training, workshops/sessions providing information about Canada and Indigenous population, filing taxes, how to write curriculum vitae for various kinds of jobs, and so on. The Multicultural Helping House Society (MHHS) on Fraser Street, Vancouver, has played a major role in this regard. The MHHS has had on its staff at least one *Bangla*-speaking settlement worker for the past several years. The MHHS venue is also used by many Bangladeshi social-cultural organizations for their meetings and cultural programs. In addition, *Bangla*-speaking individuals also work in some settlement

services that routinely provide relevant information to the community.

The structure of Bangladeshi family types in the Greater Vancouver region is mostly nuclear although some families are multi-generational with older parents, who have come to Canada under the family class/unification program. A conventional gendered division of labour as in Bangladesh is not noticed among Canadian-Bangladeshis. Due to the economic necessity, both men and women work — vastly at the entry-level, part-time, temporary, and flexible work where hours and schedules are often erratic. The nature of paid labour, as well as child-care responsibility, has restructured the conventional gendered division of labour in the family. Both men and women/spouses participate in household chores — cooking, cleaning, washing, shopping, driving, and so on. However, childcare and care activities are mainly performed by women. In terms of children's schooling, the families emphasize high academic performance that results in friction and tension between parents and children.⁶ Immigration under family class has in some cases led to friction and conflict among family members, often between spouses leading to separation and/or divorce.

Education and Employment

A significant majority of the Bangladeshis in the Greater Vancouver region came to Canada under the skilled category — for instance, engineers, doctors, IT experts, professors, technicians, bankers, computer scientists, and so on. Bangladeshi immigrants are also found in other sectors such as health, education, care work, service sector, real estate, hotels, restaurants, security arena, taxis and limousine, food industries, medium shops, established chain stores, electronic stores, and so on. Some have established small businesses such as restaurants, groceries, post office outlets, boutiques clothing, immigration consultation, home-made food, and goods production as well as delivery services.

Most small businesses rely on family/kin labour and these people work seven days a week without any day off. Bangladeshi-owned grocery stores on Fraser Street (Dhaka Bazar, Nurjahan) and in Surrey (Gulshan) import a variety of fish from Bangladesh — for instance, *hilsa*, *rui*, *katla*, *koral*, *koi*, *magur*, *kachki*, *Bele* and so on. Bangladeshis are known for their love for

fish. The *hilsa* is the most expensive and mouth-watering fish of all. The first day of the Bengali year — i.e., *Pahela Baishakh* (14th April) starts with *hilsa-pantha* (hilsa with wet rice), which is a cultural tradition. In Vancouver, the *Pahela Baishakh* coincides with the Canadian Punjabi celebration and historical *Vaisakhi parade*. The Bangladeshi stores also sell *halal* meat—chicken, beef, and goat meat, which is popular among Bangladeshis and Muslim immigrants from other countries such as Malaysia, Pakistan, and countries in Africa.

New immigrants search for jobs on their own and usually take a prolonged time to find their “skill” related jobs. The recognition of their skills and training in Bangladesh and their adjustment to a new country requires a lengthy period, and in the process, their skills frequently erode and thus experience loss of credentials. Ultimately, many get skill-training in related and/or different sectors, and then, land on jobs while sacrificing their original work and profession (for details, see Zaman, 2006). For example, a trained doctor in Bangladesh gets training in the health sector and is placed in a hospital or lab setting in a much lower position. A good number of professionals drive cabs due to the erosion of skills and training in their original fields. The cab drivers are financially well-off although they work for prolonged hours including night shifts. Some work as security guards (mostly men) and in call centres (mostly women).

To counter this loss of credentials and to help new immigrants, Bangladeshi professional engineers with Canadian degrees and work experiences established an association, namely Bangladeshi Engineers and Applied Sciences of British Columbia (BEASBC) in 2005 to provide support to trained engineers from Bangladesh. The BEASBC is a registered non-profit voluntary engineering professional organization, which provides information and career development workshops to new immigrant engineers, assists in job searches, networking, and even holds cultural events within the Greater Vancouver region (for more information, see Bhuiyan, 2019).

Two significant features regarding education and employment should be noted. Middle-aged Bangladeshis encounter more challenges in terms of entry into their professional career. Young professionals



First- and second-generation artists from the Canadian Bangladeshi community in Metro Vancouver performing on the stage at an event organized by the GVBCA to observe the Victory Day of Bangladesh on December 16, 2016.

Photo credit: Mostafizur Rahman Rajib

and graduate students—mostly trained in Canada—get entry into professional jobs far more quickly. A sharp gendered division of employment is also noticeable. For example, women get training and certification in Early Childhood Education and work in pre-school and daycare centres; some have opened daycare centres at their homes. A significant number of male immigrants work in the health care setting as nursing assistants in care centres and senior homes.

Canada accepts more than a quarter of million people as immigrants due to the demands for labour in the economy. Despite the continuous annual flow of immigrants, a shortage of labour even happens when the economy is booming although immigrants receive the brunt of racism when the unemployment rate is higher. In contrast to other provinces, the BC economy has enjoyed relative stability with modest growth in the recent past. As a result, there has been a shortage of labor in the BC labor market. As new immigrants, both men and women take whatever jobs are available in the job market irrespective of their skills and past professional careers. Many remain in the same job for years, while small numbers upgrade their skills through

additional training and certification and landed on desired jobs (Zaman, 2012).

Socio-Cultural Organizations and Community Building:

A Brief Overview

Although the Bangladeshi community is relatively new and smaller compared to the Punjabi or other South/Asian communities, there are presently many organizations (or at least, organized groups and clubs that coordinate socio-cultural programs and activities) of different scales and calibres and with various missions within this community. A growing number of Bangladeshi newcomers and their families in Metro Vancouver feel the need to celebrate their Bangladeshi heritage and national days in their new homeland. The need to transmit and teach children and youth Bangladeshi culture, language, festivals, and traditions has motivated the community members to create different social, cultural, and religious organizations. A couple of smaller associations established in the late 80s and early 90s were unified in 2002 to form the Greater Vancouver Bangladesh Cultural Association (GVBCA), the largest and most well-known common



Both authors are seen participating in the colourful parade called *Mangal Shovajatra* that summons the blessing of the Bengali New Year or *Pahela Vaishakh*, the biggest yearly event organized by the Greater Vancouver Bangladesh Cultural Association in 2016.

Photo credit: Mostafizur Rahman Rajib



Delicious Bangladeshi indigenous pancakes and pastries (*pitha*) for sale at the popular festival (*Pitha Utsav*) organized by GVBCA in January 2017.

Photo credit: Haroon Rashid



Bangladeshi community members participating under the banner of an art-based organization, *Mookhosh* in the Hyak Festival (2012) parade that takes place on the last Saturday of May each year in New Westminster city.

Photo credit: Mohiuddin Ahmed Shaheen.

platform of the Bangladeshi community (Habib and Rahman, 2017). The GVBCA was registered as a non-profit society under the BC Societies Act in response to the community's desire and need to come together to organize special events and sociocultural activities and programs as the small population started growing. For that reason, GBVCA is regarded as the "mother organization" of Bangladeshi people in British Columbia.

The general purpose of this organization is to promote the national heritage, culture, and linguistic history of Bangladesh in the multicultural society of Canada. The Association observes important national days of Bangladesh, including Independence Day (March 26) and Victory Day (December 16). It also celebrates Bangladeshi Bengali cultural heritage through organizing secular events including *Pahela Baishakh* (Bengali New Year) and *Pitha Utsav* (festival of Bangladeshi pan/cakes, desserts), and social events, such as an annual picnic and Eid Reunion following *Eid-ul-Fitr*, the biggest celebration of the Muslim community. *Baishakh Mela*, a fair to celebrate the Bengali New Year, is the largest and most popular event of the Association.

Among the other sociocultural organizations and legally registered societies, the most prominent ones are the Canada Bangladesh Community Centre (CBCC), the Mother Language Lovers of the World Society (MLLWS), and the Vancouver Tagore Society (VTS). The Society for Bangladesh Climate Justice (SBCJ), *Utsav* (meaning "festival" composed mostly of Bangladeshi Bengalis of Hindu faith), the Dhaka Club, and the Badminton Club are examples of the other noticeable organizations while the Association of Bangladeshi Engineers and Applied Scientists of BC, and the Bangladeshi Agriculturalist Association of BC are major professional organizations. The Tagore Society promotes culture, especially Bengali culture, and presents the work of Tagore, the Nobel-laureate Bengali poet, philosopher, and humanist, through multicultural activities, events, and festivals. This organization is very successful in presenting and integrating Bengali arts, music, and culture into

mainstream Canadian society in Greater Vancouver through building partnerships and collaborations with other “ethnic” groups and mainstream organizations to organize events for multicultural audiences. It has also been successful in receiving funds from the municipal government to organize such events.

The CBCC collects funds and organizes fundraising events with the purpose of building a community center — a facility and physical space where Bangladeshis and various immigrant groups gather to hold events and programs. The Centre also aims to provide distinctive settlement and employment programs and services for newcomers from Bangladesh. The organization aspires to preserve and celebrate “Bangladeshi identity” and to provide customized support for Bangladeshi immigrants to settle and integrate while keeping its doors open to people of all other nationalities and cultures. A couple of important but currently inactive or extinct organizations are the Praveen Wellness Association (PWA) and *Prabash Bangla*. The PWA used to organize programs for seniors and initiated the “Eid Reunion” event, which was eventually brought under the bigger banner of GVBCA. *Prabash Bangla* used to organize cultural programs, especially the *Rabindra-Nazrul Jayanti* (a birthday celebration of two renowned poets and cultural icons of Bengal) every year for many years. Another small but mighty organization is *Mukhosh* (meaning “mask”) formed by some Bangladeshi painters and fine arts professionals who have tirelessly provided support to many community events by creating beautiful and unique backdrops, stage decorations, placards, festoons, and other adornment items for parades. Recently it registered as the Bengali Theater Society to practice and perform stage drama and skits.

It is neither possible nor is the objective to describe or even mention all the organizations, clubs, and groups and their activities in this chapter. The names of these organizations alone demonstrate a great diversity of interest groups and organized activities within the Bangladeshi Bengali diaspora in Metro Vancouver. Members of all these other smaller organizations usually come together under the banner of the GVBCA, the umbrella organization, to reach out and network with each other, and particularly to celebrate the national days and heritage of Bangladesh in a unifying and

befitting manner, thus celebrating their identity as Bangladeshi Bengali Canadians.

The Lower Mainland Bengali Cultural Society (LMBCS) was established in 1977 and then registered as a Society in 1979. It is a non-profit charitable organization of Bengalis from West Bengal, India. The organization started activities with Bengali-speaking people in the Vancouver Lower Mainland who migrated from West Bengal and other parts of India as well as from Bangladesh. Since the community was quite small back in the 1970s, they found common ground based on shared language and cultural experiences. The founding members envisioned “a secular and non-political platform for Bengalis”; however, later, the religious festivals of *Durgapuja* and *Saraswatipuja* were added due to popular demand and based on consensus of the members in the early 1980s. At that time, the number of Bangladeshi Bengalis increased, and they started having their own programs, activities, and organizations.

Members of both Bengali communities still attend each other’s programs and events, and a good number of Bangladeshi Bengalis are still official members of LMBCS with the common mission to promote Bengali culture and heritage. The Society organizes various socio-cultural activities and events to foster and carry forward Bengali traditions and values alongside the other great traditions in the Lower Mainland. Other major activities include running a *Bangla* School for children and a small bursary for members to support post-secondary education of their children. On the other hand, the festivals of *Pitha Utsav* and *Pahela Baisakh* attract many Bengalis from West Bengal. The religious festivals of *Durgapuja* organized by *Utsav* and cultural programs such as *Rabindra-Nazrul Jayanti* have been quite successful in integrating Bengalis from both Bangladesh and India across Muslim, Hindu, and Christian faith groups. The two major events of the VTS, namely the Tagore Spring Festival and the West-Coast Tagore Festival, have also been successful in this regard, although they seem to attract the highly educated and elite class of the Bengali diaspora in Greater Vancouver. *Bangla* language (the mother tongue of Bengalis) provides a bond among the Bengalis. The *Bangla* speaking people from Bangladesh and West Bengal (India) are the seventh-largest linguistic



Young students of the Vancouver Bangla language school along with their parents, community leaders, and committee members of the Greater Vancouver Bangladesh Cultural Association.

Photo credit: Haroon Rashid

group in the world. Not only do the first-generation Bangladeshis speak *Bangla* at home, but they also feel proud of their language, and take extra efforts to teach *Bangla* to their children and grandchildren.

The community runs a *Bangla* school during the weekend for young children. A partnership between the City of Vancouver and the Vancouver Bangla School was established in February 2020 under the GVBCA leadership. The school would have been able to use free space at Sunset Community Center to continue its activities; however, classes needed to happen virtually rather than in person due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Further, many households subscribe to *Bangla* channel network, and thus, regularly receive information about Bangladesh, and watch contemporary *Bangla* drama, i.e., *natok*, serials, films, and cultural events. In short, the first-generation Canadian Bangladeshis have close connections with their country of origin despite geographical distance. Further, many of them visit Bangladesh annually or biennially, sometimes as an individual or as a family together.

A Toronto-based organization named Bangladeshi-Canadian Community Services (BCCS) provides settlement, employment, and family support services as well as information, referral and crisis support for assaulted women in Ontario. This organization also

runs a Canada-wide online forum named Bangladeshi Canadian/Canadian Bangladeshi (BCCB) to recognize the different identities of the first and second generations of people immigrating from Bangladesh while working to bring them together based on common interests and experiences. Most provinces or major metropolitan Canadian cities have a separate chapter of this online group. The BCCB Vancouver chapter has recently gained increased visibility and significance among the Bangladeshi diaspora in BC as they successfully utilize popular social media platforms to connect and serve the community

members. They led organization of online activities and events for the community, especially during the lockdown and social distancing periods of the pandemic.

In general, all these sociocultural and virtual organizations including the Bangla School play a significant role in community development, promoting the inclusion and unification of community members of diverse ages, religions, regions, educational, professional, and socioeconomic backgrounds. None of these organizations in BC provide any direct settlement services to Bangladeshi or Bengali immigrants but play an important role in the settlement of many by providing an opportunity to socialize and build friendships, support networks, and a sense of community in a new country and culture away from their original home. Through various celebrations, festivals, and events, it creates an atmosphere and opportunity for the diasporic community to feel at home and to make Canada, their new home. Such events, programs, and activities contribute to the wellbeing of many newcomers and immigrants from Bangladesh. These organizations also promote volunteerism and foster leadership opportunities for community members, especially youth. Bangladeshi Canadians thus organize, collaborate, participate, and lead community building activities in Metro Vancouver, BC.

MLLWS and International Mother Language Day

One of the most significant contributions of Bangladeshis in British Columbia is the establishment of the Mother Language Lovers of the World Society (MLLWS) that ultimately led to the proclamation by UNESCO of the 21st February as the International Mother Language Day (IMLD) in 1999. The IMLD is now globally celebrated on the 21st of February annually. The MLLWS creates awareness about linguistic diversity, inclusive education and multilingualism, and the importance of protecting minority and endangered languages. Every year the organization locally celebrates the IMLD in the Lower Mainland and organizes the Mother Language Festival to bring together Canadians of various linguistic and cultural origins who celebrate their heritage and enrich Canadian multiculturalism.

Under the banner of the MLLWS, which consists of 10 members representing seven languages (Bengali or *Bangla*, English, Cantonese, German, Hindi, Tagalog, and Kachi) a letter to the United Nations Secretary General Kofi Anan was sent requesting him to take steps to save all languages of the world from the possibility of extinction. The letter also proposed to the UN to declare 21st February, in memory of the language martyrs of 1952 in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), as the International Mother Language Day. The effort was led by the late Rafiqul Islam, a freedom fighter for the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.

After going through some formal procedures that included routing through the member country Bangladesh and supported by other countries such as Canada, Hungary, India, and Finland, the proposal arrived at the UNESCO Secretariat in Paris. Twenty-eight member countries endorsed the draft resolution. On 12th November 1999, UNESCO submitted the resolution to the UN General Assembly. On 17 November 1999, the resolution was adopted by all 198 countries including Canada. They unanimously agreed to observe 21st February as “International Mother Language Day” to promote and preserve linguistic and cultural diversity.

The adoption of IMLD by UN/UNESCO



Bangladeshi stall at the Fusion Festival in Surrey city, 2014. Photo credit: Hasan Mamun



Bangladeshi community members at the summer picnic organized by GVBCA on August 31, 2008. Photo credit: Hasan Mamun



The current president of the Mother Language Lovers of the World Society (MLLWS), Aminul Islam at the Mother Language Festival at Bear Creek Park pavilion in May 2018. The festival is organized every year since 2013 with funding support from the City of Surrey. Photo credit: Haroon Rashid



Late Rafiqul Islam, the visionary of the International Mother Language Day (IMLD) and the founding president of the Mother Language Lovers of the World Society (MLLWS) at the celebration of *Ekushe*, and IMLD in front of a make-do replica of the *Shahid Minar* at UBC Choi Building on February 21, 2007.

Photo credit: Hasan Mamun

has created far-reaching impacts on language, culture, and human rights at the local, national, and international levels. Since 1999, the IMLD is celebrated in February in a befitting manner not only in Canada and Bangladesh but also all over the world. The Bengali song “*Amar bhaiyer rokte rangano ekushey February*” (translation: 21st February is soaked in my brothers’ blood) is being sung in various languages including English, French, German, Russian, Hungarian, Hindi, and so on (available on YouTube). Sanzida as a Research Associate of CISAR organized the IMLD successfully for the past five consecutive years at UBC (2017–2021 including the pandemic year) where Habiba was a co-organizer (for more on IMLD, see Islam and M. Zaman, 2018; M. Zaman and Islam 2020).

Mosque and Islamic Information Centre

Most Bangladeshi immigrants/migrants are Muslims who pray at mosques. This religious congregations play an important role in community building. As Muslims, Bangladeshis have access to any mosque in British Columbia, and they usually visit the mosque near their residences. Currently, according to a rough estimate, there are approximately 30 mosques (including official

mosques and community-built unlisted prayer spaces) in Greater Vancouver, and Bangladeshis are involved in various activities in some of these mosques. Anecdotal stories suggest that the Fijian Muslims initiated and built a mosque in Richmond and one Bangladeshi was involved in that effort.

After the 9/11 terror attack in New York, Bangladeshi Muslims in BC, and the Greater Vancouver region, like Muslims from other countries, encountered Islamophobia, both covertly and overtly. One of the immediate impacts of Islamophobia was that men with the first name Mohammad⁷ were reluctant to be introduced as Mohammad. Since addressing people by first name is very common in Canada, some went to the extent to drop their first name or changed it to Mo or John to avoid the Islamophobic attitudes to Muslim names. However, at another level, the community members realized that it has their responsibility to educate their

children to be proud Muslims and educate others on true Islam to counter this Islamophobia. Accordingly, a group of Bangladeshis got together to build a mosque in New Westminster as there was no mosque in New Westminster. They initially established the New Westminster Islamic Information Centre. Later, it was listed as a non-profit charitable organization titled New Westminster Islamic Society. The Society later rented a place in Marpole in Vancouver. It is called *Masala* and not a mosque because it is not a property/place either bought or built. The current programs at the *Masala* include prayers five times a day, *Juma* prayer on Fridays, and *Tarabi* prayer during the holy month of Ramadan. Other religious events that the Society organizes are *Ifiar* (breaking of fast during Ramadan), and *Eid-ul-fitr* get together. In the case of large religious gatherings, the Society rents community centres to accommodate people including those from other faiths. The programs are always conducted in English. If someone wishes to conduct a religious ritual regarding birth, marriage, and death, the *Masala* arranges such programs. The New Westminster Islamic Society bought lands for burials in Chilliwack for members of the Bangladeshi community. It is customary that a family buys the funeral site for

the deceased person. However, if one is unable to afford to purchase, only then the New Westminster Islamic Society donates the burial site to the deceased person's family.

Second Generation Canadian Bangladeshis: Negotiating their Place

The history of Bangladeshi migration to Canada goes back at least 40 years; there is already a second-generation and third generation of Canadians with Bangladeshi ancestry. By the second generation,⁸ we refer to Canadian Bangladeshis who either migrated to Canada as young children with their parents/family or were born in Canada. Many of them are young adults and university graduates and/or already working as young professionals. Four Canadian-Bangladeshi youths at the Migration of Bengalis conference⁹ presented their papers in the session titled *Canadian Bengali Youth: Identity, Social, Cultural, and Family Life* (Khondaker, 2018; Mahzabin, 2018; Mohiuddin, 2018; Rahman, 2018). The session was vibrant as it triggered a range of issues of second-generation including identity, conflicts in the family, parents' emphasis on high academic achievement, sexuality, language, multiculturalism, community gossip that frequently sets cultural boundaries and limits, and/or put breaks on social interaction. The discussions at the session revealed that Bangladeshi adult immigrants are often overwhelmed with their experiences in the new country and that the intercultural experience and encounters experienced by the children are noticeably undermined and overlooked.

In addition to the above, five Canadian-Bangladeshi youths presented papers at the Canadian South Asian Youth Conference (Bhuiyan, 2019; Haque, A. 2019; Haque, M. 2019; Hasan, 2019; Rahman, 2019) organized by the authors as a sequel to the *Migration of Bengali Conference*¹⁰. Together, the nine papers, largely autobiographical, experiential, and academic, provide an overview of the experience of growing up by the second-generation Canadian-Bangladeshis. They tend to be struggling to reconcile their families' sociocultural practices with life in Canada. Specifically, young women are in the middle of a complex relationship with their parents, the Canadian-Bangladeshi community as well as the larger Canadian society. Youth encounter tremendous challenges related to the differences

between their sociocultural practices at home and the new society in which they are trying to participate in. Parents sometimes focus heavily on high academic achievement while sacrificing children's mental health and struggles in the larger society. Academic prosperity is essential, but many youths consider that it should not be the only criteria in terms of either success or quality of life in Canada. Aspects of Muslim identity were explored within the context of multicultural identity, and it was simultaneously pointed out how Canadian Bangladeshis as Muslims encounter unique challenges like Islamophobia, racism, heterosexism, ablism, and so on. In terms of either choosing their partner (same-sex or heterosexual or bisexual) or marriage (inter-religious, inter-cultural), the second-generation encounters challenges at different fronts: first, the Canadian Bangladeshi community through gossip and ridicule monitors their actions that create mental pressures on them; second, the parents/family are reluctant to accept choices other than heterosexual pairings; third, the mosque pressures parents in case of inter-religious marriage. Those Canadian Bangladeshis (very small number) who rigorously practise Islam, boycott the inter-religious wedding. In almost all cases, the second-generation Canadian Bangladeshis and their parents do overcome community hurdles as demonstrated by negotiating power and resisting narrow religious interpretation.

The youths further point out the bicultural lives that shape their identity and argue that culture should not be disregarded as only historical because culture is socially constructed. They also recognize that skin color consciously or unconsciously shapes identities. Some identified the intergenerational nature of privilege, the impacts of colonization on their family, and the underlying significance of positive self-identity. Based on self-reflection, one presenter pointed out the emergence of consciousness regarding race and identity while living in a small town as a child. The youth eloquently described the absence of belonging in the classroom because the vast majority around her peers are white. She argued for a decolonizing curriculum over critical matters including race and gender. The second-generation youth are conscious of their settler identity, and thus, recognize the unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples who inspire

their activism. Using an analysis of homelessness in Vancouver and personal activism in high school, one of the contributors (see Ishmam Bhuiyan, 2019) called for a collective understanding whereby the most privileged take a step back and create space for social transformation.

To understand the needs and struggles of youth at the family, community, provincial, and national level, the need for trust and flexibility is emphasized. Second-generation Canadian Bangladeshis are future community leaders, and thus, it is pertinent to transform their strengths to build a diverse multi-racial Canada while not sacrificing the history as well as strength of their ancestry.

Summary and Conclusion

The Bangladeshi Canadian community, though young and smaller in size, is slowly but surely making its mark on the multicultural mosaic of British Columbia and Canada. Metro Vancouver is the third-largest Bangladeshi diaspora in Canada after Toronto and Montreal. The number of second generation of Bangladeshi Canadians is rising fast. In recent times, the number of educated, professional, and younger cohorts of men and women coming from metropolitan cities, especially the capital city of Bangladesh, Dhaka, has significantly increased. A large number of post-secondary international students come to study at the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, and other universities and colleges in the Lower Mainland. Unlike the earlier cohorts of graduate students who most often came with scholarships or confirmed university funding, these recent younger arrivals come with self-financing sponsored by their parents after finishing A levels English medium studies equivalent to the UK education system. These students also enjoy the benefits of the Internet-based global communication system and integrate with Canadian education and other systems with much greater ease

compared to the earlier generations. Upon completion of university studies, a large number of these international students get absorbed in the professional and skilled job sectors of the Canadian labor market and eventually apply for permanent residency. Thus, the settlement patterns, employment and socioeconomic status, and integration experiences of the newer and younger generations of Canadian-Bangladeshis significantly differ from those of their earlier counterparts.

Several cultural, religious, social, and community organizations are established to facilitate connections, support, and settlement of the Bangladeshi immigrants in BC, especially in the Lower Mainland. These groups organize important sociocultural events and activities that foster the practice and preservation of heritage and cultural traditions, and religious and language-based identities of the Bangladeshi diaspora. With the growing number of immigrants coming from Bangladesh over the past few decades, the diversity among this population has become more evident. As a result, their organized activities have also diversified. These organizations, lately, are involving second-generation youth in their activities and collaborating with other community groups as well as the mainstream culture and media to claim their identity as Canadian Bangladeshi. Overall, intercultural activities have become more visible. Bangladeshi newcomers still depend on the informal networks of friends and family for direct settlement support because none of these organizations provide such services. Little research and data are available about the unique experiences, needs, and challenges of Bangladeshi immigrants and newcomers in BC in particular. The voices and perspectives of this population need to be heard to create improved policies and programs at the municipal, provincial and national levels, and to provide targeted and tailored support services to facilitate their successful settlement and participation in all aspects of Canadian society.

Endnotes

1. Professor, Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies, Simon Fraser University, BC, Canada
2. Research Associate, Centre for India and South Asia Research, University of British Columbia, BC, Canada
3. Bangladesh High Commission Office, Ottawa.
4. Greater Vancouver (formerly known as Greater Vancouver Regional District/GVRD) includes 21 cities and municipalities such as Vancouver, West & North Vancouver, Burnaby, Richmond, New Westminster, Surrey, White Rock, Delta, Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, Port Moody, Langley, Maple Ridge, and so on.
5. The journal *Alternate Routes* published a special issue titled *Migration of Bengalis to Canada: History, Settlement, Identity, and Activism* (Vol. 30/1, 2019) under the editorship of both authors.
6. This has been described by Maz Haque (2018).
7. Nearly all Bangladeshi Muslims (and Muslims in other countries) start their name with Mohammad as a respect to Prophet Mohammad [SW]). Typically, the middle name (and in many instances, the last name) is the real name. The concept of last name is often non-existent—for example, siblings may have completely different names from each other without any references to their parents. Parents choose names because they like them.
8. The concept of second generation is a contested one. However, we have used it to explain the intergenerational differences among immigrants and their children in Canadian context.
9. Direct link to the digital copy of the Conference Proceedings: <https://doi.org/10.21810/sfulibrary.73>
10. Direct link to the digital copy of the Conference Proceedings: <http://monographs.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/sfulibrary/catalog/book/79>

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Longing and belonging

Formidable: The Story of an Afghan Refugee's Struggles with Racism and Ableism in Canada

Farid Asey

ABSTRACT

On August 15th, 2021, the Western-backed Afghan government in Kabul fell to the Taliban. The resulting political turmoil led to a massive exodus of Afghan refugees to not only the neighbouring countries but also the West. In fact, hundreds of thousands of Afghans, particularly those who were associated with Western forces, were chaotically evacuated through the Kabul airport in the two weeks leading up to a September 1st deadline that the Westerners had self-imposed for getting out of the country. Subsequently, Canada, which had a military mission in Afghanistan for about 13 years, committed to relocating up to 40,000 Afghan refugees by the end of the year 2023. However, Afghan refugees who have long been settled in Canada continue to struggle with racism, ableism, xenophobia, Islamophobia and other dimensions of social oppression. Nonetheless, despite these seemingly insurmountable challenges, some manage to establish successful lives and careers here — which is a testament to their strong resilience and unwavering resolve to “make it” in Canada. This chapter recounts the story of an Afghan refugee, Sobhan, who got resettled in Canada in the early 1990s, faced tremendous obstacles but managed to overcome them in reestablishing a new home and a new life for himself in Canada. Additionally, while still hurt, in pain and suffering, Sobhan has managed to leave a positive mark on those around him and, by extension, on the Canadian society. For this reason, stories such as Sobhan's deserve reflection in the literature, particularly for bringing hope, optimism, and inspiration to the country.

KEYWORDS

Afghan refugees, Canada, resilience, racism, ableism

Introduction

When I first contacted him about my intention to write this chapter on him, he was not too keen on the idea. His initial reluctance emanated from an

internalized perception that he hadn't accomplished “anything grand” and, therefore, he did not have anything of value to contribute. I recall mentioning to him at one point that most of his achievements

were extraordinary from my perspective but I do not think that is what changed his mind; however, he did eventually call me to inform me that he would like to take part in this endeavour. In this regard, and at the risk of making a broad generalization, most Afghans, like most other South Asians, grow up with a sense of self-deprecating humility which at times could impact one's belief in their self-worth particularly in a Western neoliberal context that prizes shameless self-promotion. Nonetheless, this is a slight digression and I shall now return to introducing the subject of this chapter.

On the day of our meeting, as I walked towards the entrance of his residence, there he stood clad in a plaid shirt, grey-coloured slacks and charcoal sandals. His right hand trembled as he reached over to greet me. His salt-and-pepper hair seemed slightly dishevelled but, after shaking my hand, he tried to quietly finger comb his hair so as to look more presentable, I suppose. In many respects, he appeared to have just gotten out of bed but was sharp and alert otherwise. As he threw a friendly smile my way, I noticed that his eyesight had diminished considerably since the last time I saw him. There were also a few more wrinkles on his face and he was a bit unsteady when walking — something that would be barely noticeable if one has not spent enough time with him.

The above is not the description of my encounters with an elderly person but with someone who is in his early 40s. That is to say, his manner and appearance belie his age. He is a refugee to Canada hailing from Afghanistan. In addition to challenges posed by his displacement, he is visually impaired. Although his name is Sobhan, he told me that *Worund*, or the blind one, is what he remembers being called at a young age. I asked who called him “the blind one” but he did not respond at first, choosing instead to inquire about my trip to Vancouver and if everything went well on the plane in light of the COVID pandemic and travel restrictions. Or, maybe he did not quite hear my question; I could not tell at first.

However, as I sat in his living room, observing the musical instruments that were before me, I sensed the slight bit of tension in the air. I got the feeling that I should not have asked the question on who had insensitively called him “the blind one,” even though he was the one who broached the subject. I believe he tried

to not let me see that my question had touched a nerve somewhere deep in his psyche but I could see that it had. As such, while my question still lingered in the air, I tried to change the subject by describing the novelties of flying with a mask on my face the entire duration of the flight to Vancouver, but had a hard time getting the conversation going into a different direction.

Sobhan is an incredibly perceptive person and his sharp mind picks up on the minutest of subtleties. Noticing what I had been up to, he interjected to say: “It was my parents.” At this point, he paused and, as I was pretending that I had not quite heard him, he repeated himself: “It is ok, I am glad you asked but it started with my parents. In fact, I was about four years of age when I heard my mother ask my father: ‘So what are we going to do with the *Worund* (the blind) one?’” he continued.

I felt horrible and before I could say how sorry I was to hear that, he continued: “And my father’s response was ‘Well, he will be somebody’s headache in life, one of his brother’s probably’”. Sobhan then paused and, as he contemplated his answer, I detected a faint smile on his face which also communicated a serious resolve. “And I have since made it a mission of my life to not be anyone’s burden,” he added with a slight change in his tone of voice.

The youngest of nine children, when Sobhan was around eleven years of age, the civil war in Afghanistan reached its crescendo. By way of contextual information, Afghanistan is a landlocked, ruggedly mountainous and geographically isolated country in South Asia. It has suffered from chronic underdevelopment and widespread economic adversities since time immemorial. In fact, when young Sobhan was in poverty-stricken Afghanistan, the country was considered the poorest nation outside of the Sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, various military conflicts have been ravaging the country for more than forty years. Although there are internal contributing factors as well but one of the reasons for these conflicts is that Afghanistan has historically been targeted, under various pretexts, by worlds’ superpowers (e.g. the British, the Soviets and the Americans) vying for dominance in the region. Specifically, when Sobhan’s family was on the run, the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan and the Western powers were fighting them off, and by extension countering communism

expansion in South Asia, through funding Afghan *Mujahideen* who seemed to offer cost-effective and convenient proxy warriors against the Soviets. At any rate, Sobhan's family moved around inside Afghanistan in search of safety but, with nearly all of Afghanistan engulfed in flames of Soviets-*Mujahideen* conflict, they ended up seeking refuge in neighbouring Pakistan.

After about three years in Pakistan, Sobhan's family got resettled to Canada as refugees. In this vein, while he is grateful to the Canadian government for his family's resettlement, this is not a sappy gratitude. He expected conditions in Canada to be more welcoming towards refugees which is why he is not cheerfully gracious. He dislikes being called a refugee. I asked for the reason and his response was: "Because most people equate being a refugee with being a burden on the Canadian society." While his perception is his truth, borne out of his own lived experiences in Canada, I believe what he heard about his disabilities from his parents may also have also played a role in why he feels this way. Subsequently, despite a lack of social and economic supports, to avoid being a burden on anyone or anywhere, he described pushing himself to maximal limits to be a productive member of society — starting with education.

Education and Challenges in its Pursuit

Malcolm X is quoted as saying: "Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today." It is not uncommon to hear stories of young teens from underprivileged backgrounds relying on hard work at school to succeed later in life. However, what is less common are tales of individuals who have multiple challenges due to a host of systemic and debilitating barriers such as visible

and invisible disabilities, not the least of which is visual impairment, who thrive in educational environments. particularly in contexts where accessibility services and technologies are all but nonexistent. Sobhan is one such

example who has managed to use the power of gaining knowledge to find meaning, improve his life and come out relatively ahead, taking everything into account.

He described how his passion for learning was evident when, at the age of eight, he pleaded with his parents as well as school offi-

cials to be admitted into the only *School for the Blind* in Afghanistan. He remarked that because of his disabilities, his parents did not expect him to live long which is why it took a lot of effort on his part to convince them to let him get enrolled into the mentioned specialized school. In this connection, although the school was a long commute from his residence in Kabul, he made arrangements to address transportation-related complications and show up to class every day. Moreover, he noted that despite the fact that it was a specialized school, there were almost no resources such as Braille textbooks or audiobooks left by the time he had joined the school. Thus, the practice was that teachers would lecture and the students would try to memorize what they had heard. This was also the case in regular schools, where lectures and memorization were key.

Sobhan worked hard and earned the top spot in his class. He beamed with pride when he spoke of his ability to become the *class captain*, for four years in a row, at his school in Kabul. Becoming a *class captain* was a big deal to him. "I had charge and influence on my class. It was kind of the opposite of my real life or childhood where I did not matter and I was not considered something," he fondly recalled. However, after his family got displaced and ended up relocating to Pakistan, his education fell to the wayside. "In Pakistan,

"He remarked that because of his disabilities, his parents did not expect him to live long which is why it took a lot of effort on his part to convince them to let him get enrolled into the mentioned specialized school."

we neither had the money nor was anyone interested in placing me in a blind school no matter how hard I tried” he continued.

The next time Sobhan would re-engage with the education system was when he arrived in Canada. He was fourteen years of age at the time and, technically, had only grade 4 education — and that too by Afghanistan standards which he surmised were among the lowest standings in the world. Once in Canada, he was placed in a regular school. Additionally, the school officials decided to place him straight in high school, to grade 9 to be specific because of his age. He recalled feeling lost, literally and figuratively, during the first few weeks at school. There were no support systems for the visually impaired and he also had to compensate for not only the linguistic deficiencies but also a 5-year gap in education. This is not taking into account the cultural and religious shock that he needed to overcome, over and above everything else waiting to confront him.

To give you an example of the kinds of barriers that he faced, Sobhan was a very religious young man. An avid mosque-goer, he was influenced by his strong identification with the Sunni sect of Islam. He reported that of all the challenges that he had to overcome, the religious ones were the most arduous. By way of an example, the following story throws into sharp relief the enormous divide between his religion at home and the one at school.

They put me in a Catholic high school and I was very Muslim at the time. On Fridays, we would have no choice but to go to the mass. I remember one day the teacher was on the same pew as me. So

when I did the kneeling thing on the pew, she said to me: ‘Sobhan, you don’t have to do this. You are a Muslim.’ Confused and not knowing what else to say, I said: ‘Oh no, I have to do it because they bring me here. Plus, it is the house of God and, in this house of God, this is how he is respected. So I have to do it.’ And she [the teacher] was quite taken aback by that.

I was curious if he had reached out for assistance in the face of these challenges and he informed that when he approached the school Principal for help, he offered

to place him in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program. However, he had to “beg and plead with them” to not be placed in the ESL program. Motivated to know why he fought against placement in the ESL program and his reasoning was: “Well, the ESL program back then was very different from how it is now. Back then, they really treated you like a Brown idiot.”

“...he did not take an extra year or two off to catch up and/or adjust to the vastly different systems of education. He pushed himself to the limit, with full force, finding textbooks in accessible format, recording class conversations so he could listen to them later on and getting volunteers to read out notes and formulas.”

With no meaningful access to an alternative and more accessible education, Sobhan stayed in the regular school stream, following the curriculum and resources designed for sighted individuals.

Nonetheless, in what appears to be nothing short of extraordinary, Sobhan managed to graduate from high school with his peers. Specifically, despite the seemingly insurmountable odds and accessibility challenges, he did not take an extra year or two off to catch up and/or adjust to the vastly different systems of education. He pushed himself to the limit, with full force, finding textbooks in accessible format, recording class conversations so he could listen to them later on and getting volunteers to read out notes and formulas. As I was

listening to his story, I could not recall anyone else with this level of determination and perseverance.

Soon after graduating high school, Sobhan started living on his own because, again, he did not want to be a burden on his family. Interestingly, in the first room that he had rented, he became roommates with a now famous Canadian pop/R&B singer. This artist's name is being withheld on Sobhan's request but he did not have very many pleasant memories from the experience as he thinks the musical group was "too much of a menace." For example, he added that since he did not have money to eat out and was very busy with school and work, he prepared meals for the week in advance. "One weekend, I prepared meals all day Sunday so I could have food for the week and it is not easy for me to prepare meals. But, when I returned home the next day, everything was eaten by [the artist] and his crew." He added:

It was a house in Oakville and we rented rooms in the house. There were three of us. Me and [the artist] were in the basement. He was very polite and came from a good family as he had very good manners but if you would run into him at night, he would be very loud. You see, they got high all the time and then they got the munchies. And then they'd go around looking for food which is how they ate all my food that one time. They also played loud music all night using these speakers that were about as tall as me. The speakers were so powerful that they would shake the entire house when they played so it wasn't fun being next door. At that time [the artist] wasn't a singer. He was a DJ but he played music all night which didn't let me sleep.

Right about this time, Sobhan enrolled in college to complete a 3-year business administration degree. Similar to the environment in his high school, Sobhan reported bearing the brunt of overcoming barriers since there were no systemic supports or accessibility services at his college. Reflecting back on those days, he remarked that the college programs back then were not designed for people with disabilities in mind. Thus, he was forced to rely on his auditory senses, once again, to perceive college-level conceptual material.

When I asked whether the high school or college was worse, he emphatically pointed to his college experience. Referring to those years as "a nightmare," he recalled reporting his disabilities to one of his

professors. The professor had responded: "Well, this is how it is. It is not my problem you cannot see and follow." I inquired further and he added:

I explained my disability to him but he didn't care. He said accommodating my disability wasn't something he was trained for or required to do. He also said: "I am also not giving you my notes because my notes are mine. You have to take the information down from the board or get someone to do it for you."

He sought out a few other avenues but felt that none of them could be of assistance. When I asked him about his success in college despite the lack of accessibility services and supportive professors, he noted his debt of gratitude to student notetakers who had volunteered to share their notes with him. Additionally, by the time he was in college, he had become proficient with using on-screen reading software and in finding a limited number of audiobooks through a national book service for the visually impaired. These had subsequently allowed him to listen to some textbooks and class notes, independent of third-party assistance.

Employment as Another Gateway to Independence

Once in Canada, Sobhan had seriously begun his life's work in avoiding to be a burden on anyone — particularly on his family. With no linguistic proficiency, he joyously recalled asking anyone he could for a job and persisted with his ask from the time he landed in Canada. His unflinching determination culminated in finding a job delivering newspapers and flyers to homes in his neighbourhood. This was less than a month after setting foot in Canada. He would also soon start working at an ice cream trike, a temperature-controlled and insulated vending cart of frozen treats placed in front of a tricycle that played melodious jingles through a loud music box, to supplement income. It is important to point out that these occupations were in addition to studying hard at his less-than-accessible high school, without any meaningful support systems there.

After about three years of delivering newspapers and selling ice cream on the streets, Sobhan started living on his own. He had also commenced his college program by that point and, to pay for his college education and the costs that came with independent living, he found a weekend job at a convenience store in another

city, more than two hours commute away. Sobhan reported managing the commute by leaving shortly after his college classes ended on Friday afternoons and arriving to college just before his classes began the following week, on Monday mornings.

He continued working part-time, in retail and in convenience store environments until he graduated from his college program. After college, Sobhan found jobs in office and manufacturing settings. He continued working fulltime there until he was laid off. He then found himself struggling to find employment, reporting not only ablism but also racism as hurdles in his way. At this point, Sobhan went back to college to obtain a second degree which expanded the range of professional opportunities available to him. Although he currently remains employed in a professional environment where he feels independent and takes much pride in his work, it is now relevant to discuss his experiences with racism — at school, work and beyond.

Encounters of Racism at School

Sobhan reported being bullied in high school in Canada by “a group of skinheads” and “neo-Nazi crowds”. Specifically, he was called names and often heard bigoted statements from his White peers. What made these insults particularly painful was the fact that he came in contact with his tormentors quite regularly, in classrooms and outside. However, although the relentless racism took a toll on him, he did not let it get in the way of him achieving his goal of successfully completing his school, without any interruptions.

I was curious to learn more about the kinds of experiences that he had gone through and he provided the following example.

I had my morning class in a portable which was quite far on one end of the school. My afternoon class was at the other end of the school. So in between, because you know, the Canadian winters were so harsh, I would go through halls in the middle of the school. When I would go through the halls, that is where I would meet these boys who would always bug me and push me around and call me names. My locker incidentally was around there too. When I complained about those boys, I was asked to go around the hallways to avoid meeting that crowd altogether. But I said to them, “Well, that would be running away from them. And I don’t

want to run away from them. I am strong.” That was the Afghan in me talking [chuckles].

The climax of his encounters with racist bullying at school came when the Principal got involved, after witnessing an incident up-close. Sobhan had earlier complained about being bullied to school officials but nothing was done. He described the incident that “changed everything” as following:

One day, I was going through [the hallway] and I wasn’t in the mood, and this boy was pushing me around and calling me names. So I turned around and punched him right in the face. And he was a big guy, he was much bigger, much taller than me. After I punched him, he picked me up with one hand by the throat and held me up against the wall. He was saying ‘Oh, so you’re the tough guy? What are you going to do now?’ As I was held up off my feet by my throat, all of a sudden I heard this loud voice that said ‘Drop him, let him go!’ When I looked over it was the Vice Principal. We were taken to the Principal’s office and I remember hearing the Principal yelling at the guy, saying, ‘Your football scholarship, forget about it.’ Apparently this kid was on the football team and he was quite the hero. So the Principal was saying to him: ‘With this kind of thing on your record, you can kiss the football scholarships goodbye.’ And I remember the kid crying to the principal saying: ‘Sir, please. No, Sir, please. Please, please Sir! Don’t kick me off the team. I’ll stop I won’t bother him again. I promise I’ll never ever touch him again.’

After the above incident, the bully and others had backed off from harassing him, sparing Sobhan the precious time he needed to focus on his studies. In fact, and in a surprise twist, after that faithful day the group of bullying tormentors, led by the football player, had become his entourage. They were protecting Sobhan from others as he walked through the hallway and other places within the school. In other words, it was poetic justice that the one desperate punch to the face of his racist bully would change his fortunes at school. “No one bugged me after that punch,” he recalled joyously.

Racism Outside School and the Resistance

Unfortunately, the racist and ableist assaults on Sobhan did not end when he graduated from high school and college. Whereas White individuals in his cohort of

college graduates landed jobs in their fields relatively faster, he found the employment scene in the non-retail service sector (for which he was trained for) hard to penetrate. “Everybody else was getting jobs and interviews but I was being turned away, no matter how hard I tried or how many applications I submitted.”

He recounted a specific instance where a person he had mentored had gotten the job that he had applied for as well. “My mentee, this White guy, got the job but he had less experience than me and had been in the field for far shorter time than I had been. Well, the only reason he got the job was because he was White.” He shared other instances where he had competed for positions for which he had specialized training and years of experience but “White newbies” succeeded in securing those positions. His analysis of this situation was:

Well, people look at my name and guess who I am. There is discrimination on so many levels. They look at my name but don’t call me for an interview. And then I think at the level of being interviewed again, there is me. I am a foreigner and a person with disabilities. In fact, I am a foreigner before anything else and they don’t like foreigners. And there is the society. In society, it is the whole discomfort of who is he? I think I am always being judged on so many levels before I am accepted whereas a White guy could just walk in and be accepted, just like that, you know? A John or a Brian would have a much easier time to succeed in this society, despite their disabilities, whereas I always have to prove myself that I am worthy and that I can do the job despite my foreignness and my disabilities.

After overcoming many barriers to find employment, Sobhan mentioned that no matter how hard he tried at work, he was always given the impression that he

“...I am a foreigner before anything else and they don’t like foreigners. And there is the society. In society, it is the whole discomfort of who is he? I think I am always being judged on so many levels before I am accepted whereas a White guy could just walk in and be accepted...”

did not fit well with mainstream (White) Canadians. He felt on edge on this account, especially as his White colleagues always had a way of communicating to him that he did not belong in the workplace. He also described “always standing out” — first on account of his visible disabilities and second because of

his racial background. He expanded on this as follows:

It is funny about standing out. On the one extreme, I stood out where I was so different. On the other hand, when you think about standing out, I was so different [pauses] that I didn’t stand out at all as in I was not seen as important or worthy of being noticed. I mean I felt so invisible. And that’s how I stood out — by not standing out. And that affected me to a point where I felt totally invisible and irrelevant. I was kind of existing in the non-existence. Therefore, to survive, the focus of my existence at work was to be the cause of as little attention as possible.

Mental Health Challenges

Sobhan is a cancer survivor who has lost a vital organ to the disease. In addition, he has undergone multiple major medical procedures and operations. These can be considered extremely serious health conditions, but more significant to Sobhan is his continued mental health struggles on account of witnessing the ugliness of war in Afghanistan. He notes that “physical wounds heal but mental injuries have a way of staying with one for life.” Specifically, he has witnessed significant traumatic events as a young child — exposures that no human being let alone a child should ever experience.

In Canada, Sobhan went through every form of therapy and medication to get his mental health condition under control — efforts that had resulted in limited success up to that point. In this respect, he described

himself as the “Guinea pig” of psychiatrists by virtue of having been put on every conceivable psychotherapeutic drug found in Canada. He named so many of these drugs during our conversation that I stopped typing and looked at him in awe. He then discussed feeling “like a zombie” for days every time he was put on a new course of medications.

Furthermore, Sobhan disclosed that he has gone through years of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), mentioning that his long-time psychiatrist had remarked at one point that: “With all those electric shocks we are giving you, it is a miracle that you still function and remember anything.” Sobhan also developed speech impairments following these ECT sessions and had to relearn to “put sentences together properly again.” While he was painfully aware of the impacts of ECTs on him, he was smiling when he made these disclosures to me. However, I could sense the pain on his face and in his voice as he recounted his ECT stories.

My mind was inundated with questions by this point. How could he have functioned, at work and in school, despite going through these extreme and radical “therapies”? How was he able to successfully finish his high school

and then two college degree programs in spite of these conditions? How could he successfully hold down a fulltime job? I had so many other questions that came from a place of admiration and amazement.

Expanding on his difficulties with ECTs, he added: “It is hard to walk straight after each session. You cannot remember anything. Your memory is gone. You start experiencing strange side-effects and symptoms. Those things [ECTs] take everything away from you.” I asked if these posed challenges to his work and school work, and he responded: “Of course, but you also have to remind yourself that if you cannot get to work and

deliver, no one cares that you are sick. Or if you don’t hand in that assignment on-time, the professors don’t give a shit about your mental health or drug transition issues.” Although he noted taking time-off from work and school as “absolutely needed,” it appeared that he had dealt with the debilitating consequences of his ECT sessions, drug transitions and other mental health challenges largely on his own and while suffering in silence.

Coping: Music and Alcohol

As Sobhan entered young adulthood, two coping themes emerged that would develop over his lifetime. Firstly, his life would be spent not only celebrating challenges with alcohol but also developing alcohol dependency issues. Secondly, he would learn to play musical instruments and start singing. It is worth noting that he is fluent in not only the two official languages of

Afghanistan (Dari and Pashtoo) but can also hold conversations in Hindi and Urdu.

I asked how these themes helped him cope with what he was going through and he responded that, all things considered, they served to distract him. For instance, he learned to play music on his brother’s har-

monium and shared that when it comes to listening, he prefers classical music and *ghazal* because they speak to the painful burden that he is carrying inside. Another reason that he is fond of *ghazals* is because they are based on poetry and, since he understands poetry in the four languages, *ghazals* open up expressing the range, type and pattern of emotions that he feels using the diverse vocabularies, terms and terminologies available in these languages.

At this point in our conversation, Sobhan started singing Pankaj Udas’s *khushiyon ke khwaab dekhe aur gham mile ziyada*, proceeding to then translate

“It is hard to walk straight after each [ECT] session. You cannot remember anything. Your memory is gone. You start experiencing strange side-effects and symptoms. Those things take everything away from you.”

and analyze the lyrics of this song. He got teary-eyed repeating “we dream of happiness and we get a lot of *gham* (sorrow, grief or sadness). I drank alcohol less but I drank tears more.” This appeared to belie the positive and strength-based perspectives he had been sharing up until this point. With the pain palpable in his voice, he quickly overcame those emotions and managed to deliver a smile my way.

Ultimately, I got the sense that music for him is the medium that allows him to distract himself from the reality of life as he sees it. Specifically, music gives him an opportunity to escape his depressive mindset which then ushers in hopelessness. It is, therefore, no wonder that his love for music grew as his depression got a very strong hold of him. In this regard, once in Canada and after he started living on his own, he hired a musical *Ustaad* (teacher) to teach him not only the basics of classical Indian music and how it worked but also classical *Raags* and *Ragas*.

You know they say that when you are depressed, you get out and do stuff and then I took music. That is what I did and I liked it. I thought it could help me. The ironic thing is I never said anything about my depression to my music *Ustaad* (teacher). But she was a wise old woman. One day she said to me. ‘You know, you are trying to cure your mental problems with music but in actuality your mental problems are getting in the way of you learning and making music. They are holding you back from music.’ So I stopped taking lessons because I didn’t know what to do.

He then quickly added that listening to and singing music that was inspired by deeply spiritual poetry eventually led him to resort to alcohol.

As I got older and had my own money, I got into alcohol. I think I was a pretty good alcoholic for some time. I would buy boxes of wine and then I would make my own wine, 25L boxes of wine. I liked my scotch too. But alcohol wasn’t helping me cope. It was more like distracting me temporarily which is what I needed at the time.

Sobhan’s alcoholism took a dangerous turn when started drinking just to “get through it all.” He ended up in the hospital and spent some time there. He blames alcohol for reinforcing his hopelessness. “I had lost all hope. I didn’t have any expectations of myself

and of my life. The more I drank, the worse my conditions got,” he added. All of these were impacting his work, his studies and his outlook on life. However, he would eventually find the strength to part ways with alcohol before it took complete control of his life. For the record, he mentioned that it had been four years since he had last consumed alcohol and planned to never touch it again.

Resilience

I asked Sobhan what the impact of his experiences with the lack of accessible education, racism, ableism, alcoholism as well as struggling with visual loss and mental health challenges had been on him. Initially, he sidestepped the question, choosing to focus on the “positives” instead. He said that his immediate inclination was always to search for a constructive remedy in the face of life’s trials and tribulations. However, while he was upbeat, he did not put an unnecessarily bright spin on things to sell optimism as a panacea about the challenges he had confronted.

Going back to an earlier point, I asked what he meant by “positives” and his response was “resilience.” He added: “Giving up for me was not an option. I had to push through. It [pushing through] was the only option. And that is the positives of these experiences. There is no point focusing on the negatives.” Interested to hear more of his hard-won wisdom on resilience, I inquired what being resilient meant to him. He then noted that resilience, as a concept today, means something different than it did when he was growing up. Growing up, resilience meant doing the right thing, doing what was needed to look good in the eyes of his parents, his siblings, his extended family and others in society. “It was all about being strong, being persistent and resilient — no matter what happened. It was about getting up and dusting myself off and moving on.” However, Sobhan then added the caveat that it [looking strong] was the performance that was expected of him. “But that’s not the life I lived. I wasn’t happy or satisfied or even comfortable most of the time. It was suffering.” Subsequently, owing to all the challenges he has faced in Canada, resilience today means:

If I am on fire, what is the sense of doing the formalities and trying to look good in other people’s eyes. I no longer care what they think of me. If you think

of it literally, who cares? Why does that matter? That's how I see resilience today but in earlier times I cared very much about my image and what people thought of me.

He then added that he also has a “Buddhist take” on resiliency now in that it means “tolerating things.” He expounded that tolerating is “hard and painful” but without tolerating, it is hard to make it in life, particularly in Canada.

Furthermore, he attributed his relative, albeit remarkable success considering multiple barriers facing him, to “tolerating things.”

There is a Buddhist Master from Thailand and basically people would go to him and he would give them advice. If somebody said to him ‘oh my husband cheated on me’, if somebody said ‘I’m being abused,’ and so on, the first question he would ask is ‘can you tolerate it?’ The first question he would ask to them is ‘can you tolerate it?’ If you can’t always change things, the best thing to do is, whatever that is happening, you have to tolerate it and keep going. So that is what resilience means to me now. It is not about being courageous and strong and whatever makes you look resilient in other people’s eyes. It is more personal for me now.

I said what happens when matters become intolerable and his response was that he would then endeavour to “embrace things”.

If you can’t tolerate it, then you somehow embrace it. You don’t have to accept it; you just need to try to embrace it. Embracing it is easier than tolerating it. It is the way it is. If you can’t fix it then you gotta live through it but if you can embrace it, it is easier.

Concluding Remarks

One could argue that there is nothing special in Sobhan’s story of resistance, resilience and survival as a refugee who is still facing a wide array of challenges in Canada. It could also be argued that, similar to other refugees in the country, he has struggled with life’s challenges and succeeded — to a notable extent. However, from my perspective as a refugee myself, what

makes Sobhan’s lived experiences uniquely inspiring is the fact that he has not only warmly embraced multiple debilitating barriers but has also managed to remain optimistic, exuding hope and enthusiasm for life — with personal elegance and authenticity.

His steadfast resolve to deny a multiplicity of intersectional obstacles — depression, visual impairment, racism, ableism and a host of other systemic barriers — an opportunity to hinder the progress he has made is nothing short of extraordinary. Although this array of barriers are layered, one on top of the

other, with multiplicative consequences, Sobhan has demonstrated an unflinching tenacity to quickly adopt to unusual environments and navigate challenging new spaces to deal with these barriers. Again, these is no easy feat and Sobhan deserves our collective praise, respect and admiration.

Moreover, when navigating a new landscape of hardships and suffering, to the extent that this is within his control, Sobhan manages to transform adversity into opportunity and then “do good with it.” There is much to be learned from this strategy. Speaking with one of his brothers who happened to visit him the day I interviewed him, it became clear that he has changed many lives. For example, Sobhan’s brother reported that he enjoys an esteemed place in his nieces’ and nephews’ hearts since he continues to serve as an inspiration to

“Although this array of barriers are layered, one on top of the other, with multiplicative consequences, Sobhan has demonstrated an unflinching tenacity to quickly adopt to unusual environments and navigate challenging new spaces to deal with these barriers.”

them. They look up to him as an epitome of strength, an exemplar of persistence and perseverance. Sobhan, however, is not comfortable receiving these compliments which I reckon is due to his humble and down-to-earth nature.

As a matter of fact, having known Sobhan for a number of years, I can say with certainty that humility is the root and the branches of his persona. While his brother was praising him by giving the specifics of his impact on people that he knows, a visibly uncomfortable Sobhan first tried to handle his discomfort by downplaying his influence on others. However, after his brother insisted that it was critical that he remained mindful of his inspiring impact on those around him, Sobhan appeared to have come to terms with acknowledging his influence over others. And then, as his voice trembled, he said:

Well, everybody has some influence on somebody along the way in life. I think I have done good for many people but you know, it has been nothing special. It is a give and take. It is just the way it is. Nothing more.

To conclude, hurt, in pain and suffering, Sobhan summons the energy to confront his issues head-on.

He does not easily give up when the going gets tough and this fact is not that difficult to see from his story. It is also worth noting that although he achieved professional and relative financial success, it came at an immense cost considering the prevailing environment of racism and ableism that made things much harder for him. Thus, and not to minimize what others in similar situation may have gone through, it will not be an exaggeration if I say that many of us could not walk a day in his shoes — given the multitude of pressures that torment him on a daily basis. In spite of this, Sobhan continues to remain a motivational person who manages to leave a positive mark on those around him — which is a testament to his resolve to “do good and be good.” He brings strength and inspiration to those who have the privilege of knowing him. For these reasons, Canada is richer for having individuals like him and stories such as his need reflected and celebrated. Ultimately, celebrating Sobhan’s story is celebrating Canada. On this note, Canada and Canadians could do more to defeat the scourge of racism and ableism in their midst, making it slightly easier on refugees like Sobhan to not only survive but also thrive in Canada.

Identities



Piare Lal, Bhagtu Ram Mahmi and Bachni Kaur Mahmi, circa 1969.

Courtesy of Anita Lal, personal collection

Longing and belonging

Dalit Diversity: Contours of Caste in the Lower Mainland, British Columbia

Anita Lal and Sasha Sabherwal

ABSTRACT

Caste, a complex form of social stratification in Hinduism based on purity and pollution, remains a central mode of differentiating within the Sikh community in South Asia and its diaspora. Though one of the founding tenets of Sikhism was an intentional resistance to the Hindu caste system, in practice, many Sikhs hold onto caste, albeit differently than Hindus. Casteism is particularly rampant if Sikhs identify as Jat (a dominant landowning caste), and view Chamars and Mazbhis (otherwise known as Dalits, or low-caste peoples) as subordinate to them. As migrants travel overseas, caste practices became more diffuse, yet remain a central form of marking out difference within diasporic communities. This chapter chronicles the heterogeneity in caste experiences across the lower mainland of British Columbia (B.C.) among Dalits who have been in the region since the early twentieth century. We show that the changing dynamics of caste and casteism in the B.C. diaspora have transformed the Punjabi Sikh community's encounters with external discrimination, mainly at the hands of white settlers, to include internal discrimination through gendered and caste-based exclusions towards low-caste Sikhs. Through ethnographic interviews across generations of Dalits, as well as exploration of Jat cultural production (music, film, and social media), we document how caste plays out in the Western Canadian diaspora. We argue that Dalits in the diaspora experience casteism in diverse ways depending on intersectional experiences of migration histories, generation, class, gender, and political activism. We also explore how Dalits experience their caste-identity, how Dalit imaginaries in B.C. have changed over time, and we articulate the possibilities for a Dalit diasporic future.

KEY WORDS

Dalit, caste, Dalit diaspora, anti-casteism, Dalit futures, identity, Punjabi-Sikh communities

In a 2015 CBC News article, Dr. Varinder Dabri, a veterinarian who worked at the Dear Animal Hospital in Richmond, British Columbia (B.C.),

recalls his experiences with caste in Canada.¹ “You can call it a disease that has no cure. It’s a kind of cancer and it’s killing the society,” Dabri explained. Despite

being educated and having a stable job, he says that caste remains to be the status that defines him among other South Asian Canadians who still subscribe to the hierarchical system. Dabri's metaphor describing the overlapping relationship between caste and disease reflects the insidiousness of caste and casteist practices as they are inscribed in culture. Casteism becomes embodied within the everyday ways that people understand their relationship with each other, and how they position themselves over and against each other. According to Dabri, the caste system is still being taught to young people in Canada from elders in their household who carry forward casteist traditions and bring the legacies of casteism to the center of discussions about marriage. He continued:

They're telling their kids to not marry a person to a lower caste. There was one girl I worked with from a so-called upper caste and when I told her I am from a lower caste she didn't believe it. She said 'no, no they're dirty and filthy and don't have a good education.'

Stereotypes about what personality characteristics are attributed to certain castes are part and parcel of how caste has made itself endemic within South Asian and diasporic cultural practices, particularly through ideas about endogamy (the practice of marrying within a specific social group, caste, or ethnic group). Caste is depicted to be fixed, natural, and static—something that is biological and becomes inherent to their identity. Dabri clarifies that when he moved to Canada more than 15 years ago in the 1990s, he never imagined the caste system would follow him here. As he observed, casteism was a system worse than racism:

Racism is discrimination between parallel races, but the caste system has levels. Upper caste people can make a lower caste person's life miserable, but the lower caste person can't react back because of the society. People who come from India bring the caste with them. It's in their blood and they carry it with them all the time. There is no solution. The only way out is if you get a good education and change your name

Dabri's connection between race and caste offers a way for historically situating the experiences of Dalits (low-caste peoples) with those of communities of color.

Dabri's connection between these two forms of structural and systemic violence—casteism and racism—are rooted in transnational solidarities between Black communities and Dalit people.² These comparisons of caste with disease and racism are not new, but what is significant is Dabri's depictions of casteism within the Canadian diaspora as something that cannot be solved because it is so deeply sedimented within South Asian cultural practices.

Six years after the interview, in 2021, this chapter examines the contemporary landscape of caste in B.C. among Chamars³ (formerly known as an Untouchable caste, also called Dalits) in the Sikh community to show how the contours of caste have shifted in the diaspora from the outright rejection of Dabri's generation towards more complex forms of casteist discrimination. We share the stories of Dalit women and men across generations to document the changing contours of caste in the diaspora. Priya Badhan, a second-generation Vancouver-born 28 year old Chamari woman, describes her own experiences with caste in the diaspora, where unlike Dabri, who grew up in India and was already familiar with the language of caste, Badhan had to come to terms with casteism on her own. She explains her experience growing up in Canada and how many people in her family would share their experiences of caste with her.

Some would talk about India a long time ago, while others would talk about India now. But they weren't talking about Canada now. No one ever talked about what kids faced here or how caste is embedded here. They only talked about what happened in India. But they don't tie everything together. The 'we live in Canada' aspect [...] It seemed more the history being taught, rather than [an explanation of] how it ties into today.

As a child of the diaspora, Badhan learned about her relationship to caste at a young age and had to familiarize herself with how casteism would shape her life in the diaspora. She did not feel connected to the same experiences of people in the generation before her because Canada did not have the landscape of institutionalized caste hierarchies that shaped her everyday life. Badhan was more interested in how casteism manifested in Canada and how it affected her as someone who was not born in India. These experiences as

she explained were unique from the experiences of her parents and grandparents.

Our research examines these generational understandings of caste within the Dalit, and predominantly Chamar, diaspora of B.C. Since the twentieth century, B.C. has been home to one of the largest South Asian Canadian Sikh and Punjabi communities and has had an equally durable history of violence against South Asians. From the *Komagata Maru* incident involving the denied entry of hundreds of South Asian passengers onboard a steamship in B.C. in 1914, to changing immigration policies and post-9/11 racialization of South Asians that has occurred over the past two decades, South Asians have experienced expansive forms of racial, religious, and political violence at the hands of the Canadian states.⁴

Our research finds that the changing dynamics of the region, which includes heightened forms of casteist practices, have transformed this community's encounters with external discrimination, mainly at the hands of white settlers, to include internal discrimination through gendered and caste-based exclusions towards low-caste Sikhs and women. Caste, a complex form of social stratification in Hinduism based on purity and pollution remains a central mode of differentiating within the Sikh community in B.C. While one of Sikhism's founding tenets was an intentional resistance to the Hindu caste system, in practice, many Sikhs hold onto caste, especially if they identify as Jat (a dominant landowning caste), and view *Chamars* and *Mazbhis* (otherwise known as Dalits, or low-caste peoples) as subordinate to them. Our research shows that ideologies of caste and gender circulate not only through music, film, and community organizations, but also mainly through internalized practices of endogamy and aggressions against low-caste peoples.

Activists and scholars working in B.C., particularly those from the Chamar caste, have organized against casteism in the diaspora through demonstrations, conferences, teach-ins, the annual Ambedkar Lecture Series at the University of British Columbia, and through public panels and dialogues, etc. Many have addressed the silence of caste and casteism, despite its pervasiveness in the everyday lives of Dalits. In this chapter, we show that there are a diverse set of ways that Dalits experience their caste. While some Dalits in

the community face outright discrimination through verbal assaults and physical violence, others grow up without having explicit encounters but still feel their caste in a myriad of ways. We document the diversity in the Sikh diaspora of the Vancouver Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Using interviews and conversations with Dalits, including those who are immigrants, and first- and second- generation, we show the varied experiences the community has had in relation to caste. We ask: what role does caste play in the everyday life of Dalits in B.C.? How do we reckon with the Jat-centered popular culture in films, music, and across social media? Is there a Dalit future or will we move towards a post-caste society? And, finally, how do we work towards an anti-caste framework? We position ourselves in relation to our research. Lal, an activist and community organizer whose family is one of the first Dalit families to come to B.C. in 1906, has been active in speaking against Jat supremacy and casteism in the region and beyond. Sabherwal, a researcher and scholar, has lived and worked in the Pacific Northwest Punjabi community since 2019 and is working on a book manuscript on caste, gender, and religion in the region. We structured this research around feminist principles of transnationalism and intersectionality, committing our research methodologies and citational practices by paying particular attention to caste as it relates to gender, sexuality, class, religion, and ability.

In this chapter, we highlight some of our conversations with Dalits (predominantly Chamars) and showcase the multiplicity of caste experiences across the region, revealing how caste is learned and reproduced in the B.C. diaspora. We begin by outlining the history of the Sikh diaspora in B.C. to understand the experiences of Dalits throughout the twentieth century. Through a series of oral histories with early Dalit settlers and their family members to document this period of history, we emphasize the narrative that Dalits are not new to Canada, but they have been here for over one century. These narratives have been silenced and absent from the broader South Asian settlement stories that have been documented in B.C. We then weave together excerpts from interviews to chronicle the generational differences among Dalits and to share the contemporary experiences of Dalits in the B.C. diaspora. We index the ways that different generations have had their own



Maiya Ram Mahmi who arrived in Canada in 1906.

Courtesy: Anita Lal personal collection

traumas, histories, and violences. Finally, we conclude with a section on Dalit futurities to speculate on what an anti-casteist future will look like, and what kinds of solidarities might emerge from developing a caste consciousness in the diaspora. We narrativize how anti-casteism can build towards a progressivism that is intersectional and invested in a critical indigeneity, anti-Blackness, and feminist vision for solidarity.

“It’s Not Supposed to Exist in Sikhism”: Historicizing Dalits in B.C in the Early 20th Century

Scholars of South Asia have long challenged the “myth of Punjab as a casteless society,”⁵ and have investigated the ways caste persists despite conversion to Christianity, Buddhism, the Nath Panth, Islam, Sikhism, and the various reform movements in the twentieth century from communism to Ad Dharm.⁶ In Punjab and its diaspora, caste does not rely on Sanskritization through a purity-pollution binary as

it does within the Hindu caste system, rather, what matters primarily is ownership of land. The mechanism of social exclusion in Punjab is historically tied to the asymmetrical structures of its rural economy that privileged the hegemonic interests of the land-owning agricultural caste over the landless Dalit laborers.⁷ Jats, one of the largest and most powerful caste groups in Punjab and the diaspora, and who are largely of the Sikh faith, are mainly and by preference agriculturalists and landowners who form the backbone of the Punjab peasantry and own most of the land. Jats are not the only caste in Punjab that have power: other groups such as the Aroras, Sayyids, Khattris, and Mahajans have amassed political, economic, social and cultural capital through positions in state institutions, spiritual authority in shrines and/or entry into businesses and trade.⁸ However, we focus our attention on Jats because, although they are not upper-caste within the Hindu varna system, they have historically situated their community in positions of political and social power due to their material wealth both inside and outside of Punjab. In Canada, for instance, it is predominantly Jats who step into organized state and federal politics.⁹ When Sikhs began migrating in the early 1900s, they brought cultural practices of caste with them. Overtime, however, caste practices of the diaspora became more diffuse and began to manifest in more banal, yet continuously violent ways.

Sociologist Kamala Nayer has documented the longue durée history of Sikh migration to Vancouver. Nayer argues that while journalists and white settlers described those migrating to Canada from the Indian subcontinent as “Hindoo,” they were, in fact, Sikhs from Punjab, many of whom belonged to the farming Jat caste.¹⁰ Sikh immigration, she argues, occurred in five waves: 1) the early arrivals in the first half of the twentieth century; 2) white-collar professionals, who immigrated in the 1950s; 3) blue-collar laborers, who immigrated during the 1970s; 4) family members who arrived through sponsorship or arranged marriages beginning in 1951 and continuing to the present; and 5) immigrants arriving after the ‘Operation Bluestar’ in 1984 on the basis of being political refugees.¹¹ We argue that there has been a sixth wave of migration since Nayer’s work was published: 6) the wave of international students who began arriving in large numbers



Satinder Kaur Mehmi's citizenship photo, 1973.

Courtesy of Anita Lal, personal collection.



Bhagtu Ram Mahmi.

Courtesy of Anita Lal, personal collection

in the late 2010s. Though it has not been documented as such, low-caste communities have been migrating consistently throughout these six waves of migration. That is, Dalits have been migrating to Canada during the same time period as Jats and other castes, though initially in smaller numbers. Dalits experiences, however, have been made invisible within the historical record. We maintain that Dalits are not new to Canada, but they have been here for over a century. Though their presence has been erased from the archive, we show that they have been interwoven within Canadian history since the early twentieth century.

One of the first Dalits to arrive in B.C. was Maiya Ram Mahmi, who arrived in Victoria aboard the Canadian Pacific Shipping Line Charter enroute from Calcutta to Hong Kong to B.C in 1906. His migration journey began suddenly when he decided, at the last-minute, to take his brother's place to come to Victoria. Originally, his brother was the one in the family assigned to venture to Canada, but because he was the alleged 'favourite' of the family and his sisters were crying that he was going, Mahmi decided

he would take his brother's place. When he arrived in Victoria, he started working in lumber mills, farms and construction sites across Paldi, Victoria, Duncan, and Port Alberni. During this time, many Dalits took on similar labour as Jats, working in the mills together to earn a living and survive a new way of life in Canada. There was a diffused nature of hiring experiences for agricultural and mining occupations because race, not caste, was the primary distinction white settlers used for hiring. However, higher posts and entrepreneurs with money were mainly from the Jat caste. Eventually Mahmi went back and married in India, and had two sons and a daughter. His oldest son, Lakha Ram Mahmi, came to Canada in 1932 to join his father to work in the mills. His other son, Bhagtu Ram Mahmi, came in 1952, two decades later to join his brother and father. His daughter never migrated from India.

Satinder Mehmi, who was married to Bhagtu Ram Mahmi's oldest son Jai Chand Mehmi, elaborates on what she had heard about her husband and father-in-law's time in working in the mills in the 1950s. She recalled:



Satinder Kaur Mehmi in a family photo prior to migrating to Canada, 1971.

Courtesy of Anita Lal, personal collection

Everybody used to eat together at the cook houses, except those who were Chamars; they had to take their food home. One day the superintendent of the mill, Kapoor Singh, asked them, 'why do you take your food home?' The others told him, 'They are Chamars, they can't eat with us.' The next day he told everyone that they were going to eat together, and those who didn't want to didn't need to come back. Kapoor was one of the only ones who actually stood with Chamars. I didn't hear about anything else like that from other people.

Working in the mills among other South Asians was not a unified or harmonious experience. In fact, many Indians still maintained caste differences and presumed that lower-castes were within the realm of the so-called untouchables. Kapoor Singh (for whom Kapoor Regional Park in Sooke, B.C. is named) oversaw operations at Paldi and later at another sawmill at Sooke Lake.¹² As Satinder observes, he was one of the few people unwilling to continue casteism during this period, which was quite exceptional given the pervasiveness of caste practices. This experience, Satinder explained, was one of the few positive experiences around caste during that time period that the men

talked about and shared with their families. Satinder was born in 1949 and came to Canada in 1972 roughly eight years after her husband. Growing up in an urban community in India, she was not exposed to casteist ideas until she came to Canada. She elucidated on these new experiences when she migrated:

I did not know my caste until I came to Canada, nobody in India treated me as less-than anyone else. When we came here, it was Chamar-this, and Jat-that. Oh my gosh. Back where I grew up, in the army barracks, nobody knew who's who, nobody had the courage to talk about those things. I was so shocked when I came here to find out that in the gurdwara, people talked about caste like it was so important. In India, we knew who we were and heard stories from our parents, but we weren't treated badly.

Satinder's father was in the Indian Army and they grew up practicing Sikhism. Her experiences as a Dalit woman from India who grew up with an urban and educated childhood shaped her relationship to caste: she knew it was part of her identity, but it did not define who she was, nor did it result in discriminatory experiences. When she migrated to Canada, she was



Satinder Kaur Mehmi and classmate Kamal, 1971.

Courtesy of Anita Lal, personal collection



Anita Lal's mom Piare Lal prior to migrating to Canada in 1968, Punjab India.

Courtesy of Anita Lal, personal collection

astounded by the culture of casteism in B.C. As she mentions, she was exasperated at the level of caste-politics in places like local gurdwaras, where people made distinctions along the lines of caste in terms of who worked in the leadership committees. She explains that even that level of casteism did not exist in her hometown in India. On her life in Canada, she comments, “I’ve heard someone say to me that they will allow their children to marry a white person, but not someone out of caste.” As Satinder’s experiences show, caste is so embedded within the diasporic culture that it transgresses lines of race, though this is complicated by other factors including reckoning with anti-blackness within the South Asian Canadian community.¹³

Bhagtu Ram Mahmi’s daughter Piare Lal was born in India in 1955, and came to Canada in 1968 when she was 12 years old. At the time, it was difficult for women to migrate, and there were not many resources for women to find support and community once they arrived.¹⁴ In the beginning, she immediately noticed that it was a strongly male-dominated space that involved a lot of drinking, with men living within predominantly bachelor societies. Around grade six or seven, Lal got into a fight at her school in Victoria,

which housed only four or five Indian students across the entire school. Despite these small numbers of Indian students, one Indian student called Lal a Chamari, and Lal got into a fight and was suspended. During these early years despite continued forms of racism by white settlers, the Indian community still differentiated each other on the basis of caste and continued to maintain internal hierarchies. Lal’s resistance to these forms of discrimination were apparent at a very early age, and she refused to allow other castes and families to allow her to feel inferior. At 15, Lal was married to Tarsem Lal and the family moved to Quesnel to continue working in the mills. The two had four children: Rob, Anita, Sabrina, and Babita. Anita recalls:

The community in Quesnel was predominantly Jat, but we mostly played together and got along. There wasn’t outright discrimination because we were Chamar. But there still weren’t any inter-caste marriages, and there was still implicit discrimination. In fact, the first marriage out of caste in our family happened in 2001, and that was almost 100 years after our family came here. People still talked about it... My *mama* (maternal uncle) wasn’t very happy

with the marriage because there was a vulnerability factor. It's like... we're sending our daughter into a place where she may not be considered equal, and there could be a situation where someone from his family will throw caste in our face because that's what they've always done.

As Anita observes, while at surface level the community may seem to be unified, casteist tensions emerge through structural forces, for instance, at the level of marriage. These casteist practices are deeply gendered as endogamy is entwined with patriarchal structures of power.¹⁵ For Anita, the fact that it took nearly one century for the first inter-caste marriage to take place within the family was the most surprising aspect of it all. As she explains, it is so ingrained within the values and culture of the community that it has taken so much time and will continue to take time to dismantle. The Mahmi family continued to grow and as a result many within the family began marrying out of caste. Interracial marriages also became prevalent within the family. This practice of marrying outside of caste was important in marking generational differences in how caste is taught and learned within the community.

Gurbaksh Singh Dhanda came to Canada in November of 1959.¹⁶ At 19 years old, he obtained a Canadian visa and his journey spanned many days and included many stops. He recalls leaving the airport in New Delhi alone enroute to Vancouver via Bangkok and Hong Kong, before arriving in Vancouver. As soon as he arrived, he found work in the sawmills and began working regularly, while living among then other Punjabis in the same residence. He remembered this experience and the ways that Dalits were still antagonized over caste in the early 1960s:

Of course, in Canada, there was going to be differentiation between white people and us. But that is also happening within our community. This happened to me in 1962 or 1963 when I was living in Williams Lake and we were working in the mills. Someone I knew told me that he had been laid off from work now, so I'm going to leave because I have no work here. At that time there were 10 people living in the house. We would all cook together, someone would look out for the cleaning of the house, we all designated different roles to each other. So we all told him, hey don't leave from here, we're all set up pretty well here. You should instead

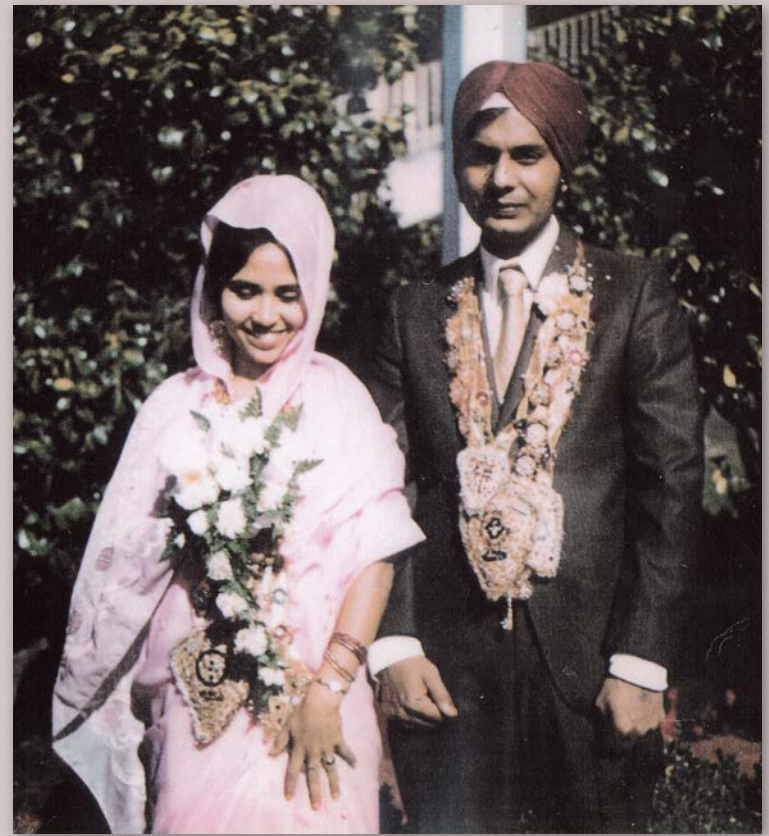
apply for unemployment and you should handle all the cooking around here in the meantime. We can give you \$10 each, so that would give you \$100 free. Food is free, and you will get money from us plus the unemployment. That is probably more than he made at work. You can save up the money. So he agreed. But the next day, he said that he thought about it all night and I realized I can't make food for "that guy" referencing me. He said I am a lower caste than him, and if any of my relatives found out that I am cooking for him then I wouldn't have a name for myself. It would ruin my reputation. He was making food for a Ravidassia, Chamar, or scheduled caste... we won't be able to even get our kids married after that! But the rest of the people living there stood with me. They said if you don't want to make my food, then we don't want to eat anything from you. In every other way, that guy was a friend to me, but when it came to eating food, that's the time where he said we weren't equal.

In a moment of generosity, where he had offered grace towards a fellow Indian migrant, he was met with staunch casteism. Rather than extending solidarity among people from the same country, caste continued to remain a divisive force. Decades later, Dhanda was one of the founding members of the society of the Shri Guru Ravidas. The Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha, Vancouver, a community center and religious temple that serves as a "source of inspiration for the historically marginalized, oppressed and disadvantaged communities,"¹⁷ was established in July of 1982. The Sabha established its first landmark in 1986 by opening the first *gurughar*, home to the Guru, in 1986 at a small location in Burnaby (which has now been converted to a Hindu temple.) As the Sabha's membership grew, it moved to its current location in a larger building in Burnaby in 2000.

By the 1970s, the community of Dalits had grown, and many, including Dhanda and Jai Chand Mehmi, began organizing to create their own community spaces. So called low-caste communities across the Lower Mainland in Vancouver began asserting their autonomy and self-determination, and simultaneously resisted the hegemony of Jats. Dalits asserted their relationship with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian constitution and a leader for Dalit rights and the Dalit movement. Diasporic groups also began using the language of human rights to communicate

the problems of Dalits and began to frame caste justice as a human rights endeavor. The Ambedkar Memorial Mission was founded in Vancouver in 1978, and moved to Toronto the next year and was renamed the Ambedkar Mission.¹⁸ The Ambedkar Mission represented Dalit issues at the Osaka International Conference Against Discrimination in 1982 and the Nairobi World Conference on Religion and Peace in 1984.¹⁹ The second international Dalit conference took place from May 16–18, 2003 in Vancouver, B.C. Largely funded and organized by the Shri Ravidass Sabhas of Vancouver and other Canadian cities, the statement of the conference “call[ed] upon the Dalits of the world to unite in their activism in the true spirit of interfaith dialogue and multiculturalism, and resolve to work tirelessly for the upliftment of the community.”²⁰ It called for the establishment of “a formal institutional structure for better networking among the Resident and Non-resident Indian Dalit community” and for more forceful outreach to the international community, including political and economic institutions such as the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and educational and research institutions in North America and Europe. Historian Purvi Mehta’s research argues that the Vancouver Conference declaration expressed its internationalist vision not only by pledging to “propagate knowledge of Babasaheb as a philosopher of emancipation to all the oppressed anywhere in the world,” but also by “affirm[ing] that every human being has the inherent right to life and dignity and that Black is Beautiful and Dalit is Dignified.”²¹ Visions for justice between the three decade period between the 1970s and the early 2000s aligned with an internationalist ethos, connected with Black Power movements, anti-racist feminist calls for solidarity, and a call for Indigenous rights and decolonization.

These radical foundations of Dalit organizers set the stage for contemporary resistance by Dalits and for organizing to create their own spaces. By the early 1980s, organizations such as the Chetna Association developed an infrastructure within the context of an intellectual caste consciousness. For instance, between the 1980s and the present there were developments across various institutions: the Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha was established in 1982; a bust of Dr. Ambedkar was placed at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in 2004



Satinder Kaur Mehmi and Jai Chand Mehmi's wedding in Victoria, BC, February 20, 1972

to recognize the significance of Dr. Ambedkar’s work to the regional diaspora; in 2016, the Ambedkar Memorial Lecture Series in Vancouver emerged and created annual lectures that take place at universities including the University of British Columbia, SFU, and Kwantlen Polytechnic University; in 2019, the Dr. Ambedkar Reading Group was established at SFU; and on April 14, 2021, the B.C. government proclaimed the Dr. Ambedkar Day of Equality in Burnaby.

Despite these institutional developments, many interlocutors, in particular youth that are first- and second-generation Canadian born Dalits, felt disconnected from the efforts of early generational Dalit organizing in the region. Some Dalit youth had not heard of these institutional events and programming, and others did not particularly identify with the intellectual framing of these events. That is, there was an attempt to reclaim Dalit spaces and make these spaces more accessible and readily legible to the experiences that contemporary Dalits experienced in the present. As Satinder Mahmi, who witnessed caste politics shifting between 1972 and 2021, explained, “Casteism is a deeper problem than what we think. We have to do more than just talk about it. We need to change people’s minds.”

“Am I a Proud Chamari or am I Anti-Caste?”: Generational Differences Among Contemporary Dalits

Many Dalits today have varied experiences with their caste identity, but one shared experience is the way that many Dalits *learn* their caste. We argue that caste becomes naturalized in diasporic communities through 1) Jat culture and 2) endogamy. That is, caste is not natural, innate, or static, but is something produced in relation to normative and mainstream Jat identity. Jat culture has become pervasive across popular culture, including films, television, and music, as well as online on social media. Songs about Jat life, Jat culture, and Jat cool have exploded and, even more in recent times, have become hegemonic on local B.C. radio stations and online. While those who are asserting Jat pride are not maliciously reproducing casteism, they still create internal divisions among Dalits who do not identify as Jat. These fissures and tensions have resulted in a range of ways that Dalits have felt othered, marginalized, and excluded from these forms of culture. For instance, many Dalits have experienced verbal discrimination from Jats, and others have been discriminated during marriage proceedings. However, Dalits are not just passively accepting this marginalization. Many have used their Dalit identity as a form of empowerment and many Dalit pride movements have developed in India, including the creation of Dalit music by Ginni Mahi, a Ravidassia woman who has become the voice of “Dalit pop” music.²² Second, marriage is a central institution that is at the heart of Punjabi culture. Weddings are significant sites of socialization for community members and become markers of status and social mobility. The practice of continuing intra-caste marriages among the same caste groups prevents any change in hierarchies. Many interlocutors have shared their caste-based experiences when it comes to conversations about marriage. In this section, we ask Dalits about Jat culture, marriage, and their relationships to caste via questions of Jat culture, marriage, the Ravidass gurdwara, and their knowledge of the teachings of Dr. Ambedkar.

Maya Khera, a 19-year-old second-generation Dalit student studying at the British Columbia Institute for Technology is born in B.C., and is the youngest person we interviewed. In our conversation, she explained her diverse experiences growing up in a predominantly

Jat-centered context. Khera grew up in a Punjabi centered community and attended schools that included a large Punjabi population. Like many interlocutors, Khera embraced her Dalit identity and saw it as a source of empowerment rather than a set-back. Having always been surrounded by family members who have been transparent about her caste-background, Khera explained that her parents “told us about being Chamars, but they did not want us to be ashamed.” She explained, “We are one of the families who did change our last name. Khera is the *pind* [village] that my family came from.” This practice of changing last names is quite common among Dalit migrants, as a form of refusing to propagate caste hierarchies. This also takes away the opportunity for othering, discrimination, bullying, harassment, belittling, etc., at school for children and in the workplace for adults. However, Khera recalled that because her last name was so difficult to place within the context of caste associations (mostly identified by occupation), she would consistently face questions about her caste background. These questions and assumptions about her last name resulted in Khera understanding the complexities of her caste.

Khera’s grandfather, Darshan Khera, who is Tarsem Lal’s first cousin is another founder of the Ravidass Sabha, what she refers to as her gurdwara. Though Maya Khera only visits the gurdwara during wedding ceremonies and for particular events, she described it as a significant space for social gatherings and interactions—it is a space for her to see her family and interact with her loved ones. Compared to other gurdwaras across the Lower Mainland, Khera observes that the Ravidass gurdwara was a space where her family could socialize as a familiar space with familiar faces without fear of exclusion. Many other interlocutors shared their diverse experiences with the Ravidass gurdwara. In an interview with Priya Badhan (quoted above), who is the great-granddaughter of Mela Singh who came to Canada at the same time as Maiya Mahmi in 1908, explained that the gurdwara was a significant place where she learned about her caste and began putting together the caste-based difference between different Sikh communities. Badhan explained:

Once I knew what caste was [...] that’s when I knew the differences between the gurdwaras. When I would go to a different gurdwara, I would question...

Oh, how come they don't have a picture of Guru Ravidass? Oh how come here [in these other gurdwaras] they don't say Guru Ravidass? I didn't ask those questions before.

Asking these questions, or pushing up against dominant ways of thinking about Sikhism was a difficult task, especially at a young age. Badhan also references a central point in the distinction between Khalsa Sikh gurdwaras and the Ravidass Sabha: the difference in the way they signify Guru Ravidass as a *guru* (saint) or as a *bhagat* (holy person). Though Guru Ravidass is a prominent figure in Sikhism and stands in as a bhagat, for Ravidassias, he is a guru and centers around the faith. While this distinction on the basis of terminology or linguistically may appear banal, many in the Ravidassia community believe this is part of their claims for recognition and autonomy, but also as a marker of working towards caste solidarity. Dalits in the diaspora believe that denying Guru Ravidass this respect creates an environment that is not fully accepting of those in the Dalit caste.

Naveen, a 36-year-old Dalit man born just outside of Kelowna, explained his relationship with the Ravidass gurdwara. He grew up going to the gurdwara frequently, and only later in life began to realize that no one else in the larger South Asian B.C. community knew about this gurdwara. He explains:

When we were younger, my parents used to take us to every gurdwara. We obviously had friends outside of our particular caste group so I had visited every Sikh temple across the lower mainland. We had a big family here that lived in different cities, so we'd go into the gurdwaras in those areas too sometimes. But at some point, you do realize, oh yeah, our gurdwara's name is a bit different. You know when I tell people I go to that gurdwara, they say they don't know which gurdwara I'm talking about. When I used to say I go to the Burnaby gurdwara, they used to think that's actually a Sikh gurdwara near New Westminster. They would assume it was that one because they didn't know about ours. It was only later on that I could clarify. Around the same time, we're asking our parents questions about our caste identities, and we realize oh... we're different. Our gurdwara is different.

This instance of learning that the Ravidass gurdwara was different from other Sikh religious spaces came

by surprise for Naveen. Naveen began to understand that something about occupying these different spaces created internal distinctions among Punjabi Sikhs in B.C. These differences, though they mark out hierarchies within the community, are also something to be embraced. Many members of the Dalit community understand the Ravidass gurdwara as a point of pride and as an accomplishment for an autonomous and agentic community space. Naveen explained the rationale for why the Dalit community needs their own religious temple:

Part of arguing with people about what caste is this reverse logic. Oh you guys are the ones talking about caste... why do you have your own gurdwara? I experienced this type of feedback. At the gurdwara we all started getting membership cards. And I was wondering, why are we getting these membership cards? But after realizing what had happened around the world, particularly in New York where there are two gurdwaras primarily for Chamar communities, and one of them was taken over by a dominant caste group, it made sense. We are protecting ourselves because ultimately, it's about identity. There's a lot of discrimination and prejudices that we're experiencing, so it makes sense that we had to get our own gurdwara. Ultimately, we want to follow the religious book like everybody else does. And if we have to get our own gurdwara, that makes sense to me as a matter of pride and a matter of something that had to be done. [...] It's about being able to take part actively in the political leadership of the temples.

As Naveen elucidates, while some may claim that marking out a specifically Chamar gurdwara reproduces casteism within the Sikh community, having their own gurdwara is a matter of pride, particularly within the context of exclusion by the Jat Sikh community. Having a community space that empowers and acknowledges Dalit identity, rather than marginalizing it or positioning it through a sense of inferiority, allows the community to have a "safe-haven" as Naveen identifies it—a space that is free from any discrimination. Badhan, too, makes a similar point about the gurdwara when she asks the question: "Am I a proud Chamari or am I anti-caste?" This question is central within the context of contemporary Dalit experiences in the diaspora. Many in the community question whether they should embrace their caste-identity as a source of

recognition and pride, or whether they should abandon their caste altogether to move towards an anti-caste abolitionist framework. Naveen and Badhan both continue to work through these questions, but also acknowledge the need to bring awareness to the injustices and structural violence that the community faces both in the diaspora and in South Asia.

Another important aspect to Dalit identity in the Lower Mainland includes a relationship with Dr. Ambedkar. Many within the community admire and worship Dr. Ambedkar as a source of inspiration and guidance towards an anti-caste framework. A photo of Dr. Ambedkar adorns the langar hall of the Ravidass gurdwara, and there is a Dr. Ambedkar library. Priya Badhan developed a caste consciousness through understanding herself in relation to Dr. Ambedkar.

I knew about Dr. Ambedkar because on his birthday they used to do a special tribute to him. There would always be speakers that would talk in both English and Punjabi, so I kinda knew who he was, his contributions to the constitution. And then I started seeing him, you'd be watching other Bollywood movies, and you'd see his picture in the background in the court. And my sister did a project on him in school. For a while there was a youth committee at the temple, so they used to get everybody involved, and we used to read some articles and stuff like that.

For some, Dr. Ambedkar plays a key role in their relationship to their caste-identity. As Satinder Mahmi explained to us, "Dr. Ambedkar was the first feminist." Understanding Dr. Ambedkar's legacy shifts with different generations having varied understandings of his life work. Many younger Dalits engage with Dr. Ambedkar's work only through hearing his name in family conversations or at the gurdwara, while others actively read and engage with his writings.

Resistance, Resilience, and Roadmaps for an Anti-Caste Future

What does a Dalit future look like in the B.C. diaspora? Will caste dissolve or will it continue to propagate itself within the community? Do we need to create systematic change in anti-discrimination legislation in Canada, modeled after what is happening in the U.S. and the U.K., to redress the violence of caste? These questions

are difficult to answer, but we reflect on these questions to imagine what an anti-caste world could look like. Many insist that marriages among Jats and Dalits, and outside of the South Asian community are influential in pushing back against caste, but do not absolve caste or erase caste-based identities. More needs to be done. We argue that an anti-caste framework is an active stance, rather than a passive one. We cannot partake in caste-blindness, in the same way that we cannot engage with color-blind rhetoric that denies the experiences of Black communities and communities of color. We need to acknowledge caste, educate ourselves based on the longer histories of caste oppression, and work to dismantle these structures. It is more than simply opposing caste or denying caste. It requires constant resistance against casteism. This means speaking out when casteist slurs are being used, having conversations about the persistence of Jat music, building bridges across caste including inter-caste and interracial marriages, and thinking intersectionally to understand how caste is intertwined with other structural forms of oppression, including misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, Islamophobia, and classism. This also means having a consciousness about how caste is a structural issue, rather than an individualized problem. We cannot continue to be bystanders of caste, and we must push against normative power hierarchies.

As we have shown, the experiences of Dalits are nuanced and diverse. These rich experiences of migration and settlement in B.C. have been punctuated by caste-based discrimination from within the community. We have work to do to unsettle hierarchical notions of power, but there are many who have dedicated their lifelong work to undoing casteism. Following their lead, and drawing from the multiple stories of Dalits in B.C., we hope to take apart caste-based scaffoldings and produce new anti-caste epistemologies in solidarity with other marginalized groups. This means, rather than isolating caste experiences through a lens of victimhood, we need to understand caste-based struggles relationally as the violence is produced alongside the violence against indigenous, queer and transgender, poor, and differently abled communities.

Endnotes

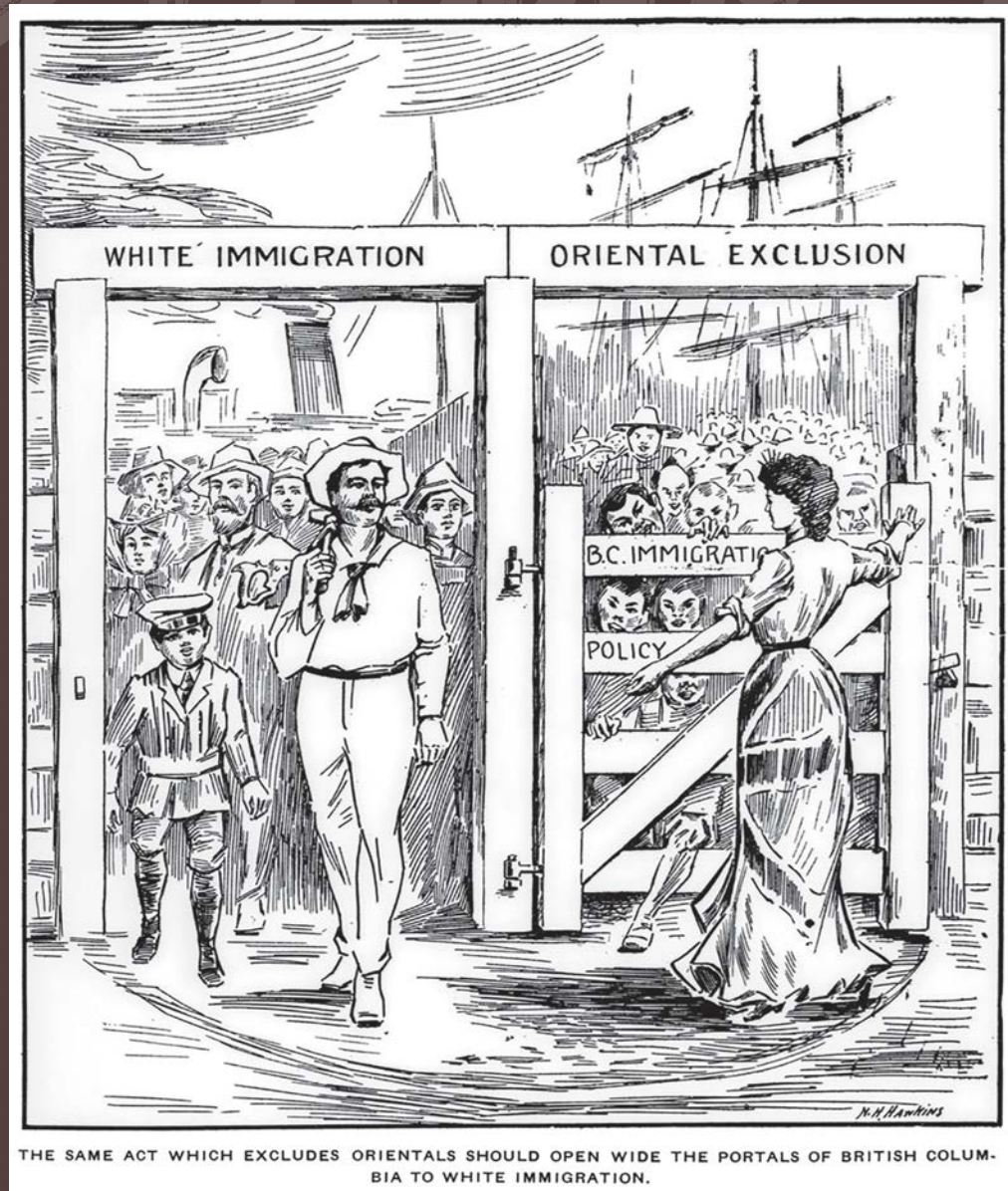
1. Jason D'Souza "Indian Caste System in Canada called 'A Disease' Worse Than Racism." CBC News, 2015.
2. See Nico Slate. *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India*. Harvard University Press, 2017.
3. While the word Chamar has been weaponized by many Jats and upper-caste communities, including Brahmins, to be used as a derogatory and insulting slur, in this paper, we use the word Chamar to reclaim it and push against these negative connotations. We continue to use the term Chamar because it is the term used by many Dalits in the B.C. community; that is, many Chamars identify more with the regional term Chamar and Chamari rather than Dalit, which is a generalized, national, and broader term.
4. See for instance Lalaie Ameeriar. *Downwardly Global: Women, Work and Citizenship in the Pakistani Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University, 2017.
5. See Ronki Ram. "Social Exclusion, Resistance and Deras: Exploring the Myth of Casteless Sikh Society in Punjab." *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 40 (2007): 4066–074.
6. For more on the Ad Dharm movement, see Mark Juergensmeyer. *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
7. See Ronki Ram. "Beyond Conversion and Sanskritisation: Articulating an Alternative Dalit Agenda in East Punjab." *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (May 2012): 639–702.
8. Purewal, Navtej K., and Virinder S. Kalra. *Beyond Religion in India and Pakistan: Gender and Caste, Borders and Boundaries*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. 26
9. For instance, X and Y are Jat politicians. Often, caste is made invisible within discussions about Canadian politics.
10. Kamala Nayar. *The Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver : Three Generations Amid Tradition, Modernity, and Multiculturalism*. University of Toronto Press, 2012, 15
11. Ibid, 17.
12. T.W. Paterson, "Paldi Sikh Temple in Cowichan Celebrating 100 Years." *Vancouver Island Free Daily*. 2019.
13. See Harpreet Mander. "Anti-Blackness in Our Community." *Itsharpo Blog*, 2019
14. See Nayan Shah. *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality and the Law in the North American West*. University of California Press. 2012.
15. Janaki Abraham, "Contingent Caste Endogamy and Patriarchy: Lessons for Our Understanding of Caste." *Economic and Political Weekly*. 49 (2). 2014. 56; Uma Chakravarti. "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State." *Economic and Political Weekly*. 28 (14). 1993. 580.
16. "Gurbaksh Singh Dhanda" Oral History. South Asian Canadian Heritage—South Asian Settler Stories.
17. Souvenir Magazine, 2016 commemorating 639th Shri Guru Ravidass Jayanti.
18. See Purvi Mehta, "Recasting Caste: Histories of Dalit Transnationalism and the Internationalization of Caste Discrimination." 2013. 73.
19. Ibid, 74.
20. "Vancouver Declaration: International Dalit Conference," Adopted Unanimously by the International Dalit Conference, Vancouver, BC Canada, May 16–18, 2003
21. Mehta, 75
22. See, Anhu Adnihotri Chaba and Jaskiran Kapoor, "Ginni Mahi, the 17 year-old Dalit from Punjab, is making waves," *The Indian Express*, 2016.

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Politics



A racist political cartoon that was featured in the August 24, 1907 issue of *The British Columbia Saturday Sunset* newspaper.

(DIS)Enfranchisement - 1907-1947: The Forty Year Struggle for The Vote exhibit collection. South Asian Canadian Digital Archive, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, Canada.

Legacies, circumstance
and fortune

How Indians Lost and Finally Won Back the Right to Vote in Canada

Sukhwant Hundal and Sadhu Binning

Dedication: Naginder Singh Gill, Darshan Singh Canadian, Doctor D.P. Pandia, who played a huge role in the long struggle to win the right to vote.

There is a long history of many hard struggles waged by the Indian immigrants in Canada to win their rights as citizens of this country. While their activities to change the racist immigration laws and their efforts and sacrifices to aid the independence movement in India are well documented, little has been written or said about the struggle to gain back the right to vote here in Canada. Those who fought for forty long years for this right thought that the day of victory would be written in golden letters in the history of the Indian community in Canada. They expressed their wish in a report published in 1947 by the Khalsa Diwan Society of Victoria: “April 2nd will always remain a red-letter day in the history of our community as the day which brought us political freedom and equality with Canadian citizens under Dominion and Provincial law.”¹

We would not be doing our duty if we didn’t pay due respect to their wishes. It is extremely important for us to remember their efforts now that we have many elected politicians from our community in all levels of governments in Canada.

Numerous people from our community contributed in different ways to this long battle. During this period while racist white people, especially those in power, opposed the demand for franchise, there

were individuals and organizations from the White community that supported the struggle. Many progressive people including political parties like the CCF (Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, which later became the NDP) and many workers’ unions came on to the side of the Indian community. The support received from these sections of the larger society during the 1940s made a huge difference. Little is written about this chapter of our history in Canada. The complete picture of the struggle is not clear from information that is currently available. We hope that this brief look at this ignored part of our past helps to shed some light and make the picture a bit clearer.

In this chapter, we explore the various aspects of the franchise issue as faced by the Indian immigrants in Canada. We discuss how and why their right to vote was taken away after their arrival in Canada by passing legislation in the Victoria Assembly. What were the economic, political, or social causes that created fear among the people in power that they acted on the basis of race to stop the immigration from India or to keep those who did come here at the margin of society? How did not having the right to vote, negatively affect the daily lives of Indians in Canada? We explore the attitude of the British Empire and especially the British government in India and why they supported this

demand even as they backed the racist policies of their dominions like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand to keep the non-white populations out and to keep those lands “safe” for the White people of Europe. Finally, we discuss the different stages and aspects of the long struggle to win back the right to vote by the Indian community. We also consider who sided with our community’s struggle from the larger Canadian society and who opposed it.

How the right to vote was taken away

Indians began immigrating to Canada’s West Coast to the province of British Columbia in the beginning of twentieth century and started working as labourers in agriculture, fishing and the lumber industry. The population of this province at the time was very small. The economy was not yet fully developed. The agriculture, fishing and even to certain extent the lumber industries were seasonal and as a result, there was unemployment. The employers in the sawmills, farms, and in fish canneries, along with all levels of government, to maintain their profits and control non-European workers, openly exploited them in more than one way. First, they paid less to the Asians to make direct profit; second, they used Asian workers as leverage to keep white workers at low wages and in poor working conditions; third, whenever there was increased unemployment or any other social, political, or economic problem, they would use these Asian workers as scapegoats by laying the blame on them.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in order to divide society into higher and lower classes, the European colonialists openly used their racist policies. Based on this view of race they declared all non-white people as being a lower level of humans. They used this card to the point of inciting violence against the Japanese and Chinese in Vancouver.² Due to the pressure exerted by white workers to improve their working conditions and raise their wages, the colonial rulers

stopped Japanese and Chinese immigration to a large extent. As a result, there was a drop in the available pool of workers in all three major industries of British Columbia. To fill this gap, Punjabi immigrants from India were allowed to enter. However, white workers opposed these new immigrants as they felt they were taking away their jobs

The Indian immigrants faced all kinds of racism and hatred upon their arrival. Their entry as immigrants and their status as British Subjects, which placed them at an equal level as Europeans, was opposed. To satisfy the racist white population and to keep Canada a white man’s country, a law was passed in 1908 against Indians entering Canada, called the Continuous Journey regulation. This law required that in order to be eligible to enter Canada, a person must come to Canada on a continuous journey from his/her country of birth.

However, at that time it was impossible to do so from

India, because there was no direct passenger ship service between India and Canada. As a result, this law barred the entry of all Indians into Canada.³ The Indians challenged that law by bringing the *Komagata Maru* here on a continuous journey from Hong Kong to Vancouver. At the same time the right to be citizens of this

country was taken away from Indians who were already here.

Upon arrival, Indians had the right to vote at all levels of government because they were subjects of the British Empire. However, by changing the provincial electoral law in British Columbia in 1907 their right to vote in BC was taken away. Then in 1908, they were also stripped of their right to vote at the municipal level. Similarly, this right had already been taken away from the Chinese and Japanese in 1874 and 1895 respectively. Due to the change in the provincial electoral law, the Indians were also unable to vote at the federal level because at that time an individual could vote at the federal level only if he or she had that right at the provincial level. Even though they had the right

“The Indians challenged that law by bringing the *Komagata Maru* here on a continuous journey from Hong Kong to Vancouver.”

to vote in other provinces, because the majority were living in BC at the time, the change in BC's law effectively made them unable to vote anywhere in Canada.

In BC, racist ideology was used to justify snatching the right to vote from Indians. For example, on March 26, 1907, while presenting the bill to take the right to vote away from Indians, Interior Minister W.H. Bowser of the Conservative government said:

I regret exceedingly that the Federal Government has taken a very strong stand in regard to a legislation of this character... But I ask the liberals of this House to break away from the party alliance in this and keep British Columbia a Whiteman's country to the extent that is in power.⁴

When this right was being taken away, the opposition Liberal Party didn't oppose this move. In fact, they supported it in a lighthearted tone. The leader of the opposition W. MacDonald said while laughing: "I do not say what he (Mr. Bowser) takes the right view of the question.... I agree with keeping foreigners out of our voters' list." He added:

A Hindu though a British subject, not one in one hundred among them can speak our language nor are they familiar with our laws and customs... I would suggest that the Government revise our election laws, and while depriving those Hindus and naturalized foreigners of franchise, exclude also others who are unable to read even a ballot paper. Until such action is taken, I propose — I vote for this measure. (Cheers & applause)⁵

In a frivolous atmosphere some other members also presented their views. One member said to Bowser, "If the Hindu were strong and mighty and had a navy of his own, the senior member of Vancouver (Mr. Bowser) would not introduce this measure."⁶ The members in attendance greeted this with laughter.

The similar kind of racism was shown in 1923 in Canada's parliament during the discussion about granting franchise rights to Indians. At this time Mr. McBride, the elected MP from BC's Caribou area spoke against granting the right to vote to Indians as follows:

... We in British Columbia want no more Hindus. Never did I value Canada and the laws of Canada more highly than when a boat-load of Hindus came from India to the port of Vancouver and was refused

admittance to this country and sent back home by the previous government. I hope this government will maintain that stand. We have on the coast of British Columbia, Chinamen and Japs running our stores. They are running the white people out. We have the Greeks there running our hotels and we have the Jews running our second-hand stores, and now some people want to bring in the Hindus to run our mills....⁷

The same year, in November 1923, the government of British Columbia passed a strong resolution against granting the right to vote back to Indians. The independent member Major R.J. Bird from Alberni presented the resolution. It was passed on December 27, 1923, in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. Its purpose was to warn the Dominion government that they should not take any steps to give the Oriental people the right to vote. Before it was presented in the Assembly, some parts of the resolution were published in the press. According to these press reports, the resolution stated:

... be it resolved that this Legislature is strongly opposed on economic and social grounds to allowing any Oriental to vote in this Province, either in provincial or Dominion elections; and therefore urges the Federal Government to take no steps that would interfere with the undoubted right of the Province to prescribe the form and extent of its own franchise, and further urges the Government of Canada, when defining its Dominion franchise, not to enfranchise Orientals.⁸

When on December 27, 1923, the resolution was presented in the BC Assembly, not a single voice was raised against it. The minister of Mines, Honourable William Sloan said in support of this resolution: "so far as the franchise is concerned we are mistress in our own house. **And that we in British Columbia stand for a white province.**" (Emphasis added.)⁹

It is clear from these examples that the racist ideology was used to keep the right to vote away from the Indian immigrants in BC and Canada. The main goal of this racist approach was to maintain control of the economy and politics of Canada in the hands of White people.

The Effects of Not Having the Right to Vote

There were several negative effects of not having the right to vote on the lives of Indian immigrants. The

first was that in the absence of this right they were not able to participate in the politics of Canada and had no say in electing representatives at all three levels of governments (Dominion, Province and Municipal). Also, they were not able to run as candidates in elections for these three levels of governments. As a result, they were not in a position to participate in any meaningful way in the legislations enacted by the three levels of governments, and the laws that directly impacted their lives.

Secondly, there were many restrictions on Indians as the result of not having the right to vote. For example, they were not allowed to sit on any jury; not allowed to work with the contractors of Public Works Departments; could not become lawyers, pharmacists, trustees of school boards and so on. In total there were 26 such restrictions on Indians connected with not having the right to vote.¹⁰

Third, the Canadian government used this as an argument to deny people from India the right to immigrate to Canada. The Canadian Immigration Act didn't allow those people into the country who were not considered able to fulfill the duties of a citizen.¹¹

Voices were raised to demand the right to vote immediately after it was taken away from the Indians. Along with the local Indian community, the British Empire and their Indian representatives also raised this demand. Both of these entities had different motives though. The British government and their representatives were demanding the right to vote for the Indians in Canada because they were afraid that it would create anger amongst Indians in India against the colonial British government. On the other hand, the Indians living in Canada were demanding the right because they wanted to be equal to other citizens of Canada. Due to the difference in their motives, they had different approaches to the problem. We will explore the role played by each separately.

The British Empire and its representatives' concerns about the right to vote of Indians living in Canada.

In the history of India's independence movement, there are many examples of the mistreatment faced by Indians in other parts of the British Empire being used to incite rebellion against the British in India. One good example of this is that the freedom fighters used the *Komagata Maru* incident to create anger against the

British in India. In view of these types of activities, the British rulers and their representatives were afraid that denial of franchise to Indians in Canada could lead to anger against the British in India or Indian freedom fighters could utilize this mistreatment to further their cause. Thus, they were asking for franchise for Indians in Canada. A resolution passed at the Imperial Conference held on 10 Downing Street in London on June 20, 1921, articulated concern about Indians not having equal rights in other parts of the British Empire such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, which from the perspective of British Commonwealth Unity expressed the desire that Indians should have the right to be citizens of these countries.¹²

It is important to note that when this resolution passed at the Imperial Conference in 1921, the members of the Babbar Akali movement were engaged in an armed struggle against the British and their local administrators in the Doaba region of Punjab. The Ghadar experience inspired this movement, and led some Ghadar members to become directly involved in this struggle. The British government worried about the growing unrest among the Indians. They were also worried that the mistreatment of Indians in other parts of the Empire could increase its problems in India. To eliminate this fear, the British Indian government in 1922 sent V.S. Sri Niwas Shastri, member of the British Privy Council, to visit various parts of the Empire.

During his visit to Canada Sri Niwas Shastri met with representatives of different levels of the government and had discussions about the problems confronted by the British government in India due to the discrimination faced by Indian immigrants. On August 19, 1922, in one such meeting in Victoria with B C Premier John Oliver, Mr. Shastri said to the Premier:

“... Hindus in British Columbia are British subjects just as much as most white people here and should have all the privileges of British citizenship although they do reside in Canada.” He also pointed out that the Hindus fought in the war and that therefore they should be accorded better treatment than they are now receiving. Mr. Shastri argued that Hindus should not only have the right to vote in Dominion and Provincial elections, but they should also have the right to take part in mayoralty and other municipal elections and sit as alderman on the city council if elected.¹³

In his response Premier Oliver assured him that “he and his cabinet would consider the proposal from the interests of the country.”¹⁴ However, in reality, the BC government took no positive step in response to Shastri’s suggestion. Actually, BC’s Assembly passed a very strong resolution in opposition to giving Indians the right to vote as discussed earlier.

What Shastri and the British Indian government at the time demanded was simple and short. All they wanted was that Indians living legally in these countries be given full citizenship rights due to their being British Subjects. They were internally in agreement with the

Whites in these dominions to keep them “safe for the Whites only” and tried their best to reassure them. For example, while talking to the press Mr. Shastri said: “By an agreement of 1908, no Indians are allowed to come to Canada for settlement. Now the Indian authorities cannot even seem to be attempting to break the word of that agreement by suggesting that the question be reopened.”¹⁵ In our view,

here Mr. Shastri is referring to the agreement or the law passed by the Indian government in 1918 and not in 1908. According to that law: “... no person from (India) can (after 1918) migrate to any Dominion for purposes either of labour or permanent settlement...”¹⁶

The effect of Sri Niwas Shastri’s visit to Canada was that the politicians at the Dominion (Canada) level were forced to pay attention to the issue. As a result of Shastri’s request and the resolution passed in London a year earlier, there was heated debate in Canada’s Parliament on June 29, 1923. Liberal party MP Mr. Jacobs raised the issue in the Parliament that according to the resolution passed by the Imperial Conference, the Indians, being British Subjects, should be given the right to vote. He strongly opposed it and expressed his views in an extremely racist manner. The main opposition came from BC MPs Mr. Neal and Mr. MacBride.

“Liberal party MP Mr. Jacobs raised the issue in the Parliament that according to the resolution passed by the Imperial Conference, the Indians, being British Subjects, should be given the right to vote.”

Mr. Neal tried to end the topic by stating that the issue did not concern the central government of Canada. He said: “It is not a Dominion matter. It is a British Columbia problem. Let us settle this problem in British Columbia.”¹⁷

The other BC MPs’ views also contained explicit racism and anger. In reaction, CCF party MP J. Woodsworth supported the extension of franchise to Indians and said “I cannot see that we are going to get very far by a narrow bigotry of that kind.... I believe that, in dealing with these matters difficult as they are — and I know they are difficult — we should rise

above narrow prejudice and look at them from a little bit more of a world point of view.”¹⁸

Similarly, in September 1928, three members from the British Empire’s Parliament Association — Divan Bahadur G. A. Netson, Divan C. Lal and T. C. Goswami — came to BC. They too expressed their views to the Canadian press supporting the right to vote for the Indians.

In a meeting with BC Cabinet, they only asked — “...whether Indians were allowed the right to vote here or not.”¹⁹ When they were informed that the Indians did not have the right to vote, they did not mention the issue after that.

In August of 1932 a British delegation came on a visit to Canada. The head of this delegation Sir Atul Chatterjee appeared before the Canadian cabinet and raised the issue that the Indians should be given the right to vote. The representatives of the Canadian government assured him that they would consider the matter.²⁰

Whenever the British government envoys met with BC and Canada’s leaders, an appeal was made that they should grant Indians the right to vote. However, they never questioned the racism and racist policies of these governments. In fact, they spoke the language of the white rulers. They stayed in their hotels and spoke

from their forums of privilege such as Lions Club and the like. It was clear that they did not worry about the mistreatment of Indians in these foreign lands; rather their worry was the reaction these conditions created in India among the masse. In order to keep Indians under control, the White government was forced to raise the issue of the rights of Indians residing in British colonies. It can not be denied that the representatives of the British Indian government had an influence on other governments, and as they raised this issue it became more important than it would have been otherwise. The Indian community in Canada understood this quite well. For this reason, it would sometimes invite these envoys themselves to come and speak and pay for their visits.

The struggle by the local Indian community

At different stages of this forty-years-long struggle to gain the right to vote in Canada (1907–1947), the local Indian community used a variety of strategies and arguments in support of its case. These strategies and reasons were dependent upon the different situations of each stage and time. At every turn of this struggle, the community had to face failures repeatedly; however, they did not stop fighting until success was achieved. If we keep this fact in mind that according to different reports, between 1942–1947, when the fight to gain the right to vote was at its peak, the total population of Indians in Canada was between 1200–1700.²¹ Note the large impact made by this small number of Indians and the advocacy, sacrifice and struggle they endured. During this long struggle, the Indians in Canada sought support of White people who had lived in India and were loyal to British Empire, from people belonging to the labour movement in Canada, especially in BC, and from people committed to socialist ideas. The members of the Indian community in Canada met with political leaders of BC and submitted their petitions but they did not hesitate to challenge these political leaders if there was a need for it.

The first step of the struggle to gain the right to vote by Indians was taken by Husain Rahim. According to a report in *The Aryan*, a newspaper published by the Indians in Canada, Hussain Rahim voted in the Municipal election of Vancouver in 1911. He contended that being a British subject, he had the right to vote in

this election. However, in the eyes of local laws, it was illegal. As a result, he was put on trial. However, he was acquitted in this trial. With this action of Hussain Rahim, the issue of right to vote for Indians in Canada came to the forefront.²²

After 1920, this issue to vote came to life again and remained active until 1947 in one form or other. Local Indian community members presented a number of arguments in order to gain the right to vote. First of all, they argued that they were British subjects and therefore they should have the right to vote. During their struggle, they repeatedly used this argument. For example, in April 1927, Canada's Governor General Viscount Willingdon came to Vancouver. At this time, an eight-member delegation from the Indian community met with the Governor General and handed him a petition. The petition demanded that because Indians living in Canada were British subjects, therefore they should be granted citizenship rights.²³

The second argument made by Indians to gain the right to vote in Canada, was that the Indians had shed blood for the British Empire. This was said in the petition given to the Governor General of Canada in 1927. After that, most of the time when delegations of Indians met with the representatives of the BC government, the Indian soldiers who had served the British Empire were included in these delegations. For example, on March 2, 1943, the delegation that met BC Premier John Hart in regard to the right to vote included three soldiers. One of them was Bahu Singh, who had fought in the First World War. The other two — Phangan Singh and G.S. Badal, were part of the Canadian army at that time. The White sympathizers of the Indian community, who had lived in India, made this argument strongly. On August 28, 1942, Sir Robert Holland said in a meeting, "it was unfair that Indians who were prepared to fight side by side with Canadian soldiers and were destined to spend their entire lives in this country, should be denied the right to a voice in Canada's affairs."²⁴

Actually, Indian people were very angry that they were not treated equally in the empire for which they were willing to sacrifice their lives. At the time of the Second World War, this anger was at its peak, when young people from the local Indian community started to receive letters for forced military service in Canada.

The community felt that when the Canadian government was not willing to enfranchise them, then it (the government) had no right to force their youth to serve in the military. In October 1942, the Khalsa Diwan Society registered a strong protest with the Defence Ministry of Canada.²⁵

By understanding the reality of those times, the Indian community, while continuing to protest also decided to exploit the issue of forced military service to its advantage. In 1942, the Khalsa Diwan Society sent a petition to the Canadian government in which they argued that Indian people were loyal to Canada and, if necessary, were willing to sacrifice their lives for the country. However, they felt that if they were being asked to perform the duties of the British subjects, then they should be given the rights of British subjects.²⁶

A large section of the mainstream community supported the argument of the Indian community. For example, two newspapers of Vancouver — *The Vancouver News Herald* and *The Vancouver Daily Province* — wrote favourable editorials based on this argument. On October 13, 1942, the editorial of the *Vancouver Daily Province* stated as follows:

The East Indians have some very good arguments. They are British subjects, they point out. They say they are loyal, and in the absence of the slightest evidence to the contrary it must be assumed they are. They insist that they would be happy to serve Canada in any way possible if admitted to citizenship. Some of them, though without citizenship rights are subject to the draft, and they regard that as hardly fair.... East Indians have been seeking the franchise in this province since 1908. If it is ever to be granted; now, while it can be employed to great political advantage, is the right moment.²⁷

Another issue used by the Indian community to gain the right to vote was the political instability in India due to the freedom struggle. For example, in 1942–43, the ‘Quit India’ agitation was very strong in India. Therefore, in a petition in 1942, the Indian community argued that the granting of franchise to Indians in Canada would be helpful to calm the political turmoil in India.²⁸

The Indian community also used to remind Canadian authorities on a regular basis that the community had made significant contributions to the development

of Canada. They said that Indian people were living in Canada as good citizens, they paid taxes and were contributing to the economic development of Canada. For example, in their petition to Governor General Viscount on April 9, 1927, they wrote:

That many of the 1,100 above mentioned have resided in Canada for from twenty to twenty-five years during which time they have purchased, improved and developed considerable land and built up many important and flourishing industries, paid large amounts in taxes and otherwise carried on as good and industrious citizens of their adopted country.²⁹

In the 1940s the same argument was articulated on various occasions. For example, on March 2, 1943, a delegation of Indians and their sympathizers met Premier John Hart of British Columbia. The members of this delegation were: Naginder Singh Gill, secretary of Khalsa Diwan Society Vancouver; Naranjan Singh, president of Khalsa Diwan Society Vancouver; Darshan Singh Sangha (who later became popular in Punjab’s political scene as Darshan Singh Canadian); Hazara Singh Garcha; Harnam Singh, president of Khalsa Diwan Society Victoria; Didar Singh, treasurer of Khalsa Diwan Society; Arjan Singh, vice treasurer of Khalsa Diwan Society; Mohindar Singh; Phangan Singh, G.S. Badal; Bahu Singh; Sir Robert Holland and Harold Pritchett, president of the International Wood Workers of America’s (IWA’s) District Number 1. During the meeting with the Premier, the secretary of Khalsa Diwan Society Vancouver, Naginder Singh Gill, read from the brief:

We have tried conscientiously to fulfil the duties and responsibilities of citizenship, but we have been denied the democratic rights of that citizenship. We contend that the denial of these rights is without justification in logic or reason.... We are a people of an old and democratic tradition. We believe in and are prepared to fight for principles and liberties of democracy. ... We want our children to grow up as good Canadians and responsible citizens.³⁰

Similarly on September 16, 1947, at Harrison Hot Springs at a meeting of the Union of Municipalities, while advocating for the right to vote for Indians, Indian lawyer Dr. Durai Pal Pandia said that Indian people

“Were taxpayers and property owners and that it was a fundamental principle of democracy that there should be no taxation without representation. ... Indians had been pioneers in the economic development of Canada, particularly in the lumber industry and agriculture. They were loyal people who had given half a million dollars towards the Sixth Victory Bond Issue and contributed generously to the Red Cross and hospitals.”³¹

While the representatives of the British government of India asked for the right of citizenship for Indians living in Canada, the local Indian community made demands for opening up of more immigration for Indians along with asking for the right to vote. For example, in the petition of April 9, 1927, to Governor General Viscount Willingdon the Indian community demanded that the Canadian government should allow some Indians to come to Canada every year and lessen the restrictions placed on entry of Indian students and traders into Canada.³²

During this long and difficult struggle to gain the right to vote, the Indian community developed connections with friends and sympathizers outside of the Indian community and obtained their support. The people from the mainstream community who supported this struggle belonged to socialist organizations, the trade union movement, the CCF party, the Labour Progressive Party, churches, teachers’ associations etc. In addition, many prominent Canadians of that time also helped the Indian community in this regard.³³

After going on for many years, the struggle reached its peak between 1942–1947. We discuss in detail the support that the Indian community gained from the CCF and the trade union movement during this period because in our view, this support played a decisive role in the success of this struggle. The representatives of the

CCF party presented this issue in the BC legislature and spoke in its favour. In a report in 1947, Harnam Singh and Sundar Singh, president and secretary of Khalsa Diwan Society Victoria wrote about the significance of this support as follows:

Although we continued to agitate for revision of the Franchise Law in our favour, it never again became a live issue until the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, a socialist party, adopted it as one of the main issue in their programme to remove racial discrimination.³⁴

On March 9, 1944, W.W. Leafex, the CCF’s assembly member from Vancouver East, introduced an amendment to BC’s Election Act to grant the right to vote to Indians. Mrs. Lara Jamieson, CCF’s assembly member from Vancouver Centre, spoke in support of this

amendment. However, this amendment did not pass because the Speaker of the Legislature, Mr. Whitaker, declared the Bill containing this amendment out of order due to some technical reasons. After this, CCF party members continued to speak in favour of granting this right to Indians living in Canada. On October 23rd, 1944, the leader of the CCF, Harold E. Winch, came to the Khalsa Diwan Society Gurdwara 1866

West 2nd Avenue, Vancouver and said, “The C.C.F.’s policy is for granting the rights of citizenship to all people legally resident in Canada, irrespective of racial origin.”³⁵

A year later in a session of the B.C. Legislature, on March 15, 1945, MLA from Vancouver Centre, W.W. Leafex, again introduced a bill to amend the B.C. Election Act, to grant the right to vote to Indians. While introducing the bill, he said,

“... with thousands of Indian troops dying for democracy in the jungles of Burma it is high time the Hindus here are given citizenship rights. By refusing

“... the Indian community demanded that the Canadian government should allow some Indians to come to Canada every year and lessen the restrictions placed on entry of Indian students and traders into Canada.”

them the vote, B.C. is encouraging sub-standards of labour and creating a problem that will have to be faced sooner or later, like the Negro problem in the U.S.”³⁶

Even though, there was widespread support in BC for the enfranchisement of Indians, this amendment failed to pass in the legislature. On March 28, 1945, the bill was defeated by 4 votes (18 in favour and 22 against). In a letter published in the *Victoria Daily Times* of April 7, 1945, Darshan Singh Sangha commented on this defeat as follows:

East Indians are British subjects by birth. They are subject to all taxation and other duties that full fledged citizen is required to perform. It is beyond reason why British citizens should not have full citizenship rights inside a British Dominion.³⁷

Why was this bill defeated at this time when there was a favourable environment in support of granting of franchise to Indians in BC? Because the Liberal government of BC, at that time was not willing to grant this right to Indians. Therefore, it is worthwhile to briefly examine the attitude of the BC's Liberals in regard to this issue. On March 9, 1944, in a debate on the amendment to the BC Election Act, introduced by the CCF, MLA W.W. Leafex, the provincial secretary and the Minister of Labour, Honourable George Pearson, while opposing the amendment, commented as follows:

There should be more than nationality in order to allow persons to enjoy the franchise. The Hindu is not helping us to maintain the standard of living we have set up in the province. There is nobody in this province as unreliable, dishonest and deceitful as the Hindus. We cannot get information from them. They break every regulation we have. We know of cases where Hindus had to pay other Hindus to get jobs. Chinese are the worry of our lives in the Labour Department, and Japanese were also. We are justified in excluding them from the full rights of citizenship.³⁸

The statement of Mr. Pearson produced a wave of anger among the Indian community and its supporters. Lara Jamieson, CCF MLA from Vancouver Centre, took notice of the minister's statement and said that a reflection of colour prejudice was visible from this statement.³⁹

The Indian community reacted strongly against this statement. Naginder Singh Gill, secretary of Khalsa Diwan Society Vancouver said, “Mr. Pearson's charges are unprovoked and unjustified. When Mr. Pearson includes the Chinese people of B.C. in his sweeping condemnation, he assumes a chauvinistic attitude, characteristic of the Nazi theories of the master race.”⁴⁰ Naginder Singh Gill challenged Mr. Pearson to repeat his words outside the legislature and said:

If Mr. Pearson is an honourable gentleman he will publicly apologize for his untrue words. But if he is unwilling to do so, let him repeat them outside of the walls of the Legislature. We can assure him if he does, we shall immediately take slander proceedings to permit the courts to decide whether or not we are the kind of undesirable citizens, scorned and insulted so gratuitously by Mr. Pearson, hiding behind his parliamentary privilege.⁴¹

On March 14, 1944, a delegation from the Indian community met Labour Minister Pearson to express a formal protest about his statement. The members of this delegation were: Naginder Singh Gill, Secretary of Khalsa Diwan Society Vancouver, Jerry Singh Hundal, Mohindar Singh, a representative of Khalsa Diwan Society Victoria, and Darshan Singh Sangha. This delegation presented Labour Minister Pearson with the protest letter and demanded that he should retract his words. The delegation also brought with them a letter from the Chinese Youth Association of Victoria, which on behalf of the Chinese community expressed a resentment against Labour Minister Pearson's words.⁴²

On March 22nd, 1944, Labour Minister Pearson sent a letter of apology to the Khalsa Diwan Society. That letter did not satisfy the Indian community. However, Mr. Pearson did not utter those words outside the assembly. Therefore, it never came to the point where the Indian community could sue him for libel.

The Indian community's struggle to gain the right to vote continued and the Liberal government of B.C. continued to find new excuses to deny them this right. In December 1944, while the Indian community prepared to get this question raised again in the next year's assembly session, a delegation from the community met with B.C.'s Attorney General, R.L. Maitland. After meeting with the delegation, Attorney General Maitland issued the following statement:

... the Oriental vote question is one, which has been accepted and settled in this province for 50 years. The East Indians are advancing an argument differing somewhat from those of the past. I do not think, however, when we have 50,000 of our best people away fighting in the war that this is the time to consider any change about which they could not be consulted. They are the ones who will have to carry on tomorrow, and they should be permitted to give consideration to any change in major politics or doctrines applying in this country....⁴³

The Attorney General's excuse shocked and hurt the Indian community. A spokesperson from the community reacted by saying that this statement by the Attorney General was an insult to the courageous performance of our people in the war.⁴⁴ The Indians thought that the Attorney General's statement was against democratic values. In a letter published in the *Victoria Daily Times* Darshan Singh Sangha commented as follows:

"Mr. Maitland contends that the boys overseas may disapprove East Indian enfranchisement at this time. Those boys are giving their lives to extend the same freedom to the people of Europe, which the East Indians are demanding at home. Freedom, like charity, begins at home. Canadian democracy will not suffer but will gain with extension of democratic rights to a people who, too, are a part of the Commonwealth."⁴⁵

The Indian community also believed that at that time a majority of Canadian soldiers and the general public were in favour of their enfranchisement. The evidence for their belief can be seen from the following letter of J.E. Boyd published in *Vancouver News Herald*. In this letter, J.E. Boyd expressed his views as follows:

Before leaving for Europe my son's last words were, "Never mind, dad, I am fighting in a war that means something!" I can only hope, with other parents whose boys are fighting and dying on every battlefield to wipe out the racial hate of Fascism, that they will not hear of Attorney General R.L. Maitland's curt refusal to even consider the question of votes for the East Indians.

Our armed forces have been told they are fighting for the Four Freedoms. Would it not greatly weaken their morale to learn that a representative of the Crown repudiates their sacrifices?...

Racial hate is the poisoned soul of Fascism without which Fascism's goal cannot be attained and it

is our duty to uproot the venomous Nazi like fangs polluting the blood stream of national unity.

In consideration of their excellent record in the building of B.C. and support of the war effort despite the serious handicaps of unequal opportunities, the East Indians decidedly merit the right of franchise — now. Let us extend them a friendly helping hand.⁴⁶

In order to understand the extent of support for the Indian franchise in the larger community, we examine the contribution made by the trade union movement of the time. It is true that in the first two or three decades of the twentieth century, Canadian and British Columbian workers were not in favour of Indians immigrating to Canada. However, the situation changed in the 1940s. In this decade, BC's labour movement strongly supported the Indians' struggle to gain the right to vote. It is important to note here that up to this time, this contribution of BC's labour movement was not given due credit in the recorded history of this struggle. For example, not a single word is mentioned in the aforementioned report of the Khalsa Diwan Society, Victoria about this contribution of the labour movement and its representatives.

Harold Pritchett, the president of District Number 1 of the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) was fully involved in this struggle. He was a member of various delegations from the Indian community who met with the government of BC in regard to the right to vote. In March 1944, when BC's labour minister made the above-mentioned negative comments about Indians, the I.W.A. condemned those remarks and demanded that the minister should retract them.⁴⁷ Later on in November 1944, I.W.A president Harold Pritchett visited the Vancouver Gurdwara and assured the Indian community that "The East Indian people have the backing of the entire labor movement in their struggle for the franchise."⁴⁸

Besides the IWA, the majority of other unions in BC were in favour of franchise for Indians. As mentioned earlier, in March 1945, a bill was introduced in the legislature of BC to grant voting rights to Indians. If we look at BC's newspapers a few weeks prior to March 1945, we find that almost every week there was some kind of statement issued or resolution passed by one of the unions in BC in favour of Indians' voting rights. At

this time the following unions expressed their support for this cause: IWA, The Dock and Shipyard Workers Union (CCL), Civic Employees Union, National Union of Operating Engineers- Local Number 3, The United Oil Workers Union-Local Number 1, IWA-Mission Local, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners (AFL)-Local 452, Mine Mill and Smelters Workers-Local 693, National Union of Machinists Union Vancouver, Pile Drivers Union-Local 2404 and others.⁴⁹

There were many reasons behind the B.C. labour movement's support for

Indians' right to vote at this time in contrast to earlier times. First, due to the Second World War, the economy of B.C. was doing very well. Therefore, B.C.'s White workers did not consider Indian workers a threat to their jobs. Secondly, under the influence of the international labour movement, a sense of comradeship had developed among the workers of different ethnicities. Thirdly, more than four decades has passed since Indians began living in Canada, and during this

time they were successful in developing relations with BC's White European decent settlers. Fourthly, under the leadership of Vancouver's Khalsa Diwan Society's secretary Naginder Singh Gill, the Indian community made a conscious decision that they were going to gain support of the majority community and the trade union movement of British Columbia. Fifthly, the Indian community was successful in gaining the support of the labour movement of BC, because Darshan Singh Sangha was actively working as an organizer for the IWA in BC.

Even though there was huge support for the Indians in the larger community, the government of B.C. was still not willing to grant this right to them. However, as a result of this support, in 1945 the bill that was introduced to grant the right to vote to Indians was defeated

by only four votes and some of the Liberal MLAs voted in favour of the bill.

With the defeat of the bill in 1945, the Indian community was hurt, but they did not lose heart. They resumed working on the issue right away in order to achieve victory in the next session of the assembly. The next election for the B.C. Legislature was to be held in December 1945. In October 1945, the Khalsa Diwan Society of Vancouver sent a circular to every candidate who was going to take part in this election. The circular stated, "With the victorious conclusion of the

war against Hitler, Fascism and Japanese aggression, we feel that democratic rights should be extended to all Canadian residents who are British subjects and of East Indian origin, on a basis of full equality with all others. Many of our kinsmen died fighting in the recent war for these principles."⁵⁰

A Liberal-Conservative coalition won BC's election in December 1945. Soon after the election, during the first session of the assembly, an all-party committee was formed to review B.C.'s Elections

Act. During the process of its public hearings the committee came to Vancouver on October 31st, 1946.⁵¹ On November 1, 1946, a delegation appeared before this committee on behalf of the Indian community. The members of this delegation were: Kapoor Singh, Kartar Singh, Mayo Singh, Eishar Singh, Gurdit Singh, Naginder Singh and Dr. Pandia.⁵² On behalf of this delegation, Dr. Pandia presented a brief to this committee. As well, the *Vancouver News Herald* published an editorial in support of extending voting rights to Indians on November 1, 1946.

In Vancouver, 12 organizations presented their briefs to this committee and supported the granting of franchise to the Indians. There was only one organization which opposed the right to vote for Indians.⁵³ In response to such support, the all-party committee of the BC Legislature on November 7, 1946,

"... more than four decades has passed since Indians began living in Canada, and during this time they were successful in developing relations with BC's White European decent settlers."

recommended that voting rights should be granted to Indians, Japanese and Chinese people living in British Columbia.⁵⁴ As a result, BC's legislature passed the Bill 85, which gave the right to vote to Indian, Japanese and Chinese Canadian in BC.⁵⁵

The achievement of the right to vote in BC automatically made Indians eligible to vote in the Dominion of Canada's elections. However, Indians still had no right to vote in municipal elections. Except in Vancouver, voting in all municipalities in B.C. was governed by the Municipal Elections Act. In order to amend this act, a resolution had to be presented and passed in the annual convention of B.C. municipalities. However, Vancouver had its own charter to govern its municipal elections. This charter had to be changed in Vancouver. The achievement of voting rights at the BC level had opened a window of opportunity to get voting rights at the municipal level. On September 10, 1947, a delegation of Indians under the leadership of the Indian Progressive Society appeared before the Vancouver City Council and petitioned for the right to vote at the municipal level. Some of the key members of this delegation were: Surain Singh, President of Indian Progressive Society; Naginder Singh Gill and Elmore Philpot, columnist at the *Vancouver Sun*.⁵⁶ However, Vancouver City Council did not make any decision concerning their request. Perhaps, before making its decision, the Vancouver City Council wanted to wait for the decision of the Municipalities of B.C. on this matter.

On September 16, 1947, the annual convention of B.C. Municipalities took place in Harrison Hot Springs. Dr. Pandia spoke at this convention to convince its delegates to vote in favour of voting rights for the Indians at the municipal level.⁵⁷ This convention passed a resolution to grant the right to vote to Indians. This resolution was applicable in all the municipalities of B.C. except Vancouver. On October 23, 1947, the legislative committee of Vancouver City Council held

its meeting. Dr. Pandia, Kapoor Singh, Kartar Singh and Eishar Singh attended the meeting on behalf of the Indian community. The committee amended its election rules and granted voting rights to Indians in Vancouver.⁵⁸ This concluded the forty years long struggle of Indians to gain the right to vote in Canada.

Conclusion

The place and the recognition Indian immigrants and their descendants have achieved in Canadian society has been possible due to the long struggle waged to gain the right to vote. This is quite obvious in the political field. If we, Indians, had not won the right to vote when we did, we would not have been this effective in the political process or as successful in the Canadian community. The people who wanted to keep Canada just for the Whites knew quite well that they

would not be able to stop non-Whites from being successful if given the right to participate in the Canadian political system. This fear is very clearly expressed in an editorial in the *Vancouver Sun* written in 1944: "Eight percent of our population in this province is Oriental. If they had votes it is quite possible, they could elect three representatives to the legislature, a Chinese, a Japanese, and a Hindu. The hon. member from Powell

Street is not quite a myth."⁵⁹

Many other rights were also connected with the franchise. Our people who were barred from voting also did not have the right to hold jobs in many important sectors of the economy and the civil administration. They could only work in some marginal sectors. It was due to the absence of this right that non-Whites were not able to find better jobs even after getting higher education. One grave effect of this situation was that while there were ample opportunities, the Indians born here in the earlier decades of last century were not able to get a higher education. The damage it did to the community as a whole can never be recovered. In other words, if the franchise was not taken away from our community

"Our people who were barred from voting also did not have the right to hold jobs in many important sectors of the economy and the civil administration."

or if it was granted earlier, it would have changed the community for the better. It is for such reasons that this victory was so important for it completely changed the direction of our community.

During the long struggle for the right to vote, Indians took some significant steps to make themselves a permanent part of Canadian society. In this process they tried to understand how the Canadian political system worked, which should be considered an important achievement in itself. At the same time, they increased contact with the larger society at the organizational level. Many activities during the right to vote struggle bear witness to how Indians forged strong relations with other organizations, ethnic groups, political parties, and labour organizations. These relations continue to strengthen our present day community. It should be noted that a specific sector of the larger society was more responsive than others. These were people with progressive ideas who wanted to make Canada a country based on equality regardless of one's color, race, religion, or any other difference and ensure everyone gets the same respect.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the victory for the right to vote struggle is that through it, the Indian immigrants became one of the forces that made Canada the country it is today. In 1947, *Vancouver Sun* journalist Elmore Philpot's words bear witness to this: "As a Canadian of European ancestry, I can testify to and stress the fact that this was a victory by Indians for Indians — but in larger sense by Indians in Canada for human equality everywhere."⁶⁰ By winning the right to vote, this struggle not only made the Indians respectable in the eyes of the larger community, it gave Canada a special place in the world. If the Canadian society is considered one of the best societies in the world, undoubtedly, the Indians contributed to this image by continuously struggling to change those discriminatory laws that divided people based on their color, race, religion, and other differences.

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PERSONAL DESCRIPTION
SIGNALEMENT

Profession }
 Profession } AKALIA PUNJAB INDIA
 Place and date of birth } 1909
 Lieu et date de naissance }

Domicile } CANADA
 Domicile }

Height } 5 FT. 1 IN.
 Taille }


Colour of eyes } BROWN
 Couleur des yeux }

Colour of hair } BLACK
 Couleur des cheveux } MOLE ON FOREHEAD.


Visible distinguishing marks
 or peculiarities
 Marques distinctives visibles
 ou autres particularités

CHILDREN		—	ENFANTS
Name	Age		Sex
Nom	Âge		Sexe
JUARKOR	8 YEARS		FEMALE
AJAEB SINGH	3 YEARS		MALE
GUR BAKHSH SINGH	1 YEAR		MALE

—3—
PHOTOGRAPH OF BEARER
PHOTOGRAPHIE DU PORTEUR



WIFE — ÉPOUSE



Signature of wife.—Signature de l'épouse.

Canadian passport of Basant Kaur [born in 1909, wife of Indar Singh] from Village Akalia, District Ludhiana, Punjab, India. Indian address and post office: Tapa. The passport also lists her three children: Juarkor (8 years, female), Ajaeb Singh (3 years, male), and Gur Bakhsh Singh (1 year, male).

Jeavan Deol Family fonds (File 2021_02_002). South Asian Canadian Digital Archive, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, Canada.

Legacies, circumstance
and fortune

Forming Sikh Identity: Living B'tween Spaces

Balbir Gurm

ABSTRACT

Identity or self-concept is tied to health and our identity is formed by our interactions in this world. When a person does not identify with a group or purpose, they do not feel included. A person has multiple social identities based on gender, age, race, socio-economic status, etc. but the focus here is on religious or spiritual identity and more specifically the politics of Sikh identity. This chapter reviews the ways that events in Panjab and India and locally continue to formulate and shape the identity of the Sikhs in Canada. It provides the lens of a health scholar involved in equity and anti-racism as she reflects on what she bore witness to, her experiences and the stories she heard from elders in the South Asian Community.

KEY WORDS

Sikh, racism, identity, health, Canadian Sikh, Sahajdhari Sikh, Operation Bluestar, Khalsa Diwan Society, South Asian settler, Farmers' protests

Introduction

Self-concept in health consists of 1. Self-efficacy: the belief that I have the ability and skills to accomplish a goal or a task (Bandura, 1997) 2. Social identity: knowing who one is and having a group that a person feels that they belong to (Abrams & Hogg, 2006); and 3. Internalized self-stigma: a feeling of worthlessness or decreased self-esteem as a result of being labelled (Corrigan, 2004; Goffman, 2009). A person's self-concept is related to their health. Self-concept is a product of our interactions and interpretations of our environment through our lens of the world. Our positionality or situatedness in the world determines our lens. Since each person is unique in their histories and understandings, the knowledge we possess about a situation is a partial truth that is bound in space and time. In this chapter, I look at the experience of Sikhs

in Canada and how events in the history of Sikhism have influenced our collective experience and helped form Sikh identity in Canada through my lens, the lens of a health scholar, community leader and equity activist.

The Sikh diaspora in Canada, historically is connected to the political environment of Panjab in particular and India in general. Many Canadians of South Asian descent (CoSAD) follow the politics in their countries of origin, are influenced by events there and assist when they can by providing moral and financial supports to the new Sikh immigrants. The Pew Research Center reports that immigrants tend to have transnational ties to their country of origin, and it decreases with the native born (2020). I believe identity is complex and is entangled in social and political environments. I reflect on the group I identify with,

the diaspora of Punjabi Sikhs (which are the dominant South Asian group in British Columbia, Canada). I attempt to understand how we have negotiated our identity as Canadian Sikhs by reviewing the political and social context.

I recognize that knowledge and truth are intertwined with power and politics. “Quite often those with power and privilege decide what is truth and perpetuate that truth. Then, this truth is internalized and reproduced by all of society (including legislation) at which point it becomes an accepted fact.” (Gurm & Marchbank, 2020).

This power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it’; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them. This means that these relations go right down into the depths of society, that they are not localized in the relations between the state and its citizens or on the frontier between classes and that they do not merely reproduce, at the level of individuals, bodies, gestures and behaviour, the general form of the law or government; that, although there is continuity, they are indeed articulated on this form through a whole series of complex mechanisms (Foucault, 1977, p. 27).

Those with power perpetuate truths through multiple ways of knowing and they have it accepted as truths and have it internalized and accepted as a truth and reproduced not only through education but through those without privilege as a taken for granted truth. The multiple ways of knowing are: empirics (science) aesthetics (artful expressions, i.e. stories, poems, photographs), ethics (moral judgement), and personal (beliefs) knowing. I will rely on these different types of knowing to come to an understanding of Sikh identity and living b’tween spaces.

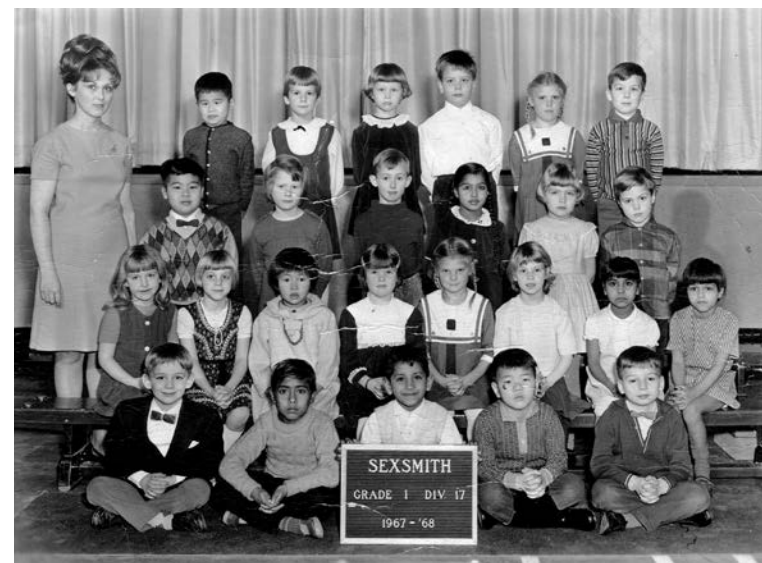
My background

First, I acknowledge that I am a settler on the land of the Coast Salish People specifically the Semiahmoo, Katzie, Kwikwetlem, Kwantlen, Qayqayt and Tsawwassen First Nations where I have my home. I give them my gratitude for being stewards of the land.

Since I am a constructivist realism theorist, I believe that how I interpret the world is tied to my social

location. Thus, I provide a glimpse of my background so you may understand my lens on the world. In the accepted social norms and privilege wheel of American society, I am in a position of privilege as a university professor, married with three adult children. On the oppression side, I am a female and brown. I believe that as someone with privilege I have an obligation to improve society (personal knowing). I have done many community projects and served on several boards. Most relevant is that I was the chair of the Punjabi Legacy Project and worked hard with multiple allies to obtain funding for the South Asian Legacy Project. I am on the management team of the project so am highly vested in this book.

As a female of colour who is a Sahajdhari Sikh, I am simultaneously privileged and oppressed by systems. I am a settler, having arrived with my mother in Canada in 1967 to join my father who had been sponsored by his eldest brother in 1961. I came into an extended family that had set their roots in Canada in 1906. My family was well integrated into the fabric of Canadian society when mom and I joined them, but everyone still spoke Panjabi at home.



Balbir's Grade 1 class at Sexsmith Elementary School, Vancouver, BC who helped her learn English language and Canadian ways of being.

Courtesy of author's private collection

I am a product of the BC education system where I suffered bullying and racism. Even though Vancouver was where most South Asians settled, we were still not a dominant group, and I was othered. As well, I had to struggle with my family to attend university because the South Asian community thought marriage should

be arranged for women after grade 12 and further education should not be pursued.

Although my extended family first arrived in Vancouver in 1906, I am the first female from my entire extended family to earn a doctoral degree. I am a graduate of the University of British Columbia where I became the first South Asian female president of an undergraduate society. In my professional life, the first tenured Punjabi Nursing Faculty in B.C.'s post-secondary education system and the first South Asian member of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Cancer Society (BC Yukon Division). These are some glass ceilings I have broken over the years. During my time at the University of British Columbia, I along with other students, noticed that there were all major languages and religions of the world offered but not courses in Sikh Studies and Punjabi. This made us feel excluded, our religion and language, two parts of our identity, did not matter. We worked to rectify this and raised \$700,000 to establish a Chair in Sikh Studies and Punjabi language in 1984.

In the working world, I continue to be discriminated against through microaggressions about my race and religion. I am asked "where are you from" and in earlier days was told "go back to where you came from." Yet when I returned to India for the first time at age 28, I was told by the Indian citizens that I was a foreigner. I feel, I live between spaces. This is the lens I bring to this work. I start with the history of my people.

History of the Sikhs

It is important to understand that although Sikhism is not the dominant religion in India, it is the most dominant religion of Canadians of South Asian Descent (CoSAD). Sikh means learner and the Sikh panth follows the teachings that were started by Guru Nanak Dev Ji through a succession of Gurus ending with the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh Ji. A panth are those that follow the spiritual ideology and practices of a leader. Guru Nanak was a great philosopher whose messages were about equity, inclusion and questioning taken-for-granted-practices. I consider him the father of social justice. With the tenth Guru the sociopolitical environment led to the creation of the Khalsa in the late 1600s. At that time, the mogul emperor was forcefully converting all citizens to the Muslim

religion. Guru Teg Bhahadur Ji (the ninth Guru) had been arrested and beheaded in public by the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb for refusing to convert to Islam as per Aurangzeb's directive. Guru Ji believed that everyone had the right to practice their religion and he would stand up for justice even if it meant his death. This led to Guru Gobind Singh Ji taking on the succession and becoming Guru at the young age of 9. History tells us that for 23 years, Guru Gobind Singh tried peaceful means, but was not able to negotiate a stop to this practice to forcefully convert citizens to Islam. Along with forced conversions, the looting and raping of women that was occurring in the region, became unbearable. This may be considered by historians as a paradigm shift from the peaceful social justice movement started by Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Although the Guru's fought wars over time, Guru Gobind Singh Ji entrenched the philosophy of sant/sipahi (saint/soldier). Guru Gobind Singh Ji called the people and said that he needed an army of individuals that would be willing to give up their lives for justice. He called for five volunteers to give up their life to his sword and he got five males, they were called the panj piyare (5 beloved ones). He baptized them with a nectar and had the panj piyare baptize him. These baptized Sikhs became the first Khalsas the "pure" ones. The Khalsa was encoded in thought and practice as a fearless army created to fight the tyranny of the emperor in 1699. These Khalsas were entrusted with five articles of faith — known as the five Ks. They needed to keep unshorn body hair (kesh) to be covered by a turban, carry a wooden comb for disciplined cleanliness of hair and spirit (kanga), wear an iron bangle on the right hand as a symbol of constantly behaving and acting in a just and honest manner (kara), carry a sword to protect the oppressed (kirpan) and wear boxers as a symbol of fidelity and discipline (kesha). After Guru Gobind Singh Ji there were no more human Gurus. The writings of the Gurus that are found in the sacred text — the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, are the living Guru for the Sikhs. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib is enshrined in Gurudwaras and the readings invoke messages of social justice and spirituality. The Sikhs that follow the 5 articles of faith are known as Kesahdhari Sikhs or Khalsas and those that follow the teachings but may not have the 5 Ks are called Sahajdhari Sikhs.



2nd Avenue Gurdwara, Kitsilano, Vancouver, BC

Courtesy of Vancouver Public Library collection.

Political History

In 1849, Panjab was part of the Sikh Empire governed by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, (1799–1839). It was the last kingdom to be colonized by the British empire after a period of great chaos in Punjab and the at the end of the Sikh Wars (1845–1846 and 1848–1849) fought between the Sikhs and the East India Company. Although, Panjab had been very ably governed by a Sikh king, the people in the kingdom and army were not all Sikhs and were made up of Muslims, Hindus and Europeans. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was known for his investment in infrastructure, prosperity and his Khalsa Army (Wikipedia).

British presence started in 1612 with the establishment of a factory by the British East India Company, creating a foothold in the country by 1690 (Welch, 2011). Due to their expansionist philosophy, they continued to conquer parts of India, and established a Raj by 1858 that lasted until 1947. The colonization of the land introduced a hierarchy of race to the people. After Panjab was conquered in 1849, the Sikhs were recruited

in large numbers for the British army and recruited to serve as police and to some degree as labour in far flung British colonies. In fact, any Sikh that joined the army had to maintain their Khalsa identity because the British wanted fearless soldiers. In this way, the British supported the Khalsa in maintaining their distinct identity from the dominant Hindus and those Sikhs that were not baptized. Participation by Sikhs in the military also introduced them to Canada. The first Sikhs to visit Canada in 1897 were part of the British army, enroute to England to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Immigration to Canada started five years after that visit as news of the new colonial frontier spread in the colonies.

Thus, settlers in Canada prior to 1914 tended to be mostly Sikh males from Panjab who congregated within groups of kinship, village and caste and sent money back to their families in Panjab to improve their lives. These early settlers were discriminated against and remained entangled in the politics of British Raj, Panjab and locally in Canada. The early

settlers experienced much discrimination and racism in their daily lives and in the justice system. They built Gurudwaras as the centres for dealing with social justice issues such as racism. In British Columbia the Gurdwara was a gathering place for all Canadians of South Asian decent and not just Sikhs. The first Sikh Society, Khalsa Diwan Society (KDS) was founded in 1906 and was the centre for addressing social and political challenges for South Asians. KDS was involved in social challenges and continues to impact local politics today.

Mid-way through British rule when messages came from India about the continuing discrimination there and the need to oust the colonial empire in Punjab, the Pacific Coast settlers, started the Ghadr party out of California to address the injustices against Punjabis. Around 1914–1915, Ghadrites returned to India knowing that they may face death at the hands of the British Empire, some men returned to India due to hostility and discrimination, and some returned because they had met their monetary goals (Johnston, 2006). The Sikhs had faced racism in Panjab from the colonizers and in Canada from the laws and European settlers. In Canada, the incident of the *Komagata Maru* in 1914, the ship from India that was not allowed by the Canadian government to berth at Burrard Inlet in Vancouver thus not allowing the passengers to disembark in Canada due to the Continuous Journey Act, supported the diaspora's feelings of discrimination. The Continuous Journey Regulation (1908) was an amendment to the Immigration Act that prevented citizens of another country from landing on Canadian soil if they did not purchase a direct ticket from their home country. At that time, there were no direct tickets sold from India to Canada. Those from India usually bought a ticket to Hong Kong first and then Vancouver (or San Francisco). It was a racist policy and a black mark in Canada's history.

In India, all the regions including Panjab fought colonization by the British Empire, and in 1947 got an independent India and Pakistan, but much bloodshed occurred. The original Panjab was divided in two based on religions. More than half of Punjab became part of Pakistan and the remainder part of India. It was extremely difficult for families that had to uproot and leave their homeland. Muslims that lived in India were

uprooted and sent to Pakistan and Sikhs that lived in the Pakistan area were uprooted and sent to India. The two countries were formed based on the major religions in the area but there was no country for the Sikhs. They were merged into the state of Punjab and promised equal rights under the constitution of India even though they were a minority. In Canada, the small minority of the population CoSAD, had their voting rights revoked and spent much time and energy fighting the federal, provincial, and municipal governments to obtain the right to vote that was finally achieved in 1947. The early South Asian settlers learned to create allies with other non-Whites, and organizations. They learned to communicate across cultures, learn political processes and enact them in peaceful ways in Canada. These early settlers helped their homeland to achieve independence and also achieved voting status for themselves. Their tenacity and resilience and commitment to equity is passed on through generations to us.

In India, after independence, the Sikhs adjusted to their Punjab and worked hard. Punjab became the wealthiest province and the breadbasket of India. The farmers became the elite in the 1960s and 1970s. Meanwhile, in Canada, immigration became less restrictive due to the relentless lobbying efforts of the first and second generation of settlers. Under the P.E. Trudeau government the Immigration Act was amended, so the late 1960's up to the 1980's saw an influx of migrants from India.

While in India, discrimination against the Sikhs by the Nation state was continuously highlighted. "The clash in April 1978 between the Nirankaris, and the members belonging to the Dam Dami Taksal and Akhand Kirtani Jatha proved to be the watershed. With this, the feeling of victimization and injustice (due to dispute of water and electricity rights) heightened. The highhandedness of the Indian state agencies aided by security forces provided the fuel in flaring anti-India sentiments among the vast sections of Sikhs" (Sra, 2013). Electricity and water from dams in Punjab were sent to neighboring states which resulted in less water and electricity for Punjab and forced the farmers in Punjab to use tubules to pump water from the ground to irrigate their fields. This caused ground water levels to start to go down. The wealthy province started to lose its spot and demand its water and power rights from the central

government. The rights that were guaranteed by the constitution.

“When a government does not follow through on a minority’s culture, religion, and language along with granting the right to practice those freely that a minority rises up as a survival instinct. Even Article 25B of the Indian Constitution does not acknowledge Sikhism as a religion separate from Hinduism” (Sra, 2013). This may have led to anti-national feelings and a powerful Akali Dal party, a state political party. The Akali Dal Party was gaining strength and other factions such as those led by (Sant) Jarnail Singh Bhindranwala arose. Jarnail Singh Bhindranwala accumulated much power in a short time. He resonated with the younger population and gained a following. In the 1980’s he demanded Punjab rights and publicly stated if an independent country for Sikhs was offered to him, he would not say no because the government had not protected the rights of the Sikhs, a minority in India. The government led by Indra Gandhi decided he was a national threat that needed to be removed. The military attacked the Golden Temple, and the Akal Takht, where Bhindrawala was housed in June 1984. There was news of the attack around the world, even as a quick media ban was imposed and media was ejected from Punjab a few days prior to the attack. The Sikh diaspora was shocked and humiliated (Devgan, 2015, p.268). Two narratives were spread around the globe: one by the Indian government that a terrorist needed to be eliminated and one by the faction of the Sikhs that they needed a homeland and threats to their identity would continue until a homeland was established. One of the army generals had taken photos of the attack and dropped the film at a store to be processed and printed. It is believed that the store staff copied these photos and that these were smuggled out to the diaspora. These photos were discretely circulated at the gurdwaras and to community leaders. The photos showed a Golden Temple full of worshippers as military entered and shot and killed individuals. There were photos of women hung by their hair and the community in Canada was told that some women were raped.

I saw these photos. These photos are heart wrenching and incite sadness and remind us that governments are capable of horrific atrocities.

This attack and images lead to demonstrations by the

diaspora around the world. Canada was no different. The two centres with the largest diaspora populations in 1984, Toronto and Vancouver held protests.

To get closer to the truth that may never be known we need multiple perspectives. The Sikh diaspora saw this as an attack on their personal identity, and community. At the time, the community thought this was an assault on Harmandir Sahib, the Akal Takht which can be viewed as the equivalent of an assault on Mecca or the Vatican. As a young adult, community insider, I witnessed conversations about the attack in places of worship and in homes. The emotional work to understand what happened began. My interpretation and experiences are entangled in systemic forms of institutional exclusion, racism, and stereotypical representations that I experience in Canada.

The communities abroad held demonstrations and wrote letters to local newspapers to express their concerns. The Canadian diaspora raised questions: If the Indian government wanted to get rid of a national security threat, why did they need to attack when the Golden Temple was full of worshippers? The attack was done on a day of celebration. This event contributed largely to a resurgence of Sikh identity, both in India and in the diasporas.

After the 1984 attack, the Sikhs decided that they needed to physically demonstrate that they were ready to fight for justice even though the old ways of hand-to-hand combat and using kirpans as weapons was no longer feasible. More and more individuals outwardly embraced initiation into Khalsahood, and the numbers of Khalsas started to surge in the Lower Mainland. While some of this can be contributed to migration at the time, I witnessed others Sikhs in their transition to Khalsas.

While the resurgence of the Khalsa occurred outside India, riots continued in India. Later that year, the Prime Minister was killed by her own bodyguards who happened to be Sikh. At times those who feel oppressed and cornered turn to violence as a last resort. Bodyguards Beant Singh and Satwant Singh who had been very loyal to their country till this time were ready to give up their lives for India, felt betrayed by the very country and Prime Minister that they had protected for years.

The Indian government provided a narrative to the

assassination that Sikhs are terrorists. Anti-Sikh riots occurred in Delhi and around India killing thousands of people while police did nothing, and there have been no significant charges to date. As well, young men were tortured and thrown in jail in India, for participating in demonstrations demanding an independent state — Khalistan or simply because they were seen as a threat. There was a cleansing of young Sikh males in Punjab as part of a violent police program. The word from Punjab to the diaspora was that this was orchestrated by police officials, and they feared for their sons' lives. At this time, many Indian Sikhs entered Canada (and other countries) as refugees, fearing for their lives in their homeland. The diaspora had extended families in Punjab who were impacted, and they heard stories of women who had lost their husbands or sons. This infuriated and saddened the local BC community. The narrative that Sikhs were terrorists and antinational was spread around the world and in Canada, leading many of us to feel shame and stigma, further making us feel marginalized. The Sikhs continued to feel they were oppressed in India and in Canada because the Sikhs became targets of racism due to this labelling of terrorists in Canada.

During this time, University of British Columbia's East Indian Students Association (EISA) member, Raj Mohinder Singh Gurm and Kamaljit Kaur Sandhu, started the Khalsa Kirtan Club, to preserve their identity and provide support to Sikh students who felt shame and stigma from mainstream Canadians after the 1984 massacre and in 1986, most members of EISA left and joined the Sikh Students' Association. These were two ways that students at UBC tried to address their Sikh identity.

In BC, the Sikhs had similar

thoughts and feelings. Some Sikhs spoke out against the atrocity of 1984, while some leaders stated they spoke for the silent majority and stated Sikhs in Canada were not demanding an independent state. There were Canadian Sikhs siding with the Khalistan movement while others remained silent and did not care because they were not going to live there and a third educated group driven by the philosophy of social justice



Sikh holds burning Indian flag in front of riot police during Vancouver demonstration yesterday.

Sikh protest disrupts ceremony

WEST VANCOUVER (CP) — About 300 Sikhs commemorated Indian Independence Day yesterday by attempting to storm the Indian Consul-General's home in the posh British Properties district to disrupt a flag-raising ceremony.

Two men were arrested during the demonstration after the rear and side windows of Consul-General Kavita Sharma's car were broken and after the crowd tried to force its way past West Vancouver police and RCMP on to the lawn of the Consul-General's house.

The demonstration began around 9 a.m. when the Sikhs arrived in the exclusive neighborhood in school buses. Manmohan Singh, a spokesman for the Sikh Students Federation, said the demonstrators were determined to prevent the Indian flag from being raised in front of the Consul-General's home.

Mr. Sharma had invited about 60 guests to his home for a morning celebration that was to have included raising the orange, green and white flag.

The attempt by the Sikh men, women and children to burst into the party was stopped by police.

However, a standoff developed with about 100 of the 300 demonstrators on the lawn between two lines of police, while the other demonstrators stayed on the street on the other side of a high hedge.

During the standoff, the RCMP — who are responsible for the safety of diplomats — called in reinforcements including officers equipped with truncheons, plexi-glass shields and tear gas.

Police were unable to estimate how many officers were present but just before the crowd dispersed, more than 100 officers surrounded the house. Others were blocking off streets in the area or stationed throughout the neighborhood.

Just after noon, Mr. Singh walked down the driveway of Mr. Sharma's home and told the Sikhs it was over.

"We had to tell this stupid Consul-General that we cannot celebrate this day," he said. "Today we are a minority (in India) and they want to wipe us out."

Earlier this summer, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered troops to invade the Sikhs' Golden Temple in Amritsar. In the course of that action, several thousand Sikhs were killed.

Satnam Singh Johal, secretary of the Khalsa Diwan Society, said the Sikhs won a victory by delaying the flag-raising until after noon.

"You do things before noon for happiness," he said. "The afternoon is for funerals and sadness."

"It is Independence Day in India, but the Sikhs do not have independence.

August 15 is a black day for the Sikh people. We don't like the Government traditions and we are not satisfied with the Government."

As the last of the school buses full of Sikhs — many of them wearing blue T-shirts with "Khalistan" in gold Indian letters — drove away, Mr. Sharma raised the flag.

Khalistan is the Sikhs' name for the independent state they wish to establish in India's Punjab region.

After raising the flag and reading a prepared statement from Indian President Zail Singh, Mr. Sharma apologized to his guests for the inconvenience caused by the demonstration.

"As the president said in his message, we Indians are known for love and compassion and freedom for all and fair treatment of minorities. I request all of you not to have any feelings of rancor towards any communities."

The Consul-General went on to say, "Violence is resorted to by cowards."

When questioned by reporters, Mr. Sharma said generally the flag-raising celebration of Independence Day is held in the morning, but "there is no significance to raising it after noon. You can raise it anytime."

The Sikhs planned to have their own celebration at 5 p.m. at the temple in Vancouver.

Globe and Mail article.

Courtesy of author's private collection.

(Sikhi) stated this was a violation of human rights and needed to be addressed in the United Nations courts. Conversations were sometimes informal and not organized publicly.

In the meantime, it became difficult for many Sikhs to obtain visas to enter India to visit family members because of the support for Khalistan in Canada. This continued for several years and then the movement seemed to become silenced. The narrative perpetuated is not that there is injustice and the Sikhs are fighting for equity, but that the Sikhs are terrorists. Sikhs do not want to be seen as terrorists and targeted by Canadian or Indian Intelligence. There are widespread and multiple opinions around the call for an independent state for Sikhs called Khalistan. These multiple sentiments and opinions also reside in Canada.

There is not one united voice. In Canada, some Gurdwaras (places of worship) formally recognized (Sant) Jarnail Singh Bhindranwala as a martyr because he was fighting for social justice and equality. The Indian government labels him a terrorist. In present day, some gurdwaras display photos of him and other Sikhs who fought for equality and identity. Also, at the height of the movement in Punjab, an Air India flight initiating in Toronto, full of Canadians exploded over Ireland and all the passengers and crew were killed. Another explosion occurred on the ground in Japan of an India JAL airline that initiated in Vancouver, and baggage handlers died. This was a sad day in Canadian history. The country was horrified. Then Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney phoned the Prime Minister of India to relay condolences for the death of Indians, when those on board were Canadian, highlighting the racism that exists in Canadian society (Harris, 2020). An official Inquiry into the disaster was undertaken, people were arrested, a trial occurred but no one was convicted other than Inderjit Singh Reyat for making a bomb.

Today some Sikhs in Canada still demand an independent state while others no longer concern themselves with the politics regarding an independent Sikh state. They believe they have rights in Canada and are thankful that their families immigrated. Others believe that as a privileged diaspora they need to continue the struggle until minority rights are obtained for fellow Sikhs in India. In June 2010, a group brought forward a petition that was brought to Parliament by Surrey

Newton MP Sukh Dhaliwal (Liberal) and Toronto area MP Andrew Kania to declare the 1984 attacks Sikh Genocide (Sikh Siyasat News, 2010). The petition was denounced by Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff and was not passed by a Conservative government. This in part may be due to the *National Post* characterizing the petitioners as terrorists (MacNair, 2010) and the media ban in 1984 which allowed the Indian government to perpetuate their perspective through news releases which was accepted as truths around the world. The petitioners may be trying to deal with their own identities, wanting not to be known as terrorists but as freedom fighters.

The local Sikh community who was one voice in the 1960s and 1970s is fractured today. The local BC community has been labelled variously as fundamentalists and moderates by the media after the attack on the Golden Temple, Operation Bluestar (1984) and some label themselves this way. Fundamentalists in this context are described as those who are baptized with the 5 Ks and support an independent Khalistan. Moderates are defined as those with cut hair and who do not get involved in affairs in India but follow the teachings of Sikhi as a way of life. This is an oversimplification because self-concept has multiple intersecting identities. These characterizations were all done by social political processes and interactions with vocal individuals. One faction that was created was by a letter that was sent by one executive member, Jathedar Ranjit Singh, of the Akal Takht providing an opinion on whether Gurdwaras should allow chairs in the langar hall (place where meals are cooked and served for worshippers). I spoke with Jathedar Ranjit Singh in India, many years after the events. What you need to know about Ranjit Singh is that he is not a Sikh scholar, nor does he have formal education beyond elementary school, yet his advice was sought on a very important community issue. Ranjit Singh, himself told me that he did not provide an edict on behalf of the Akal Takht but that it was his opinion that for everyone to be equal, they should sit in a line on the floor. Although this was his opinion, and not an edict from the Akal Takht, some Sikhs accepted this as an edict while other Sikhs who questioned it, stated that as long as everyone sits on chairs, they are still equal. They cited that many individuals have copies of Guru Granth Sahibs in their homes, but they still have sofas

and dining chairs, and it is hypocritical to state that in one place, there is more than one set of rules according to context when in Sikhi, God resides everywhere and in all animate and inanimate objects. As well, the early settlers insisted that they had permission from the Akal Takht to have chairs and tables in the langar hall and even pews in the main hall like churches, but none of the elders could locate this historical letter when I asked for it. This politicizing of the gurdwaras led to splits in BC's Sikh community. The same confrontations happened in major cities across Canada. At present some Gurdwaras have table and chairs and some don't. This division may be okay for politics and business, but it has impacted the social fabric of the community, and our Sikh identity. For example, on a practical note, this has led to couples not just worrying about religion as one of the factors to consider in marriage but also if someone is fundamentalist or moderate and has led to more complexity in relationships. Fractures such as this have questioned the identity and community of the Sikhs in BC.

This division caused a resurgence of baptized Sikhs in BC who continue to feel their identity is threatened and who also call for an independent Khalistan. Others do not identify with the baptized Sikhs and state they believe in Sikhi in their own ways and some are withdrawing from organized religion as it is practiced in the Gurdwaras. Some Sahajdhari Sikhs are further marginalized and oppressed by some baptized Sikhs, they are othered. They are made to feel that they are not Sikhs because they are not Khalsas, they are less than. These Sikhs feel that there would be no room for them, and they would not enjoy the rights they have in Canada, they would be oppressed if the dream of Khalistan was actualized. Therefore, they would never live there so they do not want to promote it. Others feel that the whole movement that started will have been for naught, those who have sacrificed their lives for the rights of Sikhs in Punjab will have died in vain. They continue to advocate for an independent Khalistan. When some were asked if they would go live in Khalistan, the response was no, it is a human right's fight for the Sikhs of Punjab who need to be supported because they are oppressed by the Indian government. They have never been given the rights that other individuals have.

A study done more recently (2015) on the digital story

of 1984 as memory work by Shruti Devgan confirms that there continue to be three narratives. Devgan studies counter memories of oppressed groups. Devgan studied 30 diasporic well-educated Sikhs from Canada and the United States and had interviews and focus groups about the digital sites that are present on the web in relationship to 1984. She states that 1984 was a watershed memory event for the Sikhs and that memories are tied to events and experiences and what is accepted as truth is shaped by power. She states that, "Socially engendered fear and socially produced shame were effective and invisible mechanisms to gag the community and preclude the Sikh story from becoming public." Based on her research she believes that in the 2000's is when Sikhs started to grieve and make sense of 1984. Her participants problematized labels such as militant, terrorist, riot and some compared the tragedy of 1984 with the Holocaust. As someone who would fit her participant population, I found myself agreeing with her findings minus that the emotional work started in 2000s, I believe the public display of the emotional work may have started in 2000s but the sense making and identifying it as human rights violations started at the time in 1984. In trying to negotiate our collective identity as Sikhs, we want to be portrayed as those who stand up for social justice and the same time, some of us that don't carry the 5 Ks, Sahajdhari Sikhs, have internal struggles of identity when baptized Sikhs tell us we are not good enough because we don't carry the physical articles of faith and have not been baptized. As Sikhs we need to negotiate our own identities based on our history and context and understand that Sikhs are as diverse as any other group and should not be stereotyped. I find as a woman, in Sikhi philosophy I should be treated as equal, but women have never been treated as equal to men within the practices of Sikh gurdwaras. All you have to do is review the executives and recall who is involved. There have been no female members on the Sikh gurdwara executive committees other than for kitchen representatives, no female jathedars or preachers/granthis or few invited/paid ragi groups sponsored by gurdwaras from India, they have generally been male. This is a reflection on two of my multiple identities: Sikh and female. At a personal level I continue to struggle with Sikh identity but at community level, I identify. To me Sikh identity is that of a social justice advocate.



Farmer's Protest Surrey, BC

Courtesy of Surrey Leader Newspaper, Jan 28, 2021.

Sikhs, being a minority, need to fight for their rights no matter where they reside, and it is true in Canada where groups who are not from dominant groups have suffered discrimination by the state. Early migrants from India were not allowed to enter Canada, the *Komagata Maru* was turned back in 1914 under the Continuous Journey Act in a legislated desire to keep Canada White. While the Sikh/Punjabi/Indian diaspora deals with its own internal issues of casteism, discrimination, and racism, it needs to support the work to understand the trauma of others, they need to be careful not to equate it with their own suffering. They need to identify the differences as well as the similarities of oppressed groups.

In Canada, although there is the Human Rights Code, systemic discrimination and generational trauma still persist. To be a Sikh means to fight for social justice. Sikh identity is of social justice advocacy, so we need to be allies with groups that have suffered due to government policies in Canada.

Sikhs need to support the Indigenous communities whose land was forcefully taken and children were stripped of their homes and placed in residential schools. The last residential school closed in 1996. This generational trauma is with the Indigenous communities, and in a different manner, it is with the Sikhs for they carry the intergenerational trauma from partition and from 1984.

The impact of the farmers protests in India also

adds to the context of Sikh identity. In September 2020 the Indian government passed three contentious agricultural laws that farmers say would restrict their earnings. "Farmer unions in Punjab and Haryana say the recent laws enacted at the Centre will dismantle the minimum support price (MSP) system. Over time big corporate houses will dictate terms and farmers will end up getting less for their crops, they argue" (*The Times of India*, Dec 8 2020). The Indian government said the laws are to help small farmers because they can sell to anyone and do not have to sell to mandis and they will get a better price due to competition (*The Times of India*, Dec 8, 2020). The diaspora in Canada still has ties to Punjab's agricultural belt and received communication that they needed assistance because they needed to peacefully protest these laws. The farmers started protesting and this resulted in the largest farmer's protests in history. The protests started in June 2020 with a few farmers in Punjab and grew to large scale by December to Delhi and by December over 250 million people had participated in national strikes. The government tried to portray this as an issue for farmers in Punjab but the agricultural industry employs 58% of India's total population, so it is an issue for farmers across India (Dhillon, 2021). Many of the farmers became martyrs as violent clashes led to around 700 deaths and several suicides by November 2020 at base camps around Delhi since farmers were physically barred from entering the national capital (Jaswal, 2021). The diaspora in Canada supported the farmers through resources and protests. In Surrey, there were consistent protests every evening and weekend on the corner of 88th and King George Boulevard and at 72nd Ave and Scott Rd. As well, several rallies were organized in the Vancouver Lower Mainland. The local Sikh community felt they needed to demonstrate emotional support by protesting locally and they were told that the Indian farmers appreciated it. Local protesters also called on local governments to condemn the attacks on peaceful protesters. In response to this, MP Sukh Dhaliwal condemned the October 3, 2020 and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau spoke up against the attacks on the farmers. The BC Federation of Labour held a rally in support of farmers in India (Garcha, 2020). In April 2021, Surrey City Council passed a motion to stand in solidarity with Indian farmers (Zytaruk, 2021). Local organizations such as Poetic

Justice Foundation and the World Sikh Organization helped amplify the Indian farmers' voices. After a year of tens of thousands of Indian farmers camping out around Delhi, the three controversial laws were repealed by the Indian government on November 29, 2021. Celebrations occurred in India and in BC, claiming that the reversal of the controversial agricultural bills had occurred due to solidarity and peaceful protests.

Conclusion

Canadian Sikh identity is tied into experiences both locally and in India. Some key events were highlighted that have had impacts on local Sikh identity. Although there is diversity within the Sikhs themselves, one thing is constant, Sikhs will continue to fight for social justice

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and support others. Atrocities such as abuse and racism continue in Canada and in India.

Sikhs need to stand with others in the fight for equity and inclusion. Sikhs are a minority group in their ancestral land and in the places of migration. We continue to be oppressed, and work hard by joining professions or creating wealth, and taking part in politics to create a just society. Just like with all groups, there is no homogeneity, but what has remained constant over time is that Sikhs have endured racism, they remain resilient, and they continue to stand up for justice in Canada and around the world. This is one aspect of Sikh identity that we can all be proud of as we negotiate our individual identities.

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Politics



In 1943 the IWA sub-local at Youbou reported that East Indians were 100% unionized.

Kaatza Station Museum & Archives, N01603, IWA Local 1-80, Wilmer Gold Photo Collection, ©United Steelworkers Local 1-1937.

Legacies, circumstance and fortune

South Asian Canadians and the Labour Movement in British Columbia

Anushay Malik

ABSTRACT

This chapter traces the history of South Asian Canadian workers and their engagement with the labour movement in British Columbia (BC). The arrival of South Asian workers in BC in the early 20th century was met with hostility and racism, but they were able to push against this and eventually became a substantive part of the labour movement. They achieved this by firstly, forming their own progressive organizations that linked up to unions and workers. Secondly, they drew on the solidarity of allies who stood up for them; this included progressive political groups like the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and unions such as the International Woodworkers of America (IWA). Thirdly, they took on leadership positions and political office and were, over time, able to carve out more space for themselves within unions and within the wider political milieu in British Columbia. Racism may not have gone away, but the experiences of these early South Asians, and their relationship to the labour movement, shows the way forward for building a truly progressive and inclusive environment in BC.

KEYWORDS

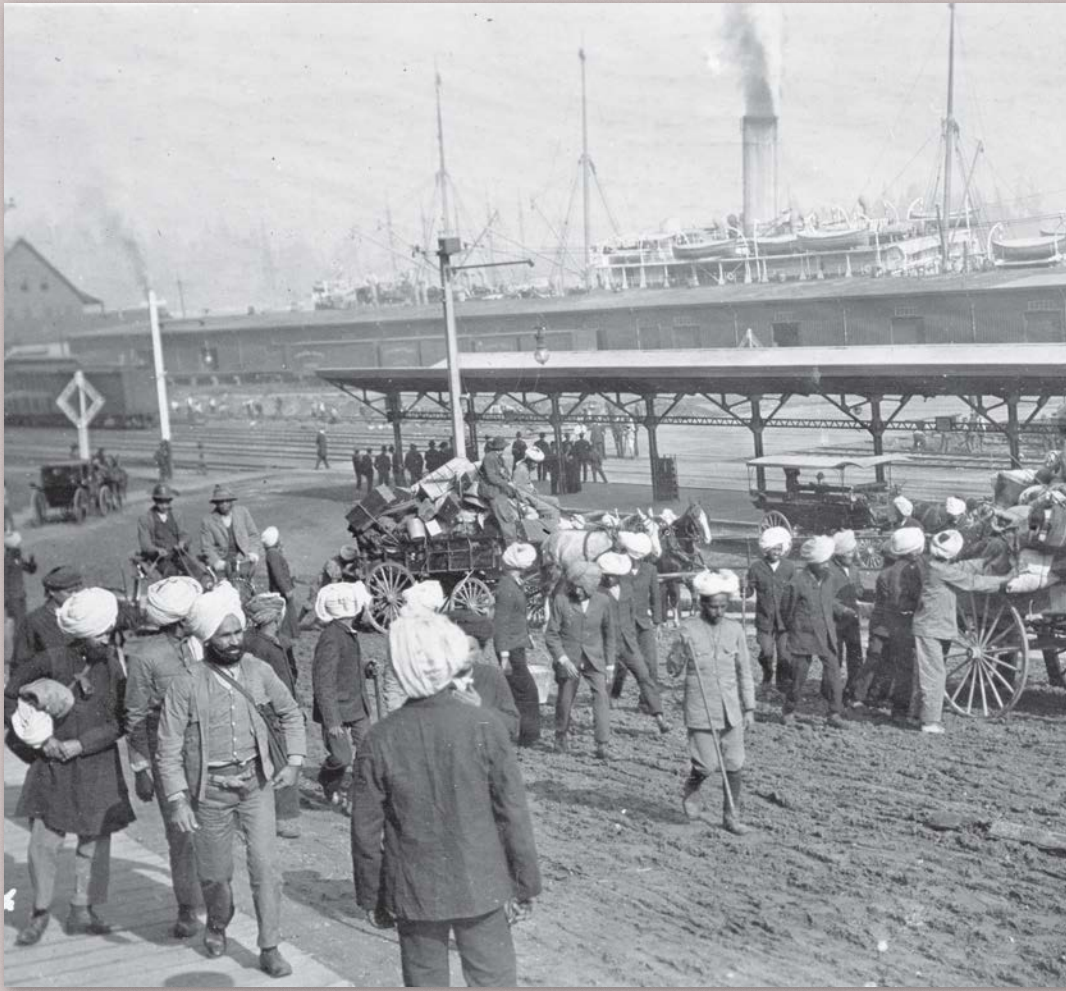
South Asian, Punjabi, labour movement, social history, racism, unions, British Columbia, Canada.

Introduction

In 1908 W.L. Mackenzie King, future prime minister but then deputy labour minister, published a report on Asian immigration to British Columbia (BC). Described by media as confirmation of the “oriental invasion” this report included interviews of government officials and new migrants. Racist and inherently exclusionary, the report nonetheless provides insights into why these migrants came to BC, and the reception they received.

Between 1904 and 1908, 5179 people erroneously

described as “Hindoos” from South Asia arrived in BC. Many had been encouraged by recruiting agents working for the Canadian Pacific Railway, and by foremen working for sawmill owners. They were assured of jobs and money to be made. “Witness no. 9” from Indian Punjab said he had been “promised” a job in Canada, and that, on that basis “200 to 300 men” who were “all from the Punjab” decided to come together.¹ From the interviews cited in this report it is clear that south Asians believed they were coming to BC because their



"East Indian immigrants at CPR Pier", c. 1910,

George Barrowclough photo, Vancouver Public Library 9426.

described as follows: Unions in BC initially excluded South Asians, but over time South Asian workers would become part of the labour movement and collectively they would improve working conditions and union representation. In the early 20th century unions in BC saw the arrival of South Asians as an "invasion of Canadian territory" which would result in "demoralizing the labor market as the East Indian always does when he leaves his native land, by means of his cheap labor and low standards."² South Asian exclusion from the labour movement allowed for capitalists, employers and agents to have free reign over South Asian workers in this early period. Over time, the relationship between South Asian Canadians and the labour movement would begin to change.

Beginning in 1944 when the War

labour was needed and so did not expect the racism and exploitation they experienced.

The Mackenzie report was less interested in describing new migrants' conditions of work and more concerned with why they were coming and how to make them stop. However, the evidence gathered for the report, like South Asian interview accounts, can also give an insight into what South Asian workers thought their working conditions would be. This is a form of "counter-storytelling": using historical evidence to focus on the experiences of marginalized people. It is a call to action in history writing that asks the reader and researcher to resist the idea that we know the story of our past. Instead, it asks, is the history that we take for granted representative of the experiences of marginalized people? Using this method this chapter analyzes sources like the Mackenzie report, archival records, newspapers and interviews in order to tell the story of the labour movement through the experiences of South Asian Canadians.

The history traced in this chapter can be broadly

Time Labour Relations Regulations compelled employers to recognize certified unions, one of the major unions in the province, the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) began to actively recruit workers from Asian communities.³ The relationship between South Asian workers and the labour movement was consolidated as the former received improvements in wages and working conditions in this same year.⁴ This changed even further after 1945 when the IWA alongside unions in other sectors like the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union (UFAWU), following trends in the global progressive movement, began to highlight how racial discrimination divided the working classes, citing capitalist employers as the real enemy. At the same time that the IWA reached out to South Asian workers the UFAWU also began to remove racial elements from their job classifications.⁵ In the 1940s and 1950s a few South Asians became union representatives themselves and continued to be supported by their allies within the labour movement and progressive organizations like the political party the Co-operative

Commonwealth Federation (CCF) that later evolved into the New Democratic Party (NDP) continuing to support the demands of workers of colour. Alongside these alliances South Asian Canadians built community-based networks (like the BC Organization to Fight Racism described later in this chapter) that linked up with the labour movement. As migration to BC increased in the 1960s and 1970s South Asian representation in the labour movement went on increasing. Racism continued to be an important issue affecting workers of colour within BC, but the experiences of these early South Asians showed how unions provided a platform to successfully fight for a more progressive and inclusive environment in the province. Several South Asian labour organizers even went on to hold political office in BC thus further expanding their service to the South Asian Canadian community.

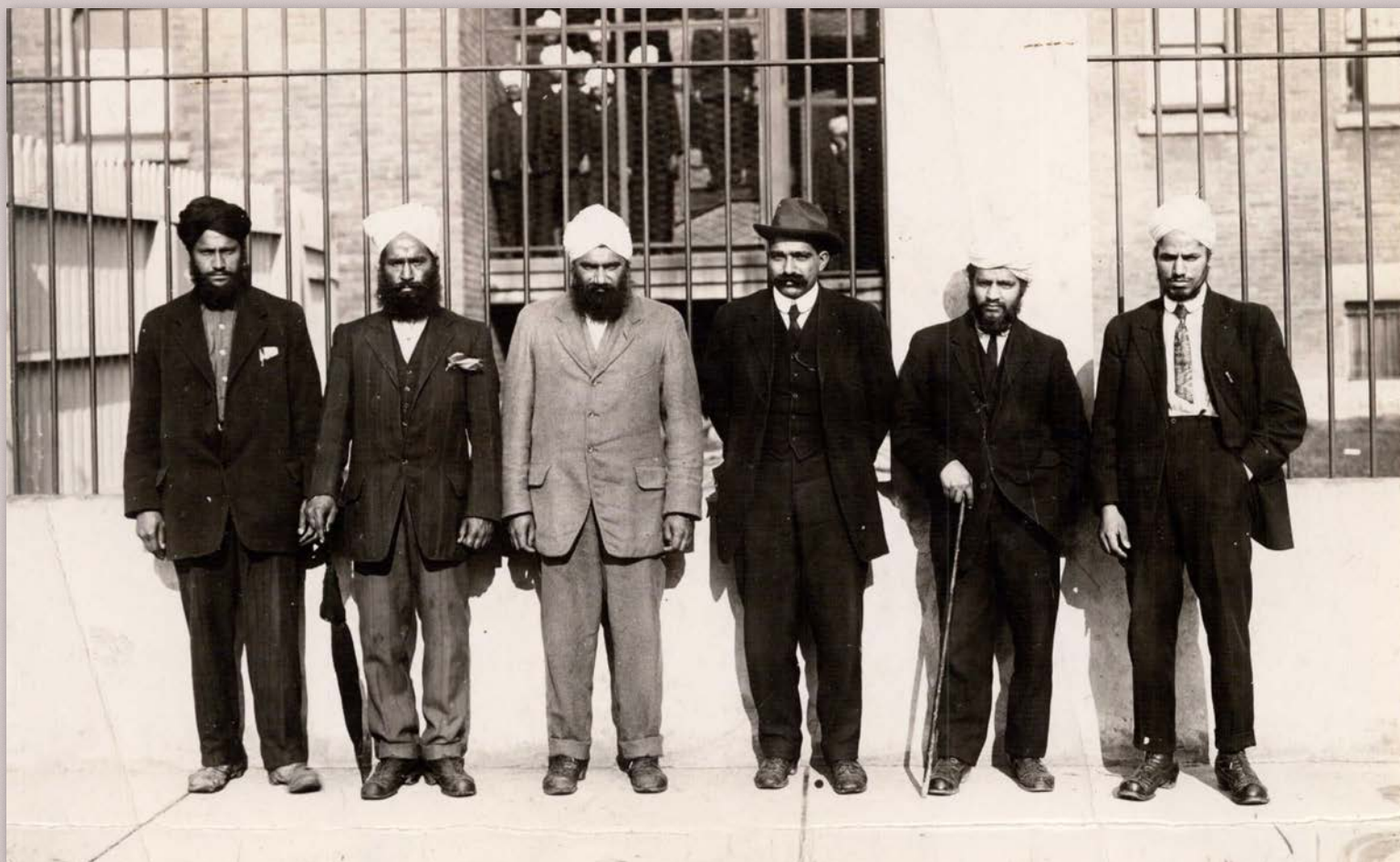
This story is traced out over 4 sections. The first section focuses on the multiple political ideologies that South Asians already had when they came to BC which allowed for an affinity with the labour movement. The second section looks at how wage discrimination and overt racism, in the earlier half of the 20th century, within and outside the labour movement prevented South Asian workers from taking union positions even while their power on the shopfloor increased. The third section looks at the exceptional story of Darshan Singh Sangha, a migrant from Punjab, as illustrative of a changing relationship between South Asian Canadians and the labour movement in BC. His story was an important, if rare, early demonstration of how worker solidarity could be built across racial divides after World War II. The last section traces the period from the 1950s onward. The formation of community organizations that were linked to the labour movement, the Canadian Farmworkers Union and the popular participation of South Asian Canadian workers in the Solidarity Movement of 1983 highlighted the growing significance of South Asians as a political force that increasingly took on positions of leadership in unions. The chapter ends with the observation that this formal involvement with union propelled some South Asians into provincial politics, allowing them to use their position to continue supporting South Asian workers in the labour movement.

The Many Stories of how South Asians came to British Columbia.

What Mackenzie wrote in his report was partially true. South Asian migration rose because workers were needed and actively encouraged by booking agents in India who were advertising jobs and detailing routes to Canada⁶ especially after migration from China sharply declined following the 1891 increase in the Chinese head tax. The workers came almost entirely from the province of Punjab in North-western India. Most were Sikh, although some were Hindus and Muslims. At the time, Punjab was relatively prosperous and diverse, but some Punjabi men lost out because of extractive colonial legislation and high taxes that were intended to produce an unfair distribution of land and benefits to those who showed ‘proven loyalty’ to the British in India.⁷ Some of the early migrants from Punjab had been part of the British Indian Army and brought back stories of the lands they had visited while on official duty, stimulating the idea of traveling for opportunity.

The Mackenzie report therefore clearly shows that South Asians came to BC in the early 20th Century for different reasons. The British Empire was a colonial world power that included both Canada, including BC, and India. Many Indians accurately assumed they had the legal right to immigrate to Canada as fellow subject of the commonwealth. However, while Canada welcomed white emigrants from throughout the British Empire, Indians were largely prevented from realizing this opportunity due to the colour of their skin. In 1906 Sant Nihal Singh, a well-known South Asian who travelled across North America and wrote extensively — particularly against racial discrimination — visited BC. In local newspapers Singh wrote that Canadians should treat “fellow-subjects in India” as equals.⁸ Singh sought support from union leaders to welcome south Asians as fellow-workers, but the ground was not yet fertile enough for his words to take root.

Despite the conditions, South Asians continued to arrive from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka in search of work. By the 1960s South Asian diaspora began coming from Uganda, Kenya, Guyana, Trinidad and Fiji⁹ — all areas that had been colonized and employed South Asian (often indentured) labour to build their railways and other colonial infrastructure. This labour then became the South Asian diaspora in



Husain Rahim is fourth from the left standing in front of the Immigration Hall in Victoria in 1913 where 39 South Asians were detained by Canadian officials. Some can be seen standing behind a barred window.

Kohaly Collection, Box 6_347, Simon Fraser University Library.

these countries. Many who arrived in this period had worked in a variety of jobs and were arguably more skilled than earlier immigrants. Crucially, several spoke English, which was very useful in building links with the labour movement.

These links with South Asian Canadians also formed on ideological grounds. For instance, many South Asian Canadian workers who were connected to global anti-colonial networks, including the Ghadr movement¹⁰, were also socialist just like many other Asian and African anticolonial activists in the early 20th century were. This made them natural allies with socialists within the BC Labour movement.

One example of this was Husain Rahim (Chagan Khiraj Varma), a revolutionary socialist who was subject to an arrest warrant by the British government in India for his activities there. He came to BC in 1910 via Honolulu and soon after formed the Canada India Supply Company.¹¹ Most of his clients were Sikh millworkers and he explicitly worked to help the community.¹² One effort was his leadership in fighting for the right to vote for South Asians in BC. Rahim also

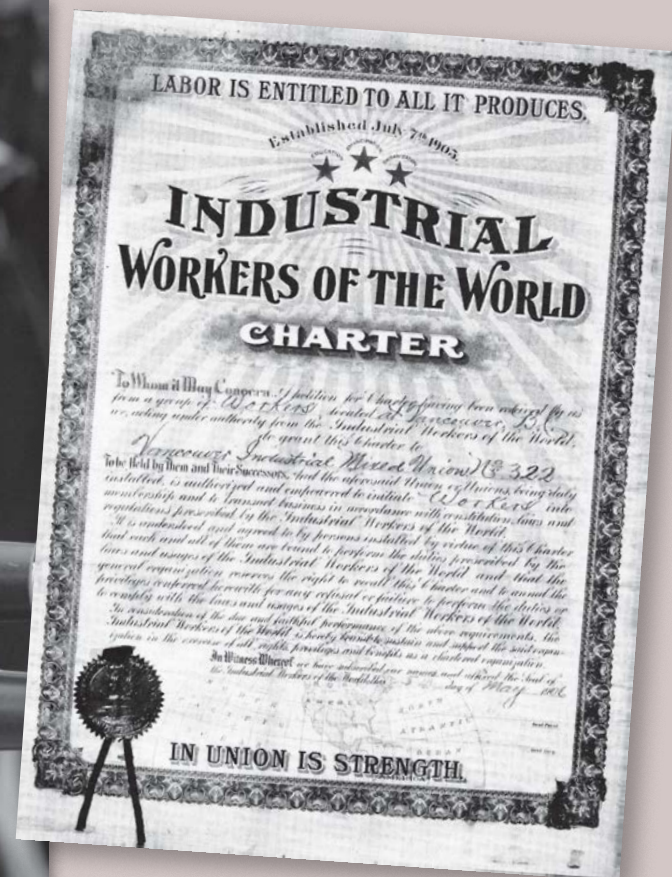
linked up with South Asian mill workers in the town of Paldi founded by mill owner Mayo Singh; “He was an educated man and Mayo and others liked him and trusted his advice.”¹³ Rahim joined the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) and was on both the BC and Dominion executive committees.¹⁴ Apparently, Rahim also tried to organize a South Asian local of the SPC.¹⁵ Well-travelled and fluent in four languages, he played a key role in connecting South Asian Canadians to a wider network of Indian revolutionaries across the world. His activities were closely monitored by government intelligence officials who sought have him deported from Canada.¹⁶

Rahim was in Vancouver when the *Komagata Maru* landed. This ship and those who chartered it were part of a global network of anti-colonial intellectuals who were challenging racist colonial governments and laws. As a member of the Shore Committee that supported the ship’s passengers, Rahim used his links with the SPC to connect with lawyer J. Edward Bird to represent the *Komagata Maru* passengers.¹⁷

Another interesting story is that of Taraknath Das,



Jinny Sims is an activist, past-president of the BC Teachers' Federation, labour organizer and NDP politician. Joshua Berson photo.



Charter-Industrial Workers of the World, Vancouver Industrial Mixed Union No. 322, British Columbia Federation of Labour fonds,

University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections, RBSC-ARC-1056.

who had travelled to Japan and Seattle before coming to BC. Das had been exposed to revolutionary groups fighting against British rule in India much before he arrived in Vancouver, where he worked as an employee of the US Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Balwant Singh was another revolutionary who belonged to the SPC; he was later executed by the British colonial government upon returning to India after the *Komagata Maru* episode.

Individuals like Husain Rahim were connected to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and may have been part of the later formation of the One Big Union, but we can only speculate on the depth of his involvement. As scholars writing on South Asian history have repeatedly stressed, we must be wary of giving too much importance to North Atlantic formations like the SPC or the BC labour movement because what influenced people like Husain Rahim and Taraknath Das was also the common desire to overthrow imperialism (understood by many socialists as intrinsically tied to capitalism by the early 20th century). This created

common ground between South Asian radicals and socialists in BC.¹⁸

These anti-colonial, pro-working class and pro-union ideals continued to shape the relationship between South Asians and the labour movement well into the latter half of the 20th century. For instance, several of the South Asian union leaders interviewed for this project discussed how their parents' histories within the Indian freedom movement influenced them.

Jinny Sims an activist, union official for the BCTF, labour organizer and NDP politician spoke of her father and his close involvement with the Indian Workers Association, a working-class organization based in England with links to the Ghadar Movement.¹⁹ Sims described how her father's solidarity with labour instilled her own values. There was a strike at her workplace before she moved to BC. She was pregnant and not a Canadian citizen, and so told by her union that she would be allowed to cross the picket line because of her precarious position. She thought of her father when she went home that night and decided that no matter



Vic Berar's father, Jaswant Sing Berar, became in the interpreter in the Youbou sawmill.

IWA Local 1-80 fonds, IWA Archives.

what the consequences, she would not cross that picket line.

Harinder Mahil's story highlights the influence of student unions. He was a sawmill worker and union activist in the 1970s and 1980s, and later worked for the International Woodworkers of America (IWA)'s New Westminster local 1-357 paper *The Chipper*. Mahil's experience working in student unions in India in the 1960s and 1970s inspired his lifelong activism. Similarly, Sucha Deepak, who went on to become a firebrand union leader and a plant committee chair in the IWA, also had a history of student activism that he brought with him from India.

Others like Vic Berar saw their parents fight for their political rights. A third generation South Asian Canadian, the men in his family had been woodworkers and his sister knew women in the IWA Ladies Auxiliary. As a child he watched his father's role in the fight for voting rights for South Asians, which influenced his commitment to political involvement.

South Asian Labour and its relationship to the Labour Movement in British Columbia

South Asian Canadians in BC did many kinds of work and, like other workers of colour in the province, faced wage discrimination and other racism. They also faced outright backlash from unions, who perceived exploited workers as a threat to their jobs and livelihoods. Perhaps most visible expression of this was the 1907 Anti-Asian riots in Vancouver, where the labour movement was the main instigator.

While racism and discrimination were overt between the 1900s and 1930s, there were sporadic moments when class, political and worker solidarity prevailed. These included the Fraser Mills strike of 1931, the role of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in supporting the South Asian right to vote and the platform that the IWA provided for South Asians to mobilize their own community members. These events directly improved working conditions for South Asian Canadians. In addition, South Asians built networks of community support through their place of worship, the Gurdwara, which functioned as a social institution and a cultural gathering place for the community.

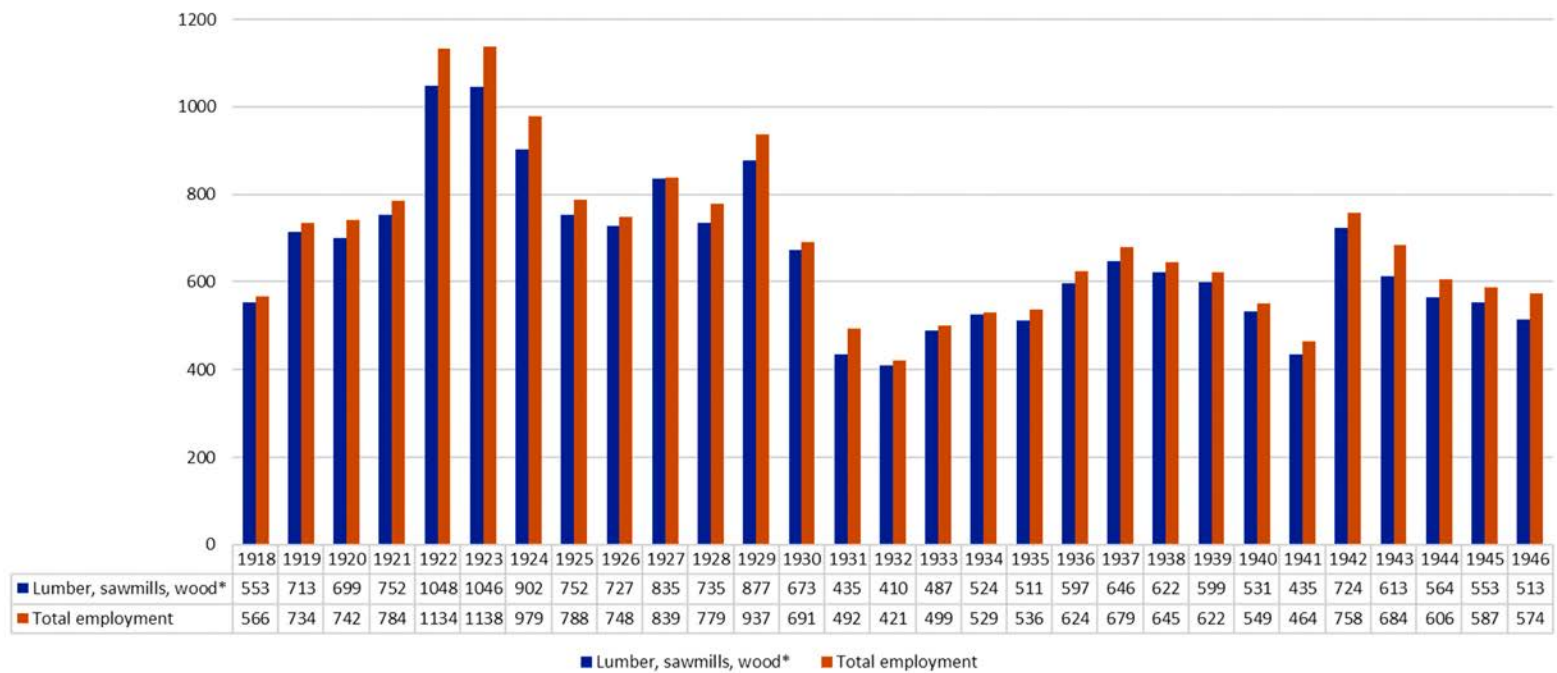
Work and Wages for South Asian Canadians in the early 20th century

At the start of the 20th Century, many South Asians arriving in BC secured jobs with the Canadian Pacific Railway, cleared forests, engaged in farming, and sold milk and wood for fuel. However, the greatest number were employed in sawmills on the green chain. There are several books and articles on these early years about South Asians who became successful capitalists and employers, but few studies of workers.²⁰

The Punjabi labour that came to BC worked extremely hard, something their employers were very pleased about because it meant that they could exploit them even further, but in times of want or shortage, they could also become targets of local ire. Albert Foote, a journalist who wrote for the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper, described South Asians who sold wood for fuel in the following terms:

"Disdainfully and critically, we used to look over the wood offerings of bedraggled, bearded, turbaned Hindoos as they apologetically posed on the back doorstep and humbly begged...today those same

South Asian employment in lumber sawmills & wood 1918-1946



* Includes: Logging, Logging railways, Lumbering, Sawmill, Wood manufacturing, Planing Mills, Pulp & Paper Manufacturing, Shingle Mills

Source: British Columbia. Legislative Assembly. PROVINCE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA ANNUAL REPORT OF THE DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR FOR THE YEARS 1918–1946.
Data for nationality of employees, Country of origin “Hindustan”, “Hindu or other East Indian”, or “British Indian or East Indies”, ©BC Labour Heritage Centre, 2021.

Hindoos look scornfully upon the race if “White Saps” who have failed to order a load of wet cedar, hemlock or other non-combustible fuel material several months in advance. War had sure made life irritating to most of us. To the Hindoo wood peddler it has brought a flood tide of prosperity completely out of proportion to the whole set-up.”²¹

Before the minimum wage law was enacted in 1926 workers from Asia were paid less than white workers and so employers wanted to hire Asian workers to reduce costs.

Ironically, anti-Oriental leagues in the 1920s had also campaigned for minimum wage legislation in the hope that it would prevent competition from Asian workers who, it was believed, would accept whatever wage they were offered.²² Without opportunity to cheap labour — employers would opt for white labour

Budh Singh, who arrived in 1907 did not speak any English when he landed. Nonetheless, he got a job in the sawmill and his wage was 5 to 10 cents an hour. By the time Indar Singh Gill arrived in 1930, he got eighteen cents an hour.²³ This was lower than the average wage in the sawmills at the time because people of colour were paid less by employers.

In some exceptional cases, when workers and unions pushed past the barriers of racial exclusion, they were able to make collective gains in benefits and in working conditions. For instance, in the 1931 Fraser Mills Strike, workers of various backgrounds came together to push against the “hindoo” bosses who controlled their bunkhouses as well as to band against their employers.²⁴ Strikes like this were important because they built solidarity between workers; for instance, an account of a strike in 1936 described how the strikers were trying to enlist the support of other workers at the mill:

The strikers had planned to get into the East Indian bunkhouse to enlist their support, and keep them from going to work. *The East Indians were as solid a bunch of men as could be found anywhere*, here and elsewhere; but they had gone to work fifteen minutes earlier, and it was too late.²⁵

Such stories were very much the exception. Recalling experiences from the 1970s, South Asian union leaders like Harinder Mahil pointed out²⁶ how even then, South Asians were encouraged to participate when there was an issue that needed resolving but were not fully included as members of the movement because



Canadian Western Lumber Company [Fraser Mills] 1900–1910,

University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections, BC-489/2.

they “were never actually encouraged to participate.” Mahil felt that this was why there were very few South Asian Canadians active in the union when he began to attend meetings. Nonetheless, this was very different from the earliest years of the 20th century when events like the Anti-Asian riots of 1907 were actively coordinated by the labour movement.

*1907 and the Anti-Asian Riots:
Between Vancouver and Bellingham*

In 1906 both the Victoria and the Vancouver Trades and Labour Councils passed petitions opposing the “East Indian presence” in British Columbia.²⁷ The Asiatic Exclusion League was instrumental in instigating the Anti-Asian riots of 1907 that targeted people of Chinese or Japanese descent. At the same time in Bellingham Washington, South Asians were the target of protests that pushed many of them across the border and into BC.

One night in September 1907, a group of South Asian mill workers in Bellingham were roused from their beds and driven out of town, with the police standing back as this took place.²⁸ These riots, on both

sides of the border, were preceded by demands from labour leaders in Bellingham and Vancouver for the imposition of immigration restrictions on Asians.²⁹ Indeed, the City council in Bellingham castigated the mill owners for hiring South Asians to begin with.³⁰ Estimates suggest that “nearly 1000 South Asians [arrived] just 4 days after the riot.”³¹ and their arrival was also reported in local papers. For example, the *Vancouver Daily World* published an article titled “Hindoos Arrive from Bellingham” which described them arriving in bunches and searching for safety “under the Union Jack”³². Unfortunately, none of them really found a safe haven. Even as the Vancouver TLC was fanning hate, however, some socialists in BC were also trying to draw attention to how the real need of the hour was class solidarity.³³

*Community and Alliances between the
Gurdwara, the Mill, the CCF and the IWA*

A few South Asians became prosperous enough to buy or open their own sawmills in the 1920s and 1930s.³⁴ Due to the concentration of South Asian workers, these sawmills, including in the towns of Paldi, Hillcrest and



Sikh men on Canadian Pacific railroad platform probably British Columbia,

University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, UW 18744.

Barnet, tended to provide safety from wider discrimination and hostility. One owner was Mayo Singh, who came to BC from San Francisco where he had been living in the Ghadr party's main office. He and a group of friends from the South Asian Canadian community, eventually bought a mill in the Cowichan Valley, BC. Both Husain Rahim and, later, Kapoor Singh Siddoo joined him.³⁵ Kapoor would later break off to set up his own mills, but the original site became the town of Paldi, a thriving town, still remembered by virtually every South Asian Canadian with family ties to the 1920s.

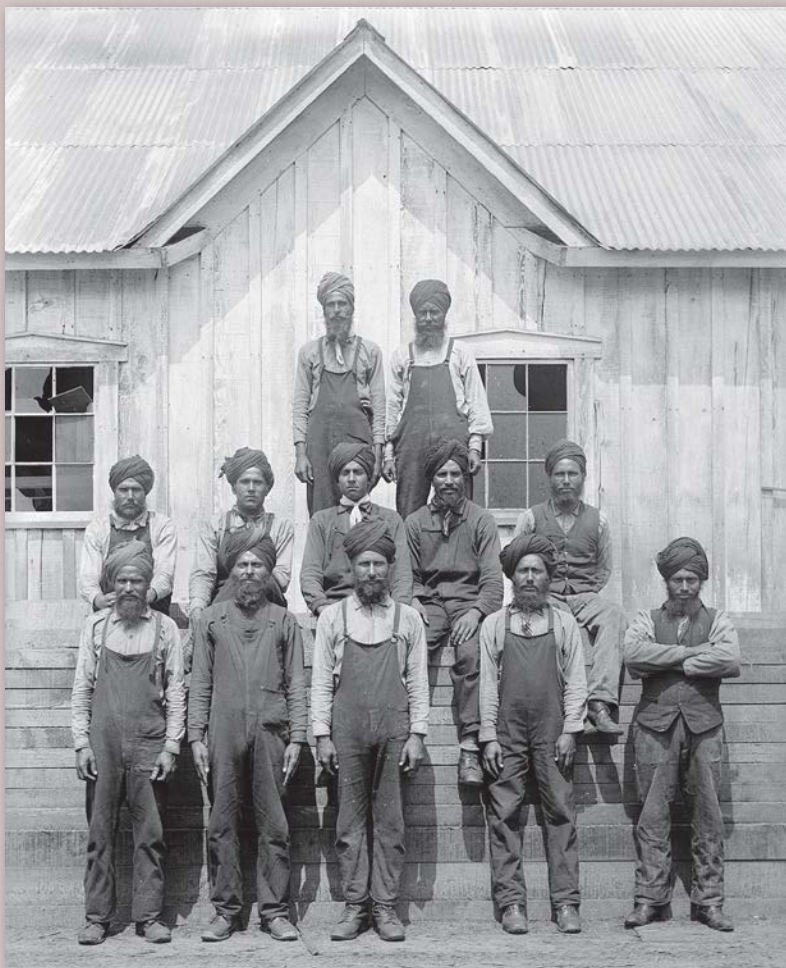
In that era, workers knew Paldi offered opportunities for upward mobility in the workplace. For instance, Bawa Singh had previously worked on the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway Corridor. He had been unable to accept an offer of promotion to foreman because he could not read, but upon moving to Paldi he became the section foreman.³⁶

Many early immigrants relied on community organizations, and financial and spiritual help from the Khalsa Diwan Society. These supports were deeply linked to the Punjabi Sikhs cultural traditions such as

Sewa and *Langar*. Traditional concepts of taking care of people, providing food, and helping newcomers to build their lives were important to South Asian Canadians ability to stand on their own feet once they arrived in BC. The Gurdwara was not just a space of worship, it was a centre for South Asian social life. Early accounts show that the network of Gurdwaras, from Hong Kong to North America, provided meals and a place to sleep. They were also spaces for political activity, which is why colonial governments kept tabs on Gurdwaras.³⁷

One racist barrier faced by the South Asian Canadian community was being denied their right to vote. The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), a socialist organization that was the precursor to the modern day New Democratic Party (NDP), played a leading role in helping to gain this right. South Asians had been campaigning for the vote for years; visiting officials from India had drawn attention to it, and Kapoor and Mayo Singh had tried to mobilize for it without success.

That began to change in 1935 when CCF MLA and Leader of the Opposition Harold Winch challenged a



A group of Sikh North Pacific Lumber Co. workers at Barnet,
Philip Timms photo, Vancouver Public Library 7641.

motion in BC's parliament to reaffirm the denial of the franchise (vote) to "orientals".³⁸ In 1945, the CCF again brought the issue forward. Minutes from district meetings of the International Woodworkers Union (IWA) in BC, reveal that there was a significant campaign to change the law, and that the IWA and broader labour movement supported expanding the right to vote.³⁹

The IWA was formed in 1937 and very quickly replaced Lumber Workers' Industrial Union and other older forestry and woodworkers' unions in BC. By the mid-1940s it was the most powerful union for woodworkers, and one of the largest unions in the province. Most South Asian sawmill workers belonged to the IWA, and the union, including its various locals⁴⁰ supported South Asian workers and their demands.

WWII, IWA and the Greater Participation of South Asians: The Story of Darshan Singh Sangha

One of those workers was Darshan Singh Sangha. Arriving in BC as a young man, he quickly became involved in the labour movement and the Communist Party of BC. Minutes of IWA district and provincial

committee meetings from the 1940s, currently held at the Kaatza Museum, show that Darshan Singh was an active member throughout his time in BC and played a central role in connecting the South Asian Canadian community to the IWA, and leadership in its organizational structure.

Details are captured by an interview conducted by Hari Sharma and Sadhu Binning for a total of almost 10 hours spread across 4 days.⁴¹ The interview explores This interview explores Singh's relationship to the labour movement and the reasons why the communists and the IWA were particularly interested attracting various minority ethnic communities in the 1940s.

The Second World War was a period characterized by tremendous labour upheaval across the colonized world, and of great significance for South Asian Labour.⁴² The IWA added Indian, Japanese and Chinese to their union organizers during WWII.

Explaining the importance of the war period in bringing about this shift, Darshan Singh focused on three main factors. First, WWII produced a labour shortage. South Asian Canadian workers who previously felt vulnerable to the boss's whim began to realize they would not be fired at the drop of a hat because they were not easy to replace. Second, the BC labour movement aligned with trends within global communism connected to nationalist movements, and the aims of freedom connected with anti-imperialism. This made people more aware of what was happening in the rest of the world. Third, as Allied countries described themselves as anti-fascist, government officials and leaders in these countries began to present a loosely defined, albeit selectively implemented, anti-racist position. This affected the attitude that BC officials had toward South Asians and the labour they performed. For example, when overturning the deportation case of an "East Indian sawmill worker", a BC judge declared "This is not Russia or Germany" and there is "no fascism here".⁴³

However, socialists and anti-fascists did not consistently defend the rights of people of colour. The case of WWII Japanese internment is illustrative in this respect because of the way even progressive sources are silent about it. Even the *Pacific Tribune*, the newspaper of the Communist Party in the 1940s, barely mentions it. Darshan noted that, despite a noticeable increase in worker consciousness and solidarity in the 1940s, few

spoke out against what was happening to Japanese Canadians.

With these caveats in mind, Darshan's account describes labour movement leaders who were important allies for South Asian Canadian workers; the names Harold Pritchett and Nigel Morgan, both with the IWA, come up repeatedly.

Pritchett is a very familiar name within accounts of the BC labour movement and the communist party, and the pages of the *Pacific Tribune* show his solidarity with global movements that he felt an ideological affinity with.⁴⁴ Nigel Morgan had similar ideological inclinations and it is no surprise that he spoke to Darshan as a fellow member of the Communist Party and asked him to help the IWA organize workers.⁴⁵ Morgan was also instrumental in the fight for equal pay for equal work — a campaign to ensure South Asians were not exploited by low wages—and it was through the IWA and the unions that this longstanding inequity was smashed.⁴⁶

Through the actions of Darshan and his comrades, the union was able to reach South Asian workers across multiple sawmills. Darshan would hold meetings in the bunkhouses where the workers were living, but it was challenging to get the workers to sign union cards.

One reason was their desperation. They were grateful for the job and unwilling to take risks. found that they would nod and listen but hesitated when it came to joining the union. The second challenge he faced was one he specifically encountered in mills owned by South Asians. Many workers were financially indebted to the people who had given them a job. Family or friendship-based connections to the employers also made workers hesitate. Joining the union equated to disrespecting their employers.

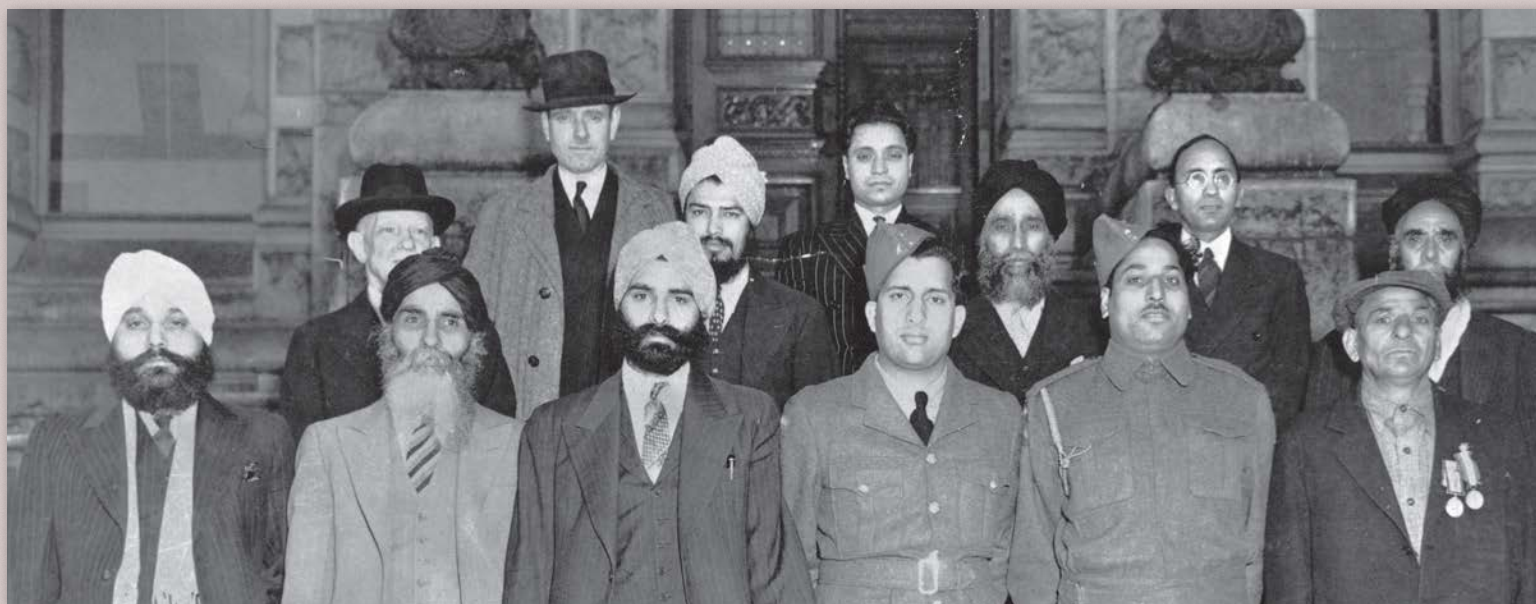
By the late 1940s workers gained



Darshan Singh Sangha's influence on the IWA extended well beyond his time in Canada.
Kaatza Station Museum & Archives, N01725, IWA Local 1-80, Wilmer Gold Photo Collection, ©United Steelworkers Local 1-1937.



IWA March on Victoria, June 1946. *Pacific Tribune* Photo.



IWA President Harold Pritchett and Organizer Darshan Singh Sangha were part of the Khalsa Diwan Society delegation to the BC Cabinet in 1943 which demanded enfranchisement for South Asians. They, along with CCF Leader Harold Winch, made a clear declaration of the mutual respect and support between labour, the CCF and the South Asian community.

Courtesy David Yorke.

confidence as increasing numbers joined the union and stood up for their rights but were not fired. They became more confident about their power and what they could achieve when they organized. The impact of scattered victories amongst the South Asian Canadian workers in sawmills was consolidated with the IWA's victorious strike in the summer of 1946, achieving wage increases and a 40-hour week for all members. Darshan was actively involved in this strike. Addressing a park rally in Victoria, Darshan underscored the sacrifices workers took because they believed the strike was necessary:

"The 37,000 in this province knew there would be no pay cheque next week, knew there would be less food on the table, no clothes for a while and less milk for the kiddies...these are facts we knew before we went on strike."⁴⁷

1946 was also when the movement for independence in India was at its peak. This was important because Darshan describes how the first people they approached when organizing in the sawmills tended to either be those who they knew through friends and acquaintances or those who were "conscious" in that they were progressive or talked about Indian nationalism. It was evidence, again, of how South Asian Canadians in BC were influenced by broader progressive trends around the world.

Darshan and his comrades, particularly Harold Pritchett, were also involved in advocating for the right for South Asians Canadians to vote. Darshan admired

Naginder Singh Gill of the Khalsa Diwan Society and appreciated how he raised the right to vote, concerns about racial discrimination, and other social justice issues. Darshan, along with his good friends Kuldeep Singh Bains and Rattan Singh, who were also sawmill workers, connected Gill and the Khalsa Diwan Society to the labour movement.

Labour movement support drew attention to the demands of the South Asian Canadian community and a now famous picture of a delegation including Naginder Singh Gill, Darshan Singh and Harold Pritchett made waves in the press. The ladies' auxiliaries of the IWA circulated petitions for their franchise as well.⁴⁸

Darshan's story does sound exceptional. He was someone who learned English, was described as a fiery speaker and was particularly important in the IWA's Victoria Local 1-118. He returned to India in 1947 but visited BC often, which was always featured in the *Pacific Tribune*. Despite all this recognition, Darshan still felt alienated in the ten years he was in BC. In the first few hours of that interview, he insists he did not feel there was racism. A little later in the story, however, other snippets begin to appear. He explains that although he felt a full member of the Communist Party and the IWA, wider society was different:

"but within the social set up the feeling of alienation stayed. I was not able to overcome it."⁴⁹

South Asians: Between Unions and Community Associations

South Asian Women and their Invisible Labour

From the 1960s onward more professional, educated South Asians came to BC. Patsy George was one such individual who came to BC after first studying in the US and then working in Nova Scotia. The prior North American experiences gave her a head start in the province. She would eventually become a member of the BC Government Employees' Union (BCGEU) and a defender of workers' rights in Operation Solidarity.

This 1983 movement fought back against the BC Social Credit Party, who held government, and their an budget and legislation designed to gut labour rights, slash social spending, and cut services and public sector jobs. The Solidarity Movement reflected changing times and worker solidarity across racial lines, including South Asian women taking the microphone at gatherings and members of the Canadian Farmworkers Union attending protests in large numbers. The Solidarity movement brought diverse people together and highlighted the changing demographic composition of the labour movement's membership in BC.

The South Asian immigrants in this period also included people with few marketable skills or educational qualifications. They often had to go to smaller towns around the province to find work, and as exploited workers they needed the unions more than ever. Nina Dhillon was one of many advocates who provided assistance. A long-time union activist and now a union staff representative for the Hospital Employees' Union (HEU), Dhillon is of South Asian descent and was raised in England. Her fluent English enabled her to advocate for herself at work and she used her skills to help new arrivals many of whom, well into the 1990s, were women who barely spoke English.

The story of South Asian women is hard to pinpoint because, in the better-known stories of South Asian community activism, women do not feature prominently. However, organizations like SAMAANTA and India Mahila Association were advocating for South Asian women throughout this time and were present in the Canadian Farmworkers' Union and the BC Organization to Fight Racism.

Between the 1930s and 1940s most women worked long and difficult hours but did not necessarily consider

their work as having monetary value. Pritam Kaur Dley lived in North Vancouver and Lake Cowichan in the early 1930s. She rose at 4:00 a.m. every morning to milk the cows, get her children ready for school and then go out with them to sell milk. After her husband died, this work supported her family.⁵⁰ Similarly Rattan Kaur Thauli⁵¹, who came to BC in 1924, described a similar daily routine. Neither woman saw this as waged labour.

For many of these women the labour they performed in their home was connected to the rhythms of work in the sawmills; their day rotated their husbands schedules. Mrs. Dhan Kaur Johal, who arrived in 1923, discussed the importance of the mill to her home life, but she also brought up how South Asian women occasionally worked as cooks in the cookhouses. South Asian women were clearly wage-earners from the earlier half of the 20th century.

In the 1950s and 1960s South Asian women would take stands against employers when they felt they had been wronged. Kashmir Kaur Johal described walking off her job at an Abbotsford farm after her employer repeatedly refused to pay her what she was owed.⁵² Other South Asian women got involved in unions. Bunt Kaur Sidhu who stood up for the rights of South Asian women in the workforce and was part of the Prince Rupert Amalgamated Shoreworkers and Clerks Union. She had come to Prince Rupert in the 1960s because her husband was working in the sawmill there. She had to overcome both family opposition and her fear of going out alone to do this work. These women clearly did not fit the image of a traditional South Asian woman from an ostensibly conservative society.

This pushback from South Asian women continued. For instance, on May 15th 1989 the *Pacific Tribune* carried a photograph of South Asian Canadian women, in traditional *shalwar kameez* holding placards outside the Vancouver Art Gallery. They were protesting longer waiting periods being introduced to qualify for Unemployment Insurance (UI). The change pushed many farmworkers into welfare at much lower amounts because most farm jobs did not last more than a few weeks.⁵³

In other strikes in the 1970s and 1980s, women and particularly women of colour clearly showed that they could mobilize and hold the picket line, but their



Patsy George participates in one of the many large Operation Solidarity demonstrations in 1983.

Image BCLHC_PG_3_16_1, Patsy George Collection, BC Labour Heritage Centre.



Windermere Unit members turned up at Trizec Corporation head office in downtown Vancouver in April 1981 to demonstrate against the corporation's racist practices. The workers were protesting the higher wages being paid to white non-union people at the Vancouver health care facility during the strike.

Courtesy Hospital Employee's Union.



East Indian Workers Association, in support of farm workers, demonstrates for labour rights for farmworkers at the courthouse November 3, 1979.

Image MSC160-489_04A, courtesy of the *Pacific Tribune* Photograph Collection, Simon Fraser University Library.

precarity meant they were not always successful. For instance, a strike in 1981 in Windermere lodge is an example of a strike that was covered in the press, was organized by South Asian women, and received the support of the labour movement, but did not see a substantial change in women's working conditions.⁵⁴

Lastly the numbers of women in the workforce continued to increase through this time, but this greater visibility was not accompanied by more power in the workplace. The rise of neoliberalism since the 1970s; the decline of the traditional industrial working classes, and the increase of automation was connected to job losses. Women played a bigger role in the workforce, but this was also because women, particularly racialized women, were seen as being more likely to remain in a job without complaining, thus contributing to a more stable, less radical workforce.⁵⁵ This tendency was offset in BC by powerful, women dominated unions like the HEU which were able to make considerable progress in achieving greater pay equity between female and male dominated professions.⁵⁶

South Asians, Unions and Community Organizations: 1970s onward

The 1970s saw the rise of neoliberalism and its associated politics of flexible labour regimes and the decline of union power across the world. In BC, this time saw the weakening of the wood industry in BC and the closure of mills. Protests against these closures and layoffs peppered the pages of the *Pacific Tribune* from the 1970s onward. For instance, in August 1974 it was reported that in addition to 8,000 workers in the wood industry losing their jobs, a third of the membership of the IWA local 1-217 had been laid off.⁵⁷ This would have directly affected South Asian labour which was a significant part of both groups. By the 1980s,

many of them began to look for other kinds of jobs in the Lower Mainland. In particular, they joined a trend that had begun in the 1970s to take employment in hospitality, trucking, longshore work and seasonal farm work.

The story of exclusion discussed in much of this chapter did not simply vanish. In fact, South Asian narratives as they appeared in the archival sources consulted for this project; the Hari Sharma files, the Charan Gill papers, the Canadian Farmworkers Union



International Longshore and Warehouse Union rally, Portside Park re: contracting-out, February 2, 1999. Sean Griffin photo, Image MSC179-19795, courtesy The Fisherman Collection, Simon Fraser University Library.



Banners of Canadian Farmworkers Union and BC Organization to Fight Racism, May 1, 1982.

Image MSC160-700_19, courtesy of the Pacific Tribune Photo Collection, Simon Fraser University Library.

as well as newspapers and interview accounts clearly show that racism continued to be a problem, but the support that South Asians received from the labour movement and their inclusion in positions of power within union executives gave them a platform to challenge this.

One clear example of this opportunity to use positional power came in 1971 when some South Asian mill workers in Quesnel got into a fight outside a pub with a group of the white workers who had harassed them for not speaking English in public. Soon after, some of these mill workers were laid off by the owner, who did not want any trouble. The mill was not unionized.⁵⁸ The unfair layoffs resulted in protests, and Sucha Singh Deepak went to Quesnel to lend support. He'd been there for three weeks before being arrested with friends. The South Asian Canadian community in Quesnel, who were strangers just three weeks earlier, collected money and arranged his bail. Sucha Singh would go on to work for the IWA and his account of his experiences in the 1970s indicates that while there was still racism in society, he was able to use his position to challenge it. At the same time, workplace conditions were changing for the better.

The BC Federation of Labour was also actively campaigning against racism. The campaigns used awareness drives and signage stating that racism at work was intolerable. The turning point in the 1970s was when groups of South Asians formed community associations that allied with the labour movement and took on racism directly.

The Indian People's Association of North America (IPANA), the Canadian Farmworkers Union (CFU) and the BC Organization to Fight Racism (BCOFR)

Hari Sharma, a professor working at Simon Fraser University (SFU), was a committed communist and community activist who inspired a generation of activists and scholars both in and outside BC. His focus was to build international solidarities with groups



By the 1980s, anti-racism campaign literature produced by the BC Federation of Labour was common in lunchrooms at worksites around the province.

Courtesy Raj Chouhan.

of leftist workers across the world as well as with unions in BC. One of the vehicles to coordinate this network was the Indian People's Association of North America (IPANA), an organization initially formed in Montreal in 1975.

IPANA's Vancouver chapter included, amongst its earliest members Harinder Mahil, Raj Chouhan and Chin Banerjee.⁵⁹ Just these names are an indication of the crisscrossing of South Asian Canadian community organizations with the labour movement. Raj Chouhan would become central to the formation of the Canadian Farmworkers Union (CFU) while Harinder Mahil, already active by that time in union politics with

the IWA, would become important in linking the IWA to the CFU and the BCOFR.⁶⁰

The IPANA group provided much of the initial impetus to form the Canadian Farmworkers Union. The strategizing for forming CFU was done between these South Asian community organizations. At an IPANA meeting, it was decided that Raj Chouhan and Harinder Mahil would take the lead in trying to organize farmworkers. Mahil introduced the group to the IWA's Gerry Stoney, who then became the key contact for the farmworkers with the IWA. The group then met in 1978 with fifteen farmworkers in a school in Surrey, did campaigning work, held meetings. Finally in 1979 they formed the Farmworkers Organizing Committee (FWOC).⁶¹

Family and community connections continued to be important. Raj Chouhan and Harinder Mahil were brothers-in-law, and soon after arriving in Canada in 1973, Chouhan also met Hari Sharma after hearing him speak on the struggles of workers in India. Sarwan Boal, a key organizer and founding member of the CFU, recalled that their group was very clear on the need for a union to lead the fight for farmworker rights so, in 1980, they formed the Canadian Farmworkers Union.

These early organizers used their contacts to connect the CFU to the BC and Canadian labour movement. In the CFU's early days, the national Canadian Labour



Canadian Farmworkers Union Founding Convention April 6, 1980. CFU President Raj Chouhan addresses the crowd after his election. CFU Secretary Treasurer Charan Gill claps.

Congress provided direct support and funding that was key to the union's activities in the early 1980s.

At the same time, they realized while workplace rights could be addressed by a union, it was also necessary to have an organization that directly pushed back against racism. As such, they helped form the BC Organization to Fight Racism with Charan Gill as its president.⁶² Over time, others came to support the struggle. An interview with Harji Sangra, one of the younger members of the CFU explained why she joined:

"My mother she worked in cranberry fields...she immigrated in the late 1950s so from 1970 on my early memories were my mom waking up quite early...my mom would work long hours. My dad... always worked in a sawmill. He was always proud of how he was in a unionized sawmill...we worked on the farms too during the summer...my mom had a head injury and we tried to apply for disability benefits and it was a nightmare...my mom was left without income for a long, long time...[sic]"⁶³

The lack of protection experienced by workers, as

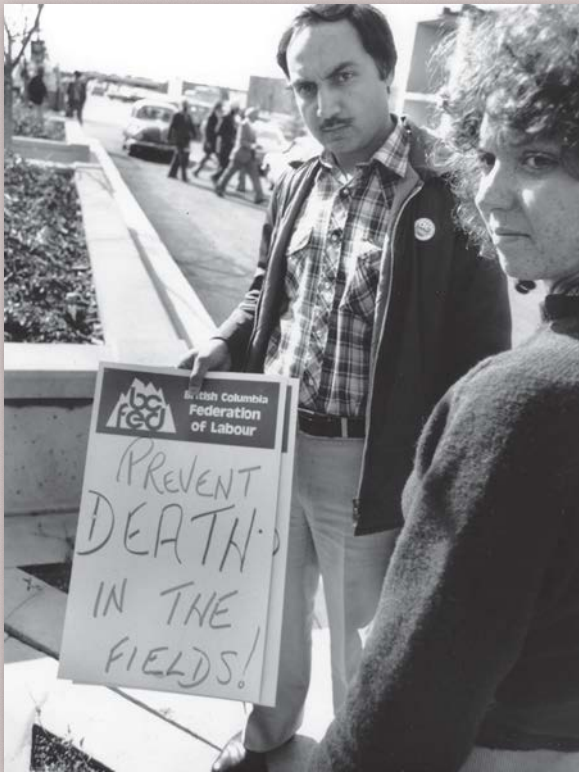
well as the connections between sawmill labour and the people who became active within the Canadian Farmworkers Union, appear to have been common. Anand Patwardhan, the famous Indian documentary maker, produced the National Film Board film *A Time to Rise* which focused on the formation of the Canadian Farmworkers Union (CFU). This documentary begins with Patwardhan in the kitchen of Pritam Kaur, a woman who would become a fiery union activist and farmworker. In the scene she is cooking food for her son. It is not yet light outside, and her son is leaving for his shift in a mill. With her hair uncovered, and speaking to Patwardhan as if he were family, sitting in her house in the early hours of the morning, the scene reveals a sense of trust. The CFU was successful because of all the legwork and grassroots work that they did in establishing that trust.

Others joined the CFU through different routes. Sarwan Boal wrote for the magazine *Watno Dur*. This publication was started by Sadhu Binning, a writer, poet, and activist. It covered progressive causes relating



CFU executive member Pritam Kaur leaves the fields with fellow workers to join the CFU march against the labour contract system on July 29, 1980.

Photos-140, Canadian Farmworkers Photo Collection, Simon Fraser University Library.



CFU Organizers Raj Chouhan and Judy Cavanaugh, Photos-017,

Craig Berggold photo, Canadian Farmworkers Union Collection, Simon Fraser University Library.

to South Asians and published several pieces on Canadian farmworkers. Excerpts from some of these, including one in Punjabi that focused on the struggle of the women mushroom workers at Hoss Farm, can be found in the Canadian Farmworkers Union digitized collection.⁶⁴

Judy Cavanaugh, was another important organizer and administrative worker for the CFU. She joined after hearing Charan Gill give an inspiring talk at SFU. She had done some farming herself when younger but as she explained, in comparison to her own experiences, it was completely different because most of the Punjabi speaking farmworkers were fully dependent on farmwork as their primary source of income.⁶⁵ This is an important observation because it points toward the changing nature of work between 1965, when Judy was a teenager, and the 1970s. The context of immigrant labour is always one of considerable vulnerability, in which they are willing to make a seasonal job into their primary form of income.

The precarity of this form of labour, specifically labour performed by women on the farms, also comes across in interviews conducted by Hari Sharma in the 1980s. These interviews show how women experienced the work differently from men. Sarwan Boal mentioned that women tended to stay in the same job for much longer than men. Harji Sangra, at the time a young woman studying at UBC, came across a poster. It advertised a position to teach English to Punjabi farmworkers, and that was her introduction to the CFU. For Sangra, one of the most memorable strikes was on Hoss Farms where a number of women were fired for organizing and unionizing, and it was those women who were at the head of the strike on the picket line. She describes how everyone from the community who was able would gather to support the women. She knew that some of their families were supportive, but others were not;

“It’s always harder. It’s always harder for women to stand up, for women to be in the public eye. And I think that is why some of the stories aren’t there you know and that’s why I think some of those voices weren’t...as audible maybe”⁶⁶

Women were also taking care of the children and the lack of any child-care arrangements affected their ability to work. Interviews describe the deplorable and extremely unsafe living conditions of the “cabins” where workers who came from outside BC would live. An oft told story was the death of Sukhdeep Madhar. This child of a farmworker drowned in a bucket of water. The tragedy shocked people and galvanized them into further action.⁶⁷

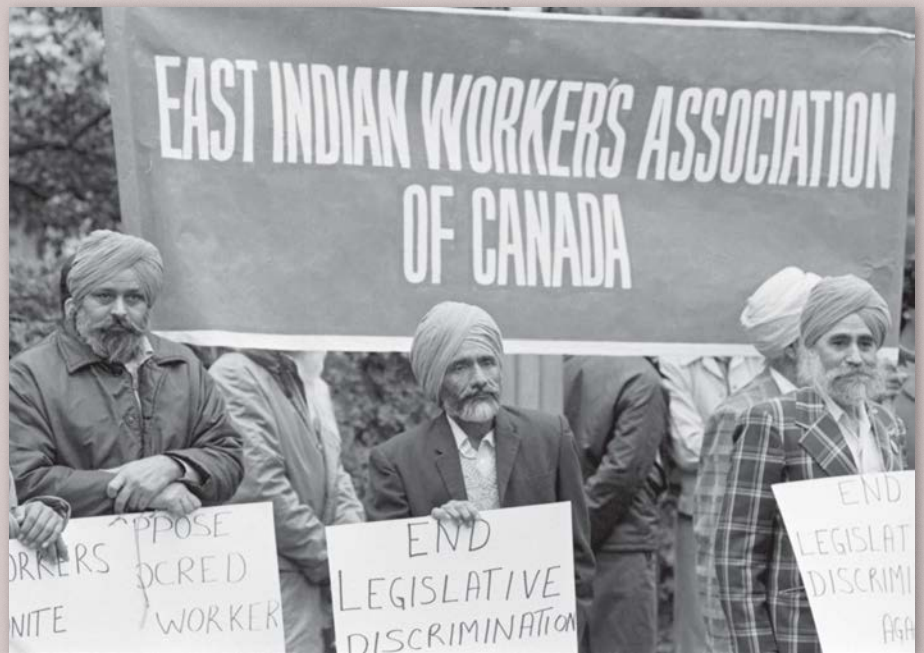
Other horrific incidents related to hazardous workplaces included the death of a farmworker due to pesticide exposure.⁶⁸ Throughout the early 1980s the CFU voiced concerns of farmworkers, ranging from the use of toxic pesticides to criticizing government regulations like the Employment Standards Act which did not extend protections and minimum wage to farmworkers working on a piece work basis.

To aid in the mobilization of farmworkers, Sadhu Binning and his



The Canadian Farmworkers Union ran English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for farmworkers, taught by volunteer tutors. The students were mainly Punjabi, mostly women, many in their fifties and sixties. Classes were in students' houses.

Craig Berggold photo, EPH0526-001, Canadian Farmworkers Union Collection, Simon Fraser University Library. 168 BC LABOUR HERITAGE CENTRE



Canadian Farmworkers rally against UI unemployment insurance cuts, May 6, 1989 at Vancouver Art Gallery.

Image MSC160-1779_1A, courtesy of the Pacific Tribune Photo Collection, Simon Fraser University Library.

brother Paul Binning produced literary and cultural content including plays like 'Picket Line' and organized cultural events through Vancouver Sath. Harji Sangra performed in these plays which popularized the cause of the CFU within wider society and drew attention to their demands. It also helped attract more people to their gatherings.⁶⁹ It would take many years and 1992 election of the NDP government, when Moe Sihota became the first South Asian Canadian to ever be elected in a federal or provincial riding. As soon as he was elected, Raj Chouhan and Harinder Mahil showed up at his door, and as the provincial labour minister he worked toward meeting demands that health and safety regulations be extended to farmworkers and enacted many of the changes that the CFU had fought for into law. It may have been slow, but the story of the CFU is definitely one of success.

The CFU was also an active participant in the 1983 Solidarity movement in BC. Photos at the largest rally in Vancouver's Empire Stadium show farmworkers and CFU organizers, including Raj Chouhan. This shows that there was considerable support from South Asian Canadians for the movement. Sadhu Binning took his entire family and his friends to be a part of that event.⁷⁰

For a variety of reasons — like lack of funds, mechanization and increasing number of migrants in the 1980s and 1990s who were very vulnerable and did not have sufficient government protections — the strength

and visibility of the CFU waned over time, but its legacy remained.

Moe Sihota also described how the Solidarity Movement brought together all manner of groups who worked on social justice with people within the labour movement. According to Sihota:

“you could hardly go to a lunchroom at a worksite independent of which union it was and not see posters talking to people about the importance of treat each other with dignity and respect...[sic]”⁷¹

The BCOFR was very important in creating awareness and exposing the prevalence of racist discrimination. Their primary mobilization was around the Ku Klux Klan, which had become active in BC in the 1970s. The government initially insisted that no action needed to be taken because the KKK were not violent, but pressure began to mount by the BCOFR and other organizations to ban them. They publicly began to track the Klan's activities so to dispute the assertions of low risk. They pointed out, for instance, that eight cross burnings had taken place in BC at which the KKK members were armed.⁷² On the 15th of September at 9:00 a.m. it was also reported that a 2-meter-long wooden cross wrapped in cloth was burned at the main entrance of the Ross Street Gurdwara in Vancouver.⁷³

There were many other racist incidents in this time period. A South Asian Canadian family was attacked



CFU members attend an Operation Solidarity Rally at Empire Stadium, Vancouver, August 10, 1983.

Photos-137, Craig Berggold photo, Canadian Farmworkers Union Collection, Simon Fraser University Library.



March 6 to April 10, 1988, Vancouver Sath Theatre collective performs two plays 'A Crop of Poison' and 'Picket Line' (both written by Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal) for the CFU cultural programme called Picket Line Tour. 'A Crop of Poison' (Jahar di Fasal) is about farmworkers and the health and safety of pesticide use.

Photos-150, Canadian Farmworkers Union Collection, Simon Fraser University Library.

in their home in 1981 and in response, the Vancouver District and Labour Council (VDLC) demanded a complete investigation.⁷⁴ In response to this same incident, the East Indian Workers Association (EIWA) a small organization of South Asian Canadians that appears to have been allied to the labour movement, held a rally to urge more labour action on racism. At this rally Homer Stevens, former president of UFAWU also spoke, highlighting how racism had been a major issue when organizing the fishing industry.⁷⁵ The actions of the BCOFR were important in drawing awareness to these issues and in mobilizing the South Asian community alongside the labour movement.

As South Asian Canadians became more politicized, took up were elected to positions or hired as staff in unions, and became more vocal about their rights as Canadians within the labour movement. For instance

a large proportion of the workers in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union are of South Asian descent. Over time, South Asian workers also began to move directly into politics. Jinny Sims, Raj Chouhan, Harry Bains and Moe Sihota are just four of the examples of prominent South Asians who were pillars of the South Asian Canadian community. For the first three listed, it was their work within the labour movement that led directly to their political careers, thus allowing them to continue to build a more progressive, more inclusive BC.

The problems of racism and exclusion continue into the present day, but the relationship of South Asian Canadians with the labour movement shows that unions are an important platform to help build solidarity between the diverse elements of the work class of British Columbia.

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46. Bergren, *Tough Timber*, p. 208
47. *Times Colonist*, 17th May 1946, p. 2.
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51. Mrs. Ratan Kaur Thauli <https://digital.lib.sfu.ca/icohc-56/mrs-ratan-kaur-thauli>.
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Politics



South Asian Studies Institute Gidda performance.

Courtesy of the South Asian Studies Institute

Legacies, circumstance and fortune

Multiculturalism and Political Participation: A Study of British Columbia's South Asian Community

Inderjeet Singh Mann

ABSTRACT

Canada is a multicultural society and is likely to become more socially diverse due to continuing demographic changes, mainly through immigration. The official declaration of Multiculturalism policy in 1971 was a big contribution that triggered the flow of immigrants from non-traditional countries — Asian, African and the Arab world. The South Asian population began increasing in the early 1970s, predominantly as a result of the changes to the Canadian immigration policy in 1967. There is no denying, that around that time, people who were permitted to immigrate to Canada faced a great deal of hostility and racism. Official Canadian Multiculturalism aims to create a space for different immigrant groups to participate in Canadian politics and society. The Multiculturalism Policy promotes integration by promoting the removal of barriers to participation in Canadian political life. The Policy played a significant role in an attempt to integrate immigrants — ethnic, racial and religious communities in Canada as compared to many other countries. This chapter explores the concept and application of Multiculturalism in general, and Canada in particular. This chapter investigates the debates on Canadian Multiculturalism and moves towards explaining political participation and its connections to Multiculturalism. It also traces the incorporation of immigrants, mainly South Asians and in particular Sikhs from the state of Punjab in India into Canadian politics at three levels — Federal, Provincial and Municipal. South Asians, mainly Sikh Canadians have actively participated in Canadian politics after attaining the political rights (the franchise) in 1947.

KEY WORDS

Canada, Multiculturalism, Immigration, South Asians/ Sikhs, Politics, Participation

Introduction

Multiculturalism demographically existed in Canadian society during confederation in 1867 — at the time when the country was politically reorganized as a Canadian Dominion. The contemporary situation refers to confederation and colonial periods as having initially three founding ethnic groups — British, French and Aboriginals. The British and French were considered ‘charter’ groups because of their power and dominance during the pre-confederation period from the early 1600s to 1867 — first, beginning with the French regime which was followed by the British. Ethnic diversity started to grow as many European immigrants arrived after the confederation around the late 1800s to the early 1900s. Some non-European immigrants also arrived such as the Sikhs (lumber workers), Chinese (railway workers), and Japanese (agricultural workers).

According to the 1901 Census, the French and British (88%) and as many as 25 ethnic settler communities of different origins existed in Canada. Over a century later, in the 2001 Census, the British and French still constituted the majority, but were relatively less and reduced to 63% of Canada’s population. However, Census

Canada noted over 200 multiple ethnic communities with diverse origins (Andrew, 2015). The past statistics and projections of a growing diversity in Canada since 1871 until the Canada Project 2031 are shown in Figure: 1.

The dramatic increase in numbers and the proportions of multiple non-European ethnic origins increased due to liberalization of that Canadian immigration policy in the late 1960s. From then and until the late 1970s, huge immigration from Asia, Africa and South and Central American continents made Canadian society increasingly diverse and racialized. In the 1981 Census, Canada, for the first time, started to count the ‘visible minority’ population that constituted 4.7% of the population, it increased to 9.4% in 1991, to 13.4% in 2001 and to 19.1% in 2011 (Statistics Canada 1981; 1991; 2001; 2011). At present, approximately one in five persons in Canada is a ‘racialized’ person, meaning a ‘visible minority’. The proportion of ‘visible minorities’ is considerably high in metropolitan cities like Toronto (47%), Vancouver (45.2%) and Calgary (28.1%) (Statistics Canada, 2013). As a result, demographically, Canada has evolved as a multicultural nation, where racial diversity has grown over the time and assump-

tively will continue into the future.

To respond to the changing social structures and demographic patterns, Canada introduced Multiculturalism as a public policy in 1971. As elaborated in the following pages, the evolution of Multiculturalism continues to pass through various stages of understanding and application.

The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (B&B Commission) in Canada, established by Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson in 1963, aimed to deal with the political discontent which was growing alarmingly among the French-speaking population against the assimilationist policies of Anglo-Saxon conformity in Quebec. The ‘Quiet Revolution’ had surged in the early 1960s in Quebec and some violent activities took place in early 1963 soon after the founding

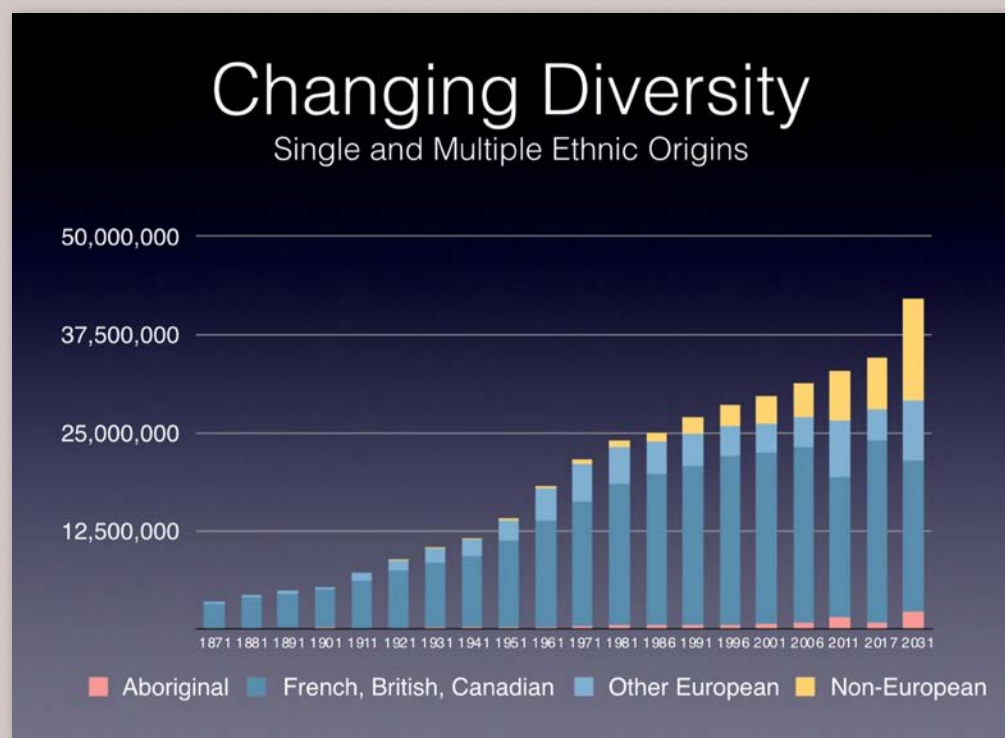


Figure 1: Changing Diversity in Canada: Past and Future Projections

Source: Griffith, Andrew (2015), *Multiculturalism in Canada: Evidence and Anecdote*.

of the 'Front de Liberation du Quebec' (FLQ) as a revolutionary organization. The FLQ began a short-lived campaign of bombings in Montreal, including places like military barracks, government buildings, railways, and residential mailboxes etc.

The B&B Commission was established to examine Quebec's role in Canada and its final report came out in 1969. Also known as the Laurendeau-Dunton Commission, the Commission's mandate was to investigate and report on the state of bilingualism and biculturalism, and to recommend measures the confederation could develop based on the principle of equality between the two 'founding peoples'. The recommendations were also to take into account the contribution of other ethnic groups to the enrichment of Canada's culture and include measures to safeguard their contributions.

However, during the hearings of the B&B Commission across Canada voices from non-British and non-French groups rejected the idea of 'biculturalism'. They argued that "Canada was more than two cultures — French and English" (Guo & Wong, 2015, p. 2). This argument was acknowledged later by the Commission that resulted in the final report, titled "The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups" published in 1969. Thereafter, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau introduced a Multiculturalism Policy in Canada, within a bilingual framework in 1971. This is when Canada became the first nation in the world with an official multiculturalism policy that aims to protect the culture of different ethnic groups through the establishment of new institutional structures (Marger, 2015). Trudeau assured the House of Commons: "Although there are two official languages, there is no official culture."

Subsequently in 1982, the Canadian Multiculturalism Policy was included into Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Half a decade later, in 1988, the Policy achieved full fledged constitutional and legal status when the 'Multiculturalism Act' was passed in by Parliament led by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. To follow the federal policy, many provinces passed legislation with little variations. It was Saskatchewan that registered first in 1974, then followed a series of registrations by Ontario in 1977, Alberta, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and P.E.I. in the 1980s,

British Columbia in 1993 and Newfoundland in 2008. However, Quebec accepted a different model termed as 'inter-culturalism' instead of 'multiculturalism' to essentialize the idea of 'two founding cultures' and 'two official languages' of the modern Canadian nation.

The Concept: Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is defined as "a political, social, and cultural movement which aimed to respect a multiplicity of diverging perspectives outside of dominant traditions," (Willet, 1998, p. 1). However, Multiculturalism as a concept has many different layers of meaning. These dimensions are further clarified, defined, and elaborated by several scholars. For instance, Garcea (2008) makes a useful distinction between multicultural public philosophy (ideology) and multicultural public policy (official state policy) in his analysis of the fragmentary effects of Multiculturalism in Canada. According to Fleras and Elliott, "Canadian multiculturalism is: i) an empirical fact; ii) ideology; iii) practice; iv) critique; and v) state policy. Multiculturalism as an empirical fact and state policy, refers to demographic diversity and corporate pluralism. Multiculturalism as ideology (or public philosophy) reflects the ideal of multiculturalism or what ought to be. Multiculturalism as practice reflects on what actually happens on the ground in terms of the commodification of diversity as a 'resource' and the political, commercial, and minority interests in its utilization. Multiculturalism as critique, challenges traditional authority; and multiculturalism, as state policy in the interest of minority, disguises an assimilationist or mono-cultural policy" (2002, p.4).

Besides, Guo and Wong suggest that multiculturalism as official state policy and as practice on the ground is distinguished by terms such as multiculturalism 'from above' vs. multiculturalism 'from below.' Multiculturalism 'from below' means multiculturalism as a discourse with political dimensions played out in local communities; and 'from above' implies, where the state engineers multiculturalism through policy and engages in the management of diversity. Thus multiculturalism 'from below' is the everyday experiences of the multiculturalism which pertains to the daily life-experiences and political struggles of ethno-cultural and 'racialized' peoples (2015, p. 5).

The following segment highlights the debates on

Canadian multiculturalism and examines the policy structure of Canadian multiculturalism and its programmes dating back to its inception.

Debates on Canadian Multiculturalism

Since the inception of the Canadian Multiculturalism Policy in 1971, its advocates and critics engaged in discourse to examine the role and impact of the integration of various ethnic groups, especially immigrants — who are termed as ethno-cultural, racial or religious communities. The competing arguments are quite often based upon different conceptions of multiculturalism which stand either in support of or against the Multiculturalism Policy.

According to an Angus Reid (2010) poll survey, 55% of Canadian respondents found the Policy of Multiculturalism as being 'good' while 30% regarded it as 'bad'. The data further revealed that more than half of the respondents (54%) opine that Canada should be a 'melting pot' whereas one-third of the respondents (33%) support Canadian multiculturalism as being a 'cultural mosaic'. This shows the contradiction between the acceptance of diversity which is the upper most characteristic of Canada today and the hidden desire of ethnic groups to be assimilated into the mainstream culture of the nation (Hyman 2011).

How then does Multiculturalism enable participation in public political life? Kymlicka (1988) argues that the Multiculturalism Policy promotes integration by removing barriers to participation in Canadian life. He suggests that here is strong evidence that the Multiculturalism Policy has played a positive role in the successful integration of immigrants; ethnic, racial and religious communities in Canada as compared to many other countries that lack an official similar policy. Furthermore, he provides the examples of success that "shows the high level of mutual identification and acceptance among immigrants and native-born Canadians, the high likelihood of immigrants in Canada becoming citizens, high rates of inter-racial marriages, high levels of proficiency in 'official' languages, and the fact that Canadian immigrants are more likely to participate in the political process, as voters, party members, or even candidates for political office than U.S., Australia, or any European country" (Kymlicka, 2010, p.7).

The findings of OECD report (2015) illustrate that children of immigrants have better educational outcomes in Canada than other Western countries. A Focus Canada survey (2006) shows that 83% of Canadians agree that Muslims make a positive contribution to Canada, suggesting that Canada is less affected by the global surge in anti-Muslim sentiments and by the resulting polarization of ethnic and religious relations experienced in many European countries (cited in Kymlicka 2010, p. 7). Sharing values and a sense of belonging to a nation are the two most cherished values considered to be significant effective indicators of the impacts of the Multiculturalism Policy in Canada. According to the General Social Survey (2003), 84% of immigrants have a strong sense of belonging to Canada, compared to 85% of the Canadian born population" (Statistics Canada, 2003). The Ethnic Diversity Survey suggests that Canadians identifying as 'visible minorities' express a stronger sense of belonging than other Canadians (Ethnic Diversity Survey, 2002). These surveys provide strong evidence that ethnic groups in Canada highly regard a sense of Canadian identity irrespective of their different religious affiliations. They share more and more of Canada's liberal-democratic norms or 'charter values' including western ideals such as freedom of choice and gender equality.

However, the common view among critics is that multiculturalism poses a threat to national integration and, contributes to ghettoization and Balkanisation in Canadian society (Bissoondath, 2002; Wong, 2010). The Public Research Initiative (PRI) data shows that Canadians widely agree that Canada should not promote cultural differences at the expense of shared Canadian values because it is not the objective of Canadian Multiculturalism (PRI 2009). Gregg (2006) argued that, "as is the case in England, France, and other advanced liberal democracies, national unity in Canada is increasingly threatened by the growing atomization of our society along ethnic lines" (p. 4). Canadian Senator, Donald Oliver (2006) believes "these critiques of multiculturalism policy have contributed to the erosion of its funding and mandate over the last couple of decades and, its move to citizenship, identity and race relations at the expense of heritage, culture and language preservation" (Hyman 2011, p. 9).

The other group of critics — social groups and

associations — question the policy of Canadian Multiculturalism. Those social groups and associations, who speak for the ‘marginalized’ and for those treated as ‘second-class citizens’ such as the Muslims, may pose a challenge to the dominant groups in Canada (Li 2003; Bannerji 2000). Others are of the opinion that the Policy of Multiculturalism can act as a hurdle to immigrants’ cohesion and social inclusion. According to Hansen & Pikkov (2008), “policies and programmes for economic and educational integration are more effective than preservation of ethno-cultural and religious identity of ‘visible minorities’”. It is suggested that some ‘racialized’ groups are not integrating successfully like Muslims as compared to other groups such as Sikhs, Chinese and others” (Hayman 2011, p. 9). Richmond and Saloojee (2005) made an observation that “a core idea of multiculturalism policy is the recognition of differences that is not the same as valued recognition” (ibid). In addition, the new emerging idea of ‘inclusive citizenship’¹ is believed to support the Policy of Multiculturalism in Canada.

More recently, multiculturalism is thought to pose a considerable challenge to national security. In the wake of the terrorist incidents of 9/11 and the United States’ Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), a backlash against the policy of multiculturalism emerged in many Western countries. The arrival of asylum seekers from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries further exacerbated the crisis of multiculturalism — in Europe particularly. The rise of right-wing populist nationalism in US and Europe in the past decade saw ethnic and religious diversity as a threat to nationhood and national security. As the criticism of multiculturalism has grown in Europe and Canada after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in US, the concept and Policy of Multiculturalism has been searching for new anchors.

The terrorist attacks in Europe are seen from the lens of anti-multiculturalism both in academia and in public discourse. The Madrid train bombings in 2004, the London bombings in 2005, and a series of terrorist attacks, more recently in France, the firebombing of the Paris offices of Charlie Hebdo in 2012 and the shootings in the Charlie Hebdo offices in early 2015, and two suicide bomb blasts in Belgium in 2016 are powerful events that occurred after 9/11, which put multiculturalism as a social and public policy under severe criticism

by the contemporary three major political leaders of Europe; David Cameron (United Kingdom), Nicolas Sarkozy (France) and Angela Merkel (Germany). These leaders spoke openly about the failure of the multiculturalism policy. Cameron went to the extent of saying that multiculturalism discourse and policy have directly fostered ‘Islamic extremism’ (Wright & Taylor, 2011).

The prolific criticism of multiculturalism in Europe has come equally from both the Right and the Left. Vertovec and Wessendorf (2010, p. 5) have analyzed “the backlash against multiculturalism in the public debates, policies and practices, associated with the European Continent. The public debate regarding multiculturalism has produced the term like ‘post-multiculturalism’ or end of multiculturalism where scholars used to suggest the need to move beyond current policies and practices of multiculturalism and to explore other approaches to immigration and ethnic integration”. The term ‘post-multiculturalism’ has been particularly popularized in Europe by Vertovec (2010) who meant it to be “a call for alternatives to multiculturalism that includes a search for new models that foster social cohesion and promote assimilation and a common identity” (ibid, p. 5). Consequently, the dominant discourse in Europe sees multiculturalism as a failed project both academically and publicly.

Notably, the discourses in Canada, in contrast to the dominant anti-multiculturalism discourse of Europe, is both critical and favourable to multiculturalism. A current public opinion poll conducted by Environics Institute holds that “An increasing majority of Canadians identify multiculturalism as one of the most important symbols of the country’s national identity. But mainstream politicians in Canada are not speaking much, for or against Canadian multiculturalism” (2015, p. 2).

Fleras and Elliott (2002) summarize the various current critiques of Canadian Multiculturalism Policy, identify five distinct but related types of critiques of Canadian Multiculturalism:

- “Multiculturalism is *divisive*: it undermines Canadian society (identity and coherence) by promoting cultural diversity at the expense of national unity;

- Multiculturalism is *marginalising* it ghettoizes minorities, their aspirations, and commodifies culture by invoking cultural solutions to structural problems;
- Multiculturalism is *essentializing*: it fossilizes differences and envisions Canada as a collection of autonomous ethnic groups that are self-contained, determining, and controlling;
- Multiculturalism is a *hoax*: it does not address the root cause of inequality as it is a symbol without substance that promises much but delivers little except to delude, conceal, evade, or distort;
- Multiculturalism is *hegemonic*: it does not empower minorities but rather contains them as it is an instrument of control that achieves consensus by manipulating people's consent without their awareness" (p. 22).

Fleras and Elliott (2002) summarize the benefits of multiculturalism policy for Canada:

- *"Unifying"* promotes unity by depoliticizing diversity without eroding a commitment to participation and equity;
- *Inclusive*: an instrument that challenges the exclusion of minority women and men to ensure integration and full participation;
- *Hybridizing*: promotes the rights of individuals to choose their level of involvement without being locked into an ethnic-culture;
- *Catalyst*: symbols can 'move mountains' by legitimizing diversity as integral while furnishing a platform for minority grievances;
- *Counter-hegemony*: a lever for advancing minority interests by challenging and transforming the social contract" (p. 108).

All said and done, Multiculturalism in Canada, as elsewhere, continues to be heavily debated: while some academics theorize multiculturalism with specific interests of Canada in mind; others make efforts to broaden the dimensions of multiculturalism in Canada. In order to understand the dimensions and developments of Canadian Multiculturalism, the next section explores the various phases of multiculturalism since its declaration as a federal policy in 1971.

Multiculturalism Developments in Canada

Dewing (2013; 3) has summarized the chronology of multiculturalism as state policy through three developmental stages: (i) incipient stage (pre-1971); (ii)

formative stage (1971–1981); and (iii) institutionalization stage (1982–present).

In the incipient stage (pre-1971) the Multiculturalism Policy in Canada was set in the post-WW II period, as the influx of European immigrants and refugees increased from the Baltic States and countries like the Netherlands, Italy, and Hungary. Immigration from the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania supplemented the earlier generation of Europeans who came largely from Germany, Sweden, Ukraine, France, Iceland, Norway and Russia in the early mass influx period of the early 1900s because of the immigration and settlement policy of Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior, and author of Canada's first *Immigration Act* in 1896. Also, in 1947 the *Canadian Citizenship Act* was passed, and Canadians were no longer seen as British subjects, facilitating many Canadian ethnic groups to question the legitimacy of British cultural hegemony. Thus, the social and political events of the 1960s in Quebec and the establishment and report of B&B Commission (as earlier mentioned) resulted in the 'official' end of assimilationist policy and the introduction of Multiculturalism policy.

The formative stage (1971–1981) began with the adoption of Multiculturalism Policy in 1971 by the government of Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau. This policy identified numerous programmes — multicultural grants, cultural development, ethnic histories, Canadian ethnic studies, teaching of official languages, and federal cultural agencies, as well as fourteen specific recommendations including teaching languages other than English or French and cultural programmes in public elementary schools. In general, the key objectives of the Policy were established "to assist cultural groups to retain and foster their identity; to assist cultural groups to overcome barriers to their full participation in Canadian society; to promote exchanges amongst cultural groups; to assist immigrants to learn an official language" (ibid; 4). In this formative stage, federal funds of approximately \$200 million, spread over ten years, were distributed to implement Multiculturalism Policy goals. A notable development was the establishment of a Multicultural Directorate within the Department of Secretary of State and then of a Ministry of Multiculturalism to facilitate the programmes and recommendations of the policy (ibid).

	Ethnicity Multiculturalism (1970s)	Equity Multiculturalism (1980s-early 1990s)	Civic Multiculturalism (1995s-2005)	Integrative Multiculturalism (2006-present)
Dimension	Cultural	Structural	Social	Societal
Focus	Respecting differences	Fostering equality	Living Together	Integration
Mandate	Ethnicity	Race relations	Civic culture	citizenship
Magnitude	Individual adjustment	Institutional accommodation	Full engagement	National Safety/Security
Problem	Prejudice	Racism/discrimination	Exclusion	Segregation/extremism
Solution	Cultural interactivity	Remove barriers	inclusion	Shared Canadian values
Outcomes	Cultural capital	Human capital	Social capital	National community/unity
Key Metaphor	"Mosaic"	"Level playing field"	"Bridging the bonds"	"Strangers becoming neighbours"

Table 1: Multiculturalism Policy shifts in Canada

Fleras, Augie (2009), *The Politics of Multiculturalism*, p 70.

It also assisted to communicate and cooperate with diverse ethnic organizations in Canada.

During the third stage, called the institutionalization stage (1982–), the Multiculturalism Policy became formalized and codified as ‘official legislation’ with the passing of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988. However, even prior to 1988 institutionalization of the Multiculturalism Policy was enhancing a corporate pluralism model in Canada. Institutionalization before the Act itself included the recognition of multicultural heritage and the inclusion of different ethnic origins along with race, colour, religion, sex, age, and mental and physical disability under equality rights in Section 15 (1) in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in 1982. Thereafter, Canada passed the *Employment Equity Act* in 1986, and established the *Canadian Race Relations Foundation* in 1996 (ibid, p.5).

More recently, in the continuation of institutionalization stage, multiculturalism includes other developments like the celebration of ‘Canadian Multiculturalism Day’ on 27 June in 2002, Asian Heritage Month, ‘May’, and ‘Canada’s Action Plan Against Racism’ in 2005, Sikh Heritage Month in Ontario in 2013, and British Columbia in 2018.

Fleras and Augie (2009) make an interesting comparative analysis of the changing meaning, nuances and contours and objectives of the Multiculturalism Policy in Canada. Their approach focuses basically on shifts

with respect to its policy objectives over the last four decades — as shown in Table 1.

Likewise, Kunz and Sykes (2007) analyze the changing focus, reference point and mandate of the Canadian Multiculturalism Policy for each of the decades of the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. In the decade of 1970s, the Multiculturalism Policy primarily started its focus on **ethnicity multiculturalism** that promotes ‘celebrating differences,’ with reference to ‘culture’ and the ‘mandate of ethnicity.’ During the decade of the 1980s the Multiculturalism Policy shifted towards **equity multiculturalism** with the focus on ‘managing diversity’, the reference point being ‘structure’ and the ‘mandate of race relations’. In the 1990s, the Policy attention turned to **civic multiculturalism** that emphasized constructive engagement, society building and citizenship. And in the 2000s, the Multiculturalism Policy made yet another shift — this time towards **integrative multiculturalism** focusing on ‘inclusive citizenship’ with a reference point being ‘Canadian identity’ and the ‘mandate of integration’. In Canada, “colloquial terminology is used to understand the trajectory of the Multiculturalism Policy: the policy evolved from ‘song and dance’ in the 1970s, to ‘anti-racism’ in the 1980s, to ‘civic participation’ in the 1990s, and to ‘fitting in’ in the 2000s” (Guo & Wong 2015, p. 4).

In the backdrop of the preceding discussion and analysis, the next section briefly describes the concept

of political participation and the involvement of South Asians, in particular the Sikh community, in Canadian politics. Subsequently, it looks at what role Canadian Multiculturalism plays to incorporate various ethnic groups, especially South Asians into Canadian Politics.

Meaning and Concept of Political Participation

Political participation consists of those voluntary activities by citizens that are intended to influence the *selection* of government leaders or the *decisions* they make (emphasis added). In liberal democracy, voting and contesting elections are considered as active participation in political process. Voting in elections is a crucial aspect of democracy and the most common form of political participation in Canada. For this purpose, political parties play a significant role in the election process (Rand Dyck 2011, p. 149).

In a liberal democracy, the primary function of political parties is to nominate candidates for contesting elections in specific ridings or constituencies; and secondary, to campaign so as to encourage and convince the listed voters to cast their votes along different party lines, in accordance with ideology, agendas and promises for the future. Parties also highlight what they have accomplished. Liberal democratic political parties always seek active involvement of all sections of the society. Thirdly, political parties incorporate the specific needs and demands made upon them and aggregate these demands and aspirations into cohesive generalised policy statements and goals. In a liberal democracy, lots of 'trade-offs' and compromises among contending demands, for instance labour and capital, take place within and through the mechanisms of political parties.

Canada is a country of representative democracy, and "its citizens select or elect, through the electoral process, those whom they would like to represent them in the decisions that are taken in legislatures, in city councils, in school boards, and in the federal House of Commons. This model is firmly rooted in the franchise — one's right to vote and those with the right to vote ultimately decide who will have the legitimize authority to make decisions" (Andrew et al. 2008, p. 11).

Political parties function in a context where Canada is a plural society and is going to become even more socially diverse due to continuing demographic changes, mainly through immigration and falling fertility

rate. Within Canada, a key route to integration into 'the dominant society' is through the political system by working through the medium of political parties. As Wood states, "Participation in electoral politics in particular serves as an important indicator of the emergence of recent immigrants from 'social isolation into the mainstream of Canadian political life'" (Wood 1981, p. 178). Issues such as the democratic political institutions and traditions in place, or otherwise from the country of origin and; 'reception' factor; time of arrival and existing length of time in Canada, can all affect the patterns of ethnic political participation. It is noted that some of the barriers to participation that are associated with immigrants' status in the new country disappear, or grow smaller, for second and subsequent generations after an initial adaptation period.

Equally noteworthy, when Canadian researchers, policymakers, and civil society organizations think about 'integration' or 'inclusion', much of their attention normally focuses on social and economic indicators, with far less attention being paid to other indicators including those related to political participation, electoral involvement, and civic engagement. This is somewhat unfortunate, and perhaps misguided, given that it is elected bodies and other decision-making structures that largely regulate social and labour market policies and thus have the potential to shape economic outcomes for immigrant (visible minority) groups. Therefore, the stress given here encourages us to study political participation of 'visible minorities'; as it can help to balance the existing research gaps.

With regards to the concept of political participation and its extension to ethnicity, Saloojee (2002) states, "the political participation of immigrants in society can be seen as part of the process of social and political integration in the new society" (p. 39). In broader sense, the term political participation can include a range of activities, from political party membership to involvement in protest movements (Stasiulis, 1997). Although participation in "electoral politics is a narrow definition of political participation, it is a valuable indicator of how recent immigrants move from "social isolation into the mainstream of Canadian political life" (Wood, 1981, p. 178).

A leading Canadian political philosopher — Will Kymlicka provides four examples of success that show

high level of mutual identification and acceptance among immigrants and native-born Canadians: (i) the high likelihood of immigrants in Canada becoming citizens; (ii) high rates of inter-racial marriages; (iii) high levels of proficiency in 'official' languages; and (iv) the fact that Canadian immigrants are more likely to participate in the political process as voters, party members, or even candidates for political office than U.S. Australia, or any European country (Hyman, 2011).

At the outset, Canadian multiculturalism recognized the cultural distinction of people belonging to different ethnic backgrounds, and facilitated the organization of many social and cultural associations. No gainsaying, these associations played a key role in making immigrants aware of their rights in general, and political rights in particular. Secondly, the growth of immigrant populations due to new immigration policy (1967) produced changes in the political landscape of Canada. Like others, the number of South Asian immigrants significantly increased which assisted them in gaining political recognition. Third, is the creation of the so-called 'critical mass' (population that is geographically concentrated) which gave South Asians, in particular the Sikhs, an advantage in getting recognized by the mainstream political parties. Fourthly, South Asians' political consciousness works well in leveraging them into Canadian politics. For example, in early 1970s, many people of South Asian descent, mainly Sikhs joined political parties (federal and provincial) and became actively involved in party activities. Many contested seats in the provincial elections, although without initial success. For example, Ujjal Dosanjh, and many others had joined political parties and ran for elections in the 1970s. During the decade, few people were elected as mayors and councilors in municipal elections in different cities across the Province of British Columbia. Naranjan Singh Grewal was the first South Asian Canadian who was elected as Alderman back in 1950 and he also went on to win the mayor's office in 1955. Johnder Basran was elected as Mayor of Lillooet in 1969 and had previously been elected as Alderman in 1965. V.S. Pendakur was elected as city councillor from Vancouver in 1972. However, at the provincial level, Moe Sihota broke the barrier by winning the Esquimalt-Port Renfrew riding as the NDP candidate in 1986. In five short years, the number of South Asian

decent provincial legislators increased to four after the provincial elections in 1991. This is also when Herb Dhaliwal became the first Canadian of South Asian origin and the first Sikh to become a Member of the Parliament-House of Commons.

However, discussing South Asian Canadians' participation in Canadian politics is not possible without revisiting Canadian history, predominantly from three aspects — franchise, immigration and multiculturalism. The next segment explores these along with the responsible factors for their exclusion and inclusion in Canadian politics.

South Asians in Canadian Politics: Exclusion and Inclusion

Canada adopted the model of representative democracy that is firmly rooted in the principle of universal franchise, i.e. one's right to vote that ultimately decides who will have legitimized authority or power to legislate and make decisions. The parameters of the franchise, particularly the criteria that determine who has the right to vote, are contested; and the criteria used to either include or exclude have varied depending on the period in history, the jurisdiction, and one's economic and social background. How one defines the franchise ultimately determines who votes; and this may have a marked impact on decisions taken. Moreover, many of the groups that remain under-represented in the electoral arena today are those who were historically excluded from their voting right.

According to a report by Elections Canada, a historical study of the franchise in Canada reveals that "the exclusion has been based on race, with Chinese, Japanese, Aboriginal, and Indo-Canadians having all faced [it] at various points in history" (Elections Canada 1997). For example, if one looks just at federal elections: "Chinese and Indo-Canadians were not granted the right to vote until 1947, while Japanese Canadians were not allowed to cast vote federally until 1948. The Inuit population did not attain the right to vote in federal elections until 1950, and while 'Status Indians' were given the right to vote in 1920, the condition that they would need to give up their 'status' and other treaty rights to do so was not removed until 1960. Moreover, some other ethnic groups have also been excluded as a result of their religion. Catholics were

denied the right to vote in pre-Confederation Canada unless they swore to uphold the king and denounce Catholicism and the authority of the pope” (ibid). Although the exclusion was intended to ensure loyalty towards Canada, it discriminated against Catholics, and against Jews and Quakers who were prevented by their religions from swearing oaths.

However, White women were given the right to vote in most provinces in 1918, while in Quebec, they were not allowed until 1940. Meanwhile, it is significant to note that the franchise status can be changed for some people. Those who may have at one time been allowed to vote can suddenly find themselves excluded. Like in pre-Confederation period of Canada, the property ownership has, at various points in time, been used to define one’s right to vote, excluding those who did not own property. White women who owned property could have the right to vote at this time, but when gender became the explicit criterion for exclusion, they could not cast vote in spite of their property ownership (ibid).

Nevertheless, inclusion, thus, is not necessarily a constant; it can be reversed or altered in historical perspectives. While ethnic, racial, religious and gender exclusions have now been detached from the electoral process, questions about who should have the right to vote continue. The age at which one should be permitted to vote remains a perennial question. The voting age in Canada was lowered to eighteen from twenty-one in 1970, and there are currently some debates on lowering it further to sixteen years of age (ibid). Significantly, there are also other ways in which the franchise could be expanded. Some still question exclusion based on citizenship and suggest that “residency status should be the criteria for voting, at least in municipal elections. Yet others question the extension of the franchise to all prison inmates, which was mandated by the Supreme Court in 2002” (Andrew et.al 2008, p. 13). In brief, while the right to vote is fundamental in a representative system of government, there are a variety of ways to define that right, and the definition has evolved over time depending upon the issues /power/ social resistance involved with them.

Notwithstanding, the political representation is not fully dependent variable on political rights or right to vote. Many other factors like mainstream

social structure, community/group culture, and its contradictions –racial discrimination are equally responsible for denial the entry to politics. For example, Immigrants in Canada were entitled to political rights — right to vote in 1947, but representation actually did not materialise until 1980s. The reason is Canadian mainstream society was not ready to accept them as political counterparts. During the time, racial discrimination was a very crucial factor for political exclusion. Besides, the insignificant number of population and its geographical concentration had also been considerable factors for South Asian absence in Canadian politics until 1980s.

However, the significant increase of the South Asian population in early 1970s was predominantly the outcome of the change in Canadian Immigration Policy in 1967. Secondly, the declaration of the Multiculturalism Policy in 1971 was considered a crucial contributor of the time that triggered the flow of immigration from non-traditional countries — the Asian, African and Arab world. The announcement of the Multiculturalism Policy gave a world-wide message of inclusion to those aspiring to immigrate to Canada. In brief, Canada was the first country that imagined itself as a world leader in espousing multiculturalism, and thus emerged as a magnet to attract immigrants in the 1970s.

When people were permitted to immigrate, they faced a high degree of hostility and racism in Canada. To respond to prevailing racism and discrimination, South Asian Canadians organized themselves in several associations: for example, the BC Organization for Fighting Racism (1975–80). By mid-70s, several progressive and left-oriented organizations were active at the political level. Unlike some earlier immigrants, new immigrants from South Asia, mainly India, were well-educated and brought with them progressive and leftist ideas.

The history of South Asian immigration is more than a century old and their contestation with various issues in Canada is well-documented. In 1967 basic changes were made to the Immigration Policy, because prior to that, immigration policies were based on racial considerations. In the 1960s, the policy shifted from racial to skill-based immigration corresponding to a point system by removing the old quota system. Canada was a beneficiary. Educated and skilled youth began migrating from South Asia, mainly India. The prime motive

of the new immigration legislation was to invite more skilled and younger immigrants who could contribute to the Canadian economy.

The effect of new Immigration Policy was that the three years (1972–1974) witnessed a greater number of South Asians, mainly Indian Sikh youths who landed in Canada on the basis of the point system. These new immigrants had quite a different experience of interaction with the larger Canadian society. Unlike the earlier immigrants, these young immigrants started resisting the prevalent racial discrimination. Earlier Sikh immigrants even protested against racial barriers, but with time, they had adjusted themselves to the prevailing racial environment and resigned themselves to the racial discrimination that they experienced in their daily lives. Some even internalized the racism. Earlier immigrants had to secure their livelihood and economic well-being; besides, they depended on government institutions for their protection. Mainstream society had full control over its institutions and resources like jobs and housing. Sometimes immigrants feared a loss of job and access to housing if they dared to speak up against racism.

In contrast, the Sikh immigrants, who came in the 70s, created a strong response against racial discrimination. Instances of violent incidents were also reported. Mostly Sikh youths were found retaliating against individuals who used ‘racial’ slurs against them. This can be considered a new phase in the migration history of South Asians, mainly Sikhs from Punjab, for a number of reasons:

- Sikh immigrants had expressed themselves in radical ways in Canada due to their youth and leftist influences that they brought from India.
- Most of them were well educated which helped them understand the ways that the Canadian system worked and they could leverage it to their advantage.
- Many of those educated young men possessed entrepreneurial skills and qualifications to set up private businesses and create jobs for other Sikhs.
- They were born in independent India and had the experience of democracy and freedom.
- Many Sikh immigrants were influenced and impacted by the *Khalistan* movement in Punjab in the 1980s. It had made them militant in their views in particular in the aftermath of the ‘Operation Blue Star’ when Indian security forces carried out

a military operation against militants hiding in the Harmandir Sahib — commonly known as the ‘Golden Temple’ — in 1984. In Canada, they were strong exponents of respect and recognition of diversity, and they championed the cause of human rights.

- They migrated during the peak period of ‘green revolution’ in Punjab. In British Columbia, many went into agriculture ‘revolutionizing’ the Canadian agriculture by newly brought skills.
- They were fully legitimized by the policy (Multiculturalism) to protect their culture as well as fight back against racial discrimination (Binning 2016; interview).

During the 1980s, for instance, mainly turban-wearing Sikhs, began asserting themselves against existing rules and regulations related to the compulsory use of helmets while riding a motorcycle despite the fact that it can lead to serious health hazards. They demanded exemptions from prevailing laws and after a few years of continuous struggle, Sikhs were eventually exempted from the obligatory wearing of helmet in 1982. Consequently, their victory boosted their confidence and encouraged them to launch many a struggle in subsequent years.

In the 1990s, Sikhs made numerous claims for religious accommodation at various places in Canada. Therefore, the debate began as to which of the minority religious practices are acceptable within Canadian multiculturalism. Several cultural and religious practices including wearing of turbans by Sikhs or headscarfs by Muslim women came to be conceived as ‘illiberal’. For this purpose, the Sikh community demanded exemptions from existing laws and for allowing them access to and acquisition of public offices allowing the turban and *kirpan*. The Canadian Government tried to evaluate those claims with historical perspectives while addressing the questions: what is the contribution of the Sikh community in building Canada — socially, economically and politically; and, what will on balance be the cost of such exemptions for the larger Canadian nation? Eventually, the Canadian government adjusted some religious claims under the Multiculturalism Policy. Consequently, Sikhs were allowed to wear the turban and an unshorn beard in the RCMP in 1990. Sikhs were permitted to wear the *kirpan* in parliament, in courtrooms, and other Governmental and official

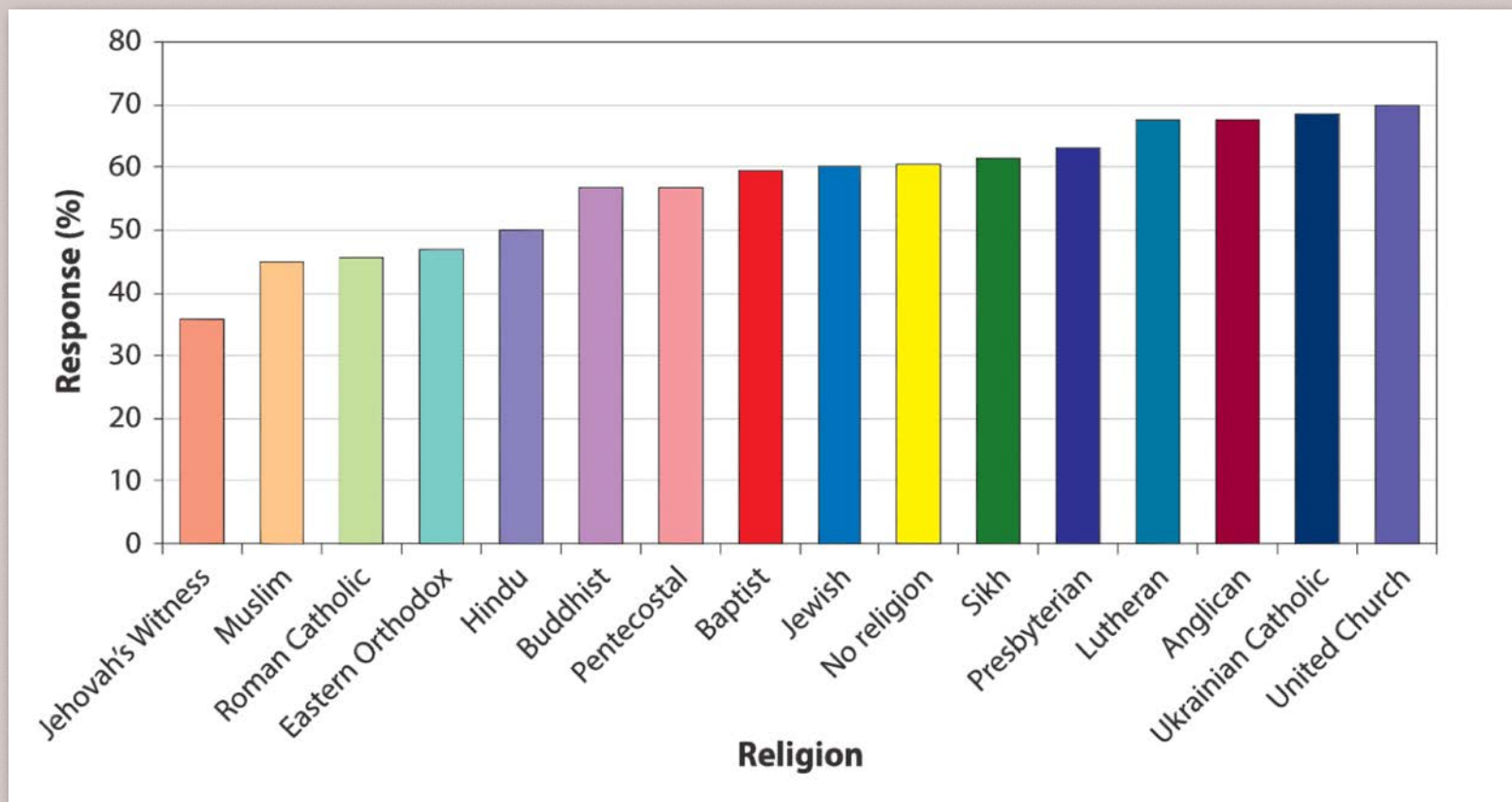


Figure 2: Proportion of Population who think “most people can be trusted” by religion

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian General Social Survey, 2003

positions in 2013. Sikh children were also allowed to wear a particular size of *kirpan* in schools in British Columbia. Sikhs won this battle after a prolonged struggle by filing court cases, building political pressure, and strong advocacy through worldwide Sikh associations including in India (CBC News, 2014).

Sikhs as a cultural community are consistently making requests for official curriculum status for Punjabi language at all levels of Canadian society — from educational institutions to public and private institutions including its use in workplaces. Sikhs have successfully worked on strategies to mobilize and leverage the official Multiculturalism Policy. One could argue that Sikhs as a South Asian community and as an ethnic minority in Canada have benefitted more from the Multiculturalism Policy than any other ethnic group in Canada. They have a better success rate in Canadian politics. They are over-represented group in federal politics.

It is not just their mobilization and organization in leveraging the multicultural discourse and policy framework of Canada, Sikhs in particular and South Asians in general are also found to be the fifth most trusted community in Canada, as shown in Figure 2.

Coming back to politics, if we look at past few

electoral results of provincial elections, South Asians, mainly Sikhs were remained successful from particular ridings where they are largely concentrated like Surrey in Greater Vancouver Area. At the grassroots level, the representation of South Asians in city governments are continuously growing. The following Tables 2, 3 & 4 demonstrate the political representation of South Asian Canadians from the province of British Columbia at three levels of the government — Federal, Provincial and Municipal.

The data in the tables bears witness that Sikhs are highly successful where they are largely concentrated. The concentration of Sikhs in Greater Vancouver region and Greater Toronto region results in their strong influence on, voter turnout, active campaigns, local advocacy and impact on party policies. However, the ridings where their numbers are not significant, the Sikh candidates have the ability to align with the demands and aspirations of other ‘visible minorities’ and immigrants which leads to their success in provincial and federal politics.

Conclusion

In summation, Multiculturalism as a political theory justifies the idea of ‘recognition of the difference’ in

Sr.	Name	Position/s Held	Constituency	Year
1	Moe Sihota	NDP MLA NDP MLA Minister of Labour and Consumer Services Minister Responsible for Constitutional Affair Minister Responsible for Multiculturalism & Human Rights	Esquimalt-Port Renfrew Esquimalt-Metchosin	1986–1991 1991–2001 1991–93 1991–93 1993–95
2	Ujjal Dosanjh	NDP MLA BC Premier Attorney General and Minister responsible for Multiculturalism and Human Rights	Vancouver-Kensington	1991–2001 2000–2001 1995 2000
3	Judi Tyabji	BC Liberal MLA	Okanagan East	1991–1996
4	Harry Lalli	NDP MLA Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Forests Minister of Transportation and Highways	Yale Lillooet Yale Lillooet Fraser-Nicola	1991–2001 2005–2009 2009–2013
5	Sindi Hawkins	BC Liberal MLA Minister of Health Planning Minister of State for Intergovernmental Relations.	Okanagan West Kelowna-Mission	1996–2001 2001–2009
6	Gulzar Cheema	BC Liberal MLA	Surrey-Panorama Ridge	2001–04
7	Patty Sahota	MLA	Burnaby	2001–05
8	Tony Bhullar	BC Liberal MLA	Surrey-Newton	2001–2005
9	Rob Nijjar	BC Liberal MLA	Vancouver-Kingsway	2001–2005
10	John Nuraney	BC Liberal MLA	Burnaby-Willingdon	2001–09
11	Dave Hayer	BC Liberal MLA	Surrey-Tynehead	2001–13
12	Karn Manhas	BC Liberal MLA	Port-Coquitlam	2001–05
13	Jagrup Brar	NDP MLA	Surrey-Panorama Ridge Surrey-Fleetwood Surrey-Fleetwood	2004–09 2009–13 2017- Present
14	Wally Oppal	BC Liberal MLA Attorney General and Minister responsible for Multiculturalism	Vancouver-Fraserview	2005–09
15	Harry Bains	NDP MLA Minister of Labour	Surrey- Newton	2005- present 2017- present
16	Raj Chouhan	Speaker of BC Legislative Assembly	Burnaby-Edmonds	2005–20 2020- present
17	Kash Heed	BC Liberal MLA Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General.	Vancouver-Fraserview	2009–13
18	Amrik Virk	BC Liberal MLA Minister of Advanced Education Minister of Technology, Innovation and Citizens' Services	Surrey-Tynehead	2013–17
19	Jas Johal	MLA	Richmond-Queens-borough	2014–17
20	Ravi Kahlon	NDP MLA Parliamentary Secretary for Sport and Multiculturalism Minister of Jobs, Economic Recovery and Innovation	Delta North	2017- present 2017–2020 2020- present
21	Rachna Singh	NDP MLA Parliamentary Secretary for Anti-Racism	Surrey- Green Timbers	2017- present 2020- present
22	Jinny Sims	NDP MLA Minister of Citizen Services	Surrey- Panorama Ridge	2017-Present
23	Aman Singh	NDP MLA	Richmond-Queens-borough	2020- present
24	Harwinder Sandhu	NDP MLA	Vernon-Monashee	2020-Present
25	Nikki Sharma	NDP MLA	Vancouver- Hastings	2020-Present

Table 2: South Asians in Provincial Politics BC (MLAs/ Ministers)

Source: Data extracted from personal interviews and website of BC Legislative Assembly.

Sr.	Name	Position/s Held	Constituency	Year
1	Herb Dhaliwal	Liberal MP Minister of Revenue Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Minister of Natural Resources	Vancouver South	1993–2004 1997 1999 2002
2	Gurmant Grewal	Conservative MP	Surrey Central Newton-North Delta	1997–04 2004–06
3	Mobina Jaffer	Liberal Senator Liberal Caucus Senator Senator Independent	Vancouver	2001–2014 2014–2018 2018- Present
4	Ujjal Dosanjh	Liberal MP Health Minister, Canada	Vancouver South	2004–11 2004–06
5	Nina Grewal	Conservative MP	Port-Kells	2004–15
6	Sukh Dhaliwal	Liberal MP	Surrey Newton	2006–11 2015-Present
7	Jinny Sims	NDP MP	Newton-North Delta	2011–15
8	Jasbir Sandhu	NDP MP	Surrey North	2011–15
9	Harjit Sajjan	Liberal MP Minister of National Defense	Vancouver South	2015- Present 2015–2021
10	Randeep Sarai	Liberal MP	Surrey Centre	2015-Present
11	Jagmeet Singh	NDP leader MP	Canada Burnaby South	2017-Present 2019-Present

Table 3: BC South Asians in Federal Politics (MPs/ Senators/ Ministers)

Source: Data extracted from personal interviews and Government websites.

Sr.	Name	Position/s Held	City	Year	Sr.	Name	Position/s Held	City	Year
1	Naranjan Grewal	Councillor Mayor	Mission	1950–54 1954–55	18	Arjun Singh	Councillor	Kamloops	2008- Present
2	Johnder Basran	Alderman Mayor	Lillooet	1965–69 1969–78	19	Barinder Rasode	Councillor	Surrey	2010–14
3	Setty Pendakur	Councillor	Vancouver	1972–74	20	Colin G. Basran	Councillor Mayor	Kelowna	2011–14 2014-Present
4	Balwant Sanghera	Alderman	Lillooet	1975–90	21	Mohini Singh	Councillor	Kelowna	2011-Present
5	Gurbax Saini	Alderman	Williams lake	1976–90	22	Akbal Singh Mund	Mayor	Vernon	2014–18
6	Amar Bhagri	Alderman	Quesnel	1980–82	23	Dalvir Kaur Nahal	Councillor	Vernon	2014–18
7	Goldy Sangha	Councillor	Quesnel	1982–84	24	Kelly Chahal	Councillor	Abbotsford	2014-Present
8	Surinderpal Rathore	Alderman	Williams lake	1983–85	25	Dave Raj Birdi	Councillor	Fort St. John	2014–18
9	Mohinder Takhar	Alderman	Terrace	1983–93	26	Sarabjit Rai	Councillor	Osoyoos	2014-Present
19	Moe Sihota	Alderman	Esquimalt	1984–86	27	Tarik Sayeed	Councillor	Penticton	2014–18
11	Harry Lalli	Councillor	Merritt	1988–91	28	Gurvinder Randhawa	Councillor	Prince Rupert	2014–18
12	Aman Virk	Councillor Mayor	Golden	1996–2008 2008–2009	29	Bill Sarai	Councillor	Kamloops	2018- Present
13	Moe Gill	Councillor	Abbotsford	1996–2018	30	Jack Singh Hundial	Councillor	Surrey	2018-Present
14	Sushil Thapar	Councillor	Quesnel	2002–18	31	Mandeep Nagra	Councillor	Surrey	2018-Present
15	Sav Dhaliwal	Councillor	Burnaby	2002- present	32	Jag Gill	Councillor	Mission	2018-Present
16	Tarlok Singh Gidda	Councillor	Mission	2005–11	33	Ken Herar	Councillor	Mission	2018-Present
17	Tom Gill	Councillor	Surrey	2006–18	34	Tek Manhas	Councillor	North Cowichan	2018-Present
					35	Kuldeep Dhaliwal	Councillor	Osoyoos	2018-Present

Table 4: South Asians in Civic Politics BC (Mayor/ Councillor/Alderman)

Source: Data extracted from personal interviews and City websites

regard to culturally marginalized communities. Under the policies of Multiculturalism, many programs were launched in Europe and Canada to adjust to the differences in society by accommodating distinct cultural groups. In Canada, Multiculturalism went through many phases, faced numerous critiques, was widely debated, and evolved over the time. Canadian Multiculturalism provides a platform to immigrant groups from South Asia, in particular Sikhs from state of Punjab, to successfully claim political representation and find a place at the table of the Canadian decision-making institutions. Even though immigrants attained political rights in 1947, especially the 'right to vote' after a long struggle, they have relied on the Multiculturalism Policy to provide a space to ethno-cultural/immigrant groups in the larger Canadian society on the one hand and, on the other hand, more recently, assist in curbing racial discrimination. Secondly, the Canadian Immigration Policy of 1967 was a turning point. It allowed the entry of skilled and well-educated people in Canada which facilitated their interaction with the wider Canadian society. The rise of a small entrepreneurial class among the ethnic immigrants worked to bring them face to face with White Canada in everyday life. These immigrants building on the legacy of the early settlers also strongly resisted the prevailing discriminatory practices through

mobilization and formation of specific interest groups and pressure groups at the grassroots political level. As a result, a number of people started participating in formal Canadian politics in early 1970s; they started joining political parties, and actively working for them. The story of South Asians, but more importantly the Sikhs, is the story of their successful leveraging of Multiculturalism to increase their representation in the legislatures and decision-making institutions.

Though the voting right was extended to South Asians in 1947 the mainstream society was not ready to see them in representational bodies. Racism and racial discrimination were big barriers in the path of political participation. Over almost a quarter century, between 1947 and 1971, only two South Asians, both Sikhs, were elected to civic bodies — Naranjan Singh Grewal was the first Indo-Canadian who was elected for political office in 1950 from Mission, and Johnder Basran was the second who was elected from Lillooet — in the province of British Columbia. South Asians and Sikhs in particular are able to leverage the electoral party contestation to their advantage. They are an overrepresented group in Canadian federal politics, and the provinces where they are largely concentrated like BC and Ontario. At the grassroots level, the representation is growing with the passage of time.

Endnotes

1. 'Inclusive citizenship' is concerned with values of participation, recognition and belonging, wherein citizens are nurtured to their fullest capacities. However, inclusive citizenship is at risk when a society fails to develop the talents and capacities of all its members

(Saloojee, 2001). In the real sense, Canada has not yet achieved inclusive citizenship, as economic, social, and political inequities that disenfranchise certain groups from full participation still exist.

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Women and children in Paldi, BC.

Courtesy of Joan Mayo fonds. South Asian Canadian Digital Archive, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, Canada.

Contributors

Rizwan Ahmed Abbas

Rizwaan is a first generation Canadian and a descendant of *Girmitiyas*; people transported by the British Empire in India to work as indentured labourers in Fiji. Upon immigrating to Canada, Rizwaan's parents settled in Sparwood, a small coal mining town in southeastern British Columbia, where Rizwaan was born and raised. At 15 years old, Rizwaan moved to Surrey with his parents and younger brother. Rizwaan has been a consulting archaeologist in BC since graduating from Simon Fraser University in 2004. He then received his Master of Science Degree (with Distinction) in Paleoanthropology and Paleolithic Archaeology from the University College London (UK), the same university where Mohandas Gandhi received his Law Degree. Rizwaan set out to introduce and describe his Indo-Fijian culture after completing his Professional Specialization Certification in Collections Management at the University of Victoria. His museum exhibit, titled, "The Indo-Fijians: Surrey's Pocket of Paradise", displayed the shared history and heritage of the Indo-Fijian people through their own words and stories. The exhibit was showcased at the Museum of Surrey in 2021/2022. Rizwaan aims to shed more light on the Indo-Fijian culture in academia so that everyone can come to appreciate this unique group of people.

Farid Asey

Dr. Farid Asey has a Ph.D. in Social Work from the University of Toronto. Born and raised in Afghanistan, he is a refugee to Canada. Prior to coming here, he had a brief but frightening stint as an asylum seeker in the US. These experiences continue to shape his research and teaching interests in uncovering institutionalized manifestations of subtle, everyday racisms and policy attitudes as sediments of colonial thinking, particularly in the public sector context. In this regard, Dr. Asey frequently engages with bureaucrats and bureaucracies to generate new knowledge on multiculturalism, and equity, diversity and inclusion as discursive devices that manage the script of difference in Canada. Another area of inquiry that fascinates him is neo-Orientalism and how it played a significant role in the spectacular failure of the American imperial enterprise in his home country. He has embarked on this inquiry through an analysis of communications, policy documents, audit reports and (wiki)leaked correspondence on Afghanistan. Dr. Asey currently lives in Quebec a province that, if its White Premier is to be believed, has no systemic racism. Dr. Asey is fluent in five languages, including the liberating vernacular of sarcasm.

Satwinder Kaur Bains

Dr. Satwinder Kaur Bains is the Director of the South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley and an Associate Professor in Scholl of Culture, Media and Society at the College of Arts. Dr. Bains's critical analysis of India's multilingual policy and planning has fueled her interest to study the impact of language, culture and identity on South Asian Canadian migration, settlement, and integration. Her research includes and intersects cross-cultural education with a focus on anti-racist curriculum implementation; race, racism, and ethnicity; identity politics; Sikh feminist ideology; migration and the South Asian Canadian Diaspora and Punjabi Canadian cultural historiography. Dr. Bains has been the driving force for the South Asian Canadian Legacy Project, designed as a legacy for future generations to build foundations about their heritage and for all Canadians to discover, appreciate and engage with and about South Asian Canadian history, culture, and heritage. Dr. Bains is a newly appointed member of the Knowledge Network and has served as a Commissioner on the Agricultural Land Commission, as a Director of the Fraser Basin Council, as a Bencher on the Law Society of British Columbia and as a member of the Farm Industry Review Board for British Columbia. She has served on numerous Boards locally, nationally, and internationally and received recognition for her commitment to social justice, preservation of histories and cultural knowledge, women's rights, service, and research. She lives in Abbotsford and with her partner Parm and three children and helps support an international farming operation, shipping blueberries around the world.

Sarah Beaulieu

Dr. Sarah Beaulieu is a Faculty Associate in the Community Health and Social Innovation Hub as well as an instructor of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of the Fraser Valley, in British Columbia. With a research focus on modern conflict anthropology, Dr. Beaulieu is the first to excavate WWI internment sites in Canada. Her research contributes new information toward the PoW lived experience within these Canadian camps. Artefacts from her research have been acquired by the Canadian Museum of History for two exhibits: the first in the Canadian History Hall and the second as part of the Civil Liberties Exhibit. Her research has been highlighted in the documentary “That Never Happened” which has received numerous international awards and was the “Official Selection” of the Permanent Mission of Canada to The United Nations, screening in Geneva, Switzerland on September 20th, 2018.

Dr. Beaulieu also uses Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) as a remote sensing method in her work as a modern conflict anthropologist. Training at the Canadian Forces Base Borden, she received her certification in 2016 and initially began using radar to search for the lost footprints of Canada’s WWI internment sites as well as in search of unmarked PoW graves. With Dr. Beaulieu’s anthropological background, she has developed a reputation for being able to interpret radar scans in a way that is both culturally sensitive and follows traditional cultural protocols. Through this work she has liaised with the RCMP in search of clandestine graves, surveyed city cemeteries, and worked for First Nations communities to survey both Indigenous cemeteries and search for the missing children from Canada’s residential school burial sites.

Dr. Beaulieu’s research in modern conflict anthropology is diverse but what ties it all together is her interest in applying an anthropological lens to the contemporary past in an effort to bring to light the stories of, and give voice to, the disenfranchised groups that have been overlooked in the historical record.

Sadhu Binning

Dr. Binning has lived in the Vancouver area since 1967. He has authored and co-authored more than nineteen books of poetry, fiction, plays, translations, and research. His works have been included in more than fifty anthologies both in Punjabi and English. He edited a literary Punjabi monthly *Watno Dur* and co-edited a quarterly, *Watan*. He co-founded Vancouver Sath, a theatre collective (1983), *Ankur*, an English literary magazine and various other literary and cultural organisations including Punjabi Literary Association (1973). He sat on the BC Arts Board from 1993 to 1995. He is a central figure in the Punjabi arts community and was named one of the top 100 South Asians making a difference in BC. He co-founded Punjabi Language Education Association in the early 1990s and has been actively promoting Punjabi in educational institutions in BC. He has presented papers on language, literature, and culture in several national and international conferences. Dr. Binning taught Punjabi at UBC from 1988 to 2008 and created original teaching material. He has received numerous awards in Canada and in Punjab, India including the supreme non-resident Punjabi author for the year 2015. Dr. Binning received an honorary degree Doctor of Letters from UBC in 2019.

Rajneesh Dhawan

Dr. Rajneesh Dhawan received his PhD from Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar, India. Dr. Dhawan is an award-winning writer and comedian who recently won the third anniversary Fraser Valley comedy competition. He is a regular performer with “The Fraser Valley comedy,” “Stand Up and Deliver and with “The Wrong side of Laugh Tracks.” Since moving to Canada in 2009 he has written and produced five plays which have been performed at various venues in the Fraser Valley. Before moving to Canada, Dr. Dhawan was active in the television and theatre circles in India. He has scripted two plays (“Anupama” and “Tarpan”) and four television Series. He has also written and directed four documentaries on Historical and social subjects. Dr. Dhawan is an Associate Professor in the Dept of English at the University of the Fraser Valley.

Subbu Govindarajapuram

Banker by profession and an artist by heart, with an adventurous wild spirit - that would summarize Mr. Subbu Govindarajapuram. As a true believer of the fact that change is the only thing constant in life, he does not miss any opportunity to live life to the fullest. Being multilingual (English, Tamil, Deccanni, French, Telugu & Malayalam) and as a student of English Literature, he has a natural flair for reading and writing. His graduate studies in Microbiology has given him a vantage point for science and arts equally. He has published a book of poems, "Lei - Fragrant Blossoms". Passionate about introducing young people to technology, he is involved with Tech Bytes Foundation, an organization that conducts technical / coding workshops for kids and youth. Being an avid hiker, he is also involved with the fitness group DestinationFIT, that organizes various fitness / sports related activities in the community. Heartfulness Meditation allows him to be calm and resilient under all situations.

David Gray

David Gray is a researcher, writer, and filmmaker specializing in Arctic mammals, exploration, and history. He has participated in 40 research expeditions to the Canadian Arctic and fourteen *Students on Ice* educational Arctic expeditions. David has directed six documentary films on Arctic history and early Sikh immigration to Canada, which have screened at film festivals from Iqaluit to Los Angeles and India. *Canadian Soldier Sikhs* won the *Best Documentary* award at the Sikh International Film Festival in New York in 2011. David has written two books on Arctic subjects (*The Muskoxen of Polar Bear Pass* and *Alert: Beyond the Inuit Lands*) and produced Virtual Museum of Canada exhibitions on the Arctic Hare and the Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913–1918. He has curated a major exhibition on the Canadian Arctic Expedition for the Canadian Museum of Civilization in 2010. David is a Fellow of the Arctic Institute of North America and was honoured by the World Sikh Organization for his contributions to Canadian Sikh history. The Royal Canadian Geographical Society named David as one of Canada's 100 great modern explorers in 2015. His recent book: *Deep and Sheltered Waters: The History of Tod Inlet*, received the Wickberg prize for the best book on Chinese Canadian History.

Balbir Gurm

Dr. Balbir Gurm is a ½ generation community leader, activist and nursing professor. Due to her strong values of social justice and seva (volunteerisms), she role models leadership in education, on boards and advisory panels, and engages communities to advocate for policy and system change. Her successful advocacy has led to policy changes. It also resulted in the South Asian Canadian Legacy Project to document the contributions of South Asians in hopes of decreasing racism and increasing inclusion. She also facilitates workshops on diversity and inclusion to address systemic racism.

Her multisectoral project, NEVR, breaks down silos by bringing together critical understandings of relationship violence. One product is a free ebook *Making Sense of a Global Pandemic: Relationship Violence & Working Together Towards a Violence Free Society*.

Dr. Gurm's excellence in education, leadership and dedication are acknowledged with multiple awards including Excellence in Nursing Education (RNABC), NISODS Teaching Excellence, YWCA Women of Distinction and Connecting the Community (2021) BC Achievement (2021), Soroptimist's Ruby, Times of Canada, Shakti and Leadership Canadian Cancer Society. She is a fellow of the Canadian Academy of Nursing and best known for using her privilege to improve health by addressing social justice issues in communities.

Sanzida Habib

Dr. Sanzida Habib is a community educator, independent scholar, and Research Associate at CISAR. She received her PhD in Women's and Gender Studies from the University of British Columbia and has worked in several Simon Fraser University and University of British Columbia research projects on South Asian and other racialized immigrant women's experiences of migration, settlement, health, and wellbeing. She has co-edited *Migration of Bengalis to Canada: History, Settlement, Identity, and Activism* (2019), Vol. 30 (1), Alternate Routes.

Sukhwant Hundal

Sukhwant Hundal is a Canadian Punjabi writer, editor, playwright, and translator living in Surrey, British Columbia. He has been co-editor of the quarterly Punjabi literary and cultural magazine *Watan* for more than a decade. He was a founding member of the theatre group *Vancouver Sath*, which produced several plays about the experience of Indo-Canadians in Canada. He has co-authored a collection of plays, a book about the history of Indo-Canadians in Canada and co-translated several books from English and Hindi into Punjabi. He regularly publishes articles and essays in well-known Punjabi magazines in Canada and India. He taught Punjabi in the department of Asian Studies in UBC for ten years.

Madhavee Inamdar

Madhavee Inamdar has been offering her expertise in diversity and inclusion to various public sector organizations for more than seventeen years. She has worked in the past with the Government of British Columbia, and the RCMP leading their diversity, inclusion, and antiracism programs. Madhavee who is originally from India, came to Canada in 2001 immigrating from Dubai. In Dubai, she was an editorial writer and a columnist for the Khaleej Times.

Madhavee did her postgraduate studies in International Politics at the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in India. Her passion for community building drove her to pursue diversity and inclusion after completing her post graduation in the United Kingdom in Strategic Studies. Currently, Madhavee is leading the Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging Program at British Columbia Lottery Corporation. Madhavee lives in Coquitlam, British Columbia with her family and her high-energy Husky Juno.

Rishma Johal

Rishma Johal is a Ph.D. Candidate at McGill University in the Department of History and Classical Studies. Her research interests include Migration and Settlement in Canada and the United States, Indigenous-Settler Relations, the British Empire, and South Asian Diaspora. Rishma is the recipient of a SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship, Fonds de Recherche du Québec Doctoral Award, MITACS Graduate Research Award, and several Graduate Excellence Awards from McGill's History Department, which are supporting her research activities throughout Canada, the United States, and Britain. Previously, Rishma completed her MA in the Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University, and conducted a comparative study on the experiences of South Asian women in Canada. Rishma also worked as a reporter for a major South Asian network covering a variety of social, cultural, and political events daily. She had the opportunity to interview numerous dignitaries on-camera as well as research, critically analyze, and present fact-based stories in an informative and professional manner. Additionally, Rishma completed a Visual Arts Certificate at the University of the Fraser Valley and conducted a photo and video project aimed at shedding light on the difficulties faced by temporary foreign workers in the Okanagan Valley. She has published several articles and worked as a freelance writer for a few popular publications as well. Rishma has been actively involved within the McGill community serving in distinct leadership positions, including the Academic Director of the History and Classics Graduate Student Association.

Taushif Kara

Dr. Taushif Kara is an historian of the Indian Ocean world and a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Centre of Islamic Studies and Jesus College at the University of Cambridge. His work has appeared in the International Journal of Islamic Architecture and Global Intellectual History. Dr. Kara obtained his PhD from the Faculty of History at Cambridge in 2021 for a thesis on the intellectual history of the Khoja diaspora, ca. 1866 – 1972. More broadly, he is interested in the history of Muslim political thought during and after the colonial period. Before coming to Cambridge, Dr. Kara studied Islamic history and philosophy at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London and served as a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Religions and Philosophies at School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London.

Amrita Kauldher

Raised by the mantra, “knowledge is power”, Amrita Kauldher is an educator whose positionality in the field of education and human rights is embedded in her family's immigration experience and history of caste discrimination. She is an anti-racist educator who has taught for 5 years in the classroom and is a graduate of the University of British Columbia's teacher education program. Amrita has a MA in social anthropology from York University and was the recipient of a SSHRC grant that made research on Sikh identity, hip hop, gender, race, and cosmopolitanisms possible. Amrita's thesis not only shared a narrative on the collaborations of Humble the Poet and Sikh Knowledge but became a project through which she explored a knowledge of self and Sikh heritage. She is currently working in human rights education, contributing to the BC Ministry of Education's K-12 Anti-Racism Action Plan.

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra is a PhD Candidate in the Department of History at the University of British Columbia. She is a Coordinator at the South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley, a co-curator of exhibits at the Sikh Heritage Museum (National Historic Site Gur Sikh Temple) and a sessional History instructor at the University of the Fraser Valley. Sharn is a past BC Museums Association Council Member and is currently a Director with the Pacific Canada Heritage Centre - Museum of Migration Society. Her research interests involve looking at museums, critical race theory and affect, Sikh migration in 20th century, and British Columbia and interracial solidarities as a movement towards anti-racism. Resistance, protest, and power are the driving forces from which she works, including through highlighting the Sikh community as Canadian history in all its complexities and evolution.

Anita Lal

Anita Lal is a fourth-generation settler, born and raised in so called 'British Columbia' on the traditional territory of Lhtako Dene and Semiahmoo, Katzie and Kwantlen First Nations. Her Biji, Thakuri Kaur Lal, instilled in her the Sikh values of seva, social justice and advocacy from a young age. These values fuel her work as the co-founder of Poetic Justice Foundation where she has been creating impactful and transformative programming, organizing, and activating the South Asian community. Her approach is always inclusive, intersectional, and critical; she draws attention to biases, inequalities and oppressive systems of racism and discrimination. Recently, her work has focused on creating space and dialogue around anti-casteism and the Dalit narrative. Anita strongly believes in giving back to the community and serves on Boards and Advisory Committees such as the South Asian Canadian Legacy Project, the South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley, and Seva Thrift Society. She also undertakes consulting work for the Royal Academy of Bhangra and Moving Forward Family Services, community-based organizations that work with marginalized people. She is inspired by Dr. Ambedkar's words: Educate. Agitate. Organize.

Anushay Malik

Dr. Anushay Malik is a labor historian who focuses on South Asia. She completed her PhD in South Asian History from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. She has worked as a research fellow at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam and in the history department at the Lahore University of Management Sciences in Lahore, Pakistan. She is currently a lecturer working at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. Her past research has focused on labor and leftist movements centering on how they impacted, and were in turn effected by, the shifting urban space of the city of Lahore. She has also worked on religious minorities (mainly Christians) and bonded labour. Her most recent project focuses on Bengali fishing communities in Karachi, Sindh, Pakistan. Her work has been published in several international journals including *Modern Asian Studies*, *South Asian History and Culture* and the *International Quarterly of Asian Studies*.

Inderjeet Singh Mann

Dr. Inderjeet Singh Mann holds a Ph.D. in Political Science and International Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi. He has been affiliated with Simon Fraser University in a research capacity. His Post-Doctoral Research on Political Participation of Ethnic Minorities in Canada was undertaken at JNU and at the South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley. His post-doctoral work was funded by the Indian Council of Social Sciences Research and the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute. His graduate research degree, M.Phil. was undertaken in Human Rights and he has worked with Amnesty International at its India office. He has taught Political Science at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Central University Punjab and Government College, Bathinda. Dr. Mann has participated as a Chair in the World Congress of Political Science (WCPS) held at Montreal in 2014, and also presented a paper at the Canadian Political Science Association's (CPSA) annual conference in 2021. His current research interests include a focus on the South Asian Canadian Diaspora and its multifaceted aspects in Canadian state and society.

John Price

Dr. John Price is Professor Emeritus in history at the University of Victoria, where he taught for 21 years before retiring in 2018. His early research focused on Japan, Canada-East Asian relations, and transpacific migration. He is the author of *Japan Works: Power and Paradox in Postwar Industrial Relations* (Cornell, 1997), *Orienteering Canada: Race, Empire and the Transpacific* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2011), and, with Ningping Yu, the biography *A Woman in Between: Searching for Dr. Victoria Chung* (CCHS/INSTRCC, 2019). More recently his work has focused on settler colonialism and anti-racism, co-editing with Christine O'Bonsawin a special volume of *BC Studies* (2024), *Unsettling the Islands: Race, Indigeneity, and the Transpacific* (Winter 2019/20). He is a co-author of the recent *Challenging Racist "British Columbia": 150 Years and Counting*. His opinion pieces are published regularly in the *Times Colonist*, the *Tyee*, the *Georgia Straight*, and *Canadian Dimension*. A recent eight-part series, *Decolonizing Canadian Foreign Policy*, is available at the Canadian Dimension website.

P. Rathanaswami

Dr. Palaniswami Rathanaswami, holds a Ph.D in Biochemistry and immigrated to Canada from Tamil Nadu, India, in 1989 and has been living in Vancouver for almost 30 years now. He loves to read Tamil literature, bibliographies, short stories, and writing poems and articles in Tamil in various social medias drives his passion. Dr. Rathanaswami has written a few medical articles in Tamil and translated a number of documents from English to Tamil for BC and Ontario provincial governments. Professionally, he is a Research Scientist, in the fields of Biochemistry, Immunology, Biotechnology and Biomedical Research. He has published over 40 research papers in leading scientific journals and is an inventor in more than 30 patents. Dr. Rathanaswami has served and continues to serve as a board member, secretary, president for a number of non-profit organizations including Tamil Cultural Society of British Columbia, Mandala Arts and Culture, etc. He has participated in People's Law School's radio shows and TV programs as a Tamil community member. He has also participated, coordinated, and moderated a number of Tamil debates and talk shows in a number of public programs.

Sasha Sabherwal

Dr. Sasha Sabherwal is the Chancellor's Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Asian American Studies at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. She received her PhD from the Department of American Studies at Yale University with a certificate in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. She is an interdisciplinary scholar of South Asian diaspora studies with research interests in transnational feminism, migration studies, the anthropology of religion, and social geographies of borderland communities. Dr. Sabherwal's book project examines how caste, a complex form of social stratification based on purity and pollution, remains central within the Pacific Northwest Sikh diaspora. Her scholarly work has been published in academic journals such as *Sikh Formations*, *Anthropological Quarterly*, *Sikh Research Journal*, and forthcoming in *Social Text*.

Balwant Sanghera

Balwant Sanghera is a retired School Psychologist, community activist and a well-respected bridge builder between different communities. He has been involved in several community organizations for a long time. Mr. Sanghera has served as a Senator at Simon Fraser University, as a member of the Langara College Governing Board. He has been recognized with various awards as part of his service to the community, which include the Order of British Columbia, the Queen's Golden and Diamond Jubilee Medals and the Solicitor General's Lifetime Achievement Award for Crime Prevention and Community Safety. He was honoured as one of the Top 25 Canadian Immigrants in 2010 by the Canadian Immigrant Magazine and as one of the 100 most influential Indo-Canadians by the Vancouver Sun. Sanghera has been serving as president of the Punjabi Language Education Association for more than 25 years. Currently, he is a member of the Board of Governors of British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT) and is General Secretary of India Cultural Centre of Canada Gurdwara Nanak Niwas, Richmond. He is one of the founders and chairperson of Richmond's Highway to Heaven Association. Mr. Sanghera is great role model for young and old alike. He is a regular contributor to number of community newspapers and appears regularly on various radio and TV programs.

Kusum Soni

Dr. Kusum Soni is a Coordinator at the South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley. Kusum earned a PhD and M.Sc. degree in Biophysics from Panjab University, Chandigarh with research interests in reproductive physiology, innovation in science and technology, and population health. She has served as faculty in the Department of Physiology at Christian Medical College & Hospital, Ludhiana (CMC&H), Research Associate at All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), and Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), New Delhi, India. Being a naturalized citizen of Canada, her research interests shifted to settlement stories of Immigrants especially South Asian Canadians which turned her into a storyteller, narratives-writer based on her personal/professional reflections. Kusum is a poet in Hindi and Punjabi and her core strengths are in translation of poetry, stories and novels, exhibition curatorial content, academic research studies and papers and in translating audio-video subtitles between English -Punjabi - Hindi. In her spare time, Kusum hosts a South Asian Radio Show in BC, engages herself in making podcasts, Vlogs in English, Hindi, and Punjabi.

Habiba Zaman

Dr. Habiba Zaman is a Professor in the Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University. She has served as an associate member of SFU Labour Studies Program for a decade and was an Acting Director of LBST in Spring 2020. Dr. Zaman is an Honorary Research Associate of the CISAR/Institute of Asian Research, University of British Columbia. She has authored several books/monographs including *Breaking the Iron Wall: Decommodification and Immigrant Women's Labor in Canada* (Lexington, 2006), *Asian Immigrants in "Two Canadas": Racialization, Marginalization, and Deregulated Work* (Fernwood, 2012). The latter book was translated in Mandarin by Professor Shaojun Chen of Hohai University (Hohai University Press, 2021). Dr. Zaman was lead author of *the Workplace Rights for Immigrants in BC: The Case of Filipino Workers* (CCPA, 2007). As a principal organizer, she has organized many conferences including Canada 150 Migration of Bengalis (2017). The journal *Alternate Routes* published her edited volume (co-editor Sanzida Habib) *Migration of Bengalis to Canada: History, Settlement, Identity, and Activism* (2019). Dr. Zaman served as a Board member of South Asian Network for Secularism and Democracy (SANSAD) and South Asian Film Education Society (SAFES) for over a decade. She is one of the editors of McGill-Queens series titled *Gender, Sexuality, and Social Justice in the Global South*.

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Mayo School, Paldi, 1956

We have, for very long wanted to record and share South Asian Canadian history in a manner that is publicly appealing, authentic and historically accurate. The desire to know our history is a deeply personal matter for all South Asian Canadians since, as an oral collectivist community, we have relied on the vibrant storytelling of our ancestors. They so rightly deserve our heartfelt acknowledgement for passing down our history through the generations. First arriving at the turn of the last century, little must they have dwelled on the fact that 100 plus years later we would be mining the archives for their stories, trials, tribulations, successes, and pride filled moments and recording it in a book for present and future generations. This work is a legacy of these giants that paved the way for all of us today.

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