

1/2004

# NISHAAN

NAGAARA

CANADA



*Sikh Canadians*



*Les sikhs au Canada*



**Sikhs in Canada's Life-and Part of It  
Sikh Spirit and The Global Society**





Sikhs in Canada's Life and Part of It  
Sikh Spirit and The Global Society

Cover: Constable Baltej Singh Dhillon with enlarged image of stamp issued at the Centennial of Sikhs in Canada.

## Editorial Director

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## Editorial Office

D-43, Sujana Singh Park  
New Delhi 110 003, India  
Tel: (91-11) 24617234  
Fax: (91-11) 24628615

e-mail : nishaan@lycos.com  
website : www.nishaan.com

## Published by

The Nagaara Trust  
16-A Palam Marg  
Vasant Vihar  
New Delhi 110 057, India

## Designed by

Kraftwerk  
kwerk@mantraonline.com

## Printed by

Agean Offset  
F-17, Mayapuri Phase II  
New Delhi 110 064

The opinions expressed in the articles published in the Nishaan Nagaara do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of The Nagaara Trust.

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This issue of the *Nisshaan* is Canada-specific, and deals with the various aspects of life and situations facing the Sikh community settled there and their achievements. There are so many issues in question and all we can do is to air those which need our studied attention. The material we have received from Sikh Canadian scholars and others is being used to make this issue of the *Nisshaan* a memorable document.

But, as the readers will see, the problematics of the Canadian Sikhs/Sikh Canadians are, in so many ways, related to those we in the Punjab are facing today. For the Sikhs settled in Canada carry "a part of Punjab with them" wherever they live, and whatever their difficulties. The metaphor is wide-ranging in its significance and shows, among other things, that the Sikhs can never be separated from that land where they imbibed the milk of *gurbani*; and where their ancestors created history of challenging oppression and sacrifices to make the Khalsa such a force to be reckoned with. The nostalgia and the perpetual desire to return home abide, always and everywhere.

Planning for this Canadian issue became even more focussed when Prime Minister Mr. Jean Chretien, on a visit to India flew to Amritsar with a view to paying his obeisance at the holy Sikh temple, the Harimandir Sahib. His 2-hour stay there during which time he met with several Akali and other Sikh leaders, walked the *parikarma*, shook hands with the charmed Sikh devotees and finally offered a *rumala* and some cash, bowing his covered head before the *Guru Granth* inside the *Santum Sanctorum* was much appreciated. Accompanied by his Canadian aides, Canadian Sikh ministers and other prominent members of the community there, he acknowledged the bravery, uprightness and selfless loyalty of most of the Sikhs in his country. He also visited the new rooms constructed

by a Canadian Sikh NRI in the Guru Ram Das Serai for visitors and devotees. In sum, he was out to make his visit as visible and memorable as possible.

Which brings us to the background of the Canadian case. The history of Sikh arrivals and settlements in various provinces of Canada goes back to when the British Raj in India was firmly established and the colonial subjugation had given birth to revolutionary movements in India. The foremost among those splinter groups was the Ghadar Party whose brave cadres, defying unfair British law, sailed out to the far shores of Canada in a Japanese vessel. The heroic saga of the *Kamagata Maru* vessel and the sacrifices of those on board, chiefly Sikhs from the Punjab, sparked off a new wave of anguished and defiant protestors. The Ghadar *Babas* as they came to be known were, then, the forerunners of the Bengal revolutionaries and of such martyrs as Shahid Bhagat Singh and his compatriots. This event, celebrated in song and story has always remained in the Canadian Sikh consciousness a source of pride and inspiration.

Braving all such restrictions and indignities which amounted almost to *apartheid*, the sturdy Sikh peasants had to accept the meanest jobs there — in their log mills, in their fields. And the only thing that sustained them through this long ordeal was their faith in the Sikh scriptures which had steeled them and their nerves and enabled them to turn the Canadian forests and snowbound, inhospitable soil into a flourishing business and industry. It was decades later when some of the restrictions were removed or diluted, that the Sikh settlers were able to build their own homes, bring their wives and other kith to kin to Canada. Over course of time, they became a strong, visible minority and with the new generations born there, branched out to different parts of Canada and eventually becoming sizeable voter-banks, electing some of their



leaders to the Canadian Parliament. Thus, their position and standing in a multi-racial society has had a dramatic effect on Canadian polity today. To be sure, most of the earlier disabilities and restrictions have remained in covert form, as some of the reports included in this issue of the *Nisbaan* suggest. And thus, their presence as a strong, hard-working community in Canada earned them the Prime Ministership of British Columbia and ministerial posts in the national Parliament. The Canadian Prime Minister, Mr. Jean Chretien's visit to the *Darbar Sahib*, then brings this part of our story full circle. What started with the *Kamagata Maru* episode has, in a hundred years or so eventually helped pave the way of their compatriots for their present position of eminence in Canada.

Since I too have had first-hand experience of the Sikh situation in Canada during one of my visits in particular, I feel tempted to strike a brief personal note. It's important, however, to remember that the enormous difficulties which the Sikhs in Canada face, including the cause of schismatic gurdwara politics, is only a reflection of the Akali leaders' politics of pelf and power. Their in-fighting and factionalism, their changing political loyalties, their fall from grace, and the cases of appalling corruption against them in courts, their inability to preserve the authority of the Akal Takht with stewardship of the supreme body usurped by mostly unworthy and squabbling Jathedars.

Back to my personal visit and the statement. In the winter of 1987, the University of Toronto organised an impressive conference whose theme *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century* (later published in book form by the University of Toronto in 1988) brought on single stage perhaps the largest and most notable of scholars, Sikhs as well as Canadian, American and British specialists in Sikh studies, to be seen anywhere. Since my discipline was British-American literature, I was naturally a kind of "outsider". I had received a telephonic invitation just

a day before the select Sikh scholars from India were scheduled to leave for Toronto. I later learnt that Professor O'Connell, one of the organisers of the Conference and his wife Jean had come across my book *Studies in Punjabi Poetry* and my articles on the desperate Sikh situation in Punjab after the notorious "Operation Bluestar" (later published in book form *Cry, the Beloved Punjab*).

The Conference was addressed by all the invited scholars, and I presented a paper on "Religious and Secular Strains in Twentieth Century Punjabi Poetry". But it so transpired that almost all the Sikh scholars barring a few, thought it expedient to gloss over "Operation Bluestar", and play a safe game. Yet three of them in particular – Lt. General Jagjit Singh Arora, Member of Parliament in India, Sardar Patwant Singh, a noted erudite and outspoken Sikh scholar and myself – struck a different note and in the discussions that followed, the papers exposed the nature of State terrorism in Punjab after the assassination of India's Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi.

Consequently, the Canadian Government invited three of us as State guests to the Capital Ottawa to meet with members of the national Parliament and each one of us was closeted next day with their important committees of Parliament to discuss in detail the gruesome situation in Punjab. I saw the Immigration Committee Chairman, and explained to him the terrible pressures on the hounded Sikh community in India. It was a comprehensive and revealing account. That evening the Speaker of Parliament hosted a dinner in our honour. We were presented replicas of the Canadian flag and some other tokens of official recognition. The Chairman of the Immigration Committee offered me and my family immediate asylum, but I told him that my place was in my own country, and that I would continue to expose the state tyranny, whatever be the consequences!



## SRI GURU GRANTH SAHIB

# A Unique Compendium of the Word Divine

*Sri Guru Granth Sahib* is not just a *granth* (a bound volume), it is a compendium of the Word Divine. It is a Guru (divine mentor), because the Word is the real Guru, not the physical body of the Guru. Guru Amar Das tells us

ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਨੇ ਸਭੁ ਕੇ ਵੇਖਦਾ ਜੇਕਾ ਜਗਤੁ ਸੰਸਾਰੁ ।  
ਛਿਨਿ ਮੁਕਤਿ ਨ ਹੋਵਈ ਜਿਚਰੁ ਸਬਦਿ ਨ ਕਰੇ ਵੀਚਾਰੁ ।  
- ਵਾਰ ਵਡਹੰਸ ਸਲੋਕੁ ਮ ੨

The whole world does behold the Guru,  
One is liberated not by seeing by him,  
But by contemplating his Word.

- SGGS p.594

So, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* is the Guru that holds and shall continue to hold, the divine Word in deep freeze for all times. The prefix *Sri* and the suffix *Sahib* are reverential epithets, the former derived from the Aryan tradition, and the latter from the Semitic. This itself underlines the transcultural import of this holy work. It transcends the narrow bounds of sectarianism and presents itself as the spiritual mentor for all mankind. Whoever becomes conversant with its message, is impelled to vouch for its universal nature. Arnold Toynbee, a historian of world renown, observed: "the *Adi Granth* is part of mankind's common spiritual treasure", and, "the Sikh religion and its scripture the *Adi Granth* will have something of special value to the rest of the world."

Beside the works of the Sikh Gurus, this compendium also accommodates the works of a large number of Hindu and Muslim holy men. Thus it enshrines the core of the spirituality of diverse faiths. Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith said

ਸੂਰਜੁ ਏਕੈ ਤੁਤਿ ਅਨੇਕ ।  
ਨਾਨਕ ਕਹਤੇ ਕੇ ਕੇਤੇ ਵੇਸ ।

- ਸੋਹਿਲਾ ਅਸਾ ਮ ੧

Just as a single sun yields a variety of seasons,  
So too the Creator has many revelations.

- SGGS pp.12-13

Hence it is that the Sikhs must hold every divine revelation with due reverence. The following line of Bhakta Kabir, found in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* underlines this instruction even more explicitly:

ਬੇਦ ਕਤੇਬ ਕਹਹੁ ਮਨ ਬੂਨੈ ਬੂਨਾ ਜੇ ਨ ਬਿਚਾਰੈ ।

- ਪ੍ਰਭਾਤੀ ਭਗਤ ਕਬੀਰ

Do not say that the Vedas and the Semitic scriptures are false,  
False is he who contemplates them not.

- SGGS p.1350

The fifth Guru, Arjan Dev, undertook to compile this *Granth*. The primal reason for this undertaking was to so preserve the Gurus' compositions as not to leave the possibility of their being deleted, distorted, or exploited in any way by schismatic groups. The *Mahima Prakash* (AD1776) records that the Guru set to work with the announcement, "As the *Panth* (the Way) has been revealed, so there must be a *granth* (book)." Bhai Gurdas was to be the able calligrapher. The making of the *Granth* was not an easy task. It involved not only sustained labour, but also rigorous intellectual discipline and most precise editorial skill, quite unknown during those times. From an enormous amount of material, selections had to be made first. What was genuine had to be sifted from the apocryphal. The selected material had to be arranged according to a predetermined, immaculate schema. The stanzas and the verses in each stanza were numbered so that no foreign or apocryphal verse could be inserted. All the words in a line were joined without leaving the customary space between them in order to preclude insertion of even an unwelcome grapheme that might alter the meaning. A spiritual genius and master of methodological exactitude, Guru Arjan, got the scripture created. It was of a large size of around 7,000 hymns, and consisting of 1948 pages of 12 in. x 8 in. size. This complete work was called *Pothi Sahib* i.e. the revered book. After the completion of its compilation in 1704 AD, it was installed in *Harmandir Sahib*, now popularly known as 'Golden Temple'. Two things about this shrine are also worth appreciating. First, that its foundation stone was laid by a Muslim holy man, Hazrat Mian Mir, second that the temple has four doors, one on each side signifying that anyone from any direction is welcome to this temple and none is barred.\* Thus, not only the *Granth Sahib*, but also the temple in which it was first installed, exhibit the stamp of pluralism and thereby that of universality.

The text of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* consists of high class spiritual poetry, almost the entire body of which is set to appropriate musical modes or *ragas* to enhance its aesthetic effect. However, the basic aim of this scripture is not merely to yield aesthetic pleasure, but primarily to make these aesthetic devices a vehicle for transmitting numinous experience. The effect intended was that the devotees may feel impelled and inspired to seek that kind of numinous experience themselves as that a way to liberation from the grand illusion called *maya*. Guru Arjan Dev gives us an inkling of this process of liberation in the following words:

\* *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* is also known as *Adi Granth*, i.e. the Primal Scripture

\*It may be noted that the Hindus of the lowest caste have been prohibited for millenia from entering the temples. Muslim women are also not allowed entry into the mosques.



The shell of illusion has burst, and the mind illumined.  
The Guru has shattered the fetters from my feet,  
And from bondage, has set me free.

- SGGS p.1002

The Sikhs have always believed that the contents of this holy book, *ab initio*, been studiously preserved by its authors themselves. That fact vouches for its authenticity. A number of scholars\*\*, applying certain methods derived from the textual analysis of the holy Bible, have tended to cast doubt over the validity of this belief. Others\*\*\* employing the same kind of methods, somewhat more critically, have been able to find fault with many of the conclusions of the previous scholars; and in the words of McReynolds, they assert that, "textual criticism is a nitpickers' paradise because of the small variations we blow up to mean a great deal."

During the times when the *Pothi Sahib* was compiled, the printing press was not in existence. Hence, only hand-written copies of it could be made. In fact, the first such manuscript copy was made expeditiously, by the devotee, Bhai Banno, who was to carry it from Amritsar to Lahore for binding. Banno sought the Guru's permission to take the *Pothi Sahib* to his village, Mangat, for the Sikhs there to have its holy view. The Guru allowed this on the condition that neither would Banno tarry at Mangat, nor spend more than one night at any one place enroute. However, it occurred to Banno that he could have a second copy transcribed on the way with the help of other devotees that accompanied him. He thus succeeded in making a copy of the *Pothi Sahib*. He brought back both the volumes, the original as well as the copy thereof. When Guru Arjan Dev perused the copy made by Bhai Banno, he could identify a good number of inaccuracies and few apocryphal additions in it. That is why, he gave it the designation of *khari beed* i.e. the 'unsavory' recension. He did not affix his signatures on it but only signed the original *Pothi Sahib*. It is not hard to imagine that when secondary, tertiary, or further-removed copies came to be made how many more errors must have crept into the relevant manuscripts. One can imagine that innumerable manuscript copies of the scripture must have been made, but, perhaps hardly any of them could have been compared with the original, as that volume had fallen into the hands of the schismatic adversaries, who would not part with it.

In 1947, when the country came to be divided, hundreds of thousands of Sikhs were thrown out of what is now Pakistan. Many hundred manuscript copies of Sri Guru Granth Sahib were brought by the Sikh refugees to be deposited at the Sikh Reference Library as the homeless refugees had no place where to install them. Shiromani

Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee got around sixty of them short listed and set up a group of three knowledgeable scholars to make a comparative textual study of these. Part one of their work was published in 1977. The avowed purpose of this work was to invite further scholars to go over the textual differences and draw conclusions as to which was the correct version. The project was doomed from the start because of the non-availability of the *Pothi Sahib* as well as the *Damdami beed* (vide infra). The dejected three scholars must have given up further work as no subsequent part(s) came to be published. The differences found were mostly such as could be explained away or were of the nature of nitpicking. That is perhaps why the then being marketed popular version of the scripture continued to reign in the Gurdwaras as, perhaps, it compared fairly well with most of the more reliable manuscripts. In 1984, during the army action on the Akal Takht Sahib, all the manuscripts in the Sikh reference Library were bundled away by the army, and their fate has not been revealed even until today. Hence, whatever possibility of further work existed, even that has disappeared.

Since the original *Pothi Sahib* had fallen into the hands of adversaries of the Guru's House, the Sikhs had become bereft of it for a considerable period of time. However, when Guru Gobind Singh, after being forced out of Anandpur, and hounded by Moghul forces, found some safe respite in Talwandi Sabo, he dictated from his memory the entire text of *Pothi Sahib* adding to it the works of his father and predecessor Guru, Tegh Bahadur. The thus enlarged recension came to be known as *Damdami beed*. This enshrines within itself the spiritual wisdom of the entire five centuries - from the birth of Shaikh Farid (1172) to the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur (1675). Its message not only extends over time but also over space - for its contributors hail from very diverse parts of India. It is this recension that was canonised by Guru Gobind Singh in 1708, just before his demise. Ever since, this Word-Guru has persistently ruled over Sikh hearts and they have held it with reverence greater than shown by any to any other holy book.

Let it be pointed out this catholic scripture is not the exclusive asset of the Sikhs. It is the Gurus' gift to the entire world. It is for the Sikhs to arrange for its universal message to be transmitted to the entire mankind.

Dr. Jaswant Singh Neki

\*\* These include Pashaura Singh, Piar Singh and Gurminder Singh Mann.

\*\*\* Such as Balwant Singh Dhillon.





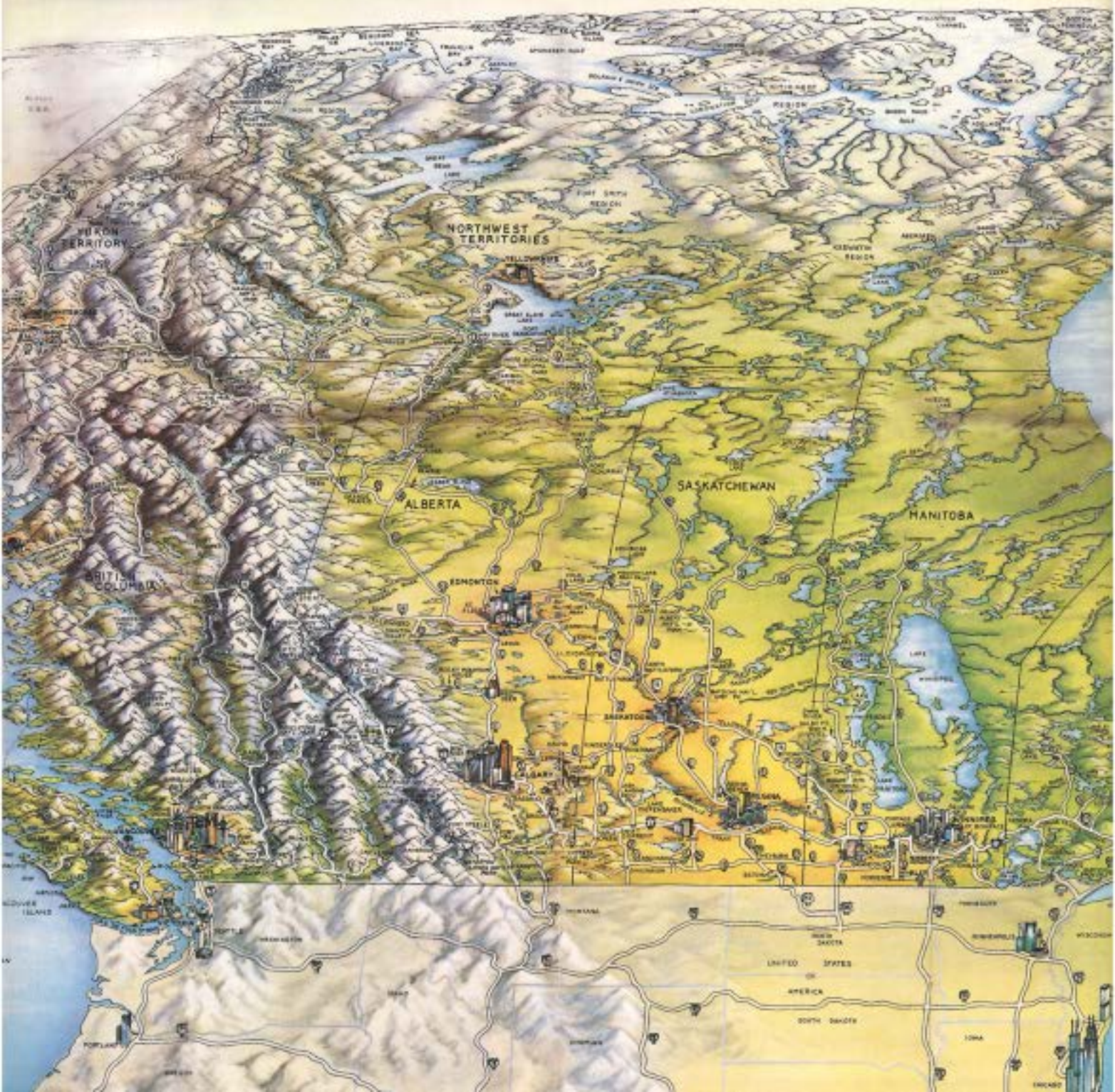
# Canada : The "Half-Continent"



Canada comprises some 3,845,000 square miles, an expanse so vast that air-mapping still discovers 'new' areas of its northern frontier. Reaching from Atlantic to the Pacific and flanked by massive islands on either coast, the "half-continent" exhibits sharply etched regions and substantial variations in climate. On the east coast, the Atlantic provinces of Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick are part of the rocky uplands of Appalachia whose southern reaches encompass the New England states. The St Lawrence lowlands, which include the most southerly portion of the province of Quebec and the southern part of Ontario which thrusts like a peninsula into what is now the industrial heart of America, are similar in structure to northern New York state, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan. Beyond Lake Superior, and separated

from southern Ontario by a thousand miles of rock highlands, stretch the Canadian prairies. Part of the immense interior plain of the continent, reaching from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Ocean at the mouth of the Mackenzie River, the prairies are so integral a section of North America's north-south region that it is still possible along hundreds of miles of the Canadian-American border to be unsure of one's national location.

Although the Atlantic provinces are not well endowed with arable land and never developed sufficient production or population strength to become of crucial economic significance to the French or English colonial empires or, indeed, to the Canadian federal nation, their location has always been considered strategic. Commanding the Gulf approaches to the St Lawrence River, they have been of obvious importance ..... their resources of fish, timber, coal, iron ore and scattered fertile valleys have sustained a population with strong local and imperial loyalties.





The Canadian Shield is an immense high plateau of pre-Cambrian granite sweeping in a majestic arc from the Archipelago of Arctic islands, south of Hudson Bay and back up to the Atlantic through Labrador. The ice sheet which once covered the Shield smoothed its endless rolling hills, filled its countless lakes and rivers, and gave to it great stark beauty.

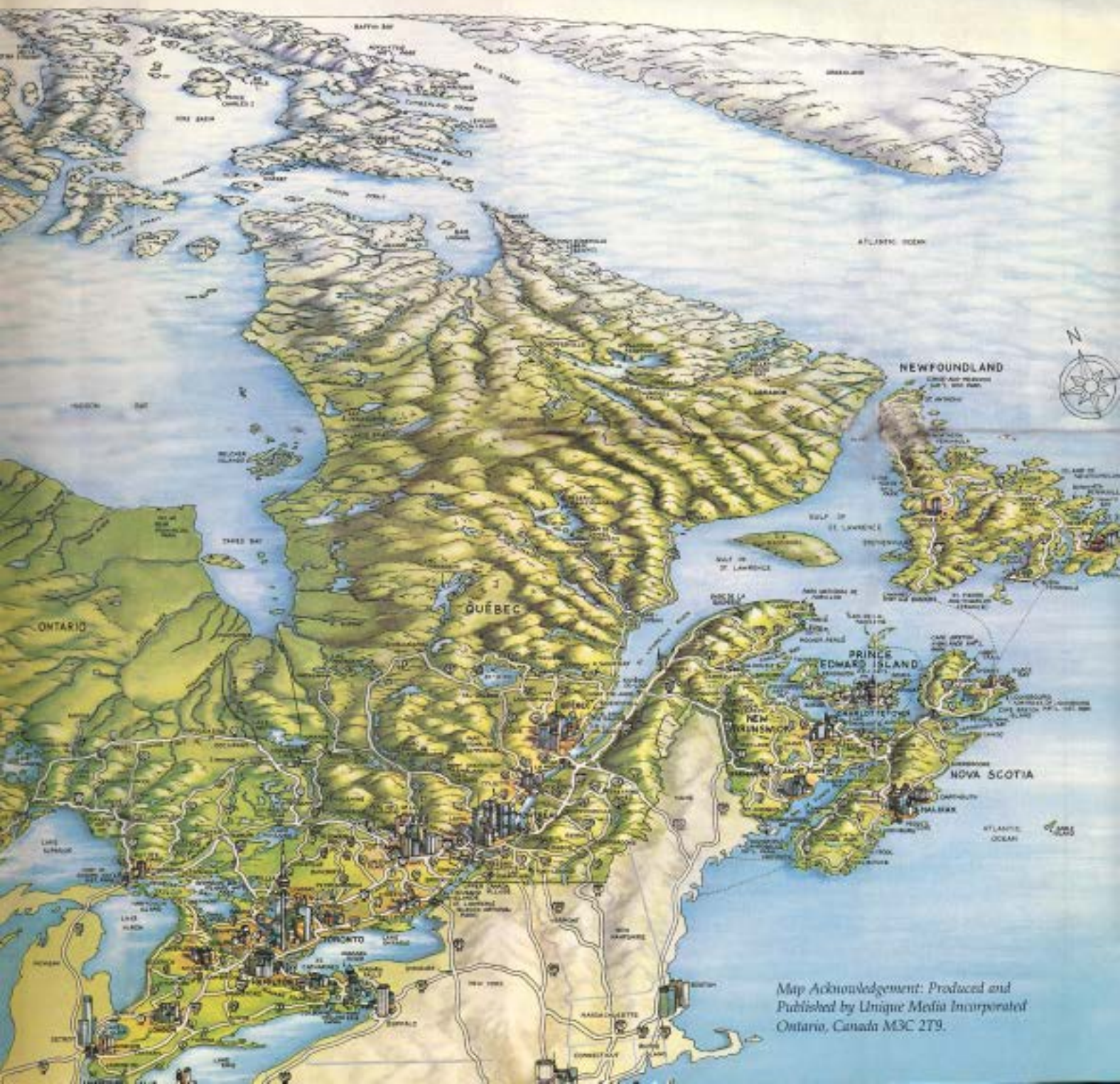
More than 90 per cent of all Canadians live within 200 miles of the United States border. Long bitter winters on the prairies meant, also, that the Canadian west attracted substantial population only after the most easily available lands to the south of the border had been occupied. Small pockets of agriculture were first developed on the southern prairies ancillary to the fur trade, but after the 1880s, streams of eager immigrants from across the Atlantic and from the northern United States rapidly occupied the immensely fertile soils of southern and western Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta.

Westwards across Canada, it is some 1,400 miles from Toronto to Winnipeg, another 600 miles to Calgary in the foothills of the Rockies and another 500 from Calgary through the tortuous barrier of the mountains to Vancouver on the Pacific delta of the Fraser River.

British Columbia, the Pacific coast province, was incorporated in the Canadian confederation at a time when the westward thrust of the fur trade had established strong British claims to the region. Beginning with the magnificent peaks of the Rockies (a mountain range shared by Alberta and British Columbia), the successive ranges of the western Cordillera occupy the entire surface of British Columbia, including the large and heavily timbered islands offshore. Cascading into the Pacific itself, the mountains severely limit the arable area of the province and thus control its population pattern. In the south, wide and fertile valleys between ranges are centres of fruit-growing while Vancouver became Canada's chief Pacific port.

Of Canada's twenty-five million people, more than half live in cities and towns, while in parts of southern Ontario and Quebec the problem of megalopolis is as real as it is in Chicago, New York or London. The St Lawrence lowlands contain more than 60 per cent of all Canadians, including Sikh Canadians who number some half a million in this half-continent of the world.

[Extracts from *The Penguin History of CANADA*, by Kenneth McNaught]



Map Acknowledgement: Produced and Published by Unique Media Incorporated Ontario, Canada M3C 2T9.



# Celebrating Baisakhi

## THE SIKH CENTENNIAL FOUNDATION

On a spectacular spring day in Canada, the snow having barely receded, the clouds an azure blue and the sun shining brightly, 250 people, mostly Sikhs, crammed themselves in a country club aptly named: *Lionhead*. Keynote speaker, Professor Hugh Johnston humoured the crowd, a mixture of well-heeled Sikh professionals and entrepreneurs, Sikh youth, corporate elite from the general Canadian community and leading mainstream journalists (Michael Enright, Rick Salutin and Lorrie Goldstein, for example), with anecdotes about the early Sikh pioneers who settled in B.C. Gifted speakers such as T. Sher Singh, one of the founders of the Sikh Centennial Foundation, and Moe Sihota, so moved the audience that some of the journalists were visibly moved. In fact, Lorrie Goldstein, soon to be editor of the right wing newspaper, *Toronto Sun*, wrote an article about the evening and confirmed his paper's support (which had often been absent in the past) for the right of Sikhs to wear turbans as RCMP officers. "Imagine the pain we cause when some (not all) Legions, deny a Sikh entry unless he removes his turban, which to a Sikh symbolises both his personal sovereignty—that he is accountable to God—and personal responsibility—that he must serve the community and those in need."

Highly successful achievers such as politician and entrepreneur Herb Dhaliwal, banker Sarbjit ("Sabi") Singh Marwah, Supreme Court justice (now Appeal Court judge) Wallace Oppal and writer, Dyal Kaur Khalsa, were honoured for their achievements. Non-Sikhs who had made significant contributions in the field of human rights were also feted—Roy McMurtry, the Chief Justice of Ontario, and activist June Callwood—the "Mother Teresa of Canada."

An auctioneer displayed his skills in selling-off exquisite stain glass panels. A play by award-winning dramatist Sharon Pollack entitled the *Komagata Maru Incident* rounded off what turned out to be a very full evening. But an evening which is now well remembered as the first of what has become the highmark of the Sikh social calendar in Ontario—the Centennial Vaisakhi Banquet. (Other cities in North America were encouraged to follow the Centennial model.).

The Sikh Centennial Foundation was launched in 1997 to commemorate the centennial of Sikh settlement in Canada. Indeed, the timing was appropriate. A sense of malaise had beset the community as it found itself enmeshed in stereotypes created by the media (that of political and religious zealots



Constable Baltej Singh Dhillon of the RCMP.



and terrorists). In the debates over the right to retain the 5 K's, the media often led their stories about the *kirpan* cases by using the word: "dagger". The Foundation strove to galvanise the community into portraying itself positively and have fun in the process. The first press release focused on the fact that Sikhs had long been in Canada, and contributed to nation building, an important piece of Canadian history that was often overlooked in the great debate that engulfed the country in defining who is a Canadian in the wake of Baltej Singh Dhillon's quest to be an RCMP officer.



The Foundation's invitation to the Baisakhi 300, in March 1999.

A special poster featuring constable Dhillon was commissioned. "Though it's me in the poster, it's not just me. What is being represented is the face of the community, the acceptance we've received in Canada. There's also a promise we make to this country: thanks for accepting us. We will stand on guard to make Canada a better place." The poster has become a classic.

Beyond the glamour and ostentation of the annual Banquet is the passion and zeal of the organising committee, many of them in their 20's and many inspired by the story of Vaisakhi. Their agenda is an ambitious one. How to reach out to the 20 to 40 year old crowd who have pride in the Sikh tradition but have become disillusioned as a result of the petty politics of their elders. The process is just as

important as the end result. The working committees are fully reflective of the Sikh community. Decisions are made through consensus. For nine months the volunteers toil to deliver a polished event that will leave its guests with many tangibles – high calibre educational books, videos, calendars and CDs – and intangibles, a sense of pride in the Sikh tradition, an appreciation for the arts and development of leadership skills among the organizers.

Each year, the committee and its advisors select an important milestone in Sikh history (the bicentenary of the formation of the *Sarkar Khalsa*, for example) and then seek writers and journalists who will help in creating original educational material that can be produced and distributed to each guest, and, more importantly, to libraries and gurdwaras. Indeed, the success of each banquet is measured by the quality of these materials. The sheer volume of books, booklets, posters, calendars and videos has been impressive. The proof is in the constant demand for reruns of many of these items. The 1998 Centennial Calendar literally established the benchmark for calendars published in the community thereafter. (The 2004's theme revolves around a multi-year celebration of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original compilation of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Previous years have centred on the poetic and lyrical aspects of the *Guru Granth* (2002) and its scholastic tradition (2003). This year will celebrate the joyous occasion of the investiture of the *Guru Granth* in the Harmandir Sahib).

The trilogy of books written by the gifted thinker, Dr IJ Singh, edited and published by the Centennial Foundation, has cemented the Foundation's clarion call to embark on an enlightened exploration of the Sikh philosophy. (One guest, a student at Harvard, had traveled all night from Boston to attend the event. He then spent the next night reading Dr. Singh's book; cover to cover.). Dr. J.J. Singh and other members of the Centennial family (which includes academic like Dr. Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh) have led the quest for re-examining how the community perceives itself; plaintively asking for a rejection of the celebration of the martial spirit and dwelling instead on the intellectual tradition of Sikhism. As Dr Singh reminds us: Sikhism differs from religions that merely proscribe human behaviour; Sikhism asks one to "discover the divinity within" through a process of self-awareness and, most importantly, self-development" which never occurs in "an ambience of unquestioning obedience." Strictures on personal fulfillment such as casteism and authoritarianism are shunned in Sikhism. It is not a question of what you are not, or what you cannot do, but what you can be. A very modern message indeed. A message that has attracted the younger generation to the Foundation.



The committees electing honorees has a daunting task. Collectively, the candidates must reflect the multiple facets of the Sikh spirit. Finding talented Sikh women, and they are out there, is a priority. Individuals who have excelled in the fight for civil liberties, the arts and letters, athletics, business, politics, philanthropy, and community development have to be identified, and, more importantly, cajoled into accepting their tributes (As true *sewadars*, many honorees refuse to be honoured). Each year as the deadline looms large and potential honorees seem to be in hiding, candidates miraculously appear out of nowhere; their stories often compelling. In 1999 the champion figure skater, Emanuel Sandhu, took the country by storm at the

other interfaith groups and corporate dignitaries as well as to Sikh youth are subsidised. Every year non-Sikhs marvel at the array of talents displayed by the honorees—talents that are not ordinarily reflected in the media ("I didn't know they were into sport"). The youth are simply in awe. Bindu Dhaliwal (1998), for example, is one of the youngest ever recipients of the Governor General's Award. 12 year old world golf champion, Anita Gahir, is another example of the abundance of talent that is prevalent in the community. Mantaj Singh Brar topped the Peel District School Board (one of the largest in the country) with a 99% average as well as scoring a litany of other awards for extracurricular activities.



*Faces of young Sikh Canadians.*

tender age of 17. The committee tracked down the star and then introduced him to basic *Sikhi*. There was a palpable glow on his face as he leafed through Patwant Singh's book on the Golden Temple—a gift presented to him in a private meeting with members of the committee. A part of him hitherto shunned had been rekindled. That same year, fisherman Vernon Malone from Nova Scotia was saluted for his civic mindedness. In the 1987 a shipload of Sikh refugees landed on the east coast. While lampooned in the media, the Sikhs were welcomed by kind souls such as Verne Malone who lavished their humble resources on their visitors. "I remember my Bible which tells me that you must welcome strangers because one of them could be an angel of God," explained Verne. He was presented his award by two Sikh truckers whom he had sheltered and are now successful entrepreneurs.

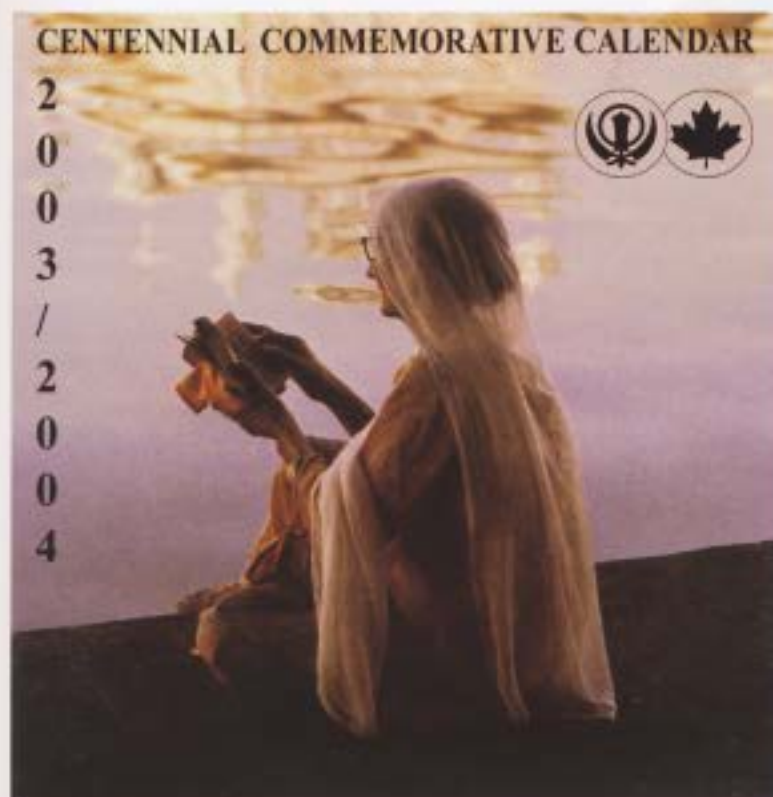
The Foundation ensures that tickets for guests from

Other committees ensure that, true to the Sikh yearning for a good laugh, splendid entertainment is provided (not to mention delectable food). Comedians such as Russell Peters have literally cut their teeth at Centennial Banquets. Home grown talent such as Gurpreet Singh Chana (the "Tabla Guy"), Ghazal queen Kiran Ahluwalia and violin virtuoso Parmela Attariwala are all now emerging as luminaries in their respective fields and have regularly regaled the invitees. After attending the 2001 Banquet, the *Toronto Star* (Canada's leading newspaper) reported: "Last night, the banquet hall stage was lavishly draped with saris and brocades to evoke the grandeur of the Maharaja's courtyard. And like a court musician, Gurpreet Singh Chana flooded the hall with compositions that fused traditional Indian music with contemporary pop."

Central to the Foundation's mandate is to foster an appreciation of the arts—a spirit that once so suffused the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the last emperor of Punjab.



Those with an appreciation of the finer things in life welcome the exhibit of Sikh art and artefacts that is displayed in a hall adjoining the dinner hall. Artists are commissioned to depict the theme for the year. This year, the Foundation has initiated the Arpana Caur Award for Sikh Art and the Bhai Vir Singh Award for Sikh literature. The Singh Twins and artist Manu Saluja have graced the Foundation with their works, serving as an inspiration to younger Sikhs.



The Foundation's agenda is indeed ambitious. Beckoning the community to start a cultural renaissance maybe overstating the case but this is the end goal. Acting as the lynchpin for all the disparate activities in the Sikh Diaspora is something that the Foundation does well: marrying entrepreneurs, academics and activists into collective projects. One example of the efficacy of this bridging capacity was the support the Foundation gave to the Sikh Human Rights Group at United Nations World Conference against Racism, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerances (WCAR) in Durban, South Africa (2001). Foundation members, led by international human rights lawyer, Tripat Kaur Hayre and one of the Foundation's guiding lights, were instrumental in the passage of Paragraph 73 which essentially recognized the concept of the "Quam"

Paragraph 73 reads:

*We recognise that certain groups with a distinct cultural identity face barriers from a complex interplay of racial, ethnic, religious and other factors as well as traditions and customs and call upon states to ensure that measures, policies and programmes aimed at eradicating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance address the barriers that this interplay of factors creates.*



*Corporate wizard "Sabi" Singh Marwah in his Scotiabank office in downtown Toronto.*

Other key members of the Foundation have participated in the design and approval of the Canada Post stamp honoring Sikh-Canadians. T. Sher Singh commissioned a gift from the Sikhs to the Vatican in honour of the second millennium of the birth of Christ. Pardeep Singh Nagra valiantly defended his right to wear a turban while boxing. His legal team included Satwinder Singh Gosal who has been involved in many 5 K cases. Other important efforts to revamp community programmes have emanated from Centennial circles. All along the Banquet—ably anchored by Inder Kaur Kalra for the last few years—has acted as the event showcasing the achievements of the community.

Most importantly, many of the young Centennial volunteers have gained valuable leadership training. They are using their experience to spearhead community projects. Kulvir Singh Gill (Chair of the Spinning Wheel Film Festival), Ramandeep Kaur Grewal (Chair of the Legal Committee) and many others are already showing that will be in the vanguard of the resurgence of the Sikh spirit. They will popularise the thirst for self-knowledge that once so defined the spirit of the Sikhs—that, to quote Professor Puran Singh, permeated the "Nam-dyed commune of the Khalsa".

*Satwinder Singh Gosal*



# Sikhs in Canada's Life - and Part of it



Prem Singh Vinning: Sikhs have often given their federal vote to Liberals because of the former prime minister's legacy of multiculturalism.

The entrance of the Guru Nanak Sikh temple in Surrey, B.C., is crowned by a massive onion-shaped dome conceived to keep the faithful in awe of the one God, the *Akal Purkh*. Most people, however, enter through the two back doors, which lead directly into the dining room. Here at midweek, turbanned older men with flowing beards and kerchiefed grandmotherly women sit at tables partaking in *langar*, the vegetarian meal that is an essential part of Sikh ritual (today it is curried vegetables, lentils and rice pudding). On the walls, quotations from the Gurus urge benevolence. Upstairs, the sanctuary is quiet; only seven people are in prayer. The holy book, *Guru Granth Sahib* is covered by a saffron cloth on a dais fronted by artificial flowers. Other copies of the scriptures are kept in a nearby room on a four-poster, queen-size bed covered with a flowered blanket. When the holy books are not being read, they are figuratively put to sleep.

A few kilometres away, on a cul-de-sac, is the more orthodox Dasmesh Darbar temple. There are no tables and chairs in its dining hall, only runner carpets to provide some comfort for those seated on the floor sipping their milky *chai* tea (conservatives shun tables and chairs, believing it creates humility and equality before God). As in the other gurdwaras, a vegetarian *langar* is served to all who come and receive, Sikh or non-Sikh. Says congregation member Jarnail Singh Chima: "The aim is to tell the congregation that humanity is one." But a different message is conveyed by posters on the wall. Gruesome images from Sikh history show a guru serenely being put to death on a large griddle; others show martyrs sawn in half or crushed between large-toothed gears.

The ideological divide separating the two temples—one moderate, one conservative—reflects the growing pains of



an ambitious community struggling to shed a legacy of violence and integrate into Canadian life. Its immense energy is already making an impressive mark. Consider federal Fisheries Minister *Herb Dhaliwal*, former television personality *Monika Deol*, B.C. Supreme Court Judge *Wally Oppal* and Toronto-born figure skater *Emanuel Sandhu*. Canada's 400,000 Sikhs—concentrated in Ontario and British Columbia—can deliver votes to help elect prime ministers and change the dynamics of provincial politics. Punjabi-born lawyer *Ujjal Dosanjh*, first elected to the B.C. legislature in 1991, became premier of British Columbia—the first provincial leader of colour. "Politics in the Indian community," says Oppal, "is a high form of calling."

Fulfilling that calling, however, often leads to fractious dissent among Sikhs. Dosanjh's campaign to become leader of British Columbia's New Democratic Party was vociferously opposed by two other Sikh members of the B.C. cabinet: *Moe Sihota* and *Harry Lali*, who threw their support behind Education Minister *Gordon Wilson*. "Sihota saw himself as the godfather of the Sikh community," says one NDP insider. "Ujjal has taken that away." Dosanjh, who as attorney general has taken a tough stand on crime, is aligned with Sikh moderates; Sihota is seen as an ally of conservatives. "Moe did a good job for the community," says *Balwant Singh Gill*, president of the *Guru Nanak temple*. "But he has done some controversial things, too. Ujjal is considered clean and white people like him—not only people from our community." Both sides targeted the Indo-Canadian community, signing up new NDP members so fast that 1,300 of 11,000 people enrolled did not even know they had become New Democrats.

Despite the internecine wrangling, Canadian Sikhs have developed remarkable political heft for a group that was not given the vote until 1947. "Sikhs have always been politically active," says *Manpreet Singh Grewal*, an *Abbotsford* community worker and journalist. "India is a democracy, after all, even though an unwieldy one." Sikh-Canadians have often given their federal vote to Liberals, in appreciation of former prime minister *Pierre Trudeau's* legacy of multiculturalism, says *Prem Singh Vinning*, who has organized support for the party in B.C. communities with large concentrations of Indo-Canadians. With exceptions: *Gurmant Singh Grewal* (no relation to *Manpreet*) holds British Columbia's *Surrey Central* for the Reform Party. Provincially, many B.C. Sikhs, who immigrated in the 1970s and worked in sawmills or on farms, saw the NDP as crusading for workers' rights. In Ontario, Sikhs have nurtured Liberal MP *Gurbax Singh Mahli* and Tory MP *Raminder Singh Gill*.

Sikhism's political potency was born in the fertile soil of northern India's Punjab, once the heartland of a Muslim



## An Ardent Adherent to Sikhism

In 1970, she was a flower-powered, 20-year-old university student trying to find a purpose in life. Then, she went to a yoga class and her teacher, *Yogi Bhajan*, turned her on to the grace of Sikhism. She embraced the humanistic principles of the religion and became an adherent, wearing a turban and changing her name to *Guru Raj Kaur Khalsa* (she is of Greek heritage but won't give her pre-Sikh name for spiritual reasons). She is known as a "White Sikh"—one of 24 in Vancouver—but she has strong ties to the Punjabi community. "White Sikhs tend to be more matriarchal than the Punjabis," she says. "A lot of our leaders are women." *Khalsa*, who teaches yoga, has even converted her garage into a temple, so she can pray whenever she feels the call.

empire. In 1499, *Nanak Dev* began preaching a new faith of universal love, sexual equality and devotion to one God. The first of 10 religious leaders whom Sikhs venerate, *Guru Nanak* synthesised Hinduism and Islam, embracing the notion of reincarnation, but rejecting the prevailing caste system. The last guru, *Gobind Singh*, who passed away in 1708 after years of warfare against tyranny, instituted two practices that came to define Sikhism for many. One was the "Khalsa," a community of the orthodox of both sexes who refrain from cutting their hair (covered by a turban) and carry a *kirpan*. A companion idea was that a true Sikh should be a "saint-soldier." To *Amarjeet Kaur Dhami*, a member of the *Dasmesh Darbar temple*, *Guru Gobind Singh's* views are still relevant. "We don't turn the other cheek," she says.

Although Sikhs ruled the Punjab in the early 19th century, they were a minority—less than two per cent of India's people and only 13 per cent of Punjab's. Even so,



## The Devout Diva

Monika Deol often wore form-fitting outfits as the "diva" of MuchMusic and Citytv—epitomising the glamorous, assimilated Sikh woman. So, many were surprised when, four years ago, she married Avtar Singh Bains in a traditional Sikh ceremony. But Deol, who is in her early 30s, has always been quietly devout, wearing a *kara*, a steel bracelet, which is one of the five symbols of Sikhism. "My faith is about striving to be a decent person," she says. Recently, Punjabi-born Deol gave up a Vancouver television job in order to stay home with her two young children—a third is on the way. Several times a year, she flies to her native Winnipeg to help her mother prepare the *langar*, a ritual lunch, in a local temple. "For Sikhs," says Deol, "family is what life is all about."



Sikhs made up 37 per cent of colonial-era Indian Army officers, and were prominent in the struggle for independence (Dosanjh's grandfather fought against the British and was jailed). The partition of the subcontinent in 1947 into India and Pakistan witnessed an exodus of Muslims to the latter, and made Sikhs a slim majority in the Punjab. But many felt mistreated by the central government. As tensions mounted, thousands left. The diaspora became so ubiquitous some Sikhs joked that when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon in 1969, a Sikh was already there asking, "Taxi, sir?"

Sikh immigrants first arrived in Canada in 1903 to work for the Canadian Pacific Railway or in sawmills. Partap Singh Johal, the father of Vancouver philanthropist Asa Singh Johal, 77, arrived in the Kootenays in 1905. "These first Sikhs to Canada were adventurers," says Asa's 46-year-old daughter, Geven Opal. "They came speaking no English and with no education." And they met stinging prejudice. Responding to anti-Asian riots in Vancouver, Ottawa restricted immigration in 1908. When entrepreneur Gurdit

Singh Sarhali chartered a steamship, the *Komagata Maru*, to carry 376 Punjabis to Vancouver in the spring of 1914, Canadian officials did not let the passengers disembark, leaving them aboard with little food or water. Immigration officers even stormed the ship, intending to drive it into international waters. The Sikhs resisted until July 23, when the *Komagata Maru* sailed away. Large-scale Sikh immigration to Canada did not begin again until the late 1960s.

Virtually all Canadian Sikhs have maintained strong family ties to India and pay close attention to events in the Punjab. In June 1984, a shock wave struck. Acting on reports that Sikh militants were hoarding weapons, the Indian Army stormed the Golden Temple, Sikhdom's holiest shrine, in the city of Amritsar, killing hundreds. Within months, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was also dead, assassinated by Sikh bodyguards. In riots that followed, nearly 3,000 Sikhs died, and authorities unleashed a savage crackdown on activists.

The Indian Army's assault at the Golden Temple shattered the tranquility of Sikhs everywhere. "I lost an uncle in that tragic chapter," says Constable Baltej Singh Dhillon, the first Sikh to wear a turban in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. "He was mobbed, wrapped in tires, doused in gasoline and set on fire." The attack convinced many moderates that only an independent Sikh state—Khalistan—could guarantee their faith's security. "In a place like the Punjab," says Dosanjh, "you may not always get justice from politicians or the courts, and there is a tendency to take the law into your own hands. That carries over into actions here [in Canada]."

Through the decade that followed, pro-Khalistan executives—many with connections to terrorist groups such as the Babbar Khalsa and the International Sikh Youth Federation—held power at most Canadian gurdwaras, controlling the huge revenues they brought in. Some \$1 million a year. Moderates claim some of that money went to pro-Khalistani fighters. Many individual Canadian Sikhs contributed directly to the cause. Dasmesh temple member Dhami took out a \$5,000 loan for the "guerrillas" in Punjab: "If money is what they need, why shouldn't I give it to them?"

The few who questioned the necessity of an independent Khalistan, or opposed violence to achieve it, came under attack. In February, 1985, a man wielding an iron bar attacked Dosanjh, putting him in hospital. Charan Gill, now executive director of a community support group and a Dosanjh ally, was also attacked at a temple for writing a letter to a newspaper protesting violence. "To them, anyone who didn't believe in Khalistan was not a good Sikh," Gill recalls.



Violence spawned in Canada reached its nadir in 1985. On June 23, Air India Flight 182 exploded off Ireland, killing all 329 aboard. The unsolved act of terrorism—in which many Sikhs lost relatives and friends—remains a raw wound. Some Canadian Sikhs came to believe they were sharing *langar* with terrorists. Others blamed the Indian government—or Canada—for committing the horrific act to discredit Khalistan. The RCMP and Canadian Security Intelligence Service launched investigations that have preoccupied both agencies to little result: no one was ever charged.



*Young Sikhs wearing patkas playing ice-hockey in Toronto.*

Violence on a smaller scale continues to haunt the community. In July, 1995, officers from six Toronto police divisions broke up a melee between rival groups of Babbar Khalsa and International Sikh Youth Federation supporters. In January, 1997, the RCMP subdued a brawl at Guru Nanak between 70 people who forcibly removed tables and chairs from the temple, and moderates. In a particularly cowardly attack, wheelchair-bound newspaper editor Tara Singh Hayer was killed in his garage in November, 1998.

Other prominent Canadian Sikhs acknowledge the struggle against violence and intimidation—and lament the price it has exacted. "There is fear in the community," says B.C. Liberal MLA Sindi Hawkins. "The actions of a few taint the many." Since 1998, however, spurred by revulsion over Hayer's murder, many have had enough. It helps that in India, security forces have been reined in and concessions made to Sikh demands. In the Vancouver area, moderates have replaced conservatives in peaceful elections at temples. There and in Ontario, dissenters have abandoned contested temples to set up their own-like Dasmesh Darbar, where they may worship as they like.

Many younger Sikhs express pride in their faith but distaste for their elders' politics. "Our generation is fired

of the divisions," says Jay Singh Grewal, 18, a student in Delta, B.C. "It distracts from the real meaning of Sikhism." Adds Jas Johal, a 29-year-old reporter at BCTV. "They should really be fighting over how to make the temple relevant to my generation." Without steps to make the faith accessible to younger people, many of whom cannot understand Punjabi-only services, Johal warns, "they are going to lose the younger generation."

But even among their elders, there is wide consensus on putting factionalism and violence behind them. Other cultural holdovers are proving more resistant. Five hundred years after the first guru abolished social castes, they continue to flourish. "Our faith is very influenced by Hinduism, which is fraught by the caste system," says Manpreet Singh Grewal. Most Sikhs in Canada are from the Jat, or landowning, caste and prefer to marry in that group. "Our religion tells us that everybody is equal," says social activist Raminder Dosanjh, the mother of three sons and Ujjal's wife. "But when my brother married someone from a different caste, it bothered my mother very much."



*At the school library.*

Arranged marriages are still common. In Canada, the process is often more liberalised—parents or their twenty something children seek out companies such as "Sanjog Marriage Services" to make introductions to prospective spouses. Young people may also reject the match-once a taboo act of rebellion. Poet Phinder Singh Dulai, 32, has been married to a Dutch-English woman for more than a decade. "It was tough on my parents," he says. "It was a question of cultural identity for them. But we have to let go of feudal relations between women and men and caste politics." Other politics, though, remain fair game. "This is an ambitious people," says reporter Johal. "You're going to see a Sikh premier, why not a Sikh prime minister?"

*Jennifer Hunter and Chris Wood*

*Acknowledgement: Maclean's  
Canada's Weekly News Magazine*



# Resilience of the Spirit



*Gurdit Singh addresses fellow passengers on board the Komagata Maru, in 1914*

With the passage of time, the story of how Sikhs came to Canada over one hundred years ago seems to have attained almost mythic qualities. Most of us growing up in the Diaspora have at some time or another heard the story of the *Komagata Maru* and how the 346 Sikhs came to Vancouver in 1914. Their plight - being stranded in the harbour at Burrard Inlet, B.C. for two months without any help from the British and Canadian Governments and then being shot in India upon their return - still brings a tear to the eye. The fact that the early Sikh settlers did not get the right to vote until 1947 still rankles many Sikhs to the core.

Sarjeet Singh Jagpal relates the story of the early pioneers in their own words in his magnificent book, *Becoming Canadians*. The book projects the dreams and struggles of these splendid Sikhs in such a fashion that the reader can almost smell the pine of the lumber camps and the smoke of the camp fires where most of the men worked. What is evident after reviewing this period of history (1897 to 1947) is the resilience of the Sikh spirit. Sikhs not only

settled in Canada, they literally helped build the country - anchored by their unwavering commitment to their religion; determined to secure a life of comfort and opportunity for their children; and eager to impose dominion over their new surroundings. And their children and grandchildren, such as Justice Wallace Oppal of the British Columbia Court of Appeal, are a testament to their legacy.

Sikhs returning from the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria's investiture as Queen of the Empire in 1897 ventured into British Columbia and marveled at how the land was similar to their Punjab. Buoyed by their stories and lured by dreams of land for the Sikhs in the Doab who were running out of land, Sikh immigrants came to Canada between the years 1904 to 1908. By that year, close to 5,000 Sikhs had set foot in Canada.

1908 was also the year when the immigration of Sikhs was effectively curtailed. An Order-In-Council was enacted





*Sikhs in Stanley Park, Vancouver circa 1904*

which prohibited persons to enter into Canada who did not come by direct voyage. This legislation was aimed directly at Sikhs (incorrectly identified as "Hindus"). Indeed, the Canadian government instructed Canadian Pacific steamships, which previously sailed directly from Calcutta to B.C., to now stop en route. Moreover in 1908, legislation was also enacted requiring immigrants to Canada to possess \$200 (previously the benchmark was \$25). This was an inordinate amount considering that the annual income of a Sikh in Punjab would have been \$50. Another heart-breaking discriminatory hurdle was a requirement that Sikh immigrants could not bring their families to Canada. The impact of this legislation was such that immigration was reduced from approximately 3,000 in 1907 to an average of only 20 per year over the next 40 years. In 1911, the number of Sikhs in Canada was just over 2,000.

Public opinion had vastly been swayed by politicians  
*Sikh workers with the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1910*



of the time who were steeped in the theory of eugenics, which supported theories of racial superiority and, as a popular song of the time proclaimed, to keep "White Canada for Ever." William Lyon McKenzie King, the first minister of labour, and soon to be the Prime Minister of Canada, feared that the Asiatics would corrupt the morals of good Canadian citizens with their importation of opium. In the face of an economic recession, trade unions were also alarmed at the possibility that their jobs were being taken away by the Sikhs and the Chinese who had come some 40 years earlier. Such was the hostility of the host society that in 1907 the Mayor of Vancouver and other well known politicians led anti-Asiatic riots against people of Chinese and Sikh background. Ironically, at the same time Canada was engaged in a massive immigration scheme to populate the Canadian West with European settlers.



*Sikh pioneers in Canada, 1925*

The combined effect of the discriminatory legislation was that Sikhs could not enter professions such as law and pharmacy and could not own land in certain areas. They were also struck off municipal voters' roles which then denied them the right to vote both provincially and federally. This was a travesty in light of the fact that Sikhs were British subjects, and, in theory, allowed basic freedoms such as the right to vote throughout the British Empire. England also had a duty to protect these rights. However, at a time when Whitehall was taking a hands-off approach with respect to the conduct of their dominions, the cry of Sikhs for protection fell on deaf ears.

The Canadian Government even went to the extent of proposing that all Sikhs be deported to what was then called British Honduras. After an exploratory visit in the accompaniment of two members of the Sikh community, the Sikhs rebuffed this proposal. Despite their ability to thrive in the most adverse of circumstances, Sikhs were not attracted by the mosquito-infested swamps of Central America (perhaps a proposal would be entertained now!).



The Khalsa Diwan Society of Vancouver, formed in 1907, realised that their members lacked the sophistication to challenge the legal system. Thus it arranged for Harvard graduate Professor Teja Singh to come to B.C. In fact, he was even sent to Columbia University in New York to obtain a degree in Education so that he could use his skills for the Sikh community. He sought to revamp the image of the community; Sikhs would be seen as industrious people committed to the Canadian way of life. The Professor found the Guru Nanak Mining and Trust Company which aimed to pool resources for the purchase of mining stakes; arrange accommodation for students; buy land for unemployed workers and to facilitate the importing of goods from India. Deputations were made to various levels of government.

Mostly uneducated, the early pioneers took the tough jobs in the railways, the lumber and fishing industries. Sikhs



*Sikhs in New Westminster circa 1908*

were employed on the construction of the Canadian Pacific railway line over some of the most difficult terrain in the world. Living conditions were particularly difficult and the hours of work were long. Due to discrimination, accommodation was hard to come by in the cities. In the mills, the pioneers were hoarded together in lumber bunk houses. They learned to cook. The winters were extremely cold. However, they became trusted employees-respected for their hard work and willingness to travel.

The first *gurdwara* was constructed in the town of Golden, B.C. in 1903. Early signs of settlement included the construction of the Vancouver Sikh Temple in 1908 by the Khalsa Diwan Society and religious life became the central common bond among the Sikhs in British Columbia. "Our elders built this temple by carrying rocks in baskets on their heads to clear the land. They moved huge rocks by hand, going to great pains to level and prepare the land for construction. There was a lot of bush and forest that

had to be cleared first, big huge trees cut and cleared away by hand. It was a lot of work but they built this temple with pride so that we would have a place of our own here." Gurdwaras were later built in other parts of Vancouver, Victoria, New Westminster, Abbotsford and Paldi.

In 1912, the first Sikh was born in B.C. Hardial Singh Atwal was the son of the first *granthi* of the Second Avenue Gurdwara.

The arrival of the *Komagata Maru* on 23 May, 1914 to test the Canadian continuous voyage law and its departure two months later had a devastating impact on the Sikh community. The passage of the ship chartered in Hong Kong by entrepreneur Gurdit Singh was eagerly monitored by Canadian officials. The premier of B.C., Sir Richard MacBride, stated his position clearly: "To admit Orientals



*Railways workers at Frank in Alberta, 1903*

in large numbers would mean in the end the extinction of the white peoples and we have always in mind the necessity of keeping this a white man's country." Only 22 men from the ship were allowed to disembark since they could establish domicile in Canada. Gurdit Singh was told to pay the ship's charter dues (which he hoped to defray from selling cargo) or the ship would be impounded. The B.C. Sikh community raised the necessary amount of \$22,000. They also raised money for the considerable legal challenges, claiming that the immigration laws were invalid. The claims were rejected at all levels, including the highest Court of Appeal, the Judicial Council of the Privy Council in England. The Sikhs aboard the *Komagata Maru* refused to leave, wresting control of the ship from the Japanese crew. Eventually, the Canadian navy was dispatched to escort the ship out of the Vancouver harbour.

Many Canadian Sikhs left after 1914, disenchanted with the Empire's hollow promises of freedom, and so became





*The Hundal family in Canada, 1912.*

involved in the struggle for freedom in India. Not until 1919 when restrictions were lifted on family reunification requirements that the community was able to regain its footing, both physically and mentally, in Canada.

By 1918 the Sikh population in British Columbia was at a low of about 700. In the subsequent years, Sikhs were determined to stay in Canada and make the best of a bad situation. Businessmen such as Kapoor Singh and Mayo Singh Manhas purchased small lumber mills in Vancouver Island and established considerable businesses. (The philanthropy of Mayo Singh is legendary.) They were successful in forming relationships with Canadians from the general community who held properties and businesses in trust for them to circumvent legislation which prevented Sikhs from holding properties in certain areas. Some pioneers gained lumber cartage contracts which led to more

*Dhaddi Jathur c. 1905.*



lucrative work in the burgeoning transportation sector. Others bought small farms. Mayo Singh and Kapoor Singh bought a saw mill and 400 acres of timber rights near Duncan, B.C. in 1917. The village, which still stands today, is called Paldi and is named after Mayo's ancestral village in Punjab. Of course, the entrepreneurs built a gurdwara and even a Japanese temple for their Japanese employees. There were also European employees. Mayo Singh became the first Sikh industrialist in Canada.

It was Mayo Singh and Kapoor Singh who were also in the forefront of the fight for the franchise. With the assistance of a Hindu lawyer by the name of Dr. Pandia who arrived in Canada in the late 1930's, they started what was essentially the first sophisticated political lobbying by Sikhs. The issue of the right to vote came to head when some Sikhs who were required to enlist in the Canadian



*The original Sikh Temple at Abbotsford in 1934*

army during the Second World War refused to do so until they received the right to vote in Canada. By 1947, the Sikh lobbyists had convinced the Canadian Federation of Municipalities to endorse a resolution allowing East Indians (as they were now called) the vote in municipal elections which would then allow them to vote provincially and federally. On 15 September, 1947, Sikhs were granted the right to vote. Ironically, India became politically free a month earlier, on 15 August, 1947.

Immigration policies were eventually relaxed. Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau introduced an expansive immigration programme. His policy of multiculturalism also created space for Sikhs to gain acceptance in Canada. By the early 1970's, the modern wave of immigration had begun—mostly in Ontario. Currently, there are about 500,000 Sikhs in Canada.



# Sikh Canadians in Politics



They say it's the Pacific air that makes for strange political happenings—and for colorful politicians—in British Columbia. The first mayor of Vancouver called himself "Amour de Cosmos". His political successors were not so magnanimous in their outlook on the world. Politicians of all levels banded together to hound out the Sikh pioneers of the early twentieth century—passing discriminatory legislation in 1907 that effectively halted Sikh immigration to Canada for half a century. Until 1947, Sikhs were denied entry into professions such as law and pharmacy; could not own land and indeed—could not even vote. (It's a strange quirk of history that Sikhs in India gained the right to vote just before Sikhs in Canada!).

Almost a hundred years later, a powerful troika of Sikh politicians have forever changed the political landscape in Canada. All hailing from dusty villages in the Punjab Doab, and political activists at universities in B.C., between themselves they were in the running for Prime Minister, premier of British Columbia and leader of the federal NDP. In February, 2000, Ujjal Dosanjh (first elected in 1991) became the Premier of British Columbia. He came to prominence as Attorney-General when he successfully negotiated a truce (which had so eluded his predecessors) after a stand-off with an aboriginal group.

A few years later, Herb (Harbance Singh) Dhaliwal, a self-made millionaire, became senior cabinet minister and the Prime Minister's lieutenant for Western Canada. Reluctantly, he decided not to pursue the position of Prime Minister. The trilingual Moe (Manmohan Singh) Sihota, elected in 1986, was the work horse when the provincial NDP was in opposition—holding four major portfolios at once. Moe Sihota stole the limelight in the landmark Meech Lake Constitutional Accord; hailed daily in the evening news as the dealmaker at pivotal stages of exceedingly complex discussions, he declined to run for the leadership of the federal NDP. Together, they championed the rights of minorities and became known for taking principled stands.

Such has been their indelible mark on the politics of this country that *Maclean's*, Canada's national magazine, featured the Sikh community in its

21 February 2000 issue. The cover page of the magazine was captioned: "Sikh Power" and the series of articles on the Sikh community focused on how "a potent political community flexes its muscle." The number of success stories is ever-increasing. Sindi Hawkins, a leading nurse and then lawyer, is a member of the current B.C. cabinet and an inspiration to aspirant Sikh female politicians. Her Cabinet colleague, Dr. Gulzar Singh Cheema, was also elected to the provincial legislature of Manitoba where he was singled out by the leading newspapers for his exceptional contribution to provincial politics when he decided to move to British Columbia. Professor Raj Singh Pannu is the leader of the Alberta NDP. Recently, Harinder Singh Takhar became the first Sikh politician appointed to the cabinet of Ontario. Many Sikhs could not suppress their smiles when they learned that he was appointed as Minister of Transport!

The path of politics has not been easy. Faced with the "old boy's network" many of these politicians had to seek nomination twice: fighting traditional prejudices and thwarting petty communal animosities emanating from the "old country". In Ontario, many of the political candidates have been mired in the nomination process—in many cases against other Sikhs and thus splitting the vote! The successful politicians, like those in B.C., have spearheaded-mainstream Canadian non-profit organizations such as the United Way as part of their political ascendancy. In the main part, their social values reflect those of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the political icon who was Prime Minister for many of the formative years of the community. Trudeau's liberal immigration policies, entrenching of multiculturalism as a bedrock Canadian value and enshrining of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms have struck a strong chord with the Sikh community.

What is more encouraging is that the younger generation has taken up the



## Navdeep Singh Bains

Candidate for Liberal Nomination  
Mississauga - Brampton South  
Federal Riding

"As a resident of this city for over 16 years, I have had the opportunity to learn about various local, national and international issues by talking to community members and learning through our own social institutions.

After completing high school from Turner Fenton Secondary School, I earned an Undergraduate business degree from York University. I also have an M.B.A. from the University of Windsor, as well as my Certified Management Accountant (C.M.A.) designation. For the past few years, I worked as a financial analyst at the Ford Motor Company of Canada in Oakville, where I also served as a member of their Diversity Council.

On a community level, I have facilitated and participated in many youth initiatives, including food drives for the less fortunate and volunteered for other community projects through Guru Gobind Singh Children's Foundation. Recently married, both my wife Brahamjot Kaur and I have built strong ties to the local area residents and are committed to providing the community with a renewed sense of pride and leadership. I ask for your support for my nomination as the Liberal candidate for Mississauga-Brampton South."



challenge. Whereas their parents grappled with racism, they must prove that they are aware of Sikh community issues. They also have to put their professional careers on the backburner while pursuing their political ambitions. Exuberant, politically savvy, proudly Sikh and passionately Canadian, they articulate the aspirations of their predecessors.

25 year old Dr. Ruby Dhalla, part of the Prime Minister's inner circle, is one of the rising stars in the community. Involved in politics at the age of 12 with the active support of her mother, she co-chaired the annual meeting of the senior Liberal Party at the age of 18, the first time that a youth had ever been asked to be a Chair. She has served on the National Women's Commission—an organization dedicated to promoting female politicians in Canada. Juggling high-level volunteer commitments and academics (and distinguishing herself in the process), Ruby Dhalla has gone to great pains to stay involved politically. "It's not easy for a Sikh woman who is professional," she comments passionately. "But it is very important for young people to be involved in the process and provide a different perspective." That perspective comes from being a Sikh who is born in Canada but is intimately familiar with the Sikh tradition. The balance is all too important. "Sikhs are extremely talented but we're only seen from one-dimension." Dr. Dhalla laments the fact that when she first sat around the table at policy sessions, Sikhs were viewed as preoccupied solely with immigration matters. "Like everybody else, we are concerned with other issues: the economy, jobs, health, education. Yet rarely are we asked to comment on these matters" But Ruby is confident that the mythic

glass ceiling is being lowered." People like Herb Dhaliwal and Gurbax Singh Malhi (Canada's first turbaned Sikh member of parliament) have made it easier for Canadians to understand who we are."

Armed with an MBA and an engaging personality, political aspirant, Navdeep Singh Bains, reflects on his strong need to contribute to Canada, a country about which he is passionate. "This country has given us opportunities that our parents would never have received in India such as the chance to create the wealth that we have been blessed with." Attracted to liberal politics because of Pierre Elliott Trudeau and his Charter of Rights, the turban-wearing Bains dismisses the notion that he will be cast as totally



*Gurbax Singh Malhi is the first turbaned Sikh MP in the West.*

beholden to the Sikh community in a riding where up to 25% of the voters are visible minorities. "I'm a Canadian and a Sikh. Like all other Canadians I can balance both aspects." He is asked if one day there will be a turbaned Canadian Prime Minister. "Absolutely. But not for another generation. It will take that long to change the Canadian psyche. Perhaps first we'll need to have a Canadian hockey star with a *dastar*."

In 30 years Nav Bains will be 57—perhaps too old to play professional hockey!



# Canadian Prime Minister **Jean "SINGH" Chrétien** visits the Punjab



*Canada's Prime Minister honoured with the siropa and kirpan at the Darbar Sahib, in Amritsar.*

The Canadian Prime Minister was christened Jean "Singh" Chrétien as he wound up his two day memorable working trip to India with a visit to the *Darbar Sahib* in Amritsar, besides inaugurating his country's Consulate-General Office at Chandigarh on 25 October 2003. It was a special day for him as it marked the completion of his one decade in power with tens of thousands of Punjabis, mostly Sikhs, struggling to touch or just get a glimpse of him, both in Chandigarh and in Amritsar, on Diwali day.

Accompanied by his wife, Mr Jean Chretien became the first foreign head of a government and second leader of a national political party of Canada to visit the Golden Temple in recent times. "It is something which I will remember for the rest of my life", an emotional Mr Jean Chretien remarked saying, "I never shook so many hands in so few hours".

The Canadian Prime Minister had flown by a chartered Bombardier regional jet to both Amritsar and Chandigarh

on the final day of his last official visit to Asia before his planned retirement in early 2004. But his whirlwind tour ran behind schedule as his entourage got caught in the surging crowds at the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar.

Enjoying the clear sky and warm sunshine, the Prime Minister mingled with devotees, occasionally breaking the security cordon in the *Parikarma*. He shook hands with the devotees to offer Diwali greetings.

Mr Chretien, who is well versed with the Sikh traditions, offered a 'rumala' for *Guru Granth Sahib* which he had specially brought from Canada. He also offered *pirsada* and cash as a humble devotee. He was presented a *siropa* (robe of honour) by the Head Granthi, Giani Puran Singh.

Mr Chretien created history of a nature as he was the first Prime Minister of a sovereign country to pay obeisance at the Golden Temple. Queen Elizabeth II and her husband, Duke of Edinburgh, had visited the temple in 1997. The Canadian Prime Minister was accompanied by Herb Dhaliwal, Minister of Natural Resources, Gurbax Singh



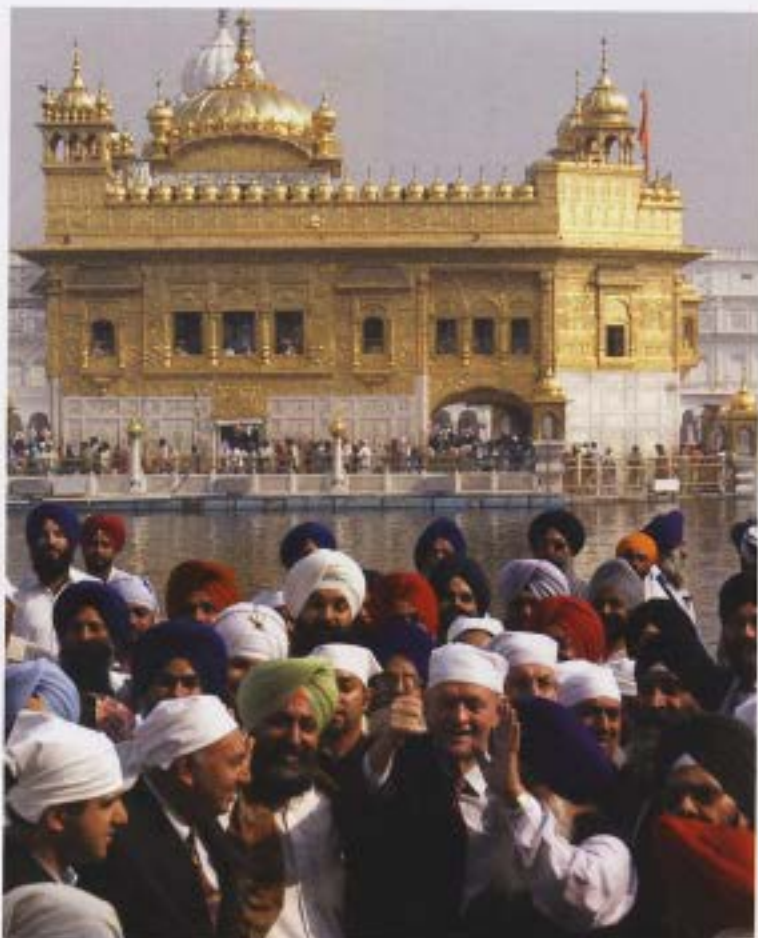
Málhi, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Labour, Baljit Singh Chadha, member of the Privy Council of Canada, along with his senior advisers and a strong contingent of the Canadian media. Mr Chretien also inaugurated the "Guru Arjun Dev Niwas", a 15-room *serai* complex for visiting NRIs. Constructed at a cost of Rs 60 lakh, this was contributed by the Chadha Family Trust.

Addressing the gathering after offering prayers, Mr Chretien said he had brought him warm greetings from his countrymen and the large number of Punjabi community settled there for the people of India. He said the million strong Punjabi community, majority of them Sikhs, which constituted 2 per cent of the Canadian population had contributed a lot to the development of Canada. The Sikhs play a decisive role in the elections in many constituencies in Canada. He also spoke a couple of words in French for his countrymen in Canada and for the benefit of the large contingent of electronic media covering his visit.

The visiting Prime Minister described his visit as the fulfillment of a promise made to the Sikh Canadians when he assumed PMship on 25 October 1993. He paid rich tributes to the Sikhs who have been steadily emigrating to Canada and form the largest single group of Indo-Canadians.

It was Herb Dhaliwal, who at the end of his speech, presented the *karna* to the Prime Minister and christened him as "Jean Singh Chretien". Dhaliwal said that it was under Chretien's leadership that Sikhs could make their historic entry into Canada's House of Commons in 1993 and that he could become a federal minister.

"India is one of our most important partners", Chretien had said. "The Consulate General at Chandigarh will improve the flow of people between our two countries by enhancing immigration and visa services to both Canadians and Indians in the region. Enhanced representation is an essential component for building the political, economic and cultural framework required for rapidly expanding relationship". He



*Canada's Prime Minister at the Holy Darbar Sahib in Amritsar*

disclosed that India had been one of the major source of immigrants to Canada and of the total new entrants to Canada in 2001, 11 per cent came from India itself.

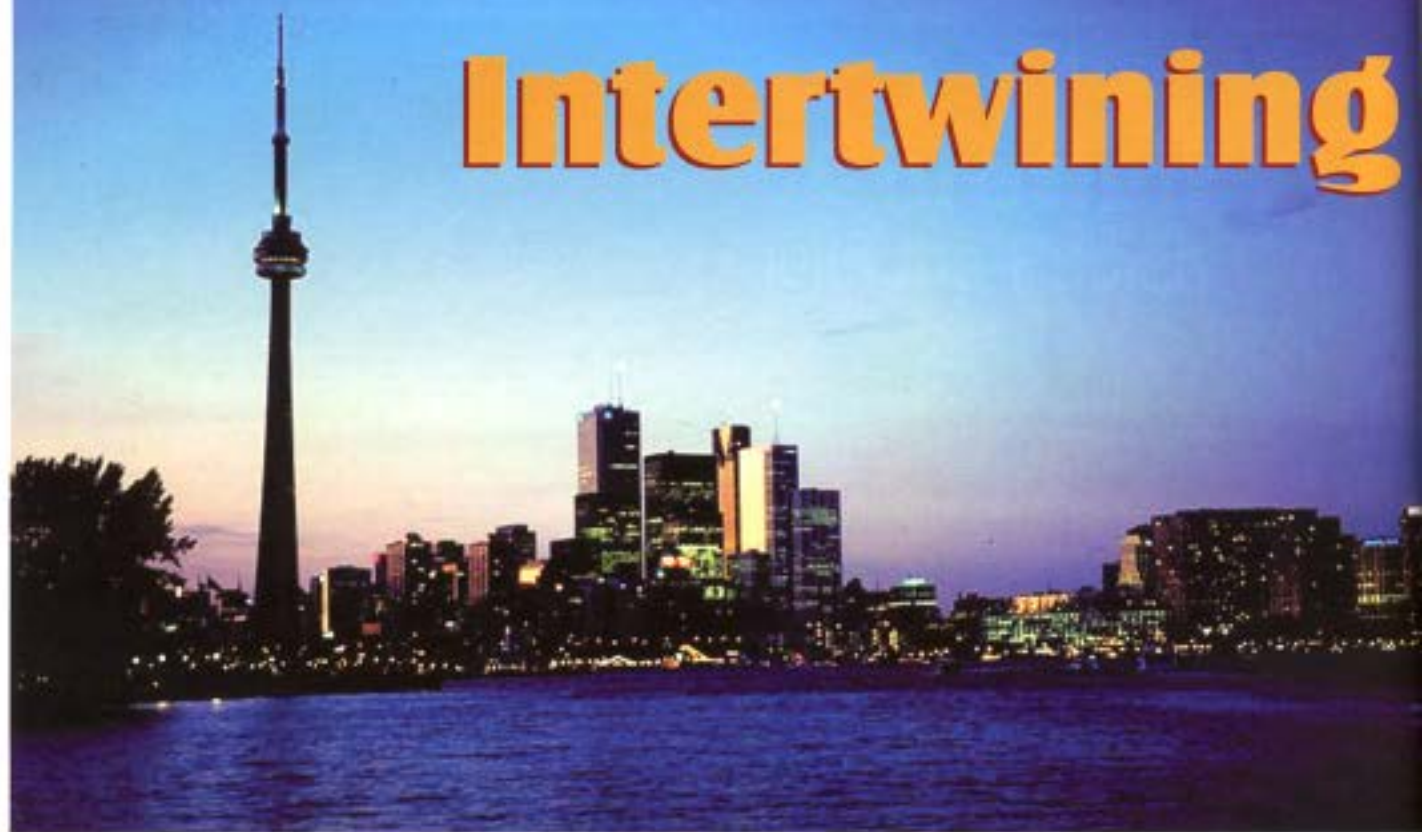
Though the Sikhs had contributed immensely for the betterment of the Canadian society, their presence in the public sector was minimal. More jobs should be given to the Sikhs, he added. Sikhs should not be prevented from taking up any job only because as they wear turban or keep unshorn hair. Sikhs were being subjected to "unreasonable" searches at airports all across Europe and the USA. Canada could sponsor a special year dedicated to an important Sikh anniversary in the United Nations. The year 2004 could be sponsored as a year of inter-faith understanding and mutual respect, commemorating the 400th anniversary of the Sikh scripture, *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Taking a cue from the visiting dignitary, the Punjab Chief Minister, Capt Amarinder Singh, said that he was amazed to learn that the proportion of Sikhs living in Canada – 500,000, or 2 per cent of the national population – was a little more than the percentage of Sikhs (1.5%) living in India.

Later that evening, Mr Chretien flew back to Ottawa via Oslo in his special Airbus aircraft.



# Intertwining



*The Toronto skyline.....*

For anyone who has travelled through the Punjab, crisscrossing its web of teeming villages, towns and cities, separated by golden fields of wheat that grow throughout the land of five rivers, it may seem strange that so many Sikhs aspire to one day leave their homeland.

But as it was for Deepinder Singh Gill and Jagdeep Singh Purewal, who uprooted their lives to move to Canada more than a decade ago, the culture and everyday life that lies beyond India's borders, toward the west, remains a mystery to many.

Like most Sikhs who emigrate, Gill and Purewal wanted the type of stability and security for themselves and eventually their families that they felt India could no longer provide. The unique paths each has since followed tell the story of life in Canada for many of its near 500,000 Sikhs.

Sitting inside his spacious four-bedroom, 3000-square-foot home on a late-January evening, a week after winter storms deposited two feet of snow throughout the Greater Toronto Area and covering the entire landscape in a soft-white blanket, Gill is joined by his wife Gurmeet Kaur and their two young daughters, Harkiran and Tuvraen.

They live in the North Toronto suburb of Brampton (nicknamed "Singhdale"), where 120,000 Sikhs make-up a third of the population. "A lot of people say don't use your surname because of the caste issue," says Gill, a devoted Amritdhari Sikh, who keeps his flowing beard open, at home and at his job, where he works as a software architect and

project leader for Nortel Networks, one of the largest telecommunications companies in the country. "To me it's a way of being identified. People started saying Deepinder Singh of Brampton, but there are so many Singhs here."

Gill moved to Canada in 1991, leaving his job with Punjab Communication Limited, where he worked for two years after completing a degree in electrical and communications engineering from Guru Nanak Engineering College, just outside Ludhiana.

Six years earlier, his elder brother had moved to Canada after marrying a Sikh-Canadian woman whose family had been settled in Canada since the early '70s, when 80,000 Sikhs arrived during the first large wave of Sikh immigration from India, the U.K. and East Africa.

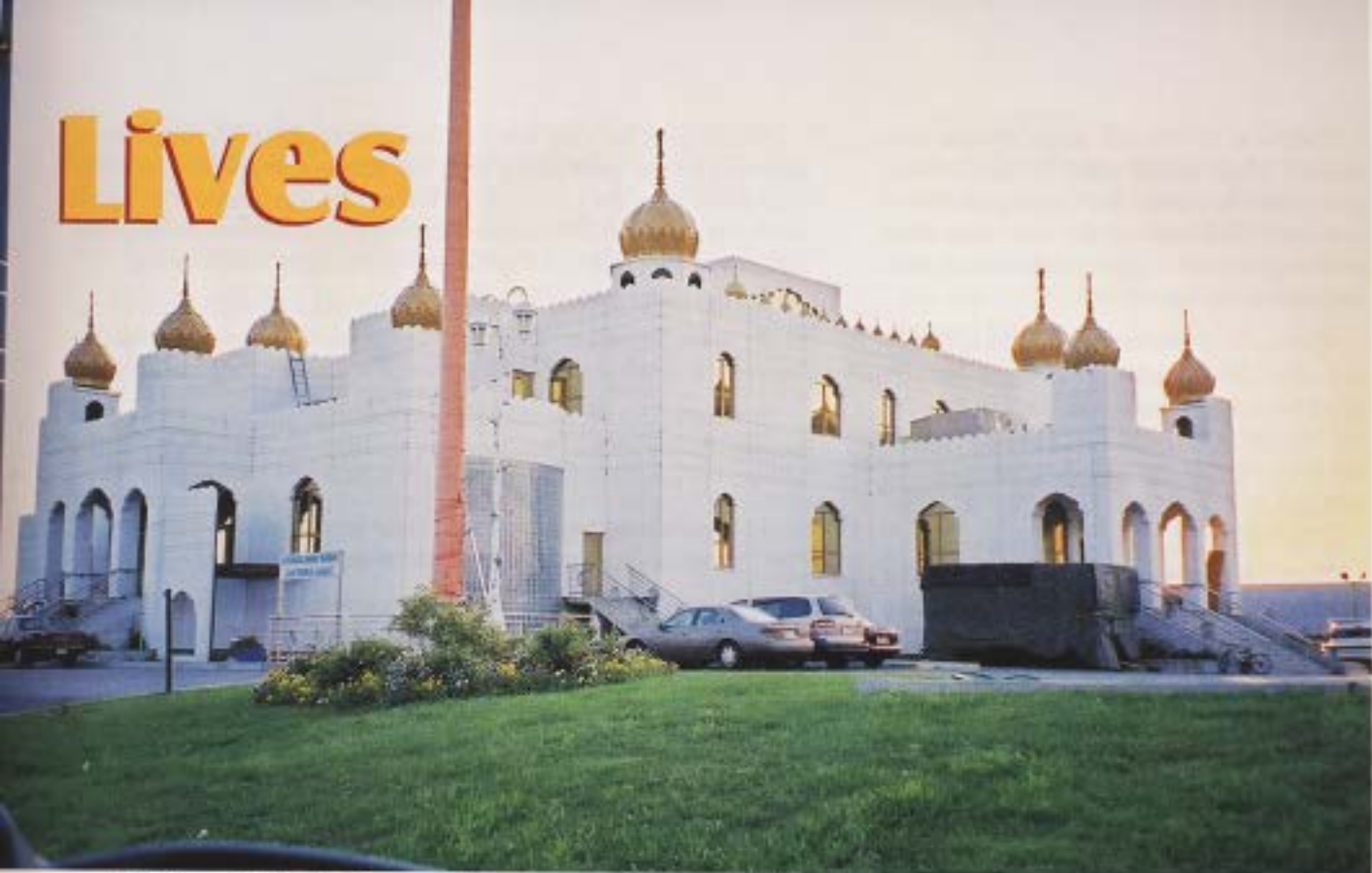
"He met her while on a summer student internship," Gill says, with a wide smile, as he relates his families surprise, almost 20-years ago, on the day his brother's Canadian student-visa was approved. "We didn't think he would get it. Thousands of people were applying, but he came back home holding it in his hand and said, 'I got it.'"

That fateful decision, perhaps the result of pure luck, represented a drastic turn, the one single catalyst that would propel most of Gill's family to eventually leave India and generations of history behind.

While he and the rest of his immediate family in India were finalising their sponsorship by his brother in Canada,



# Lives



....and Gurdwara Sahib at Lachine, near Montreal.

Gill applied to a Master's programme in electrical engineering at the University of Toronto, one of the most prestigious post-secondary institutions in the country, located in downtown Toronto, and was accepted.

But after arriving, at a time when the high-tech industry was ready to explode, Gill switched to a computer engineering programme and, while commuting daily from the suburban home he shared with his mother, father, two brothers and his sister-in-law, distinguished himself as a promising young graduate student.

It's at this point that the intertwining narratives of Deepinder Singh Gill's story and Jagdeep Singh Purewal's story begin to unravel and separate.

With his wife, son and daughter by his side, sitting on one of the dozens of sofas inside his Brampton furniture store later that same evening, Purewal conveys an ambiguity that defines his decision to leave Punjab a decade earlier.

After politely offering some sweets and tea, his wife Harminder says, "That's the Canadian way isn't it?" When asked how her Canadian hospitality is different from the Punjabi way, she quickly replies with a laugh, "The Punjabi

way is you don't have a choice, you just give it and it's taken."

She sits on the edge of the sofa wearing her winter coat, and unravels the last twenty years of her life.

She was raised in Patiala and was taking pre-med courses, the equivalent to Grade-12 in Canada, at Mahilpur Khalsa College in the mid-'80s. But the death of her father a few years earlier had left the family devastated and she eventually dropped out of school to help her mother and younger siblings.

Her eldest brother was a veterinary doctor in India, but married a visiting Sikh-Canadian woman whose family had also moved during the first wave of Sikh immigration to Canada in the early '70s. Though he did not want to leave his life in India and his work, which he would not be allowed to practice in Canada unless he went back to university, it was

an inevitable decision.

He arrived in 1986 and shortly after began to sell real estate. In 1988, after being sponsored by her brother, Harminder, her widowed mother and the rest of her family arrived in Canada under the country's policy of family reunification.



The Purewal family at Brampton ("Singhdale").



That was before the point system was adopted, which is used today by the Canadian government to ensure most immigrants have sufficient language skills and education credentials to receive gainful employment or to further their studies.

Harjinder began working a string of factory and other labour jobs around the heavily industrialised suburban areas north of Toronto. She bundled advertising flyers for newspapers and was a machine operator at a plastics factory, then took orders at a factory warehouse where outdoor accessories were sold.

She was laid-off regularly, at a time when the economy was struggling to emerge from a spiralling recession, but always managed to eventually find work.

Meanwhile, she went back to India and married Jagdeep Singh Purewal in 1991, and he moved shortly after. Raised in Mohali, neighbouring the capital Chandigarh, the son of a school headmaster and a teacher, Purewal received a diploma in mechanical engineering from a polytechnic school and had worked as a factory supervisor for a company in Chandigarh that exported computer wiring, before leaving for Canada.

Upon his arrival, Purewal was disheartened by the difficulties he faced while looking for a job. "Initially I was excited, but when you try to get jobs and everyone asked for Canadian experience — all you were offered was odd jobs," Purewal says. "In six months I hardly got two or three calls for work, labour jobs. I didn't want to join those."

At the time, they lived with Harjinder's two younger brothers and their mother at her elder brother and sister-in-law's home in Brampton. "I tried to enrol at a co-op programme," Purewal says, "but was told to go to school for spoken English because my pronunciation was different. There was more independence in India!"

After remaining unemployed for six months, Purewal was offered a job as a salesman for a furniture store owned by a Sikh family in Brampton. He moved from one furniture shop to another during the recession, till the late '90s, while Harjinder juggled her string of factory jobs with raising their young son, Tanveer, and their daughter, Gurveer in the basement apartment they had rented on their own.

Meanwhile, for Gill, life in Canada was unfolding much more smoothly. After graduating with his Masters degree in computer engineering from the University of Toronto, he was offered a job by his faculty supervisor, who had started his own biotech software development firm just as the demand for specialised applications was booming.

Shortly after, in 1994, he went to India and was introduced by his family to his future wife, Gurmeet Kaur, who at the time was studying engineering at the Guru Nanak Engineering College, his alma mater.

"I wasn't thinking about moving to Canada," she says. "I was more focussed on my studies. But the corruption in India was bad at that time and a lot of people were trying to move overseas."

The couple laugh together, recollecting the whirlwind that surrounded their wedding. They were married four days after they met.

With little time to think about the country she would soon call home, Gurmeet concentrated on finishing her electrical engineering degree and wondered what adapting to life with a new family would be like.



*Young Khalsas are potential ice-hockey players for Toronto.*

"That's all I was thinking about. I'm surprised, thinking back, that I didn't really question anything about the country I was moving to." But after her studies had been completed, she vividly remembers the day she arrived in Canada to join her husband.

"It was 12 February 1995. There was a lot of snow when we came from the airport. We drove past the Malton Gurdwara (one of 32 located in the province of Ontario). The Malton Gurdwara is the first thing everybody sees coming out from the airport."

Like many Sikhs, her adjustment was much easier because of the large, tightly knit Sikh community that has developed in the Toronto area. The atmosphere at the numerous Gurdwaras in the area also suited the spiritual life she adopted after marrying into an Amritdhari family, as husband and wife regularly attended kirtan and other services throughout the city.

While their family, spiritual and social life became more and more rounded, Gurmeet was completing a degree in Computer Science at nearby York University, which recognised most of her course work from Guru Nanak Engineering College and required only one additional year of computer programming classes to obtain a four-year bachelor's degree.



Together with her husband, they had decided the transition from electrical engineering to computer science would give her the best chance to find a good job. She took classes part-time, in the evenings, taking advantage of a very flexible university schedule that allowed her to look after her newborn daughter during the day, and graduated with her degree.

Three months later, in the fall of 1998, not in a rush to begin working, she was offered a job as a software administrator with Nortel Networks, one of the most sought after positions for someone with her degree in the entire country. She joined her husband, who had earlier accepted a job offer from Nortel as well.

After working with the company for two years, she was laid off, during the most recent recession, but was hired immediately by another software company, which allows her to set her own hours and even work from home when she wants, a luxury her husband also enjoys with Nortel.

They have two personal computers and two lap top computers at home, with high-speed Internet connections that allow them and the children instant access to a high-tech work environment.



*Inside the Malton Gurdwara in Toronto.*

For both the Gills and the Purewals, the late '90s was a time when raising their young children with a balance of Sikh values and an appreciation for the more admirable aspects of western culture posed a constant challenge. It was also a time when plans for the first private Sikh school in Toronto were realized. The Malton Khalsa School was opened 10 kilometres south of Brampton, where both families were living at the time.

"In our case we were really, really blessed with the school," says Gill. "I can't explain in words how great the opportunity is. It's just the right combination of following the Canadian education system, plus bringing in the things that we really value as Sikhs, the religious studies, Punjabi classes, Sikh history and culture."

His eight-year-old daughter Tuvraen joins the conversation. Wearing her impeccably tied black distaar, and well versed in the daily kirtan she performs every morning, she epitomises the best of Canadian pluralism.

"In the summer I play soccer and now my mom and dad are trying to put me in basketball, and I go ice-skating every Wednesday."

She mentions her favourite basketball player, Vince Carter, the star of the National Basketball Association's *Toronto Raptors*, a team that features a very visible "Super-Fan" who sits in the front row of every home game and has not missed one contest since the team entered the league in the mid-'90s.

His name is Nav Singh Bhatia, a turban-wearing Sikh businessman who, for the past five years, has sponsored Vaisakhi Day celebrations during the halftime of one *Toronto Raptors* game every March, attended by thousands of Sikhs from across the city. It's a testament to how integrated the Sikh community in Toronto has become.

For Gill, it has all made life very easy, especially now that his mother and father are living with the family as well. "My mom really likes listening to kirtan on television. There are two stations that show it daily and another station has audio from The Golden Temple 24 hours a day."

Though finding a comfortable life in Canada has been a more tenuous journey for Purewal and his wife, their hard work through the years is now paying off. They opened their own furniture store in 2001, where they now both work, and enrolled their children in the private Khalsa School a few years ago.

"It's still up and down, owning your own business," he says, "but we've been able to do all right. We own our own house now, the kids like going to the Khalsa School and most of the people in this country are very friendly."

His eight year-old daughter Gurveer has excelled at karate, winning two gold medals and a silver at the last provincial tournament, and is getting ready for an upcoming tournament on the weekend.

"Both kids go to karate lessons twice a week. And at school they are learning kirtan and Punjabi and Sikh history. I sometimes wish they weren't exposed to the materialism of western countries like Canada, but even in India, things are changing. I couldn't go back now."

It's a sentiment that Deepinder Singh Gill shares. "Sometimes we look at our life here and we feel we are not thanking God enough for all this."



# Discrimination - and Celebration for Sikh Canadians



Led by Col. Pritam Singh Jauhal (saluting), Sikh officers participating in Indian R-Day celebrations in Vancouver in January, 2003.

On 20 April 1999, in the grand foyer of the *Museum of Civilisation* in Ottawa, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien unveiled a special Canada Post stamp celebrating 100 years of Sikh presence in Canada. Hours earlier, in a drab federal building in Toronto, a tribunal of the Canadian Human Rights Commission began a month-long hearing into why devout Sikhs were being barred from flying *Canada 3000*.

The charter airline had refused to let Balbir Singh Nijjar of Brampton board a flight to Vancouver, unless he surrendered his *kirpan*, the symbolic short sword that observant Sikhs must carry, just as they must wear a turban. He refused and was turned back from the security counter. He complained to the human rights commission, which sided with him and referred the case to adjudication.

"Many objects commonly found on board aircraft can be used as weapons", noted the commission in its annual report. "The fact that *kirpans* can be used in this way does not ... justify a total ban".

The issue has been dealt with repeatedly and decisively, by tribunals and courts. The airline industry itself has developed guidelines that are a model of Canadian compromise – allowing four-inch *kirpans* that fulfil the religious requirements of Sikhs while addressing safety concerns.

The policy by Transport Canada and the Air Transport Association is now followed by *Air Canada* and *Canadian*.

In deeming Nijjar's 3.5-inch *kirpan* a danger to passengers and crew, *Canada 3000* is in danger of becoming to the corporate world what a tiny minority of turban-averse Legionnaires have been to the vast majority of Canadians – a public embarrassment.

Prejudice can come couched in the name of preserving tradition or protecting public safety. Yet airlines, including *Canada 3000* provide passengers with metal knives and forks and bottles of wine and liquor, which can be used to cause serious injury.





## Sikh Canadians *Les sikhs au Canada*



DAY OF ISSUE: JUNE 15, 1999  
CANADA POST CORPORATION SOCIÉTÉ CANADIENNE DES POSTES



Marking 100 years of Sikh/Indo-Canadian presence in the country, a commemorative stamp with the *Khanda* was released by the Right Honourable Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, and the Chairman, of the Canada Post, the Honourable André Ouellet in April 1999. The organisers (the Honourable Herb Dhaliwal and Gurbax Singh Malhi) presented a sizeable brass *Khanda* each to the Prime Minister and the Chairman of Canada Post in the presence of 750 participants at the gala event including members from the Community and politicians from all across the country and the entire political spectrum. The latter included several cabinet ministers and MPs from several political parties.

One major announcement, indeed the only announcement, made at the occasion was the establishment of *Endowments for Scholarships* on behalf of the Sikh/Indo-Canadian community with generous support from a private foundation in Montreal.

Initially, the two endowments for a total sum of \$ 500,000 were designated for Concordia University and McGill University. According to Prof. Balbir Singh Sahni, the plan is to move towards the establishment of similar scholarships at other Canadian universities. While the present allocation will permit the establishment of 10 scholarships, the target is a total of 50. Clearly, through ongoing participation in cultural and religious activities, both within and outside the community the Canadian Mosaic is enriched. This initiative is a welcomed role for the community. It was resoundingly applauded at the function.

Indo-Canadian, visible minorities and other Canadians will be the beneficiaries of the scholarships.

Similar common sense was invoked in 1991 by a tribunal of the Ontario Human Rights Commission in admonishing the Peel school board for discriminating against a student and a teacher wearing *kirpans*.

Rabbi Gunter Plaut ruled that a *kirpan* of a reasonable size is no more a weapon than baseball bats, sharp pencils and dozens of other objects on school property that can be wielded as weapons. His ruling was upheld by the divisional court. But the board proceeded to the Ontario Court of Appeal, which simply refused to hear it.

The board could have saved itself, and taxpayers, much grief had it abided by two earlier rulings – in 1990 in British Columbia, in 1981 in 1981 in Ontario. In both,

*kirpan*-wearing Sikhs won the right to health services offered by workers compensation boards. Wrote Frederick Zemans, chair of the Ontario Human Rights Commission tribunal:

"A society that believes in the fundamental equality of all persons must be prepared to accept various, often unique, forms of expressing personal religious beliefs. We justifiably pride ourselves on the civil liberties of our young nation, and we must be prepared to put our tolerance to the hard and difficult tests". Sikhs - like Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hutterites, Amish and other - do put us to the test. Outrageously different and admirably gutsy, Sikhs force us to live up to all that we proclaim about equality, human rights and justice.

When they came to the West Coast 100 years ago, Sikhs faced a particularly severe backlash. Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Mackenzie King told them to go back to where they had come from. Municipal, provincial and federal governments banned them from certain jobs or buying land or sponsoring family or voting.

That was then. But even now, Sikhs must regularly jump through regulatory hoops to wear the turban (several cases had to be fought right up to the Supreme Court for that right) or carry a small *kirpan*.

The latest case will add nothing substantive to the debate, notes Mississauga lawyer Satwinder Gosal, who has been involved in several such matters.

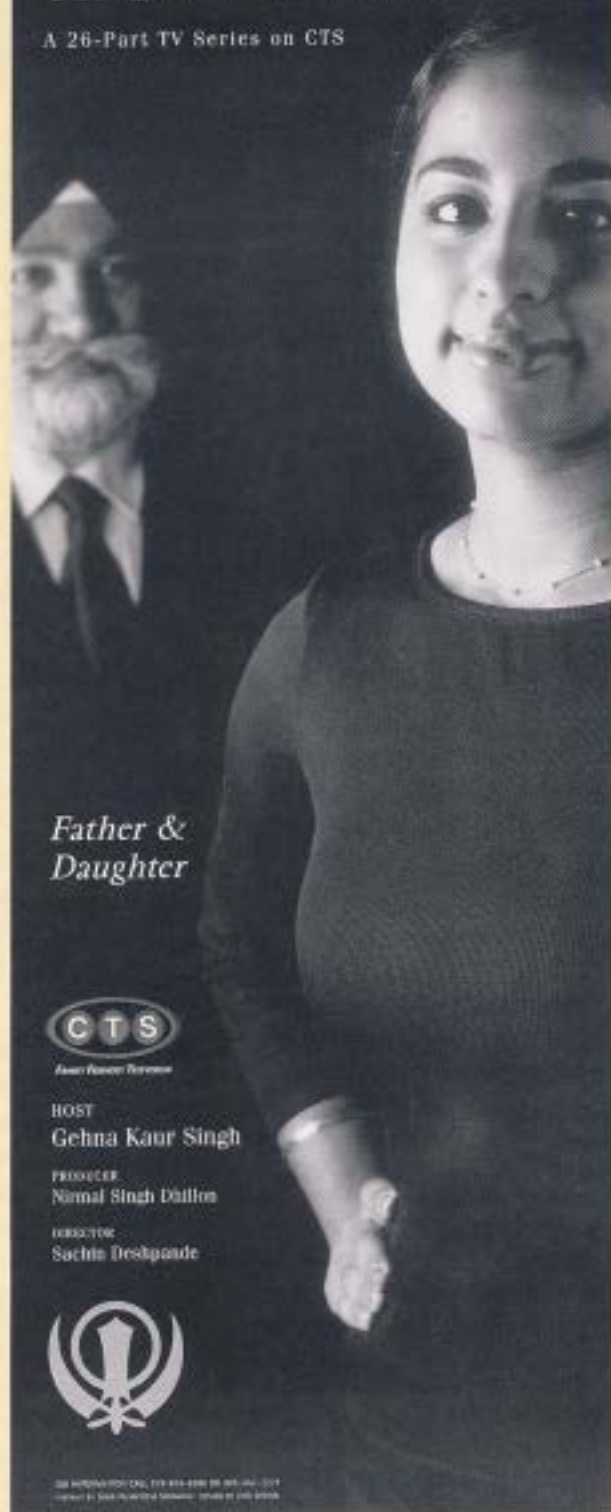
The only silver lining is that the Canadian judicial system



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## THE KHANDA



THE KHANDA is the symbol of the Sikh faith. It is a double-edged sword with a circular guard and a base. It is a symbol of the Sikh faith and is used in the Sikh religion.

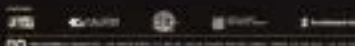
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*Beautifully designed and produced poster at the Tercentenary  
of the Khalsa Panth.*

works, and helps deliver reasonable accommodation for Sikhs, and other minorities.

Canada is also the only Western jurisdiction to honour the Sikhs with a commemorative stamp – featuring the *khanda*, a double-edged sword that can cleave the truth from falsehood; a circle with no beginning or end representing an infinite God; and two *kirpans* symbolising the twin spiritual and temporal duties of a believer.

In their daily prayer, Sikhs intone, *Nishchai kar apni jeet karon*, "Keep thine faith to win".

They deserve to, for they have also put their faith in Canada.

*From: Toronto Star*



## Baljit Singh Chadha

The Honourable Baljit Singh Chadha, P.C. counts as one of his blessings the ability to undertake *Seva* (charitable works). At the age of 40, following a family tradition, Baljit and his wife Roshi created the Chadha Family Foundation. One of the projects undertaken by the Foundation was the underwriting and guaranteeing of half of the initial \$600,000 budget of the *Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms* exhibition held at the Royal Ontario Museum. Other projects have included the establishment at McGill and Concordia Universities in Montreal of permanent endowments, which will pay in perpetuity for tuition fees and books of 10 students each year. The Foundation has also sponsored the annual gala of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; has funded the start up costs of a full credit course in Sikh studies at McGill University; and the establishment of the Technology Centre at the prestigious Lower Canada College, Montreal.

Consistent with his understandings of *Seva*, Baljit has facilitated inter-religion and inter-ethnic dialogue among Canadians. He has established a scholarship at the Hellenic Scholarship Foundation, sponsored a gala of the Jewish arts centre, contributed towards the construction of a Hindu Mandir, funded the renovation of the Orthodox Church of St. Markella & St. Irene and the Tamil Temple of Saiva Mission of Quebec.



Baljit Singh Chadha has received numerous awards for his diverse activities. For example, he was the recipient of *The Arts and Trade Medal* in recognition of his remarkable work in the area of export of food products and for his commitment to improving intercultural relations. Last year, Baljit was appointed to the prestigious Security and Intelligence Review Committee, which oversees the activities of the Canadian Intelligence service: CSIS, and as such Baljit is a member of the Queen's Privy Council of Canada.

All this from a young man who came to study in Canada at the age of 21, started a business with borrowed capital and rented a desk from a friend and then established one of the few world wide trading houses in Quebec.

The Chadha family are devout Sewadars of the Golden Temple, Amritsar and have undertaken various projects, included in which is the construction of 15 rooms for overseas pilgrims at the Sarai at the Harmandir Sahib.



Baljit Singh, Roshi, Gurveen and Harkhet talk with the Governor General of Canada Adrienne Clarkson at Rideau Hall after the swearing in ceremony.



## Ajit Kaur Tiwana

In her own words, "somewhere deep down within me, at very early age, I had a vision of serving in uniform ... no matter how hard I tried to move away, it kept nagging at me. I just knew that the profession I'm in was my calling and once I accepted it and began pursuing it, everything just fell in place. The only decision I was really faced with was to chose the Organisation that I wanted to work for. For me,

the most logical choice was the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, because of the unlimited career opportunities within Federal Policing, and that's what attracted me to the RCMP.

A month before graduation from the RCMP Academy I was advised that I was being posted to Fisher Branch, Manitoba. I had never heard of this place, so Cst. Dana Patterson and myself went over to the academy library and we pulled a map of Manitoba out and frantically looked for Fisher Branch on the map. We couldn't find it... it was a little scary ... so we looked through the index and then finally found Fisher Branch. According to the map it was approximately 170 kms north of Winnipeg. We actually laughed after finding Fisher Branch, even though it was quite a shock. At that point you know that you made a commitment to serve so it doesn't matter where you go ... it's your first posting, you take what's handed down to you and you promise yourself that you're going to make the most of it.

There were a total of 9 member at this detachment. 1 Sergeant N.C.O., 1 Corporal, and 7 Constable. We live in homes provided by the Force and we live in a compound together behind the detachment. We're a family no matter how you look at it. We count on each other for our lives and the camaraderie is strong.

On a personal level there have been huge challenges. Coming from a Punjabi Sikh family and having lived in India and the Toronto area, I grew up in an environment where I was constantly surrounded by people of my culture and religion. Fisher Branch tested the strength of my identity. With the closest Gurdwara being 200km from Fisher Branch, and a very small East Indian community in Winnipeg (200km away) I had to remain very strong to overcome the lack of contact with people of my community and lack of access to my religious institutions. I had to bring that same Sikh energy that I grew up in, into my home to feel comfortable and at peace with myself. Although at a personal level there have been challenges, there are no regrets. Everyone around me knows who I am, what I believe in and they respect what I stand for."

As for her future aspirations, she was pursuing a Master of Arts, in Political Studies from the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. "I just finished my first year. My area of specialisation is *Intelligence, Espionage, Insurgency and Terrorism*. My advisor is Dr. O. Peter St. John who is a specialist in "Intelligence, Espionage, Insurgency, and Terrorism", and has written several books on the subject matter.

I'm specialising in this area because I'd like to streamline my career so that I can work in the National Security Intelligence Section of the RCMP in Ontario. There's a great deal of opportunity within the Organisation and along the way I hope to make the most of any area that I have opportunity of working in.

I was born 1971 in India, in a small village near Chandigarh in the Punjab and came to Canada in 1972 with my parents. We initially settled in Toronto and then moved to Brantford, Ontario. In 1981 I returned to India and attended Dalhousie Public School in Dalhousie, a boarding school, and I spent 2 years there. In 1983 I began attending Auckland House School in Simla, Himachal Pradesh. Auckland House School was a Protestant boarding school and I spent 7 years there. During my time in



Ajit Kaur Tiwana was the first South Asian woman to join the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 1987.



## Pardeep Singh Nagra

At 7:00 a.m. December 2, 1999 in Campbell River, B.C., Pardeep Singh Nagra began his medical examinations. The 29 year old community development worker, already much decorated for his voluntary work in the mainstream, was ready to compete in the national amateur boxing championships. If successful, he could be selected for the Olympics. But his competition would be more than just other boxers – he also had to take on the Canadian Amateur Boxing Association which said he could not fight unless he shaved his beard. The same argument was posed by Boxing Ontario the year before. However, under pressure from the OHRC, they permitted Pardeep to fight so long as he wore a net over his beard.

At the very moment Pardeep was undergoing his physicals, his lawyers were appearing before a judge in Ontario (which is three hours ahead of B.C.) to ask for a mandatory order to compel the Boxing association to allow Pardeep to compete. The order was granted almost immediately and faxed to B.C. In what seemed like blatant contempt for the Court Order, the Boxing Association cancelled the entire light-flyweight division, thus preventing Pardeep from competing. What transpired over the next few months was the ugly debate that the country had not experienced since the days of Baltej Singh Dhillon's challenge of the RCMP almost a decade earlier.

Like Dhillon, Nagra was passionate and articulate in expressing his religious beliefs. He became an overnight celebrity; appearing on talk shows as an eloquent ambassador for the *Quom*. In the face of death threats, he stood up for his view of



Sikhi and his commitment to Canada. "People who struggle to define themselves in the Canadian context define Canada.... that's the beauty of the country".

Early the following year, Pardeep fought against the 10 time national champion. He maintained his poise in spite of the taunts of the ignorant audience. While he lost in the ring, he had already won out of the ring.

Auckland House School I had the opportunity of developing several skills ... everyone knows that boarding schools in India focus on developing all round students. We participated in everything from sports, academics, art, music, drama, debates and declamation, and a whole lot more. So, during my stay in Auckland House School I participated in art competitions, some I won some I lost. I played basketball for 6 years and I was on the school team. We won a number of Provincial Basketball Tournaments. I loved sports, so I played field hockey, table tennis, badminton and I competed in soft ball, shot put, running relays, gymnastics and other sports. I also had the opportunity to act in 2-3 school plays that were hosted for the public. The most famous one we staged was a 3 hour play called "Arsenic and Old Lace" in which I played the part of Jonathan Brewster (the villain). It was an amazing experience. I participated in classical dance classes, sitar classes and piano classes. During my final year I was nominated the House Captain for Durrant House. So, during that year I provided leadership and led my House through all major sports/academic competitions. It was a very successful year for Durrant House.

I graduated from Auckland House in 1988 and returned to Canada. I joined the Morning Star Secondary School in Malton, Ontario. I completed my O.S.S.D. in 1991 and joined University of Waterloo in 1991. I joined as a Science student, hoping to go to Medical School but once I finished 1st year I realized sciences wasn't for me ... and at the back of my mind I just knew I had to be in uniform and I had to be a police officer. So, I took some law classes and political science classes and I loved it! So, I switched over to arts. I graduated from University, of Waterloo with a Honours Bachelor of Arts degree (major Political Science and minor-Legal Studies).

I applied to the RCMP in October 1995 and got accepted to the Academy in January 1998. It was a long and trying wait but it was something I was willing to wait for. Once I completed my training and went to my first posting, about a year after I decided it was time to do my Masters. So, I applied to the University of Manitoba, got accepted and started my Masters in September 1999.



## Surjit Singh Babra

When one thinks of the entrepreneurial spirit, what comes to mind is someone who possesses ambition, is a visionary and a risk taker. When one couples that spirit with qualities of good will and humanitarianism, the name Surjit Singh Babra comes to mind. Surjit is chair and president of the SkyLink Group of Companies, a privately held Canadian corporation. Established in 1989, SkyLink Aviation Inc. is an international aviation company which has been providing aviation support services to high profile organisations such as the United Nations, World Food Programme, U.S. Aid, INS (Homeland) Securities, the Canadian government and other national Governments. Collectively, the SkyLink Group of Companies has a turnover of \$ 300 million each year.

Born in India, Surjit spent his childhood in Kenya. He attended college back in India, and then moved to London, to continue his studies. There, he started work with a local travel agency and four years later, driven by his demanding work ethic, Surjit left his job to form a travel business of his own. In 1988, Surjit formed a partnership with an individual who brought his aviation skills to the partnership and together, the group developed the opportunity to work in supporting the United Nations peacekeeping operations. Since its foray into air transport, SkyLink has flown for agencies such as UNICEF, the World Food Programme and NATO in addition to the U.N. In 1994, SkyLink was contracted by the Canadian



Armed Forces to air medical, relief and peace keeping supplies to Uganda and Rwanda – the largest peace keeping air lift in Canadian military history.

Surjit has exhibited dedication to the International community through more than just providing necessary services to the organisations that are mentioned above. In 1992, during the U.N.'s mission to Cambodia, Surjit made a first hand trip to Cambodia to assess the situation himself and provide moral support for his pilots. During the Rwanda mission in 1994, the Canadian Regiment discovered hundreds of orphans and SkyLink offered to air lift the first shipment of clothes to the children. More recently, in June of 1993, Surjit Singh Babra and SkyLink were honoured for their donation of \$ 100,000 to fund demining training and provision of modern demining equipment in Mozambique. SkyLink has also been involved in providing medical relief on a voluntary basis to the children in Iraq.

Surjit is famous for his *hukam* and general sense of *chardit karta*. If indeed there was a proverbial first Sikh on the moon to greet Neil Armstrong, it must have been Surjit Singh Babra. Certainly for him, the sky has never been the limit.

## Jaswant Guzder, M.D.

Jaswant Kaur (nee Bains) Guzder was born in Duncan, B.C. to pioneer Sikh immigrants in 1947. She completed one year of undergraduate study at the University of Victoria, subsequently moving to McGill University in Montreal in 1966 to complete a Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry; a Medical Degree in 1973; as well as a Diploma in Psychiatry with distinction in 1974.

Jaswant is a psychoanalyst and accomplished artist who is currently an associate professor of psychiatry at McGill University in Montreal with several academic and clinical appointments. She is a member of many professional associations including the Canadian Psychiatric Association, the Canadian Psychoanalytic Association, the Society for Culture and Psychiatry, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, to name a few. She has been an invited speaker for many presentations and workshops in Canada, the United Kingdom and India. Some of these presentations include: "Psychic Trauma and Family Violence..... Families and Children of South Asian Origin: Bicultural Realities in Canada", "Traumatized Children in Vulnerable Families: Issues of Parental Capacity", "Portrayal of Women in Religion, Art and Film: Women in the Judeo-Christian and Hindu Traditions", and "The Importance of Cultural Preservation for the well being of marginalised communities".

Dr. Guzder is considered an innovative researcher in the borderline personality field with specific reference to children and in transcultural clinical consultation.

Alongside post-graduate studies in psychiatry, her vast list of research activities has led to collaboration on many publications that include *The Cultural Context of Clinical Assessment; diatheses and stressors in borderline pathology in childhood; The role of neuropsychological risk and trauma; and Psychological Risk Factors for Borderline Pathology in School-aged Children.*

While Jaswant's main job is director of a child day treatment unit for seven to twelve year old children, she is active in a variety of capacities including teaching positions with various institutions that include various departments and divisions at the Jewish General Hospital and McGill University.

In addition to Jaswant's extensive work in psychiatry, she is an artist and has had art training at the Museum of Fine Arts School in Montreal, the University of Victoria printmaking ateliers, and worked with a Jungian analyst on art therapy workshops. She has done book illustrating and exhibited her art works in galleries in Canada, the United Kingdom and India. Recently, she has been active with the *Teesri Duniya* theatre company as part of their board of directors in promoting themes of life in the Diaspora.



## Manjit Singh

Manjit Singh, a distinguished Sikh-Canadian, has been described as a "role model", contributing towards the stature of emerging immigrant communities. As a Sikh, a Punjabi, and a person with origins in India, he continues to excel in his ambassadorial role. Graduating in Business Management (University of Western Ontario, Canada) and History as well as Economics and Political Science (University of Delhi, India), Manjit Singh chose to seek early retirement in 1990



to be able to devote his attention to volunteer work full time. His extensive experience of over 30 years in the corporate world has enabled him to accomplish several unprecedented targets over the past decade.

In Canada, in recognition of these efforts, he has been bestowed with numerous appointments, honorary positions and has received prestigious awards.

Amongst Manjit Singh's volunteer career, certain significant appointments can be highlighted. He was Director, Canadian Sikh Council, National President, World Council on Religion and Peace, Board Member, World Council on Religion and Peace, Trustee, Punjabi Association of Quebec, Vice Chair,

Employment Equity Advisory Committee, Treasury Board, Government of Canada, Executive Member, Montreal Inter-faith Council Member, Advisory Committee to the Commissioner, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Director, Punjabi Association of Quebec, Chairman, Advisory Committee on Visible Minorities in the Public Service and Crown Corporations, Member, Advisory Committee of the Canadian Ethno-Cultural Council to the Demographic Review Task Force, Health and Welfare Canada, Chairman, Censes Sub-Committee, The Canadian Ethno-Cultural Council, President, Montreal Chapter [West Island], NACOI (National Assoc. of Canadians of Origins in India).



*With RCMP Commissioner Inkestert Mark, as an advisor to the RCMP in 1994.*



*An outside view of the Gurdwara Sahib Greater Montreal, which was opened in March 1999. Manjit Singh was the project manager for this Gurdwara.*

Manjit Singh's pro-active and advisory roles in a cross-section of official and NGO institutions have yielded many significant accomplishments and awards, including the granting of permission to wear turbans to members of the RCMP. He was appointed as the first Sikh chaplain at a North American University, (McGill University, presently at Concordia University also). He established teaching of 3 credit "Introduction to Sikhism" course at a Canadian university starting with McGill and now extending to University of Calgary and under consideration at York University.



# The Sikhs in Canada

The Sikh immigrants and their Canadian born descendants are an important segment of the visible minority population in Canada. This sociological study and analysis of Sikh migrations and their location in the Canadian landscape are presented within broad political, economic, and social contexts. Their migration patterns are analysed within the broader context of international migrations, history of immigration policy, and the social and economic consequences for immigrants. Major sections of the book deal with procurement and use of immigrant labour, political economy of immigrant and migrant workers, racism, and the consequences of various policies for the formation of social institutions such as the family.

Given the importance of religion and the current diversity of religious faiths in Canada, religious affiliation of a particular group and the knowledge of the beliefs, codes, and practices of that religion become crucial in understanding that community. This is particularly so in the case of the Sikhs, who have a distinct physical identity: the 5 Ks and the turban. Practice of their faith in accordance with religious teachings and strict adherence to the 5 Ks and turban may often come into conflict with the social practices, institutional requirements, and legal codes. For instance, initial strong opposition by some to the recruitment of Sikhs in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) was primarily based on the argument that Sikhs wearing turbans would violate the traditions of the RCMP and traditional codes regarding uniforms. Wearing the *kirpan* by some students has often created tension in some schools. Sikhs have also sought exemption from bicycle safety helmet laws. They successfully lobbied in British Columbia for such an exemption in 1996, but in 2002 are faced with somewhat similar legislation in Alberta, which they vow to oppose. The Sikhs are asking for an across the country helmet exemption rather than recourse in individual jurisdictions.

## the Sikhs in Canada

Migration, Race, Class, and Gender

Gurcharn S. Basran • B. Singh Bolaria

OXFORD

Turbaned Sikhs now serve in the RCMP, school boards have made accommodations for practicing Sikh students, and Sikhs have gained exemption from helmet laws in some jurisdictions; all this has been made possible only through legal challenges and political lobbying. A knowledge of the Sikh faith and religious practices would perhaps help to create a better and wider understanding of these issues in the larger society and avoid future tensions and conflicts.

Thus, the section on *Sikhs, Sikhism, and the Khalsa Panth* is essential to understanding these issues and contradictions. The social context within which the Sikh religion emerged, the life, contributions, and teachings of the Gurus, religious codes and practices, also contribute to an understanding of the internal conflict within the community between the



'fundamentalists' and the 'moderates', and the links of these factions to the religious institution and place of religious authority in Punjab. The Sikh identity of self-sacrifice, bravado and valour are rooted in their historical experiences since very foundation of the Sikh religion.

Social, economic, and political links of Sikhs in Canada to the 'old country' are not unique to this community, but are common to all immigrant communities to a degree. However, in the case of Sikhs, these links have remained strong because of historical and contemporary immigration policy and practices. Even now about two thirds of the Sikhs are foreign-born, with their roots largely in the Punjab. Religionisation of politics intertwined with the politics of language, caste, class, regional, and communal loyalties continue to be important forces in people's lives. A full appreciation of the current situation in the Punjab requires a historical-structural analysis of a number of forces and events both internal and external to the Sikh community. This book's presentation covers the social, economic, political and communal context of the historical and contemporary dimensions of the 'Punjab problem'. While the 'religious factor' has received most attention, the issues of the political economy and the development policies of the state have remained largely in the background. The communalisation of politics, portrayal of regional issues as Sikh demands, and the sectarian and secessionist perception of the Punjab problem, helped to divert attention away from the underlying material conditions in the region. Political issues and agitations are rooted in economic development policy and its contradictions in Punjab, and embody broader economic forces of displacement, underemployment, unemployment, and increasing economic disparity.

Contending political interests played an important role in the social construction of the issues and problems. Polarisation of politics between the 'moderates' and the 'extremists' in the Sikh community received encouragement even from the secular parties for electoral gains. External political interests and internal politics between the 'moderates' and the 'extremists' in the Sikh community received encouragement even from the secular parties for electoral gains. External political interests and internal politics and contradictions among the Sikhs contributed to an increasing polarisation of Punjab politics. The state, both at the provincial and central levels, also played an important role in shaping the political process and the construction of the Punjab problem and

also the state's response and solution to the problems. Oppressive state policies were justified to root out 'extremists' and restore peace and order. While on the surface, the 'Punjab problem' appears to have been stabilised, the basic economic and social issues remain unresolved.

The author's central point is that without a historical-structural analysis of the origin and development of the Sikh religion and religious codes and practices, one cannot fully understand the Sikh community in Canada, its internal contradictions and conflicts, and its relations with the larger community. While the communalisation of issues remains a factor, the political economy of the province, economic development policies, and class disparities are fundamental to a full understanding of the Punjab problem. This type of analysis also contributes to a better understanding of religious, social, economic and political links between the community in Canada and their primary place of origin in Punjab. Globalisation of production and internationalisation of labour and capital is likely to further extend these links.

Sikh workers, and other workers from India, have been a racialised segment of the workforce in Canada. Racialised immigration controls have ranged from total exclusion to continuous journey stipulation and annual immigrant nationality quotas. In the case of immigrants from India, institutional racism has been most explicit in the racialised hierarchy of preferred immigrants, denial of legal-political rights, conjugal rights, and labour market inequalities. These measures created structural conditions for exploitation of the early immigrants at their workplace and social discrimination in their daily lives. Their material existence and everyday lived experience in Canada and its link to their colonial background formed an important dimension of the political consciousness of pioneer immigrants. While explicitly racist immigration controls and overt institutional racism are in the past, racial minorities continue to face socio-economic inequalities in Canada.

The early Sikh workers in Canada were one of the most disadvantaged, racialised, and subordinated foreign-born workforce. The structural conditions and constraints under which they entered Canada made them the most vulnerable labour force. They were not allowed to bring their families and children with them and were denied legal-political rights. With limited alternative job opportunities, racial labour policies at their place of employment relegated them largely to low-paying and subordinated jobs in segregated work areas. The organisation of the workforce and work along racial lines had various dimensions: racially segregated labour and living conditions; racial preference in employment and blocked alternative opportunities; differential wages and price of labour by race; racialised work and segregated work areas; racialised occupational and social hierarchy. They also faced racism and



discrimination in their daily lives and had to endure and cope with discrimination in housing, restaurants, hotels, bars, and were denied many other services. Sikhs were also insulted and ridiculed for their appearance and mode of dress. Many of the discriminatory work and social experiences Sikhs shared with other Hindustanis. Their common shared experiences united them in their support for India's independence from colonial rule and against the racist immigration policy, racism, and racial discrimination.

In many respects the Sikhs were a sub-proletarianised, marginalised and subordinated workforce who were preferred as workers but considered as undesirable immigrants and permanent settlers.

### **Post War Canada: Social Mobility and Inequality**

Post-war changes in immigration policy have had a profound impact on the sources of immigrants and their characteristics, and consequently the contemporary Canadian population is more heterogeneous and diverse. The recent arrivals are also better educated with professional qualifications and training than the early immigrants. They also tend to be better educated than their Canadian-born counterparts. While visible minority men and women have higher educational levels in comparison to other Canadians, they have differential labour market opportunities and employment earnings and incomes. Consequently the incidence of low income among visible minorities remains above the Canadian average. However, there is considerable inter- and intra-group variation among the visible minority groups.

The social and demographic characteristics of the Sikh community differ markedly from early immigrants from India. Their labour market opportunities and profile have also improved considerably in recent years. This is primarily due to the pre-immigration class and educational background of recent arrivals and the post-war changes in the occupational structure of Canada. The employment data indicate, however, that Sikhs and other Indo-Canadians still face inequality in the labour market and have low employment earnings and incomes. Notwithstanding higher educational attainment they are less likely to be in professional, managerial, and administrative jobs.

In the media the Sikh community is often 'problematised' and portrayed as undemocratic, conflict- and violence-ridden, a threat to the general public requiring inordinate use of public safety, law and order services. These portrayals have also contributed to the low social status (ranking) of Sikhs).

The visible success of a few Sikhs masks the economic and social inequality faced by many and glosses over the fact that a large number of Sikhs are far from being prosperous.

Historically, the development of Sikh families was stifled because of racist and sexist immigration policies, recruitment of single male labour, denial of normal conjugal family life, and other restrictions and limitations placed upon their permanent settlement in Canada. The repeal of many of the statutory restrictions and changes in immigration policy saw the influx of better educated, professional-skilled workers, often from middle and upper-class urban backgrounds. Their family structure and family relations differ markedly from those Sikhs who arrived earlier and had relatively low educational levels, predominantly from a rural background and faced discriminatory state policies and a hostile social environment. Contemporary Sikh families show considerable diversity in family structure and dynamics, akin to that of families in the general population. There is considerable variation in cultural practices, gender relations, parent-child relations, and family attitudes toward courtship and marriage.

The economic well-being and internal dynamics of racial minority families are also linked to economic and social status of visible minority women. The socio-economic and labour market profiles of these women differ from those of their non-visible counterparts. In their analysis of gender inequality, most of the mainstream feminists assume a common experience of all women based on gender alone, separate from any other experiences. While gender affects social distribution of privileges it does not operate alone. Women of colour cannot overlook the simultaneity of experiences of racism, sexism, and class inequalities. Race and racism continue to structure the experience of racial minority women in their daily lives and in the labour market. These experiences are, however, far from monolithic because of the diversity of origin and background, cultural practices, religion, educational level, and class status.

State policies on immigration and racial minorities also influence the characteristics of immigrants and the nature of social and economic inequality. Many social forces determine state policies, including the demographic imperatives and the labour requirements Canada will face in the future. The policies may also be influenced by the increasing presence of the visible minority population in Canada and their participation in the political process. Thus this book's discussion and analysis have much larger implications for Canadian society and public policy.





# Sikh Spirit and the Global Society

The infotech revolution has dramatically transformed the wide world into a global village. As a result, peoples of different races and creeds in distant regions have virtually become next door neighbours. Different faith communities interpenetrate and interact with each other daily. Gone are the days when people belonging to different denominations lived in their own tiny isolated camps, untroubled and ignorant of what happened outside.

**Pluralism:** In today's pluralistic global society however, there is growing unrest and disharmony. This has been due mainly to the fact that adherents of every faith are keen, indeed over-zealous, to extol their own, under-rating the ideology and culture of others. Leaders of each religion claim for their faith a monopoly over truth. To them, only their religion, only their prophet can lead man on the path to God-realisation and self-realisation. Other religions are declared as fake and other faith-communities as infidels. This exclusivist attitude is doing much damage to mankind's social fabric, and this needs to be rectified. We must realise that "the religious life of mankind from now on, if it is to be lived at all, will be lived in a context of religious pluralism .... this is true for all of us. Therefore, the present situation should be the concern of all religions.

The Sikh faith is the youngest of major world religions, and could be called a higher stage in the evolution of the religious consciousness of man. Originating with Guru Nanak (1469-1539) in the north-west of India, it has since spread throughout the world despite the fact that it is not a missionary faith in the evangelical sense. Its expansion, spurred during Britain's Colonial rule, continues because of the Sikh Diaspora. But dissemination of knowledge about the Sikh faith, especially in Europe and North America has helped in this expansion. Chronologically, the fifteenth century, when Sikh faith originated, belongs to the medieval age in Indian history. However, an in-depth study of it reveals its critical attitude towards the medieval spirit and its responsiveness to modernity.

**Dynamics:** The Sikh faith demands and provides a new definition to the concept of religion itself. For example, herein the boundaries between the realms of the sacred and the secular get blurred: in fact, there is a dynamic interaction between the two. Herein, the spiritual becomes inspirational to the temporal, and the temporal makes the spiritual a dynamic one. Thus, man and the mundane world he lives in get spiritualised: the world no more remains sinful, or *mayic*, or just in suffering, rather it becomes a place where resides the Lord Himself.



Ihu jagu sachai ki hai kothari sache  
 Ka vichu vasu  
 This world is abode of the Lord –  
 Verily, He the Creator-Lord is ever  
 immanent herein.

This is called *dharamsal* where dharma is to be lived. The world is the creation of God, and in the world one finds the becoming of God in time. Man is not a born sinner, rather he is declared one with God, one in essence, thus giving place to the idea of spiritual unity and ethnic equality of mankind. God is one and He reveals to different holy men at different points of time. Thus, each revelation is genuine and each religion valid. However, the feeling of *haumai*, or egoism, which is the natural consequence of *avidya*, or ignorance, makes man forgetful of his unity with God and other human beings and rather causes his differentiation from both. In the Sikh scripture, human life is declared the crown of all life – better than even that of gods who are also said to yearn for human life. It is the only opportunity for the individual soul to attempt and achieve oneness with the Supreme Soul: union with God can be realised while still living a robust and righteous life of filial and social obligations, says the Sikh scripture: *hasandia khelandia pahinandia khawandia viche hovai mukti*. Thus, the world and worldly life are declared as wonderful and worth living. Doing noble deeds while still contemplating on the Name Divine is the Sikh ideal: in fact, the best of religions is the one which exhorts humans to contemplate on God while performing noble deeds in proactive social life:

*Sarab dharma mahi sreshath dharma  
 Hari ko namu japi nirmal karamu*

**Universal:** The Sikh faith integrates the world and worldly life with the idea of divinity. It rejects asceticism, but at the same time it is also highly critical of the hedonistic way of life. Asceticism and hedonism, as two extremes, are rejected in Sikhism and the Sikh concept of social action is marked by boundaries of morality. In Sikhism, the Khalsa as created by Guru Gobind Singh in fulfillment of Guru Nanak's mission is the agency to which the task of social transformation has been endowed whereas the scripture renders the general framework of structure in which the task is to be accomplished. However, both the structure and the agency must function in harmony to bring about peaceful co-existence, love and compassion, equality and justice in society.

As against the exclusivist attitude, Guru Nanak does not try to impose on anybody the message of his revelation, rather he shared this with all. He took out four preaching odysseys, travelling throughout India and many neighbouring countries to share that message with mankind in general and the holy men of diverse religious traditions in particular. He made it a point to visit every place of pilgrimage that fell on his way and held discourse with holy men there. The idea was to listen to them and then convey to them his own viewpoint. In one of his hymns, Guru Nanak testifies to the importance of dialogue in inter-faith and inter-community relations – *jab lab dunia rahiai Nanak kichhu suniai kichhu kahiai*. Man must continue to maintain dialogue throughout his worldly existence because that is the only way of reaching the truth. Even here priority is given to listening to the viewpoint of others. Dialogue is recommended, but polemic is categorically rejected:

*Khoji upjai badi binsai Hau bali bali gur kartara*  
 (Genuine search [for truth] begins when all polemic ends; sacrifice am I unto God the Creator).

Polemic causes – and is also caused by – ego which, in the Sikh scripture, is referred to as a “serious malady”. On the other hand, humility which is a necessary pre-requisite for listening to the other's point of view is the essence of all virtue. Guru Nanak's “*Siddha Goshiti*”, as we find it included in the Sikh scripture, is a sort of spiritual dialogue between Guru Nanak and Siddhas on the Sikh philosophy of life vis-à-vis the philosophy of yoga. Throughout the long-drawn dialogue, the serenity and sobriety is retained with the aim to realise the truth. Guru Nanak states that it is only through meaningful dialogue that truth can be arrived at. It is also this sort of attitude which the modern mind must cultivate so as to resolve most socio-political and inter-community problems.

Another exclusivist point negated by the Sikh faith has been denial of validity and authenticity of prophets and revelation of other traditions. This is generally done by comparing the ideal of one's own faith with the practices of others. Sikhism not only acknowledges and appreciates all other faiths, it accepts their equal validity. This is like the 20<sup>th</sup> century American poet and mystic, Walt Whitman, who accepted “a hundred, a thousand other Saviours and mediators and Bibles”. This attitude helps us understand and appreciate other religions and live in harmony with other faith-communities.

Compilation of the Sikh Scripture is another clear example of the Sikh acceptance of religious pluralism. This can undoubtedly be called the unique scripture in its emphatic statement that revelation is neither religion-specific nor region-specific nor person-specific. It holds that revelation to different prophets in different spatio-historico-cultural milieus was



expressed by them in the language, idiom and metaphor that were best suited to them, and that the revelation in each case was genuine. It is in confirmation of this that Guru Arjan while compiling the Sikh scriptures included hymns of several holy men from other traditions along with those of the Gurus. And, these holy men belonged to different caste groups, different regions and different periods. And all the hymns in the Scripture – may they be of Guru Nanak, or Kabir or Ravidas or Farid – are held in equal reverence. However, there are certain areas where the Gurus do not entirely agree with them, and at such points they retain what these holy men have to say but add to them their own comments so as to make their view point clear.

The Sikh Gurus acceptance and appreciation of other faiths was equally followed by their followers. For example, Guru Nanak was held in equal reverence by Hindus as well as by Muslims. The fact of Guru Arjan gathering both Hindus as well as Muslims around him is acknowledged by Emperor Jahangir himself. It was on Guru Arjan's invitation that Mian Mir, a known Muslim Sufi, laid the foundation stone of the Harimandar Sahib at Amritsar, *sanctum sanctorum* of the Sikhs. Guru Tegh Bahadur gave his life for the sake of religious freedom of man. Among the Sikhs, Bhai Kanhaiya is the best example of the Sikh seeing the same divine essence behind different religious denominations of wounded soldiers in the battlefield of Anandpur. Treating all human beings as spiritually one, and ethnically equal, notwithstanding their different religious backgrounds is the pre-requisite for maintaining harmonious relationship between different faith-communities.

The Sikh faith, no doubt, accepts plurality but this acceptance is not passive, rather it is critical. This critical spirit is quite explicit on at least two very vital points.

**One**, the Sikh Gurus are highly critical of any religion which sanctions and safeguards any hierarchical structure of mankind. The idea of inequality by birth among people is not acceptable to them. There are many hymns in the Sikh scripture which criticise the spirit and philosophy of the Vedic tradition which classifies humans into different *varnas* or castes. In Sikh theology, all humans are equal, notwithstanding all the differences in their exterior: all humans are, in essence, one with God and equal among themselves as well as in His eye.

**Two**, the Sikh faith condemns the religion that mobilises mass support in the name of religion to serve the interests of any contemporary ruling political class. The Sikh Gurus

are against religion becoming an instrument of political dominance. Therefore, they criticise any religion that serves an oppressive purpose, especially at the hands of political classes. Thus, religion no more remains an asylum for the voiceless and the helpless, rather it is made a weapon in the hands of the suffering people against the unjust oppressor.

**Emansipatory "Panth":** Khalsa (constituents of the Khalsa Panth) is the agency to carry out the work of social transformation, and the Khalsa-Panth (as a collective social entity) as created by Guru Gobind Singh on the *Vaisakhi* day (30 March) of AD 1699 represents, in micro-cosmic form, the Sikh ideal of social structure. It is a classless and casteless social structure wherein love is the abiding value which gets "reflected in the altruistic tendencies of the Khalsa." Everybody here suffers in the suffering of everybody else. This suffering is not in the sense of pain from evil as evil, but it is in bearing the pain of others to relieve them of pain as also of evil. This altruistic tendency finds expression in the deeds of *seva* (service) to others, contributing in cash and kind for philanthropic purposes, striving for and even suffering martyrdom for a righteous cause, etc. As Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the President of India wrote, creation of Khalsa was to 'defy religious intolerance, religious persecution and political inequality'. Cultivation of the values of the Khalsa by all humans is an answer to many maladies of modern life.

If we want the world to be set free from the prevalent distrust and disharmony, oppression and violence, 'we have to see others as our brothers and sisters. We need to discover how to affirm our own identity ... without threatening the identity of others'. This happens to be the central message of the Sikh faith which imbibes that the idea of God's love for all beings teaches us to value the other in his or her otherness. It considers all religions and their revelations as valid, appreciates others faiths but, at the same time, adopts dialogue to convey its differences on whatever points, makes love for God the *visa-tergo* for love for mankind and expresses this love through *seva* and other such philanthropic activities. Sikh stress is on ethics of creative activism aiming at the realisation of an ideal social structure of the Gurus vision. The need of the time is that we must not limit ourselves to words alone but try and put them into practice, and so live the idea in our practical social life.

Dr. Dharam Singh

Department of "Encyclopedia of Sikhism"  
Guru Gobind Singh Bhawan, Punjabi University, Patiala



Order of Merit bestowed on Jean-Marie Lafont

## FRANCO-SIKH TIES IN HISTORY



*At the special ceremony on 12 December 2003: Jean-Marie Lafont and the French Ambassador Dominique Girad, both wearing turbans, with S. Tarlochan Singh and S. Vikramjit Singh Sahney.*

As the French Ambassador Dominique Girad said in his opening address. "It is an honour and, indeed a true joy, to bestow on Jean-Marie Lafont the medal of the Order of Merit."

"Jean-Marie Lafont is such an inspiring *Renaissance Man*, a man initiating and conducting ambitious projects, where West and East meet, securing lost archives, generating fascinating exhibition concepts, launching historical museums, restoring masterpieces gone astray, networking research teams, etc.

Jean-Marie, is it because you are from the south of France, from Marseilles, where people are known and sought after for their warmth and joyfulness? Is it because you are this thorough Mediterranean *intellectual* we admire, well versed in Greek and Latin, that were your first passion, rewarded by a doctor's title at a very young age, that surely gave you this ethical humanistic approach we all cherish in you? Is it because you have such a wonderful wife, Réhana, whom you met when you came to this part of the world, and who surely contributed immensely to make you what you are today? Is it because you cultivate friendship as a cardinal virtue, like a spirited maharaja of the quintessential sort, always caring for

others, always concerned of making them *aware*, of past grandeur, of consequences of their doings, of roots and destinies? Dear Jean-Marie, that you are a magic friend : you make life sound interesting.

Jean-Marie, you are one of the most prominent historians of the day, whose work is essential to know how India and France came closer to each other in the past."

"Since war was very much part of our first close encounter with the sub-continent, you became a thorough specialist of military affairs in XVIIth and XVIIIth Century. Your views on France's first endeavours in India are totally new. You were among the first historians to throw light on the contributions of our *philosophes voyageurs* prior – and later parallel to – the colonial episode, whose knowledge and know-how in fact mattered to the maharajas of the time and who entered as engineers and *men of the art* in their service. And how they loved India! They wrote and wrote treatises, letters, reports, essays, translation works. They were curious, imaginative, enterprising. And they were successful! They really brought European advanced techniques of the time to the most remote areas of India.

As for the XIXth Century, your contribution is also a major one. You somehow resurrected Maharaja Ranjit Singh





*Display of Sikh martial arts at the French Ambassador's residence in New Delhi.*

The question of the headwear in French state schools having become an emotive and vital issue involving the Sikh students, among other minorities, particularly the Muslim, the visit of the French Foreign Minister to New Delhi lately aroused huge interest. The Sikh delegations calling on him and the French Ambassador to India registered strong protest, which put the French dignitaries on the defensive, as it were.

While conferring Order of Merit on the Ambassador, Mr. Jean-Marie Lafont, Mr. Dominique Girard spoke very highly of the Sikh values, valour and uprightness. Among other things, he traced the long history of the Sikh-French relations, touching on the grandeur of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's court and the Sikh monarch's appointment of French Army officers as Generals for his armies, to equip with them with the techniques of western warfare and army training. The shrewd and insightful Maharaja had realised the importance of training his troops on western lines to meet the menace of the British army knocking on the threshold of Punjab.

These sentiment were echoed by the French Ambassador in his reply which again was full of high praise for the Maharaja and for the Sikhs as a community of great soldiers, greater devotee and great scholars. The turban issue is a question of Sikh honour and Sikh identity. This fact was brought graphically to the notice of the French dignitaries. It appeared from their response that the French Government, aware of the problem would soon find some ways to satisfy the aggrieved Sikhs.

DSM

and could give justice to Punjab's noble battle for dignity and independence. Three French men took part in this modern *epopeia*: General Allard, General Ventura and General Court, and you could show that there again France and India had met, on true modern terms: the Maharaja and the generals were friends, the generals fell in love and ..... married! They married local beauties, in the French way, embracing India as they embraced matrimonial bliss. Knowledge and know-how was shared and developed together. If you allow me so say so, that really was "true co-operation" in earlier times.

Your work has been already acknowledged by the scientific community, and beyond academic circles. You have been awarded in 1995 the Giles Prize, the prestigious Prize of the *Institut de France*.

This is but a small recollection of the numerous breakthroughs you brought about in history sciences. But all of us here read your scientific writings. In fact we are very thankful to *Oxford University Press* that recognised the excellence of your historical work and even committed you to produce a full collection of *French Sources of Indian History Series* where some of your masterpieces are now accessible for common readers. Sometimes we are even fortunate enough to just listen to you. You are a fabulous conteur, and History told *ad improvisum* by you is pure magic. Everything becomes



clear, details come alive, the sense of man's dreams and actions become real. We are truly thankful to you for the light you cast on our daily toiling and doing.

In conclusion to this small recounting of your outstanding merits, I would like to pay homage to the *Renaissance Man* you are. We owe you so much. The students and research fellows working under your guidance, the scientific community, France and India. I just recall some of the ambitious projects you brought to life: *L'extraordinaire aventure de Benot de Doigne aux Indes* (1996, Chambléry), *Malraux en Gandhara* (1997, Embassy of France in India, realised with the expertise of your dear wife Réhana). *XVIIIth Century Maps and Drawings of Indian Cities and Monuments in French Archives* (2000, National Museum, New Delhi), *Life and Times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, (2001, opening of Ranjit Singh Museum). I know you have many other projects in store : Imam Bakhsh



(Above) Some of the guests at the French Ambassador's residence at New Delhi and (Below) H.E. M. Dominique Girard (on the left) with family and friends.



Lahori and La Fontaine, Begum Sumro, Raymond in Hyderabad, Claude Martin in Lucknow, Tippu Sultan, and others. I know you will consistently work at creating such new encounters.

All these adventures show of your intellectual stature. The French Government is grateful to you for being the scientific entrepreneur you are, a pioneering scholar and a French humanist in India.

To accompany us in this celebration by which the French Government pays tribute to your academic and scholarly achievements, and to the strong and ever expanding friendship and co-operation between France and India, I asked you, my dear Jean-Marie, to request the Sikh community to share our pleasure and grace us with its presence. I told you, and I told many of them, my admiration and my esteem for the Sikhs, a wonderful part of the Indian Nation, a superb component of the Indian culture and an integral part of the Indian future, within the borders of India and throughout a world which more than ever will survive only thanks to cultural diversity, respect and co-operation.

*Jean-Marie Lafont, au nom du Président de la République, nous vous faisons chevalier dans l'Ordre national du Mérite.*

*Dominique Girard,  
Ambassador of France  
to India*



# Jean-Marie Lafont and Kingdom of The Punjab

Jean-Marie Lafont recalled that, in 1830, a brilliant young French scientist, Victor Jacquemont, was on his way from Delhi to Lahore to meet Maharaja Ranjit Singh. In a letter to his father from Delhi, he observed with mirth that all the Frenchmen he had met in India were either *marquis* or *chevaliers*.

"Some months ago, when my Ambassador informed me that I had been granted this distinction, Jacquemont's observation came immediately to my mind. I am not aware

my case? Mine is not a career of high position with political and administrative responsibilities. In my 36 years of educational service I have been directed not by worldly ambition, but a passion which I will explain shortly. When I accepted to go to Afghanistan in 1967, this was not only an administrative move but the right personal decision.

I have to admit to a very passionate "curiosity" for inter-cultural connections, be it in Greek civilisation or Indo-French history. My driving force for all these years is to



General Allard and his family at Lahore. Oil on canvas "Paris, 1836".

how many French *marquis* there are in India today, but standing before you, you have one more" *chevalier, sans armes ni cheval*.

Mr Ambassador, when you received a high award from our Defence Minister last April, you explained to the French community the meaning of such distinctions and the reason why the République is conferring them upon some of its citizens: it acknowledges an outstanding contribution beyond the line of duty.

The question arises: what is this honour acknowledging

understand how men and women from different parts of the world and having different backgrounds, creeds, ways of life, different perceptive and analysis of the cosmos could share the same inquisitiveness and the same openness for other people, societies, cultures, religions and "mentalités".

I have always been fascinated by the Greeks and the non-Greeks, including the Indo-Greeks and Graeco-buddhist art which flourished in Gandhara. I excavated in Afghanistan, on the Amu Darya river, several years before



I met the lovely lady who is today my wife... But it's after we met, and when we were not yet married, that we were told in Lahore about a French officer of Napoléon who had married a Hindu princess from Chamba, in Himachal Pradesh. That had taken place in Lahore when the kingdom of Punjab was under the enlightened and benevolent rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Hence a new life, new discoveries, new trends of research in the fields of Indo-French relations approached not from the beaten tracks of the French East India Company, or the French settlements in India, but from the unusual and often untold stories of the French people who decided to step over the cultural differences in 16th to 19th

Indologist, while the Indologists told me I was a historian. An uncomfortable situation with no place in the French system and intelligensia, which some analysts rightly call the French *Nomenklatura*.

But help came from the French Academy and the Ministry of External Affairs, including four Ambassadors to India, who understood better than anybody else the extent of my work and the meaning of my publications. This is one more reason why, Mr. Ambassador, I am grateful to you for hosting this event.

These French people and institutions helped me to conduct my research here, but it is my Indian friends who



*The Darbar of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Gouache on paper, stuck on wood panel.*

century India to enter service of the Indian states before the British Raj.

After 30 years of work in the subcontinent, an entire aspect of Indo-French history has been resurrected. Spending twelve years in Lahore and sixteen in Delhi is not a traditional *cursus* for a French educationist trained to teach French, Latin and Greek to young people in France. But it was not possible to conduct such a research in the traditional framework of French universities and research institutions. The historians considered me to be an

made it possible to complete it. How can I forget the help received from the Punjabi and Sikh communities in my work on Punjab history and Maharaja Ranjit Singh? How can I express my gratitude to Sardar Tarlochan Singh who has a well deserved reputation for promoting Sikh and Punjabi history and culture all over the world? The exhibition my wife and I were able to put up in Amritsar bicentenary of the coronation of Maharaja Ranjit Singh is the result of our combined efforts. And it is gratifying to know that this temporary exhibition has been kept as the





*Fezli Azam Joo, wife of General Court.  
Oil on canvas by August Schoefft.*



*Maharaja Ranjit Singh with generals Allard and Ventura.  
Military Manual of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.*

permanent exhibition of the Maharaja Ranjit Singh Museum in Amritsar, while the book *Maharaja Ranjit Singh Lord of the Five Rivers* has been reprinted after the first edition sold out in three months.

I have to make a confession: if since 1974 I have been working on Indo-French relations, it is because of one person: Réhana, my wife, to whom my work and my entire life are dedicated. She is the inspiration and the *ultima ratio* of my research in these incredibly rich fields of Indo-French exchanges through the last five centuries. Our three sons, who belong to India as well as to France, have attached me more and more to this land and to this people. Will you be surprised if I admit that in the University of Delhi, every student of mine is like my son or my daughter during the two years that I have the privilege of working with them, when I try to show them some new ways of studying the encounter of two cultures for a better, closer relationship between India and France, India and Europe in the 21st century?

I am glad to inform you – with some pride – that the

European Union in its Cross Cultural Exchange Programme has just selected the project I had launched a couple of years ago on preservation, restoration and digitalisation of archives in Europe and India dealing with economic and cultural exchanges between India and Europe. This One-Million-Euro project includes among other partners, the University of Delhi and the Punjab State Archives in Patiala, along with the *Centre Des Archives d'Outre-Mer* in France where we have collected our archival documentation on India.

And last but not the least : we are planning in Paris, Saint-Tropez and Marseille an exhibition on Maharaja Ranjit Singh and France which the Indian Government has already accepted to sponsor. Sardar Tarlochan Singh is again helping me in trying to implement the various proposals we have made. Let's hope we can do it sooner, rather than later.

I thank you for sharing this evening with my wife, my sons and me"

*Jean-Marie Lafont*



# NOTRE TURBAN, NOTRE IDENTITE

## France Ban on "Religious Symbols"

France's National Assembly voted on 11 February 2004 by an overwhelming majority to ban Muslim head scarves "and other religious symbols" from public schools, a move that underscores the broad support for the French secular ideal but is certain to deepen resentment among France's large Muslim population. The vote came hours after the minister of national education, Luc Ferry, said that the law would stretch much further than religious symbols and require all students to attend mixed-sex physical education classes and accept



About 3,000 Sikhs from across Europe marched on a Paris boulevard to defend their traditional turbans against a looming French ban on religious symbols in state schools in Paris. Banners read "Sikh turbans at school" (left) and "Our turban is our identity."

what is taught on the Holocaust and human reproduction. Three weeks earlier, Mr Ferry, a philosopher and best-selling author, said that bandannas and hairiness would be banned from public schools if they were considered religious signs. The draft law bans "ostensibly" religious signs that have been defined by President Jacques Chirac and a blue-ribbon governmental advisory commission as Islamic head scarves, Christian crosses that are too large in size and Jewish skull-caps (Sikh turbans are also likely to be included). But the legislation also includes a lengthy preamble demanding that public schools must be "protected" and guarantee total equality, including "co-education of all teachings, particularly in sports and physical education". Schools, it said, are the "the best tool for planting the roots of the republican idea".

Mr Ferry made clear that religious beliefs could not be used as an excuse to avoid gym or biology classes and that questioning the veracity of the Holocaust would not be tolerated. "They have no right to contest the contents of a course, for example the programme on the Holocaust in history of human reproduction in biology or physical education", Mr Ferry said on Europe 1 radio. The law "will keep classrooms from being divided up into militant religious communities", Ferry added, noting that there had been a "spectacular rise in racism and anti-Semitism in the past three years".

In recent years, teachers have complained that some Muslim students have been so disruptive in rejecting the veracity of the Nazi slaughter of the Jews that it is impossible to teach the subject. Teachers have also said that some Muslim girls have boycotted classes on human reproduction because they are too graphic and have demanded sexually segregated gym classes; there are also reports that both male and female Muslim students have demanded prayer breaks within the standardised baccalaureate exams at the end of high school and a ban on pork in school cafeterias. The law does not specifically deal with the issue of students behaviour.

*From: The New York Times*

## French Disconnection

Secular India, arguably more than any other country, knows the immense virtues of keeping the matters of State apart from those of faith. There have been enough occasions in the last half-a-century where tragedies arising out of religion-based politics have made it amply clear that the traditional separation of the Church and State needs to be faithfully maintained. So, on the face of it, secular India should applaud the recent law passed by French President Jacques Chirac which bans the wearing of the Islamic headscarf and other 'conspicuous' religious symbols in State



schools. And yet, it is clear that Mr Chirac's France – with its 5 million-odd Muslim citizens – in an effort to maintain the strict form of French secularism known as *laïcité*, has swung the dial to the other extreme.

By lumping harmless visual displays or practices of faith in the same basket as religious radicalism (or at least making a straightforward connection between the two) France not only seems to have failed to grasp the essence of multiculturalism, but also runs the risk of facing a backlash. The ban, after all, is also directed against religious symbols of other faiths – which has made the Sikh community in France, for instance, also protest against the latest law. Effectively, by paying too much attention to such ideological markers, Mr Chirac has, in fact, made them now stand out in a jarring manner that doesn't serve a modern, syncretic society.

France may boast of a football team where many, including national hero Zinedine Zidane, is of non-French origin. But these still stand out as exceptions. *Laïcité* has still been unable to make France a society in which the same quality of social mobility is provided to all sections. The hard secularism that France has followed since the days of fighting a victorious battle against obscurantism and an authoritative Catholic Church in the past must now be allowed to modernise itself. The State is above religion. But Mr Chirac must realise that the two are far from being always in conflict with each other.

*From: The Hindustan Times*

## Oui, Monsieur de Villepin

Upon his arrival in New Delhi, French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin has been deluged with protests. His government's decision to ban all "conspicuous" religious symbols from public schools has been controversial all through. Among these symbols are believed to be Muslim headscarves, Jewish skullcaps, Sikh turbans and Christian crosses. All this, aver French officials, is in pursuit of equality and integration. Others fear the move is simply a ruse to stigmatise minorities and segregate them out of the public arena. The true picture perhaps lies somewhere between these two extremes. De Villepin highlighted the complexity of the issue when he assured Indian officials that his regime would find a way of



*Sikh students protest against the French government's proposed law blocking religious attire in public schools, seen at the Golden Temple in Amritsar.*

resolving it, by respecting the sentiments of the Sikh community and the constraints of "our situation in France".

In the manner in which France approaches the task will lie valuable instruction to societies elsewhere on the challenges of multiculturalism. France's way of honouring secularism has been somewhat unique. Its history is replete with endeavours to deliver equality to all by banishing religious distinctions from public life. Integration is equated with affirmative action, it is thought to be best served by removing overt ethno-religious markers. The other secular way, of course, is to desist from imposing too many restrictions on a citizen, whatever his religious affiliation. In the past the merits of the two modes could have been debated endlessly. Migration has been with human societies for ever but movement of peoples tended to be a slow process. That gradualism made for a more seamless process of integration. Today movement is quick and rapid. Technology allows a migrant to keep in touch with the



*American Sikh children protest against the French government's ban on turbans.*



home country; it enables her to nurture sub-identities – among them religious – across national boundaries. The French law, thus, asks them to make a completely unwarranted choice between an over-arching national identity and a personally valued sub-identity.

In India, Foreign Minister de Villepin just had to glance around to realise the absurdity of the ban on Sikh turbans. But as he zipped around the lecture circuit as the poster boy of an alternative, un-American worldview, he must also know that imposing sameness is too anachronistic a task in these multicultural times.

*From: The Indian Express*

## France may Compromise on Turban Issue

Faced with a storm of protest from Sikhs worldwide, the French Government has indicated early redressal of their grievances regarding sanctions on the turban as part of the anti-veil law.

"We need to solve this (the Sikh) problem", visiting Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin stated in New Delhi immediately after his meeting with Union Minister Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa and National Commission for Minorities (NCM) chairman Tarlochan Singh to exclusively discuss the turban issue. France would try to work out a "good compromise" for the Sikhs "considering the 'specificity' of their problem", he remarked.

"We need to have a compromise between the principle of neutrality and showing respect to the Sikh faith".

At the meeting with Sikh leaders, including Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa and



Meeting of Sardar Tarlochan Singh, Chairman, National Commission for Minorities with Mr. Dominique De Villepin, Foreign Minister of France regarding issue of turbans in France at New Delhi. On his left are S. Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa, Union Minister for Chemicals and Fertilisers and S. Sukhdev Singh Bhaur, General Secretary, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee.

Tarlochan Singh, De Villepin also received memoranda from Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) chief Gurcharan Singh Tohra by his aides and from the NCM chief himself.

Both the Union Minister and Tarlochan Singh told reporters after their one-to-one meeting with the French leader that they had been assured of a positive response from Paris to their request. "France recognises well the role the Sikhs played while fighting for it with their turbans on during the World Wars. We also share historical links with the French since the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh", said the NCM Chairman, referring to the presence of Napoleon Bonaparte's military generals in service of the Punjab (*with turbans on* - Ed.).

## Bishop of Paris to Take Up Turban Issue

National Minorities Commission Chairman Tarlochan Singh has said the "turban row in Paris was likely to be resolved soon with the Bishop of Paris set to taking up the issue with the French government.

The Union government was also working through diplomatic channels to resolve the issue.

India's Foreign Secretary had taken up the matter with his French counterpart and that the French Ambassador in India had also been apprised of the matter. He said the French Ambassador had submitted a report regarding the issue to his government.

The NCM Chairman said that when the French government had formed a Committee to devise ways to create a secular atmosphere in the country, the Sikh population had not represented before the Committee when it was examining the issue of banning various types of head gears. He said now that the French government had been apprised of the matter, the issue "was likely to be solved amicably".



## BANS AND TURBANS

# A Matter of Honour



(Above): Maharaja Bhupendra Singh standardised the Patiala-style turban.

(Right): A style favoured in the Punjab that is now in Pakistan.

(Far right): A British Indian Army JCO in ceremonial regalia in the late 19th century.



Come to think of it, I am just yards of fine muslin cloth in a myriad of colours and, sometimes, designs. Yet when I adorn the head of those who wear me, I am the epitome of grace, culture and honour. Wars have been fought over me, people have become brothers when they exchange me with another of my kin — Maharaja Ranjit Singh gained the Kohinoor diamond in this fashion. I am a turban.

Now they want to ban me in schools in France. But how can they do it? So many brave warriors who wore me died fighting for France. I have been a crown on the heads of historical figures, and of those who are not even footnotes of history. I have made my presence felt in the continents of Asia and Africa for centuries. And if you look back at civilisations, you'll find my mention in the *Old Testament* and in Egyptian, Turkish and Indian texts and art; in fact, almost everywhere where civilisation made an impact. Why, even relief medallions at Sanchi and Bharhut stupas, dating back to 2nd Century BC or earlier, feature me.

The French government's "ban" on the turban has triggered protests from Sikhs across the world. This is not the first time the turban has run into trouble. It has seen some trying times on foreign shores during its long and chequered history. It has stirred opposition, curiosity, ridicule and was even spurned in cultures unfamiliar with what it stood for. The turban has existed in India since time immemorial as a symbol of pride and honour. After 9/11, turbaned persons have been targeted by bigots in the US and Europe. Much like the enterprising Sikh, who ventures unafraid to distant lands, the turban too has endured. The turban tells its tale of travails and triumph in the words of Roopinder Singh.

The Egyptians called me *pir*, I am referred to as the turban in Biblical texts, in Persian I am called *dastar* and in Arabic one of the words for me is *imamah*. In Hindi I am called *pagree* and in Punjabi am referred to as both *pagari* or *dastar*. Other terms for me include *murassa*, *khirki-dar*, *Faruq Shahi*, *atpati*, *kuladar*, *pechdar* and *Safawi*, named after the dynasty of the same name in Iran.

I am a symbol of honour, which is why if someone talks of soiling a turban, it implies being dishonoured. In fact, a great honour being conferred upon someone by royalty is *dastar a fazilat*. Today, I will confine this narration to India and, in particular, to the Sikhs. In passing, let me mention that I was an item of formal wear in the southern Indian states, where lyers used silk cloth. In Maharashtra, there was the *pheta* and, of course, Rajasthan is well known for my colourful





*Baba Kharrak Singh was jailed for wearing a black turban.*

cousins called *pagari*, *pencha*, *sela*, or *safa*. Museums in Udaipur and Jodhpur have hundreds of styles on display.

What is my ideal length? Actually, it varies, based on the area, style and the person. Historians will bear me out when I tell you that Prince Salim, the 16th-century Sultan of Turkey, wore 11 yards of *malmal*, and other Muslim nobles followed suit. Nowadays, it varies from 5 to

8 yards. The Nihang Sikhs wear turbans which are many times this size!

In Mughal India, when a reign changed, the new Emperor evolved a style uniquely his own, which was, of course, widely followed. Just look at how Emperors Babur, Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir and Shahjahan, and their successors changed the style.

For the Sikhs, I am what Guru Gobind Singh ordered his Khalsa to wear at all times. However, because of my distinctiveness, the Sikhs have gone through various trials and tribulations in the last three centuries. They were easily identified and persecuted during the reign of the Mughals and from time to time thereafter, but have remained steadfast in their devotion to me and all that I stand for. The slogan: "*Pagari sambhal oye Jatta*," by Shaheed Bhagat Singh's uncle became a clarion call for independence from British colonialism.

They have refused to take me off, even if asked to do so as a safety measure. Memorably, in both World Wars, Sikh soldiers who were fighting for the Allies refused to wear steel helmets, despite knowing that the casualties among them would be higher if they did so. When told by their officers that the cost of pensions etc. accruing from their death was too much for the British Empire to bear, they unanimously agreed to forego any pension if they got a head injury. They still refused to dispense with me. Nowadays, the dispute is about crash helmets for motorcyclists, and the governments of Malaysia, Singapore Australia and the UK have amended their laws to make special allowance for me.

Someone has documented that during World Wars I and II, 83,055 turbaned Sikh soldiers died and 1,09,045 were

wounded when fighting under the command of the Allied forces.

Many Sikhs, settled in the UK following World War II, faced discrimination because of me. In 1969, however, the Sikh bus company employees in Wolverhampton, led by Sohan Singh Jolly, won the right to wear turbans while on duty. This marked the successful culmination of a long-running campaign.

Other skirmishes followed, notably in Manchester, and it was only in 1982 that the House of Lords, Britain's highest court, ruled that Sikhs are a distinct ethnic group entitled to protection under the Race Relations Act. Nowadays, in the UK, turban-wearing Sikhs can be seen in all walks of life, including the police and the army.



*One of the pioneer Sikhs immigrants to Astoria, Oregon, USA, circa 1916.*

In the USA, I was called all kinds of names when Sikh immigrants first touched the shores of California at the end of the 19th century. They were derisively called "rag heads" because of me. Turbaned Bhagat Singh Thind served in the US army during World War I, but was denied American citizenship because he was "non-European White." Now many Sikhs wear me proudly, many hold top jobs, but the armed forces still discriminate against me. I have faced problems because of ignorance and bigotry after 9/11, but it has always been a continuing struggle to educate people about what I stand for.

In Canada, I faced problems during the early 1900s and, in fact, the Sikhs were disfranchised by British Columbia in 1907, and the *Komagatu Maru* tragedy, where 376 passengers of the ship were not allowed to disembark at Vancouver, followed in 1914. However, Canada gave voting rights to these people in 1947 and things have changed.

In 1990, Baltej Singh Dhillon proudly wore me and joined the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Some bigoted Canadians protested, but finally the ruling was in my favour a few years later.

In Africa, turbaned Sikhs did not face much problem, except for dealing with curiosity, which always happens. The same was much the case in New Zealand and Australia, except for one time when some members of the Australian Returned Services League tried to have Sikhs debarred from one of their clubs because they refused to remove their turbans on the premises of the club. I understand that the RSL objectors had to back down.

Anyway, so much for my being discriminated against. Most of the time I strike a distinctive note, which attracts



*The turban of Kabuli Sikhs is influenced by the culture they live in.*





The turban worn by the President's Bodyguard has its distinctive style.

attention. And many people are curious about how I am tied. Well, there are various ways, and indeed many distinct styles have evolved, expressing the individuality of various persons as well as the togetherness of various groups.

The way I have been tied often reflected the society of the time and of course there was always the sartorial element. A matching turban, a contrasting one, a *bandhni* turban with a splash of colours, a *lehariya* turban in which pattern makes waves, the African turban with its flat folds. There have been so many turbans, so many ways in which the Sikhs have tied them....

The patterns that the Sikhs wear come primarily from the Rajputs of Rajasthan, where there are thousands of my cousins. Since societal life is stratified in that area, colours and patterns represent specific castes or sub-groups. The way they are tied is also strictly laid down.

For the Sikhs, however, there are no hard and fast rules, though various social groups and geographical areas such as Malwa, Majha, Peshawar, Pothohar and Afghanistan have distinct styles. The Jats tie me differently from the non-Jats. The former, for example, do not wear patterns, just plain ones.

As for the colour, the elderly wear white, which is also a political colour of the Congress Party. The Akalis support royal blue, electric blue and saffron. Most Sikhs have at least half a dozen colours, which they wear to suit the occasion or the attire. Princely states, however, had distinctive colours of their own (see box).

Black, however, became a colour of specific protest during the British Raj after the tragic killings of the Sikhs

at Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak (now in Pakistan) where the local *mahants*, in connivance with the British authorities, had killed a large number of pilgrims.

In fact, Baba Kharak Singh, a prominent leader of the time, wore me in black. He was jailed by the British from 1922 to 1927. Hundreds of other Sikhs also wore black at that time and many were jailed, but remained steadfast in their demand till the British relented. In the troubled decade of the 1980s, saffron became a colour of discontent.

Though I am overwhelmingly worn by men, women too support turbans, especially those belonging to the Akhand Kirtani Jatha of Bhai Randhir Singh and also American women converts to Sikhism. They follow the injunction made by Guru Gobind Singh who asked Mai Bhago to wear the *kachera* and tie a turban. Though small in number, these ladies do cut a dashing figure.



Women belonging to the Akhand Kirtani Jatha wear turbans.

When you talk of me, you have to keep in mind the royal house of Patiala, which evolved the distinctive Patiala Shahi turban in which a thumb is used to create a depression near the forehead. The Patiala turban was standardised during the reign of Maharaja Bhupendra Singh.

Urdu poet Faiz wrote a beautiful couplet about me.

*Sari-khusrau se naazi-kaj kutahi chin bhi jata hai /Kutha-l-Khusaravi se bue sultani nahai jati.*

"While the turban may be taken from the head of a Sultan, the aroma of royalty will not leave the turban."

I am rooted in history that is inseparable from the spiritual journey of the believer. This reason alone is sufficient for me not to be taken lightly or easily dismissed, even though I have, like the symbols that stem out of other religions, become for many followers more an expression of religiosity and cultural values than of spirituality.

I have to be respected for what I stand for, and those who tie me have to reflect on that too, since it is their conduct that will give me the power to stand for honour. "You judge a man by his turban, gait and his speech," maintains an ancient Persian saying. How very true.

**Text by Roopinder Singh**  
[Courtesy: The Tribune]  
**Sketches by R. M. Singh**

## Colours of The Turban

### Indian armed forces

Black	Cavalry and Armoured Corps
Green	Infantry
Maroon	Special Forces and Para-commandos
Blue	Artillery, Engineers
Grey	Aviation Corps

### Princely states

The following were the colours favoured for formal turbans by the royalty of the princely states of Punjab:

Patiala	Pink (court) and lemon.
Faridkot	Hara Ferozi (turquoise).
Nabha	Maroon
Jind	Orange



Birmingham policemen are now turbaned too.



# Towards True Understanding



## The World Sikh Council's Women's Conference at Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan, USA December 2003

Palbinder Kaur, one of the speakers at the conference, asked all those who believed in equality (of the sexes) to raise their hands. Immediately the room was filled with raised hands. "Why the need for a Women's Conference then?" shot back Palbinder. "Clearly, we are not practising what we believe in: Equality."

At the women's conference hosted by the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Oakland University, and co-sponsored by World Sikh Council's "America Region," all four distinguished women Sikh speakers concurred on one point: The "we" in question were we "Sikhs," rather than "we, women." All four spoke on different topics, but the essence of their statements was the same: A Sikh is a Sikh, irrespective of their gender.

Over two hundred delegates from the United States and Canada attended the conference at Oakland University where Professor Gary Shepard, the university's Director of Religious Studies welcomed them. Professor Charles Mabee, Special Lecturer of Religious Studies at the university, made the opening remarks, putting the conference theme in the current context. Sangieeta Kaur and Rupinder Kaur graciously moderated the seminar.

Palbinder Kaur of Surrey, a practising lawyer from British Columbia, recipient of the Queen's Golden Jubilee

Medal for Community Service and current Director of Fraser Health Authority was the first speaker. Her topic: "The Role of Women as Envisioned by Sikh Gurus".

Through examples of situations personally known to her, Palbinder pointed out how many women in the North American Sikh community were as suppressed today as they were in Guru Nanak's time. A father killing his daughter, her unborn child and her husband because she had married against his will - an issue of his *izzat*. A young woman being forced to spend the rest of her life alone and single, after the tragic death of her fiancé - thus becoming a living sati. Women prevented from answering the telephone or from taking walks alone outside the home lest they unwittingly come in contact with a male. A simple custom of distributing sweets on the birth of a male child but not when a girl is born. How can such unmistakable, obvious prejudice be norm? Obviously, we are not practising what we believe in.

"Change must occur at an individual level; it is only when the individual is recognised as being the vehicle of change that true gender equality can be experienced," said Palbinder. But first, and most importantly, no one can give you your rights if you don't want them: "*Maan tu jyot sarup hui apna mool paichan*," she quoted.



Corporate lawyer from Toronto and a regular speaker at Sikh conferences, Ramandeep Kaur discussed the 'Role played by Sikh Women in History.' She spoke of the accomplishments of Sikh women who, inspired by the Gurus' revolutionary ideals, met adversity with dignity and courage. Ramandeep also discussed the concept of the Khalsa, "which is gender neutral and equal in all respects, in terms of both religious rights that a Khalsa enjoys and responsibilities that she must shoulder." Apart from citing examples of Mata Gujri ji and other notable Sikh women, Ramandeep took a page out of her own family's history book and recounted her grandmother's struggle to survive the Partition (of India and Pakistan in 1947). Walking across to the Indian border with her brother, and 10-day old baby, she battled the idea of strangling her newborn more than once lest he might give them away, while her husband, a soldier in the British - Indian army was fighting another battle not too far away, only she didn't know where. It was not until eight years later that she was reunited with her



husband. Ramandeep highlighted the example of her grandmother as one of the many women whose faith kept them in *chardi kala* in the face of adversity.

The afternoon session resumed with the third speaker of the day, Inni Kaur. From Norwalk, Connecticut, she is Vice-President of Spectrum Communications, a published poet and a member of the Editorial Board of the journal, *Nishaan*. Inni spoke on 'Emphasising Peace, Harmony and Equality at Home.' She demolished the gender inequality issue by commencing her speech with "Ik Onkar - The One from whom everything comes...the One with has created all. If we believe in that then where is the gender inequality issue?" she asked.

Inni also explained the significance of the *Lavans*, how marriage is a "3-way union" with the Guru as its centre, realised on three levels - physical, emotional and spiritual. She underlined the necessity of a strong bond between husband and wife to follow the lifestyle of a Sikh and "make our houses homes where our children feel the spirit of Sikhi."

She highlighted the very basic, normally sidelined facets of Sikhism: The three golden rules - *Kirit Karo*, *Naam Japo* and *Vand Chako*, the need to make "*ghar, ghar, dharamsal*," the grace of accepting *hukam* and the joy of *chardi kala*. The simple, solid guidelines that mark the Sikh way of life.

Anahat Kaur, the last speaker, is a practicing Obstetrician/Gynaecologist from Los Angeles, California. She tackled the issues related to "The Adoption of the Principle of Equal Opportunities for All." Anahat, recipient of the American Heart Association Research Award, and a Board member of the National Conference of Community and Justice of Orange County Region, encouraged women to take a stand for what they felt was right and urged them to follow the *Rehat Maryada*. Referring to the ongoing debate whether the *Rehat Maryada* should be altered: Since it was not of the women, it could hardly be for them. Yet, when reviewing each passage of the *Rehat Maryada*, Anahat showed how the *Rehat Maryada* re-affirmed the strong role of woman in the Sikh religion. She argued that it stood

equally for all men and women who were Sikhs, for all Sikhs.

At every point the *Rehat Maryada* spells out "A Sikh should..." There is no mention whether this Sikh is a man, woman, girl or boy. In fact, in places where women are singled out, it is to protect them against social discrimination and superstition. For example:

- ❖ Any person who kills female infants or gives off a son or daughter in matrimony for a price or reward shall be liable to chastisement involving automatic boycott.
- ❖ A Sikh's marriage party should have as small a number of people as the girl's people desire.
- ❖ Child marriage is taboo for Sikhs.

Even though the *Rehat Maryada* was chalked out in 1932, issues such as child infanticide, child marriage and dowry are widely prevalent even today.

It is commonly said that it is but one voice that which speaks on *Gurmata*. At the conference four speakers from





different parts of North America and different backgrounds, spoke on different topics. But they had one voice. Anahat persuaded women "to be the Rosa Parks of today." In 1955 Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man in a bus. She was tired and weary from a long day of work, She was also tired of the treatment she and other African Americans received every day of their lives, with the racism, segregation, and Jim Crow laws of the time. "Our mistreatment was just not right, and I was tired of it," wrote Parks in her book, "Quiet Strength".) "Quiet strength" is what Palbinder Kaur asked of her peers - to bring about change by simply changing oneself. To lead by example was the true message of the Gurus. It's what Ramandeep's grandmother brimmed with, it is what Inni Kaur's golden rule - silence - is based upon.

Both Palbinder and Inni Kaur described *Ik Onkar* as a "revolutionary thought." The fact that not only was this God universal, but was also accessible to all, men and women alike. Guru Nanak's vision of God was not a God for only the privileged few, but a genderless God who was within all, and obtainable by all, irrespective of gender, caste or class. Palbinder stressed that by referring to God as 'He,' we lower God to mere human form and this is simply a form of idolatry,

In the question-answer session that followed the speeches, pertinent issues were raised:

As four women committed to the Sikh way of life, they saw no barriers living in Western society. Palbinder recalls an incident where a young girl came up and thanked her, "for being you." She explained to Palbinder that as long as she could remember she always wanted to be a security guard, but her father wouldn't hear of it because it wasn't a job for girls. But when he saw Palbinder in a panel discussion on television, he turned to his daughter, pointed at Palbinder and said, "If she can sit amongst men and do a job that is typically male, there is no reason why you can't become a security guard."

All four believed in the sanctity of marriage and agreed that one has to find the strength from within. With reverence Inni said, "my Guru is my centre, it is from where I draw my strength, it is my anchor. One's spouse is one's source of support; one cannot feed off his/her strength."

All four talked about the incredible *sewa* by Sikh women and stressed the importance of going to the Gurdwara.

While discussing the subject of menstruation, Inni Kaur recalled how one of the girls at the Gurdwara told her she missed her Sunday class because she had her period. Why should one feel 'unclean' and hesitate to come to the Gurdwara while menstruating? Palbinder noted that the Guru Granth Sahib is replete with passages glorifying the process of conception and birth, and that Guru Nanak saw menstruation as a natural process, not one of degradation.

The subject of women entering the Gurdwara while menstruating brought up another, graver point: "Why are we passing on such uneducated, unfounded ideas to our children? What kind of Sikhs are we raising, whose very foundation is based on flimsy notions?"

In his concluding remarks, Chair of the Education Committee, Kuldeep Singh appealed to the audience to follow the footsteps of Mata Gujri ji and Bhag Kaur, and inculcate in the younger generation the true, strong spirit of Sikhie. He thanked the attendees and honoured the speakers with Sikh Studies Award plaques.

During the conference, the Education and Interfaith committees of the WSC, in collaboration with the Sikh Educational and Religious Foundation of Dublin, Ohio, arranged a Sikh literature display ranging from topics of Sikh theology and history to human rights.

Video recordings of this landmark Sikh conference can be obtained by contacting S. Kuldeep Singh at [sikhs@accesstoleado.com](mailto:sikhs@accesstoleado.com).

Sanmeet Kaur



# Kaur

Is there any place  
That I can call my own  
Is there any thought  
That I can call my own.

Shackled through centuries  
At the mercy of man  
I a woman  
Have no place at all.

Brunt alive  
Stoned to death  
Sold at bazaars  
Whipped at whim.

What is the purpose  
Of this miserable existence  
Is there no one  
Who will hear my plea.

Aeons go by  
I'm still in this rut  
The burning and stoning  
Have not stopped.

I resign to my fate  
Accept my destiny.  
I a woman  
Am a shadow.

Never to be seen  
Never to be heard.  
This is my fate  
This is my existence.

I find the courage  
To take the ultimate step  
To eradicate myself  
From this existence.

I break the shackles  
Slip into the night  
Not knowing how to end  
This miserable life.

But that night  
Deep in the forest  
Hidden from man

I hear a Divine Melody.  
The voice is hypnotic  
I am drawn towards it  
Not knowing what to expect  
As I walk towards it.

I see a man  
Is it a man?  
Yes, it is a man  
A man with a strange aura.

He sees me  
But makes no move  
I keep my distance  
I am unsure.

He speaks  
And I howl  
Like a wounded animal  
I fall to the ground.

*Ik Onkar*  
The "Word" penetrates my soul  
Shackles of centuries  
Loosen their hold.

*"You are a spark of the Divine Light  
Recognise your worth."*



I listen to the Divine Melody  
I weep and wail.

Me, a nothing  
Me, a nobody  
Has within  
A spark of Divinity.

The tears subside  
I'm filled with wonder  
I look up  
To see Divine Wonder.

The Divine Melody continues  
I'm surrounded with Light  
Every pore of my being  
Is filled with this Light.

Your womb is the cradle  
That gives births to kings  
Your love is pure  
It nurtures the saints.

You, my child  
Are not unclean  
Unclean are the eyes  
That brand you in that light.

I melt at every word  
I don't know what to say  
The Amrit flows  
I begin to glow.

*You are not a commodity  
You are not a property  
You are a spark of Divinity  
Recognize your worth,*

I give you the name Kaur  
It belongs to you  
Stand tall, my child  
I am with you.

At that moment  
I transcend  
I am not a woman  
I am not a man  
I am a Sikh.



# NANAK

## *The art of Arpana*





# Caur



Arpana Caur, the highly acclaimed artist, displayed her work dedicated to the Great Guru of all times, Nanak at the Academy of Fine Arts and Literature at the Siri Fort Institutional area of New Delhi, in December 2003.

*As she has stated, I began painting Nanak in the '80s, after the 1984 riots exhibition in Art Heritage Gallery Delhi, and Cymroza Gallery Bombay and then after a Ladakh visit in 1988 when I saw 'Lama Nanak was here' outside Pathar Sahib Gurdwara built by the Army on the Leh-Alchi Highway. In Sikkim and North East too he is called Lama Nanak by the local Buddhist population.*

When I went for the first Baghdad Biennale in 1986 I learnt Nanak was there too, for there is a gurdwara and he is known as Peer Nanak (also in Pakistan). The few works what I did in the last two decades are sold and dispersed, but I wanted to do a series to invoke his secular spirit and his insatiable travels on foot with Bala and Mardana the rababi, a Hindu and a Muslim, spreading his message of love and peace wherever his feet would take him. Although half of these 15 canvasses were reserved by friends and collectors. I requested them to wait till I had shown the series, my very small and humble homage to Baba/Peer/Lama Nanak.

The artistic expression of Arpana Caur is the distillate of a long period of struggle. It is not only the struggle of a determined and talented literary mother and her two daughters, one of whom met with a tragic end in Paris, but of the Indian people to free themselves from colonial rule. This history of ding-dong battles, beginning as peasant and tribal revolts almost as soon as the East India Company spread its tentacles over the country in the late eighteenth century, carried on relentlessly till India became independent in 1947. And naturally, it left an indelible stamp on our culture and expression.

The history of peasant revolts made the folk artist the natural ally of the national movement and of the post-colonial artist, re-establishing contracts with a continuity of culture even colonial brutality could not suppress, nor post-modernism obscure. But while it seemed a natural enough alliance in hindsight, it was not an easy one to forge at the time. The British and the Indian colonial elite encouraged both an imitative Victorian imagery married to Indian epic literature, as well as the revival of imperial miniatures, and stylised Ajanta figuration after failing to attract the Indian aesthetic elite to follow the colonial programme.

Even after Independence, Nehru tried to revive "Gupta art," which has had a lasting influence on a number of our leading contemporary artists. Recently, the revival of Ravi Varma's art and bazaar kitsch by the neo-colonial elite in a globalising India gives us evidence of new threats. That contemporary artists, including Arpana, have been able to avoid these diversions is to their credit.

Arpana Caur went through this entire journey herself, unlike other artists who were given readymade solutions at art school. Having made a practical survey as it were, she chose definite options



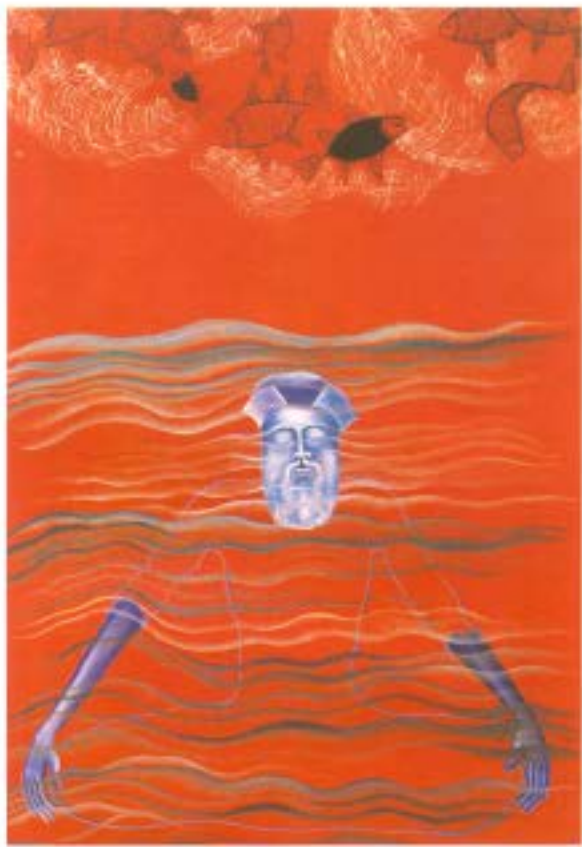


*In Bleeding Times, oil on canvas, 2001, 56" x 44"*

in her work from 1974 onwards. Her early figures remind one of the stocky, rounded treatment of Gupta aesthetics, which she later blended with influences from Chola bronzes and provincial Mughal styles of the Deccan and the Himalayan foothills. She then went the whole hog into collaborative works with folk artists and ended up evolving a visual expression that draws on folk motifs but expresses concrete present-day concerns as a sort of 'magical reality'.

At every stage, she had to make her own choice of visual language in relation to her own experiences, which differ from the ordinary in many ways. She was born in a Sikh family of medical practitioners who left Lahore during the Partition and settled in Delhi in 1947. She was brought up in a family of strong women, as her mother left a stifling middle-class marriage to earn her living as a creative writer, with all the hardships it involved. And finally, she faced the trauma of the Delhi riots in 1984, when Sikhs, who regarded themselves as the sword-arm of India, and played a major role in its struggle for independence, were slaughtered by politically motivated rabble after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. All these events affected her life and art profoundly.

The unconventional nature of the life she has led has helped Aparna keep away from the conventional in art and strike out on a path of her own. That is why she remained



*The immersion.*

firmly figurative while most of Delhi's artists were steeped in abstraction to one degree or another. The incorporation of abstract and textured spaces in her compositions was a much later development in keeping with her slow and steady progress based on her own perception and experience. This is the basis of the authenticity of her art and its continuity.

Her earliest works are those of an outsider looking at the colourful world of galleries behind plate glass, but then there are works of the mid-'70s that envisage the breaking up of that window to 'let the outside in'. In fact, the inside-outside theme predominates in her work of this period. She contrasts the drabness of one sphere with the brightness of the other. What is interesting is that the duality does not hold her down. Sometimes the inside is drab, sometimes the outside. She is her own master.

This comes out much more forcefully in the first of her original images: *The Child Goddess*. Here she portrays a nude girl lecturing to several nude figures who are immersed in their own concerns and not listening to her. They could well be statues. These images appear to contain the germ of a future series in them: the one of a performer without an audience. They recur again and again in different contexts in her works, growing in subtlety and sensitivity over the years.



The blatantly disinterested crowd the child-goddess is addressing becomes the audience whose absence is indicated in *The Mission Audience* series of 1981, through empty chairs; and finally, people are pictured as visibly immersed in petty day-to-day concerns, ignoring riot victims floating past or dead bodies lying on the ground, in her series – *World Goes On*. This series, painted from 1984 onwards, reflects a growing sensitivity in her portrayal of reality.

The audience in *The Child-Goddess* series, is stone deaf, but present. In *The Performance* series, it is absent. Both these, however, do not capture indifference in all its complexity as do the images of people living their daily lives, doing mundane things, while riot victims float past them unobserved. This demands considerable artistic depiction and reflects the real flowering of this image. The fact that we are able to trace this image of mid-'70s, evolving in different conditions and emerging as a hard reality in the '80s, not only of present-day India, but of a world being continually desensitised by a flood of information and making a spectacle of everything, including appalling human tragedies, reflects how her art is genuinely a product of the progress of her life and times and not borrowed stuff.

The continuity of this image over decades, drawing different elements into it and enriching it visually, reveals her to be very much an artist with her own agenda. She is neither influenced easily nor given to chopping and changing her expressing with what is fashionable at the time or to please the market forces. She always has a message to give: this dictates the large size of her works, such as a massive mural done in collaboration with a German artist, covering four storeys of a five-storeyed building in Hamburg.

This monumentality, both of her themes and their visual representations, gives her work the historicity of classical artists, like the muralists of Ajanta. This is why a number of museums, like the Victoria & Albert and the Bradford Museums in Britain, the Kunstmuseum in Dusseldorf, Germany, the Hiroshima Museum of Modern Art and the Glenbarra Museum in Japan, the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm (Sweden), the Singapore museum, the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) and other museums in India, have chosen to acquire her works. However this history is personalised with the artist as the centre of her world which has the stamp of contemporaneity on it.



*Landscape within, oil on canvas 2003, 47"x32".*



*Endless journeys, oil on canvas 2002, 69"x44".*





*Solmi Mahitwal, Inset: Seventeenth-century Pahari miniature.*

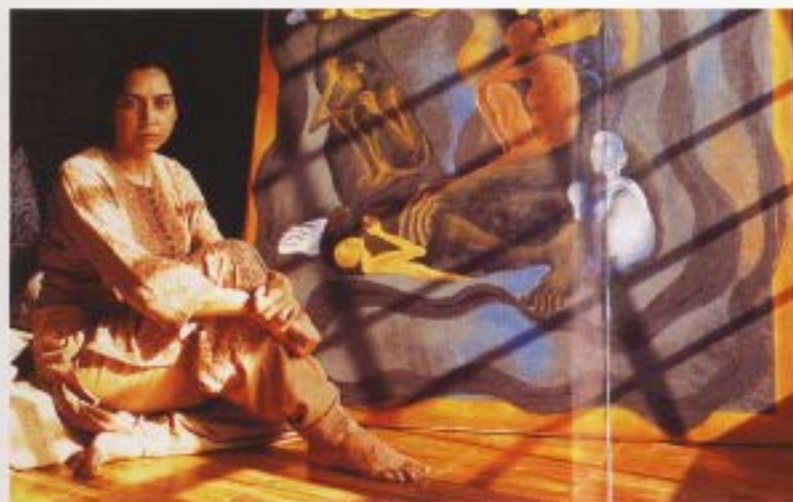


*Prakriti. : The same wood, 15"x12"; collaborative work on paper, co-signed Arpana Caur and Sat Narain Pande, 1997.*



*Arpana Caur at the entrance of the magnificent building that houses her "Fine Arts".*





*Arpana Caur: presenting images of the realities of life.*

And yet, there is nothing narrow about the way she visualises these themes, using time-tested images in a new context. This helps her art to convey its freshness without sacrificing its mainstream quality.

Take, for example, her use of the umbrella as a visual. In her earliest work it is a protective device. Starting out as a distinguishing feature in images of women who are protected and those who are not, in *The Sheltered Women* series, it takes the form of a human being, in her mother and daughter images; of a banana leaf in her *Time Image* series and in some of the images in her *Resilient Green* series, or even a *Guru Granth Sahib* protecting her grandfather carrying his belongings in a sack from Pakistan in her *Partition* series. There is a universality of discourse in the images she uses but the context is personal.

It is drawn from many different sources. There are images from ritual, like the umbrella; from legends, like the woman with scissors, reminiscent of the classical Greek myth of the Fates; the upturned *Kalpavriksha* of Hindu mythology; or from the poetry of Nanak and Kabir, as in *The Body is just a Garment* series. Then there are physical images of the Tirthankaras, the Buddha, Ghalib, Bhagat Singh, and even the popular image of Raj Kapoor and Nargis under an umbrella from the film *Shri 420*. There is also the global image of a bombed-out public building of Hiroshima that the nuclear threat posed by imperialism has given worldwide significance to, in a work commissioned by the Hiroshima Museum for the fiftieth anniversary of the holocaust. Lately, she has added images from the folk-art of the Warlis and of tattoo artists of the Godna tradition to her repertoire.

But then she shifts the focus of these to her personal contemporary view of things. There is nothing reverential about it, as we can see from the figures of saints plugging in to the Tree of Enlightenment, or of Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* cutting across the dialogue of Bhagat Singh and Gandhi on violence and non-violence. These are personal statements, like her letters to Ghalib, that we find tune into, after the initial contact with existing and known images is made, giving them universal relevance beyond mere authenticity.

What really makes them stand out, however, is her unselfconscious way of expressing these realities as she does in her goddesses of the past


and present, contrasting the *devi* figure with that of a female building-labourer carrying bricks. Her art is remarkable in the simplicity with which she presents a radical view of the realities of our lives, using images that we are used to, in a new context. She confronts us with images of policemen firing at angels in the sky; of trees as providing both shade and a butt for a gun; of neatly-lined kitchen knives; of houses burning; of windows with shaved heads drowning in the Ganges; of forms that remind us of Renaissance art with cherubs in the sky; of miniatures of satis; of popular ritual images of gods and goddesses; so we are repelled, but not so much that we refuse to think of these things.

Structurally she achieves this by confronting us with dualities: figurative and abstract, monochromatic and polychromatic, the single image and its multiple reproductions, men and women, day and night, land and water ... she is always alive to the fact that everything has two sides to it. She could have left it at that. But she does not want to sit on the fence safely. She takes sides, and with a very clear perspective of a future where humanity confronts oppression; peace confronts war; and the environment, pollution. Hers is an art of hope and of a sense of liberation on a grand scale. And a world becoming smaller every day takes to it naturally.



*Brigadier D.J. Singh*





# Letters to the Editor

Sir,

This is in reference to Nishaan issue IV/2003 whereby a comment was made by S.Swaranjit Singh from Amritsar in the "Letters to the Editor" section and response by the Editors based on a "live situation" faced by S.Hardev Singh Dadyala from Washington, concerning wearing of a "hard hat" while working on a construction field in Washington D.C.

I would like to share my experience of a similar incident which took place with the summer of 2003 at Sakhalin Island, Russia. The Oil Company Shell was inviting potential contractors to visit a couple of existing ports for further development of a Supply Base and I happened to be in the group which was supposed to visit the sites along with the Shell personnel.

In the invitation to tour the sites, it was clearly mentioned that all participants should wear appropriate protective equipment and clothing, i.e. 'Hard Hats, shoes with steel toe, safety glasses'. The invitation had been sent from Rijswijk, Holland and the concerned persons were to travel to Sakhalin to accompany us on the tour.

Since I wear the turban, I could not wear a 'Hard Hat' and sent a reply to the main person concerned informing him about my situation and I could not wear a Hard Hat because of my turban. The senior management of my company thought it was a waste of time for me to send such a mail as they had met this person in Holland, they knew of his attitude and that he would not even bother to reply to this message sent to me.

To their surprise and to my feeling of a battle won, I received a call on my cell phone from the concerned person in Holland, couple of days prior to the tour to the sites. He mentioned that he went through the contents of my mail and Shell had never ever faced such a situation where a request had been made to tour the sites wearing a turban instead of a 'hard hat' and that actually a team of top management in the Rikswijk office held a 30-minute discussion on how to tackle this matter.

The result of their discussion was to allow me to wear my turban and visit the sites but on the condition that I would have to fill in some forms whereby I would state that if I would get injured due to inadequate protection, I would have to bear full responsibility and all medical claims would have to be settled by me and that Shell would not be liable for any claims raised by me or on my company's behalf.

It just proves that there is always a way to get around what you want provided you have your faith in it.

Yours etc.

Prabhjot Singh

C-1/2911 Sushant Lok I  
Gurgaon 122002, Haryana

Sir,

I had a chance to go through your recent issue of *Nishaan* and thereafter wanted to convey my whole hearted thanks for publishing some events of our inaugural function for a free educational centre for needy and poor Sikh girls of weaker section of the society at Rohini on 13 October 2003, where Hon'ble Lt Governor of Delhi was the Chief Guest.

On behalf of all of my society members, I am deeply obliged by this act of yours in spreading the message of our small effort made for the betterment and uplift of girls of weaker section, who shall be assets for making bright future of mankind in the days to come.

All the *sewaks* of this Society are also managing the working of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Vidya Kender (a free educational centre for needy and poor boys including free lodging and boarding etc.) at Andheria Morh, Mehrauli, New Delhi.

I would request you to please send us more copies of your recent Issue of magazine *Nishaan* (for Rohini centre and for Sri Guru Granth Sahib Vidya Kender) for the display at these centres.

The *sewaks* of these centres shall be highly grateful to you,

Yours etc.

Tirath Singh

Sikh Humanitarian Society  
C-1/54 Sector 16, Rohini, Delhi

Sir,

Akilesh Mithal has a phobia about the Sikhs: (ref. article published in *The Asian Age*). In his review, Mithal tells us that Nanak abhorred violence but Gobind Singh gave the sword to the Sikhs. He gloats over the Purbiyas (mercenaries in the employ of the East India Company) clashing against the Sikhs in battle after battle. Finally, he deplores the fact that the martial-races-myth was created by the British. May I submit to Mithal that the phenomenon of the Sikhs becoming warriors happened after a century of diaspora due to the tyranny of the Mughal rulers – a period when Sikhs were hunted and thousands were killed before they succeeded in wresting power from the Mughals, later becoming the first Indians to drive the invaders back from where they came (Ranjit Singh's foray into Afghanistan). The Sikh "defeat" he refers to is the Anglo-Sikh Wars of 1846-49, caused by the treachery of some Brahmins and Baniyas who had ingratiated themselves into the Khalsa ranks. The British took the Sikh campaign very seriously indeed, and it is absurd to imagine that the Purbiyas (who were merely support troops), fought in the front ranks.

Yours etc.

Serbjot Singh

Gulmohar Park, New Delhi