



Documenting our own history: The Punjabi Canadian Legacy Project

~ Dr. Balbir Kaur ~

Canadians have come a long way since 1907, when MP Herbert Stevens decided that "Canada is best left in the hands of the Anglo-Saxon race.... it shall remain white and our doors shall be closed to the Asians." In 1914, those doors were firmly shut indeed to the Komagata Maru, a ship forced to spend two months in Burrard Inlet, running low on food and drinking water, after 376 passengers—340 Sikhs, 24 Muslims, and 12 Hindus—were refused entry to Canada. All were British subjects being turned away from what was at the time a British colony, solely because of their ethnicity. Today, human rights legislation

ensures all communities have an equal right to participate in all public processes in Canada.

What did the early Punjabi settlers endure? What was their experience? The experience of Punjabis in British Columbia cannot be read in school textbooks. In fact, very little history of Punjabis in BC has been documented, especially from the Punjabi community's perspective. In BC's memory, institutions' exhibits and displays were mainly focused on the experiences of white Anglo-Saxon European origin settlers until very recently and minority cultural groups were omitted by design.



Dr. Tzu-I Chung, Curator of History at the Royal BC Museum (RBCM), and Satwinder Bains, Director of the South Asian Studies Institute (SASI) at the University of the Fraser Valley, recognized this. They realized the urgency in working with the Punjabi communities to preserve and share their under-represented histories inside and outside of institutional boundaries. In September 2015, after consulting widely, the BC Punjabi Intercultural History Advisory Committee was established to work with RBCM and the Centre for Indo-Canadian Studies. The committee, led by myself, Dr. Balbir Gurm, and Mo Dhaliwal, has advocated and supported a community-based approach in establishing a Punjabi Canadian Legacy Project.

What is the aim of the Punjabi Canadian Legacy Project?

The aim of the Punjabi Canadian Legacy Project (the project) is to strengthen British Columbian society by making Punjabi Canadian heritage an integral and widely-valued component of Canadian history.

The goals of the project are to:

- Adopt community consultation and engagement best practices.
- Connect with Punjabi Canadians across a variety of community hubs including places of worship, homes, schools and cultural institutions such as museums, libraries and archives.
- Gather oral histories, artifacts and archives from a diverse cross-section of Punjabi Canadians in BC.
- Respond to the priorities and interests of diverse Punjabi Canadian diaspora settlements in the development and sharing of their own unique stories.
- Facilitate widespread engagement through bespoke social media and online channels.
- Establish and strengthen enduring bonds of trust between the Punjabi Canadian community and cultural institutions across the province.



From 2015-2016, as recommended by our advisory committee, we conducted an intervention event in Victoria at the Royal BC Museum and asked the Punjabi community for their feedback on the Modern Gallery. We then held 7 community consultations across the province of BC: Abbotsford, Duncan, Golden, Kelowna, Prince George, Surrey, and Vancouver. The intervention event at RBCM has resulted in the inclusion of Punjabi Canadian voices in their permanent logging display. The 7 community consultations provided feedback on ways the community would like to tell their stories. We specifically asked:

- What significant stories best convey the Punjabi legacy in BC?
- What collections are important to future generations?
- How should we make Punjabi history available to the general community?

The results from all the consultations can be found on RBCM's website <https://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/about/explore/centre-arrivals/punjabi-intercultural-historyproject/bcpunjabi>. Some of the themes that emerged

were stories of much resilience in the face of racism, marginalization and resilience; hard work and entrepreneurialism; working at sawmills, living in bunkhouses, building gurdwaras and, of course, the tragedy that is the Komagata Maru. Some particular stories that stand out for me are: working in mills, picking blueberries, asking families if they wanted anything picked up when driving to Famous Foods from South Vancouver because few families had cars; the formulation of the Khalsa Diwan Society in 1904 which served everyone from Punjab and not just Sikhs, the Abbotsford Gurdwara with historical status, Paldi, the assistance provided by the Mayo and Doman families, the generosity of the community and its partnership with the labour movement in obtaining the right to vote, and much more. These are the stories that the community wants the RBCM to tell – onsite, online and across the province. Some of the specific recommendations are to create curricula for K-12, and a website integrating all work documenting the experiences of Punjabis from pioneering families to present-day settlers. There is a recognition that there is a

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wealth of information, that there are common and unique experiences, and that we need to be as inclusive as possible. The community would like to see all voices of their community expressed – including the hard to reach, not just the often heard. We need to obtain artefacts for a permanent gallery and digital display and there needs to be artefacts around the province and not only at the RBCM.

The community wants an appreciation of their history to serve a contemporary purpose – a wider understanding of cultural diversity through storytelling will be a first step in meaningfully contributing to a reduction in the race-based discrimination that many Punjabi Canadians still experience today. It will also contribute to actions toward a culturally safe and inclusive society. It will send the message that WE ALL BELONG AND ALL OF OUR STORIES ARE IMPORTANT.

In 2017, we have the second advisory committee to the project and I am privileged to be voted as Chair and to continue to lead the work with Co Vice-Chairs, Mo Dhaliwal and Betty Dusange Hayer. (<https://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/about/explore/centre-arrivals/punjabi-canadian-legacy-project-pclp/advisory-committee>). In 2016-2017, with a partnership with the Province of BC, we

conducted a Historical Places project the South Asian Canadian Historic Places Recognition Project. There was a public call for nominations and a committee selected the sites. The sites can be found at

<https://heritagebc.ca/south-asian-canadian-map/?lang=en>. Also from 2017-present, we have continued to collect digital stories from across the province that are accessible at www.southasiancanadianheritage.ca. Although we have many stories, we still need more to include the many different perspectives.

It is up to us, the community, to tell our history through our lens. I urge you all to become involved. Feel free to email SASl@ufv.ca and let us know if you want to tell your story or if you have artefacts, such as passports from late 1890s or early 1900s, an original suitcase, or other objects that your family may have brought from the original Punjab (whether East or West Punjab) as well as photos from life in Canada. It is time that we take up space within the history of BC and share our stories with future generations.

Dr. Balbir Kaur Gurm

Dr. Gurm is a nursing faculty at KPU and volunteer chair of the Punjabi Canadian Legacy Project's Advisory Committee. Her family can be traced back to her great uncle Sham Singh Gill who settled in Vancouver, BC in 1906.