

Sikh Heritage Month: The South Asian pioneers of Fraser Mills

Narain Singh and Maha Kaur Dosanjh were among the first Sikhs to settle in B.C. Their descendants want to keep their story alive.

NICK EAGLAND
Updated: April 7, 2019



Narain Singh Dosanjh was only 16 years old when he made the gruelling month-long voyage by sea from India to Vancouver in 1907.

The boy had little more than pocket change but sought a better life in Canada, where he planned to find well-paying work to support his family back home. It took him 22 years to save enough money to bring his wife, Maha Kaur Dosanjh, to live with him in B.C.

When Narain arrived he was confronted by racism and, speaking little English, struggled to find work and an affordable home. Some nights he would sleep in boxcars. In 1908, the Canadian government implemented the "continuous journey" regulation to restrict further South Asian immigration.

Narain first took a railway job in California but in 1908 returned to New Westminster, where a mill settlement was expanding and cheap immigrant labour was in high demand.

It didn't take long for Narain to become a foreman. Over the next decades he and four other "pioneer" families at Fraser Mills — a settlement which became Maillardville, now part of Coquitlam — helped hundreds more Sikh families plant deep roots in B.C.



Portrait of Narain Singh Dosanjh, circa 1920. Dosanjh family collection. P N G

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Discussion about Sikh history in B.C. often turns to the Komagata Maru incident but the descendants of Narain and Maha Dosanjh fear that other important stories, including those of the first Sikh settlers in B.C. at Fraser Mills, are at risk of being lost over time.

Their first-born son, Sarjeet “Boxie” Singh Dosanjh, 89, and his wife, Gurdev Kaur Dosanjh, 75, have made it their mission to ensure that doesn’t happen.

“All those five families lived like one family,” Gurdev said. “They were close-knit.”



Sarjeet “Boxie” Singh Dosanjh and his wife Gurdev Kaur Dosanjh under the portraits of his parents in their living room in Delta. Photo by Gerry Kahrmann/Postmedia G E R R Y P / K N A G H

Sarjeet and Gurdev said the pioneers, most of whom came between 1904 and 1908, were self-sufficient and careful with their money. The woman grew their own vegetables, milked their own cows and churned their own butter. They would only buy sugar, rice and flour for their roti, and spices from a specialty store in Vancouver. Maha bleached and dyed material from flour and rice sacks to sew Indian dresses.

They said men from the Punjab kept coming to the mill looking for work but didn’t speak English, so Narain, who knew a bit of English and had gained the respect of his bosses, asked to become foreman on the green chain, where lumber was graded and sorted.

“He was on the friendly side. He got used to everybody, got to know the manager and superintendent,” Sarjeet said. “They started hiring foreigners, like Punjabi people, and there were quite a few hundreds of them after that.”

Sarjeet believes up to 700 men worked under his father. The days were long and they were paid less than their European-settler colleagues.

“It was hard work,” Sarjeet said.

But the families supported each other and eventually built a Gurdwara at Fraser Mills, with lumber paid for by the company, who came to cherish the Sikh workers.

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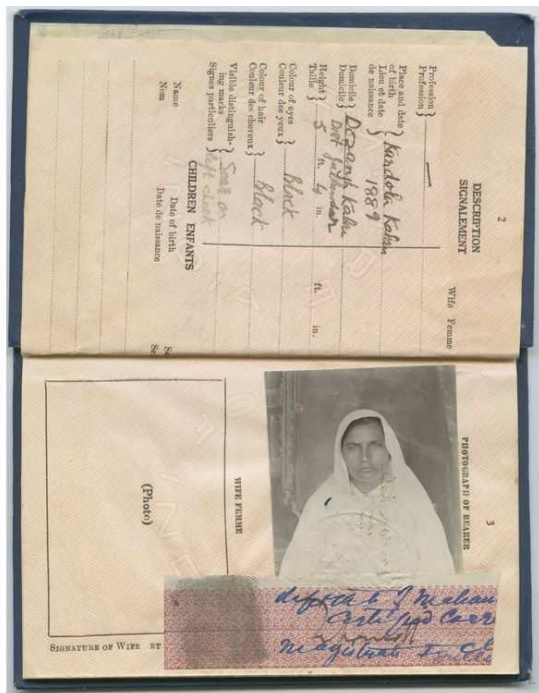
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British Indian passport of Maha Kaur Dosanjh, 1929. Dosanjh family collection. P N G

Gurdev said Narain and Maha strived to make coming to Canada easier for families from the Punjab.

“That was a big thing,” she said.

Narain died from a heart attack aboard a ferry to Victoria in November, 1966, and Maha died the following March.

Sarjeet and Gurdev said they believe Narain and Maha’s sacrifices gave their descendants comfortable lives, free of discrimination or struggle.

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Passports, citizenship certificates and photos of the Dosanjh family, including Narain Singh and Maha Kaur in the foreground. F R A N C I P/S N G G E O R G I A N

“When they came they had nothing, and they gave us everything,” Gurdev said. “We like to tell our grandkids. We are the only connection to tell them the hardship they went through, the work they did to live.”

The couple said they have done their best to teach their four children and seven grandchildren about the values of “mama” and “papa.”

"I always like to talk to my grandchildren about how they were, and they say, 'You're the same way,'" Sarjeet said.

Later this month, Sarjeet and Gurdev will visit two schools in Surrey for Sikh Heritage Month, where they will share Narain and Maha's story with youth and their parents. They have also created two \$1,000 scholarships in their names for Grade 12 students who excel in their studies and have contributed to their community.



Sarjeet "Boxie" Singh Dosanjh with his wife Gurdev Kaur Dosanjh. Photo by Nick Procaylo/Postmedia
N I C K P P N R G O C A Y L O

Satwinder Bains, director of the South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley, has known the Dosanjh family for close to four decades.

Bains said much of the Sikh pioneers' story is missing from the written record, so the burden of passing on that oral history has been left to their living descendants.

"The settlers that came at the turn of the century, like Mr. Dosanjh and his family, were under the gun at that time with racist laws, so really, putting their history out there would have been no benefit to them because they would have been under more scrutiny," she said.

"The assimilationist policies of the time really required you to blend in and become part of whatever we understand to be the Canadian model."



Sarjeet "Boxie" Singh Dosanjh and his wife Gurdev Kaur Dosanjh on their blueberry farm in Delta. Photo by Gerry Kahrmann/Postmedia G E R R Y P / K N A G H R M A N N

Bains said settler history is problematic. Many the stories of the Japanese, Chinese and Ukrainians, for example, have been omitted or erased from the written record. The history is complicated, too, and the pioneers from the Punjab may have not understood that they were displacing First Nations people, she added.

"At this stage, for people to read their own history, I think we're very late," she said. "We should have been reading it a long time ago."



She believes it is important that Canadians now work to understand the struggles of the pioneers during that time of settlement.

"To put myself in their shoes, in this time and age, I don't think we could survive this," she said.

"We're such soft creatures of comfort. Those were very difficult times."

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