

A Note On Asian Indian Women In British Columbia 1900-1935

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Asian Indians in British Columbia are relatively recent immigrants. The earliest recorded history of their presence dates their arrival around the mid-1800s when merchants, sailors, and mercantilists briefly sojourned.¹ As time passed, retired Sikh soldiers came to view the reported beauty and vastness of the British Empire's newly settled colony as they travelled en route to India after having attended Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebrations. These travellers sent inviting reports on Canada and its prospective wealth to their friends and relatives. Around the same time, some steamship companies, particularly the CPR, stirred up interest in emigration to Canada among the people of the Punjab. According to Johnston, the Sikhs in 1904 were "encouraged by Hong Kong agents of the Canadian Pacific Railway who were seeking to replace steerage traffic lost after the Canadian government had raised the head tax on Chinese immigrants."² Slowly, and sometimes in small groups, men who were assumed to be "Hindu," arrived in British Columbia.³ No women came.

Sometime early in the century working-class Sikh men came to Victoria and Vancouver. They left behind them temporarily their families and friends in the state of Punjab, an agricultural area which lies in the north of India, bordering on Pakistan. Mainly these pioneers came to British Columbia to take advantage of the opportunity to earn large amounts of money, at least compared to the amount they could earn in India. Others who were adventurous simply wanted to make a new home in a part of the British Empire which promised no forms of discrimination.

However, in 1904, British Columbia, even though it was part of the British Empire, did not welcome the 258 Asian Indian men. In fact, much to the dismay of the immigrants, overt anti-Asian feelings were conspicuous. According to Samuel Raj, "local politicians denounced the East Indian immigrants as a burden to the city" and proclaimed that they were

"destructive of the British way of life in the province . . . and breeders of disease."⁴ The local newspapers of the day in both Victoria and Vancouver were similarly unfriendly as they "maligned" the Sikhs.⁵ In sensational language, press captions urged action to restrict Indian immigration: "Get rid of Hindus at whatever cost."⁶

Although anti-Asian feeling was overt, Indian immigration which continued slowly but decisively was restrained only indirectly as a result of immigration laws. A "Continuous Voyage Order," originally issued to prevent the Japanese from emigrating to Canada from Hawaii, affected Indian immigration. The Order in Council said that "the Governor-General in Council may . . . prohibit the landing . . . of any immigrants who have come to Canada otherwise than by continuous journey from the country of which they are natives . . ."⁷

Indians could not comply with the order since there were no steamship companies providing direct service from India to Canada. To prevent a court challenge, a new Immigration Act (1910) was introduced.⁸ In its terms was an order that all Asian immigrants, with the exception of the Japanese and Chinese, had to have the sum of \$200.00 with them when they disembarked in Canada. Some years later a regulation to stop the arrival of skilled and unskilled labour affected the Sikh community.

However, despite these setbacks, around 1910 many Indian men had decided to settle permanently in British Columbia so they began to discuss the coming of the women and the children. A great deal of conflict with the larger society arose around this issue which took almost fifteen years to resolve. White Canadian society took the position that two wrongs did not make a right: since the admission of Indian males had been a wrong, the admission of women could not right the situation at all. In the newspapers it was put this way: "[For] the comfort and happiness of the generations that are to succeed us, we must not permit their women to come in at all."⁹ Clearly, it was hoped that the men who wanted families would return to the Punjab or else remain in Canada without fathering successive generations. The larger society viewed Indian women merely as instruments of reproduction. Apparently only white women could be, to use the rhetoric of maternal feminism, virtuous moral influences who, by their presence, would build stable families for British Columbia.

And yet the women came. By 1910 three of the Sikh elite had wives present with them. Nothing is written about the women in their own right. Instead they are noted in passing: "Mrs. Sundar Singh and Mrs. Teja Singh came to Canada with their husbands. Mrs. Uday Ram arrived on February 10, 1910, and was admitted having fulfilled the requirements."¹⁰ Both Teja Singh and Sundar Singh had been trained at India House in London, England, so they were no strangers to British public opinion or mores.

Although the Indian community unanimously supported the immigration of Asian Indian women, not many white Canadians agreed with them. Indian women, who were British subjects, certainly did not have the freedom of the British Empire since they were more or less barred from Canada. However, some people in Eastern Canada responded to Indian women's plight and found support in British Columbia in Reverend Hall and

Isabella Ross Broad. These people, along with Dr. Sundar Singh, were responsible "for creating a favourable climate in university circles and clubs, such as the Empire Club and the Canadian Club."¹¹

Dr. Sundar Singh met with Bessie Pullen-Burry in her travels across Canada in 1911 during her stay in Victoria. He asked her "to represent the case of the Sikhs in [her] writings to the people of England." She did that on one page of *From Halifax to Vancouver* where she assured him of her "entire sympathy." His argument was summarized as follows: he said that "[m]any of them were old soldiers of the Empire; they were faithful to the British Raj; and having acquired a sufficiency wished their wives to join them. . . . he hoped, in view of the fact that the Sikhs were subjects of the Empire, this privilege would eventually be extended to them."¹²

If Raj is right, then "Hall and especially Broad made considerable impact on the church-going Christians,"¹³ but, ultimately, they were not successful. "Where it mattered most, west of the Rockies, even the Ministerial Association voted to keep the East Indian women out, lest a "Hindu colony" emerge in a Christian country.¹⁴ Furthermore, the National Council of Women also voted to keep out the Asian women.¹⁵

And yet the women came. Late in 1910, two priests returned to India to bring their wives and two small children to British Columbia. However, their coming was not a matter of course; instead they arrived in Canada as an exception to the rule: ". . . wives of Bhag Singh and Balwant Singh and their children arrived in Vancouver on January 22, 1912, with their returning husbands. The husbands were allowed to return to their homes as they had Canadian domicile but the wives and children were detained for deportation. They were freed on bail later. Their plight was taken up by the entire East Indian community and their sympathizers and it became the object of many deliberations in several places in Canada as well as in London, England, and New Delhi, India. After several months of uncertainty, the families' nightmare came to an end with intervention by Parliament."¹⁶ Happily, Mrs. Balwant Singh gave birth to the first Indian child born in British Columbia, a son, who still lives in Duncan, BC.¹⁷

The Immigration officials had yet another way of making immigration to Canada difficult for women. Lest more men return to India to accompany their wives to Canada in the hopes that clemency for their families would follow, the Immigration Department refused to issue the very identity certificates which the men required to re-enter Canada. And yet a woman came. In 1911, Hira Singh returned from India with his wife and child. Mr. Singh was permitted to enter, but his wife and child were held for deportation. The immigration ban had been overturned in the case of Bhag Singh and Balwant Singh and so it was again, after a vigorous protest from the Indian community. Mrs. Hira Singh and her young child were another exception.

The fight to keep open the doors of immigration for Indians applied also to men. They too challenged discriminatory laws. The famous Komagata Maru incident resulted in closing the door on Indian immigration to British Columbia. Johnston described the incident: "In May, 1914, 400 Sikhs left for BC by chartered ship, resolved to claim their rights to equal treatment with white citizens of the British Empire and force entry into Canada. They were

anchored off Vancouver for over two months, enduring extreme physical deprivation, and harassment by Immigration officials, but defying federal deportation orders, even when the Canadian government attempted to enforce them with a gunboat. The leaders of the group . . . were finally persuaded to return to India. They were then full of revolutionary fervour against the Raj."¹⁸

But the women's case was to have a better hearing, at least officially. After years of facing contrived rules and policies fabricated to justify the exclusion of women, they were to be allowed to enter Canada. At the Imperial War Conference, 1917-19, the Indian government secured an agreement which permitted Asian Indian women to enter Canada. Following that agreement, however, only a few women entered. None came in 1920. Only eleven women and nine children entered in the three years from 1921 to 1923.¹⁹

As more women entered in succeeding years,²⁰ some of them joined their husbands in the small community named Paldi, near Duncan, on Vancouver Island. Many of the women were told by their husbands to leave their Indian clothing and jewellery behind them. As the accompanying photograph makes clear, the women adapted Western styles of dress to their own cultural demands even in 1933 or 1934. In the new settlement, community life was closely structured to resemble village life in India, so the women lived a very cloistered life and communicated with the larger society only through their husbands, and ultimately, their children. However, that was not all bad since amongst the women of the community there existed a familial interdependency and a fierce loyalty.²¹ Since these women almost never associated with people of the larger society and certainly did not drive cars or enjoy individual mobility, the community members who were not family members seemed to be so over time. When children spoke of Massi or Phuah or Tiye or Mahmi, the title was both literal and figurative.²²

My mother, with one child, joined her husband in Paldi in 1927. She was always reluctant to talk about her life and feelings in those early days in British Columbia. Sustained by her religion and her community, she did what she had to do: she worked hard to feed her children, to look after the house and her husband and neighbours. Thirty or forty others did the same. She was willing to admit, however, that Western style food preparation made her legs ache. Accustomed to squatting on the ground at home in India, she had to stand to prepare meals in Paldi.

When I was a child I asked my mother why she did not speak English, and as an adult I asked again. She said she did not have time. If she had had time, there were no classes available to her anyway, she said. Besides, the men took care of "outside" things, so the new language was their responsibility. Since neither women nor men of the Asian Indian community had the franchise until 1947, my mother did not have the incentive of citizenship responsibility to motivate her. Other Indian women pioneers substantiated my mother's observations.²³

Most of the women who first came to British Columbia are now dead. Those who remain are elderly and in frail health. Only oral history can save their observations about adapting to life in a province in which they knew

they were unwanted citizens. However, in their own community the fight to have them in Canada took precedence over male political rights such as the franchise.²⁴



Private Collection

First women and children residents, Paldi, BC, c.1934.

Footnotes

1. Adrian C. Mayer, *A Report of the East Indian Community in Vancouver* (Institute of Social and Economic Research: UBC, 1959).
2. Hugh Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979): 2.
3. Quite obviously the white Canadians lacked the understanding of the term "Hindu" which refers to one of India's largest religious groups. The relevant comparison here would be to call every Caucasian person a Protestant. Sikhism is a reformed religion founded by Guru Nanak in the 15th century, A.D.
4. Samuel Raj, "Some Aspects of East Indian Struggle in Canada, 1905-1947" in *Visible Minorities and Multiculturalism*, edited by K. Victor Ujimoto and Gordon Kirabayashi (Toronto: Butterworth, 1980): 67.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Norman Buchignani and Doreen Indra, "The Political Organization of South Asians in Canada, 1904-1920" in *Ethnicity, Power and Politics in Canada*, edited by Jorgen Dahlie and Tissa Fernando: 215.
9. Raj: 73.
10. Johnston: 12.
11. Raj: 72; Johnston: 13.
12. Bessie Pullen-Burry, *From Halifax to Vancouver* (London: Mills and Boon, 1912): 347
13. Raj: 73.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
17. Hardial Singh Atwal.
18. Johnston: flyleaf.
19. Raj: 73.
20. Only about 400 Indian women immigrated to Canada before WW II. Michael Ames, "Conflict and Change in British Columbia Sikh Family Life," *BC Studies*, No. 20, Winter '73-74: 17.
21. Oral history: my mother.
22. These titles are the names of female relatives who are younger than the mother, on the father's side, or an aunt on the mother's side.
23. Mahinder Doman, *Assessment: Integration of Non-English Speaking Asian Indian Women* (Victoria, BC, 1983, unpublished).
24. Raj: 74.