

**Social and Political Lives of Early
Sikh Settlers in California:
1897-1946**



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Invited address to be presented at the *Sikhs Beyond Boundaries: Imagined Profiles and the Real People* Conference, sponsored by the Sikh American Research Center of the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society as part of the Centenary celebration of the founding of the Stockton Gurdwara, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California, September 22, 2012.

My address today will outline the first half-century of Punjabi/Sikh presence in North America, concentrating on their economic, social, and political struggles in California. It will very briefly note how their migration and adaptation were intertwined with, and impacted by, both the conditions and political policies in the United States as well as those prevailing within British India, particularly regarding immigration and citizenship.

Although this early period can be generally and correctly characterized as one of almost continuous population decline and socio-economic marginalization, it was also simultaneously a time of rising political consciousness, activism, and resistance to discriminatory government laws in the United States and to the rule of the British Raj in India. The story of this relatively small community's difficult transformation from struggling economic sojourners to acquiring full US citizenship shortly after India herself achieved independence remains one of the most remarkable, but under appreciated, in American immigration history.

It is also a story about how the founding of the Stockton *gurdwara* in 1912 created both a physical place and a symbolic center for Sikh life that played a crucial role in community life over the next forty years. It created the sole Sikh worship center in the US until 1947. The Stockton *gurdwara* remains a revered historic structure and is an icon known to Sikhs around the world. It is an important cultural touchstone and holds a major place in the history of the Sikh Diaspora, particularly in California.

However, the second act in the American Sikh story, the period from 1946 to the present, is more remarkable still, resulting in an even more spectacular half-century of growth involving Sikh/Punjabi communities across the United States, beginning in the mid-20th century and continuing to today. The last 60 years are all the more remarkable when contrasted with chronic uncertainty that characterized the first five decades of their immigration history. If someone objectively examined the status and conditions of the original Pioneer Sikhs in California in the late 1940s, they would logically conclude that it was not at all clear that Sikhs could even survive, let alone ever prosper, in America.

Nevertheless it was during those initial long decades of general economic and demographic decline, social discrimination, and facing a continual and increasingly hostile, anti-Asian set of legal decisions, that Sikhs found ways to resist and circumvent these disadvantages. The community, especially in rural California, became galvanized by both domestic and international injustices. Sikhs responded to colonialism, institutionalized racism, and local discriminatory practices by seeking legal redress and supporting Sikh causes in America and India. The locus of much of this activity, secular and sacred, was, then as now, centered in the Stockton *gurdwara*.

I expect that this audience knows the basic outlines of Sikh early history in the US, but a brief review of how precarious the Sikh position was from the beginning can be summarized thus:

- ❖ The first immigrants to North America were largely Punjabi male peasant farmers from the northwest of British-controlled India.
- ❖ Eighty-five to ninety percent of whom identified themselves as Sikhs; ten to twelve percent were Punjabi Muslims, with the remainder Punjabi Hindus.
- ❖ There were almost no South Asian women on the West coast in the first decade of immigration, and perhaps no more than one hundred ever entered the US prior to 1945. It was all but impossible to find a Sikh mate.
- ❖ Concentrated on the West Coast, there were never more than six or seven thousand legal South Asians in residence, the majority (6,100) arriving between 1904-1911. They came largely from agrarian and/or military backgrounds. Moreover, in 1912, an Immigration Commission estimated that between one-half and three-fifths of the South Asian immigrants of that time could neither read nor write.
- ❖ Between 1915-1929, some 1650 additional Sikhs arrived, but during the Depression years and throughout World War II only 183 additional South Asian legal immigrants were recorded.
- ❖ However, in the first two decades of the 20th century some 6,750 South Asians were either deported or "voluntarily" left, many to support *Gadar* and other anti-British political activities in India or abroad, or for personal reasons.
- ❖ By 1930 the so-called "Hindu" population in California had declined to 3,130; by 1940 to 2,405; and by the end of the Second World War to less than 1,600 individuals.
- ❖ Even factoring in a further possible 3000 illegals who sporadically filtered in via Mexico in the 1920s to 1930s, fewer than a total of ten thousand Sikhs ever came to the United States in the first half of the 20th century, and only 15% of those remained by mid-century.
- ❖ The slow but inexorable decline of the original populations was somewhat offset by the formation in California of "Hindu-Mexican" (a.k.a. "Mexidu") family units whose story has been most fully documented and detailed by Karen Leonard. This unusual social component was composed of some 400 bi-cultural families headed by South Asian Punjabi Sikh or Muslim males, their Spanish-heritage wives, and their offspring, eventually forming networks statewide. For practical terms, these mixed marriages formed a loose social network that provided Pioneer men with the only domestic stability they could create at the time.

To say that the initial conditions of Sikh immigration to America were not auspicious would be a Himalayan understatement.

The *Gurdwara* and *Gadar*: Religion and Politics

Throughout all this time, in spite of difficult economic circumstances, a series of prejudicial, restrictive legislative acts (e.g., Alien Land Laws, 1913; Barred Zone Provision, 1917; Third Supreme Court decision, 1923) and sporadic US government surveillance, Sikhs in America continued to organize and lobby for their rights. The locus of much of this activity was the Stockton *gurdwara*. Although severely restricted for fifty years in their choices of occupation, marriage partners, freedom to travel abroad, own land, and participate in mainstream political activities, they continued to gather at the Stockton *gurdwara* to debate and organize.

From the beginning the *gurdwara* served as an important nexus of Sikh social, religious, and political life. It simultaneously functioned as a the combination of church, dining hall, rest home, guest house, employment information center, meeting place, and sanctuary where Punjabi culture and language were understood and appreciated.

The role of the Sikh temple as a political actor has been well-documented as part of the *Gadar*-era, so well in fact that the political machinations and in-fighting among the various *partis* (political factions) tends to sometimes overshadow the more mundane and central functions of the *gurdwara* as a social institution and welfare society. Nevertheless, it is difficult to discuss the *gurdwara* during the early years of Punjabi presence in America *without* referring to *Gadar* activities because the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society (PCKDS) and the *Gadar* Party were largely composed of the same membership and financially supported by the same people. It is somewhat paradoxical that although the two organizations differed dramatically in their specific institutional goals and activities, the PCKDS and the *gurdwara* were the only two constants in terms of formal organizations available to Sikhs for many decades.

The PCKDS in that era was a socio-religious collective which was interested primarily in managing the *gurdwara* and providing support to its members, most of whom were, of course, Sikhs. It was, strictly speaking, the governing body for the Sikh worship site.

On the other hand, the *Gadar* Party was clearly a militant political association dedicated to violent overthrow of British rule in India. It originated in California as an indigenous response to external circumstances, although it certainly was a modern revolutionary movement, one which eventually achieved international dimensions. Beginning as a home-grown organization, within a few years it forged extensive global networks including links to Hong Kong, Thailand, Russia, and Ireland. It became a force that eventually directly affected international relations among many European

countries including Germany and England, as well as influencing both Canadian and American foreign relations.

This caused political problems for the entire California Sikh community because it regularly attracted the unwanted attentions of the immigration service, FBI, British Secret Service, and state and local authorities in California and elsewhere. The *Gadar* Party was a spectacular and exciting element in the lives of California Sikhs, but its international heyday lasted roughly seven years, from 1913 until the end of World War I. Thereafter, *Gadar* became almost wholly a Sikh enterprise and, as it was from the beginning, Punjabi farmers throughout the American West were its main financial backers from 1913 until as late as 1947.

Never particularly effective in implementing its primary goal, *Gadar* nevertheless survived British, British-Indian, and American government surveillance and counter-intelligence, the deportation of some leaders, and the spectacular "Hindu Conspiracy Trial" of 1917-1918 in San Francisco, California. Sikhs also continued to publish *Gadar* materials throughout the early period and only ceased upon Indian Independence.

For all its political activity, the *Gadar* was also an important social institution that facilitated all manner of communication among its members. Although sometimes debates over policy and tactics could cause divisiveness, it also provided a feeling of cultural solidarity, and provided a rationale and impetus for action. In the face of continuous economic discrimination and social exclusion, it gave the Sikhs and other South Asians a "party" and cause of their own, one with a clear purpose and high ideals. Both the *gurdwara* and *Gadar* organizations provided a reason to band together. For many men these activities were the only "social functions" they had besides group drinking and religious services.

While *Gadar* meetings took place across California, the Stockton *gurdwara* frequently provided a forum for *Gadar* discussions and planning. Men and their Mexican wives remembered traveling to Stockton from around the state five or six times a year, and how these occasions combined attendance at religious services with *Gadar* fund raising, strategy sessions, and political discussions. As one old timer characterized it, "One day was for praying and the other for plotting."

Following World War One, *Gadar* ideals and goals continued to impact the political thinking and ambitions of many California Sikhs, but its importance gradually diminished over the decades. In retrospect, it seems that the social and religious aspects of the *gurdwara* as a social institution became dominant over time. The longer the community resided in California, the more they realized that Sikhs had serious domestic obstacles to overcome. While they never abandoned the *Gadar* goal, they increasingly turned their political attention to issues of social and legal rights within America during the later inter-war years. They also continued to work hard and take advantage of any economic opportunities that arose. Similarly, once they realized that, for whatever reasons, they were unlikely to be able to return home, they shifted mentally from being sojourners and

temporary economic migrants, and began to realize that their future and their fortunes were going to be forged primarily within an American context.

In spite of severe social and legal barriers, many South Asians did well on the West Coast. Within less than a decade of their arrival, many had established themselves in farming ventures, often in partnership with other Punjabis. They quickly and expertly assessed the local markets and crops. And while they worked at almost anything that came to hand in the early period, including building railroads and bridges, logging, mining, and road construction in Canada and the American Northwest, it was in California agriculture that they found their most promising and lasting niche.

California land records show an initial Sikh pattern of leasing, followed, if possible, by purchase. Sikhs were already in the Central California valley by 1906. A few became successfully involved in establishing rice culture in the Northern Sacramento Valley, as well as undertaking orchard and vineyard cultivation in Yuba and Sutter Counties. By 1908, they were in the Imperial Valley of southern California where they helped initiate cotton growing, and, later, vegetable row crops. A 1920 state report listed 85,000 acres in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys as under the control of "Hindus" and an additional 30,000 in the Imperial valley, most of which was leased.

Ninety miles north of us in Yuba and Sutter counties of the northern Sacramento Valley, the Sikhs began to coalesce very early and eventually settled down, forming a northern nucleus that served as a small, but relatively stable, California Sikh community throughout their early history. Much of their success can be traced to cultivating 10-30 acre peach, prune, almond, or walnut farms in the Yuba City-Marysville area. This pattern endured through the difficult 1920-1940 period, when the local Sikh population eventually dwindled to around 350-400 persons owning less than 1,000 acres by 1946. Not surprisingly, in spite of the limited opportunities and legal restrictions the early Sikhs endured, this same location currently contains the largest agricultural concentration of Sikhs outside of India (10,000+) and now boasts third- and, even, forth-generation Sikh farm families.

In the difficult interwar period, just as Sikhs shifted their attitudes towards making a life in America, American attitudes towards empire and other peoples was beginning to change. Colonial attitudes towards India that had been so common in the society up to that time were giving way to growing support for Indian self-determination and self-governance in South Asia and elsewhere.

Simultaneously, the widespread reflexive racism at home was diminishing somewhat. By the end of the 1930s, in addition to *Gadar*, a second wave of South Asian organizations arose to promote both Indian Independence abroad, and the right of citizenship for South Asians who already resided in the US or might wish immigrate. This time, new political centers arose outside of California in New York, Chicago, and, even, Arizona, and they became ever more effective in lobbying, public relations, and garnering support from mainstream media and federal governmental figures and agencies.

After decades of generally unsuccessful political activity, Sikhs saw the tide of public opinion regarding South Asians, domestic and foreign, turn more positive during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Many individuals, American and South Asian, were involved in achieving the rights of citizenship that were finally confirmed on July 2, 1946, when the US Congress passed the Luce-Celler bill. However, Sardar Jigit (J.J.) Singh, a successful New York businessman, was a key figure whose political savvy and contacts in mainstream journalism were crucial factors that led to passage of this historic legislation.

Incidentally, this legal victory was the first and, to that time, *only*, successful outcome achieved by Sikhs at the national level since they arrived nearly a half-century earlier. It is also symbolic that the legislation in America was passed over a year before India herself became independent on August 15, 1947.

Although this law eliminated the ban on Indian immigration and allowed Indians to become naturalized citizens, it was far from a total success. The impact of obtaining citizenship remained greatly restricted as the total number of East Indians allowed to immigrate was set at a mere 100 per year, a quota which can only be considered simultaneously symbolic and ludicrous given that India had a population of 400 million. More important, of course, than the actual numbers, was the legal precedent. After nearly thirty years of systematic exclusion and another quarter-of-a-century of being denied citizenship, the Luce-Celler bill restored to East Indians the option of United States' residence and naturalization, and the freedom to travel freely to India and return.

However, in a final perverse twist of fate, Indian Independence did not result in a whole nation-state, but a bifurcated, "Partitioned" India. Thus, as the first half of the 20th Century wound down, events occurred which paradoxically brought both vindication and redress for Sikhs in America, but also contained the devastating reality that, shortly following their American victory, the gaining of independence was achieved at a tragically high cost in lives and loss of territory. It literally left the Punjabi homeland shattered, and large swaths of it ceded to the new nation of Pakistan.

Of course, over the subsequent sixty years, the growth of the Sikh community in America has surpassed all expectations, and resulted in transformation beyond any the Pioneer Sikhs could have imagined. But the foundations of this renaissance were built on the financial and legal struggles of those early Sikhs in California, which was inextricably intertwined with history of the Stockton *gurdwara*. All South Asians in America owe a great debt to those Pioneer ancestors. It is fitting that we should be here today recognizing the Stockton *gurdwara* as the foundational Sikh religious institution in the United States.

As we celebrate the Centenary of the founding of this key North American religious center, it is appropriate to take a minute or two to discuss some links between the Stockton *gurdwara* and the institution that is our host today, the University of the Pacific. There are some interesting, but little known connections between university and the California Sikhs.

The University of the Pacific is a private university originally chartered in 1851 in Santa Clara. It moved to San Jose in 1871, and remained in the Bay area until 1925, when it relocated to Stockton. Although the University was established in California long before the Sikhs arrived, the *gurdwara* was constructed thirteen years *before* Pacific arrived in the central valley. This put both organizations in the geographic center of California Sikh culture and community, because within a 500 mile radius of Stockton lived the majority of American Sikhs in the US from 1900 to 1965 (95% of Sikhs in the US resided therein until the 1960s). In other words, Stockton and greater Central Valley generally constituted the historic core of Pioneer Sikh communities.

However, very few historians or social scientists of that time took much note of early Sikh presence. One notable exception was Harold S. “Jake” Jacoby (1907-2000). He graduated from Pacific in 1928, and returned for a long career here as a beloved teacher and administrator, serving for 37 years as a faculty member. I mention him only because Jake was one of the very earliest US scholars who took any interest in the Sikh communities in their own backyards.

In fact, in 1956, he published one of the first, detailed, and still-useful pamphlets on Sikhs in America titled, “A Half-Century Appraisal of East Indians in the United States.” The material was based on fifteen years of interviews with Pioneer Sikhs. The report was originally written as an invited research lecture he gave to the faculty on this campus. He maintained a life-long interest in and friendships with Sikhs from throughout California. It is therefore appropriate that a half-century later we should acknowledge his early scholarly interest at this time and in this place.

I sincerely hope that further academic research focusing the earlier periods of Sikh history continues, because I am convinced that although there has been an explosion of literature on Diasporic Sikhs around the world, I do not believe that the present picture of the first half-century is anywhere near as complete as it could be.

For example, in the past six months I have become aware of some very interesting historical research being done in the Pacific Northwest, primarily in Oregon and Washington, using a combination of newspaper archives and public records that seems to have the potential to expand our understanding of what the “facts on the ground” were in certain Pacific Northwest locales where Sikhs had settled in the first few decades on immigration to North America. The first is an article by Johanna Ogden titled, “*Gadar*, Historical Silences, and Notions of Belonging: Early 1900s Punjabis of the Columbia River,” published in July in the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 113 (Summer 2012), No. 2, pp. 164-197, Portland, Oregon. As part of her analysis she begins by discussing a keynote address by Har Dayal in Astoria, Oregon, on May 30, 1913.

She considers this meeting and speech as the opening salvo in the founding of *Gadar*. She then reviews both the responses of local Sikhs and Hindus to this call-to-arms, and the social, political, and economic backlash that the presence of Punjabis in the Columbia River basin provoked from the general public. Her larger question is why

this chapter of Oregon history has been essentially erased from the prevailing dominant narrative. She notes:

“...while they were not physically driven from the state, the Punjabis have been run out of Oregon historically. There are no identifiable vestiges of them in Oregon’s landscape, little recognition of their lives or accomplishments exists in our collective memory, and the watershed founding of *Gadar* is largely forgotten. If remembered at all, *Gadar*’s Oregon story is eclipsed by that of San Francisco, the later home of its office and press.”

Ogden, 2012, p.166

In fact, the press she refers to, which was located in Oakland and produced much of the *Gadar* literature of the inter-war period, was recently acquired by the Stockton *gurdwara* where it will be on public display.

A second article on Sikh activities in the Pacific Northwest that has not been published yet, is titled, “(In)visible Minority: The Indian Community in the Pacific Northwest after the 'Anti-Hindoo' Riots of 1907-8.” The author effectively argues that, in the aftermath of various violent encounters between Sikhs and local communities in Washington and Oregon, rather than leaving those locations as some previous researchers have suggested, they remained for decades in those Pacific Northwest regions. However, isolated and discriminated against, many of these micro-communities persisted for decades, but kept such a low profile that they seemed to almost disappear from the historical record.

Both authors have gleaned new, and often surprising, information about the lives of early Sikh sojourners who lived far from the California nexus, and who endured significant hardship to do so. Much more of this kind of finely detailed and documented research would be welcome by anyone interested in the constructing whole story of immigration on the West Coast, and who wishes to include fully and accurately all the myriad groups who participated in the building of America, including the Sikhs.

So let me conclude by offering two quotes I think are *apropos* to our subject today. The first is the well-known Shakespearean line: “The Past is Prologue,” from his play *The Tempest*, because it seems a particularly apt metaphor to describe the arc of Sikh history from the first half of the 20th century until today.

The second is from William Faulkner, who so wisely noted, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

It seems fitting that we periodically express our collective appreciation for the sacrifices and hard work of the Sikh Pioneers. It was those early efforts that set the foundation, which, eventually, created the successes that all Sikhs in America benefit from. The role of the Stockton *gurdwara* lies at the core of this achievement. It continues to play a key role in California Sikh religious life. This heritage is therefore,

in every sense, a living legacy...one which we honor and celebrate today.

Thank you.