

# **Life and Times of Pakher Singh Gill: A Panjabi Californian in the Early Twentieth Century**

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## Introduction

Today the California Society is considered diverse, tolerant and relatively liberal. At this time the American Society is one of the best in the world; it is basically a meritocracy. In present day California the minority groups like the Chinese, Japanese, Blacks, Hispanics, East Indians, Filipinos, etc. constitute a significant percentage of the population. They have political power and many are economically well off. However it was not always like this. American-Indians in California were first brutalized by the Spaniards and Franciscan missionaries. After 1850, when California became a state, the Mexican-Californians suffered the full fury of white injustice, bigotry, prejudice and cruelty (1). The blacks and American-Indians did not have the right to vote. Between 1850 to 1880, the Chinese population grew rapidly. During this time Japanese also started arriving to California. Like other minority groups, they were subjected to harsh and brutal discrimination. They were not eligible for citizenship and had no voting rights. Anti-miscegenation laws were on the books in California till 1949. The immigration acts of 1924 revoked the American citizenship of Chinese, Japanese and East Indians. In general California was the most racist, bigoted and cruel state at that time.

We study the past, to understand the present and plan for the future. The present is evanescent, the future is unknown but the past is etched in stone. Even God cannot change our past. The present is already becoming the past as we speak. Remember the “Present” is the “Past” of the “Future” (2).

By presenting the biography of Parkher Singh Gill (P.S. Gill) we intend to shed light on the socio-politico-economic conditions in California in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His story will also highlight the struggles carried on by Panjabi Jutt Sikhs in California (2). P.S. Gill was first an Indian, then he was a Panjabi, then he was a Sikh, then he was a Jutt Sikh. Later on he became a Californian and an American. But always remember, to begin with he was a Scythian. To understand his actions and thoughts, it will be necessary to trace his Scythian and Jutt Sikh roots.

## Historical and Cultural Background

The Jutts of Panjab are descendants of Asian Scythians whose original home was Asian Steppe which is a large land mass extending from Southern Siberia in the east to an area around the Black Sea in the west. It is mainly a grassland suitable for nomadic way of life. In 700 BC, the Scythians occupied Southern Russia. The average Scythian was superb horseman, tall and sturdy. The Russian Cossacks like the Jutts of Punjab are of Scythian descent. "What men! They are real Scythians!" Napoleon is said to have exclaimed at the sight of thundering charge by Cossack cavalry, as his tattered forces fought end-less rear guard actions on the wintry retreat from Moscow. Although the Scythians formed confederacies, they remained ruggedly individualistic. Their original religion was Shamanism. They did not generally admit authority or superiority and tried to maintain equality of status among them; that is one reason, their Indian descendants i.e. the Jutts of Panjab were not easily influenced by the Brahmanic Caste System of the Hindu Society. They ate a wholesome diet of grain, meat and milk. The Scythian considered owning a horse a status symbol. The horse enabled them to launch swift and effective raids on the enemy. They practically lived in the horse-saddle. In 650 BC they extended their influence up to Egypt. In 514 BC they humiliated a large Persian force of 700,000 men under Darius the Great. They loved music and left behind beautifully carved gold ornaments. In 310 BC, they were defeated by the Sarmatians. Their main migration to India occurred between 50 BC and AD 50. After their arrival in India first they became Buddhist but later became Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Migration of Scythians also occurred westward up to Scandinavia and Baltic countries. In Panjab, they gave up their nomadic ways and settled into communities of land cultivators and farmers. It is interesting to note that some of the traits and characteristics of Scythians are found among the modern Jutts of Panjab namely rugged individualism, bravery, frankness and contempt for authority.

P.S. Gill was a Jutt Sikh, a descendant of Scythians. He was not an ordinary criminal motivated by greed or money but was a self-respecting honorable patriot with a great sense of honor and pride. Moreover like Cesar Chavez (3), but at a much earlier time in history of California, he was a supporter of the rights of farm workers and was very popular among them. To understand his character fully we will need to briefly review the history of the Sikhs (4-6). His Scythian descent (7, 8) was responsible for his actions and thoughts.

P.S. Gill was born in the village of Choorchuck, now in Moga District on May 7, 1889; Baba Ruhr Singh, one of the Gadarite early 20<sup>th</sup> Century California Sikh revolutionary was also

from the same village as was Lachman S. Gill one of the Chief Ministers of post-partition Panjab. P.S. Gill studied at Govt High School and had 8<sup>th</sup> grade education. The story of P.S. Gill, his struggles and trials will illustrate the hardships suffered and eventual triumph of East Indians in California (2, 9-34).

Panjab is the land of the Sikhs. Of their 10 Gurus, 9 were born in Panjab. Initially the emphasis was on spiritualism. The first Guru Nanak travelled far and wide in a peaceful teaching style. He had learnt Hindi, Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic. He developed a large following by the time he settled at Kartarpur. With each martyrdom, the Sikhs became more militant. After the execution of the 5<sup>th</sup> Guru Arjan Dev, his son wore two swords and maintained a cavalry force. After the martyrdom of the 9<sup>th</sup> Guru Tegh Bahadur, the 10th Guru Gobind Singh completely militarized the sect and fought many successful battles against the Mughals and their Hindu supporter Hill Rajahs. After the assassination of Guru Gobind Singh, his appointee Banda Singh Bahadur successfully challenged the Mughal Empire almost at its zenith and established territorial Sikh presence in Panjab and Western Oudh. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Sikhs were controlling vast territories in Panjab through the 12 Missals. Bhagel Singh occupied Delhi in 1783 and proceeded to build Sikh Gurudwaras in and around Delhi. The Sikh kingdom was established at Lahore in 1799 under Ranjit Singh. Some battles during the two Anglo-Sikh wars are memorable. For the first time during their long successful military campaigns in India, the British were soundly & decisively beaten by the Sikhs in 2 battles, one at Ferozeshahr and the other at Chellianwalla. Panjab was annexed by the British in 1849. After 1849, most of the Jutt Sikhs went to their ancestral occupation of farming; some joined the British army; the religious matters were largely left in the hands of Khatri and Sahjdhari Sikhs. A splinter group known as Nirankaris came in conflict with the British and started the kooka movement. Their leader Baba Ram Singh was deported to Burma. Many organizations such as Chief Khalsa Dewan and Singh Sabhas were started; they had branches in California and British Columbia. During the period of 1900 onwards, Sikhs migrated to countries such as Burma, Thailand, Hong Kong, Philippines, Fiji, Malaya, Singapore, East Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and California. In Panjab, a canal system converted the barren lands of Lyallpur and Montgomery into fertile agricultural lands. The government increased the water and land tax in 1907. The Sikh farmers of those 2 districts led a successful campaign against the tax increase. Incidentally this was the first successful non-violent campaign against the British in India. The Sikhs joined the British army and won many Victoria

Crosses in WW I & WW II. The Sikhs settled outside India realized that they were not getting the respect they deserved because India was being ruled by the British. The Ghadar (Revolutionary) party was formed at Astoria, Oregon on April 21, 1913 and later was head-quartered at San Francisco. As we will note later P.S. Gill was very active in the affairs of the Ghadar Party. The incidence of Kamagata Maru occurred in 1914. In its aftermath 12 people were hanged in India including a 17 year old lad, Kartar Singh Saraba. During Kamagata Maru episode, a Canadian Anglo-Indian policeman, who treated Indians brutally was, in the typical Sikh trait for revenge, killed by Mewa Singh Lopoke who was hanged in Vancouver on Jan 11, 1915. In India, Pandit Kanshi Ram from the village Marauli Kalan (author's village) near Morinda was hanged. On April 13, 1919, the massacre at Jallianwalla occurred on the orders of M. O'Dwyer, British Governor of Panjab; hundreds of innocents were killed. Again in the Sikh tradition of revenge, M. O'Dwyer was shot dead by Udham Singh in London in 1940. In 1920,, Gurdwara Reform movement also known as the Akali movement successfully wrested the control of Sikh Gurudwaras from corrupt Hindu Mahants who were supported by the British. This was the first major successful non-violent Movement against the British; this was achieved by the Sikhs and not by M.K. Gandhi's Congress party. In a non-violent movement the British police clubbed to death Lajpat Rai. To avenge this death, Bhagat Singh Sandhu killed a British police officer and he was hanged on March 23, 1931 at the age of 23. During WW II. The British forces were defeated by the Japanese in South-East Asia and Burma. Indian National Army was formed first under the command of Capt Mohan Singh & Col. Niranjn Singh Gill and later led by S.C. Bose. In 1947 India was partitioned into Pakistan & India; this was accompanied by lot of violence and mass migration of populations. Again Sikhs paid a heavy price; thousands were killed & displaced. However, they by dint of hard work and persistence re-established themselves. They have made significant contribution to India's progress in all spheres of activity including, military, economy, education agriculture and science. The Sikh leaders at this time were Master Tara Singh and S. Baldev Singh, the latter from the village of Dumna (author's mother's village). Thanks to the hard work of Panjabis, Panjab had the highest per capita income in India. The Sikh soldiers & generals played important roles in 1947 in the first India-Pakistan war over Kashmir. In 1965 Sikhs again played a significant role in India's military victory. In 1966 Panjab was divided into 3 states Viz Haryana, Panjab & Himachal. All these three states subsequently have made impressive economic gains. Almost two million Sikhs are settled abroad and they have made a name for themselves in their chosen professions; many

among them are Sahjadhari Sikhs. Their remittances to Panjab, in no small measure are contributing to Panjab's prosperity & wealth. This short history of the Sikhs will help explain the actions and thoughts of P.S. Gill. When P.S. Gill left India in 1908. The British Empire was at its zenith; Panjab and India were firmly in their grip.

P.S. Gill after 3 days of train journey from Ludhiana to Calcutta arrived in the latter city in 1908. Calcutta at that time already had a sizeable Sikh community with well-established Gurdwaras and Social life. P.S. Gill was popular with the local Sikhs and was considered a quiet likeable lad. But like all Sikh youth at that time he was restless & looking for adventure. He stayed in Calcutta for a short 2 years. Sikhs have been serving in British army and as policemen in Hong Kong since the 1880's. They were able to remit money back home to hang on to their lands. P.S. Gill being outgoing and gregarious made many Bengali friends and also learned to speak the Bengali language. After working hard he saved money & sailed for Hong Kong in 1910. In Hong Kong, an elderly Chinese lady became a godmother to him and helped him in every way she could. He learned Mandarin and became quite fluent in it. He already could speak, read and write Panjabi, Urdu & also had smattering of English. He spent about 2 years in Hong Kong and 1 year in Shanghai. From Shanghai, he sent home about 120 pound sterling. He reached Seattle in 1913 when he was 24 years old. At this time he became a Sahjdhari Sikh. He had an impressive physique, 6 feet tall and had a handsome face. In Seattle, he worked in the lumber mills. He took active part in the affairs of the small Sikh community and had developed political savvy. Being a Jutt he was looking for farm land. That search brought him to Imperial Valley California in 1917.

People from India (generally derisively called "Hindoos", although a large majority were Jutt Sikhs) started arriving in British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and California in 1890's and suffered prejudice and discrimination, particularly as a result of California's Alien Land Law, similar to what happened to the Chinese and Japanese. The Japanese and Chinese could expect some help from their governments; the East Indians had no such recourse as India was ruled by the British at that time.

In the period from 1890 to 1923, immigrants from India were generally illiterate with agricultural/military backgrounds, however a small number were educated professors & students. The East Indians came long after the Chinese and Japanese presence had already caused resentment and hostility in the white population of Canada and America. The Sikhs in California faced many legal sanctions and restrictions because the prejudice and fear of "yellow peril" was

transferred to the Sikhs and they were perceived as the next” invasion” and got characterized as the “Turbaned Tide”. They were stereotyped as being filthy, illiterate, and clannish. They lived in segregated areas along with Chinese, Japanese and other Asiatics. Sporadic violence occurred against them and some were murdered. Panjabi men mostly settled in Sacramento Valley, Central California and the Imperial Valley. Being expert farmers, very soon they started leasing land and began farming on their own. This alarmed the Anglo farmers who felt threatened by their progress upwards on the agricultural ladder. In 1913 California Alien Land Law was passed whereby Asians could not own land. The relatively more humiliating treatment meted out to the Panjabis relative to the Japanese convinced some of the Panjabi intellectuals in Berkeley and San Francisco to form the Ghadar Party whose aim was to fight for India’s freedom from the British with arms. P.S. Gill took active part in the affairs of the Ghadar Party, lectured to the Sikh farmers and contributed money to the movement. Sikh Gurdwaras were established in many towns; the earliest was at Vancouver B.C. The Gurudwara at Stockton served as a meeting place for Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims. P.S. Gill as already mentioned was fluent in Mandarin, Panjabi, Hindi and Urdu and was politically erudite. He regularly read newspapers to keep himself informed about current events. Many Anglo land- lords, bankers, and lawyers fronted for the Sikhs; they had high praise for the Sikh farmer. Because of the Alien Land Law all agreements were verbal. A few dishonest Anglo landlords cheated their Sikh farmers and reneged on the verbal agreements. Many Sikhs married Mexican women and put the land in the name of their spouses and children; they continued to farm as their childrens’ trustees and guardians. The Panjabis mainly grew cotton in the Imperial Valley but some got into growing lettuce and fruit in the orchards.

Before Imperial Canal was built, the Imperial Valley was a hot, barren, arid and inhospitable desert. In 1901 water arrived in the valley. During the next 30 years many towns were established; farms and ranches were brought under cultivation. In 1907 first electric lights were installed and auto cars appeared on the dusty streets. P.S. Gill arrived in the Imperial Valley in 1917. The town of Calipatria was established in 1914; one of the founders of Calipatria was Victor R. Stereling. After water came to Calipatria, rapid & effective development occurred. Hard working Anglo pioneers met their match in the equally hard working & persistent Jutt Sikhs working in Imperial Valley at that time. P.S. Gill through friends and news papers kept himself informed about the Akali movement in Panjab and made liberal contributions to the cause. The Sikh farmers depending entirely on the honesty and goodwill of Anglo friends, lawyers and

bankers in the matter of verbal leases successfully cultivated cotton, lettuce, alfalfa on hundreds of acres in the Imperial Valley. P.S. Gill being relatively better educated than other Panjabis assumed a leadership role. He conducted negotiations on their behalf. He was a supporter of the farm laborer. Some old timers describe him as tall, handsome, pleasant, kind and considerate. He had a high sense of pride in his ethnic identity and was politically active. He spoke out against the British occupation of India; when people from Ghadar party approached he gave them full support. P.S. Gill entered into a verbal lease with Victor R. Sterling, John B. Hager and William Thornburg, and cultivated lettuce on 320 acres near Calipatria. The contract stated that P.S. Gill would be paid within 3 days after the crop was shipped out. John B. Hager and Victor R. Sterling were extremely bigoted & prejudiced against the Panjabis; they missed no opportunity to humiliate and insult Panjabi farm workers. P.S. Gill was assigned to chastise them as he had to deal with them on a daily basis and bore the brunt of their humiliating racial comments.

April 1, 1925 in Calipatria in the north end of the Imperial Valley was a typical spring day. P.S. Gill got up early and after a bath, he did his morning Sikh prayer using a Gutka (Religious Hand Book). After breakfast he drove to Bradford ranch south east of Calipatria. Sterling and Hager were shipping lettuce out from P.S. Gill's leased land; the whole crop was worth \$ 50,000; he politely requested Sterling for his share of the money. They refused to give him any money. Because of the Alien Land Law, he could not get any legal help. At 05:00 p.m. he again confronted Sterling and Hager about his share of the crop money. As usual, Victor R. Sterling rudely informed him that he owned nothing there and said, "Go away, you Goddamn Hindoo" At that moment P.S. Gill decided that the time had come to settle the score: the time for pleadings and entreaties was abruptly terminated by that comment, "God damn Hindoo". At 05:30 p.m. Sterling was shot dead. Hager tried to run away and pleaded with Gill not to shoot him that he will give Gill a cheque for \$ 25000. P.S. Gill told him it was not a matter of money anymore & shot him dead. After this P.S. Gill drove to the office of William R. Thornburg in Calipatria. When he reached there, Mrs. Thornburg who was 8 months pregnant came in front of her husband and pleaded with P.S. Gill not to shoot her husband. Seeing her P.S. Gill said, "I am Guru Ka Sikh, I do not raise my hand on women & children" saying this he threw away his gun and waited for the sheriff.

The trial of P.S. Gill galvanized the Sikh community behind him. Hundreds of Sikh men, women & children were present in the court. Lot of money was raised for his defence. The

Mexican farm workers were sympathetic towards him. He was convicted of second degree murder and sentenced to 14 years prison time at San Quentin.

P.S. Gill was in prison from 1925 to 1940. He is described as a model prisoner, who followed all the rules and got along well with prison officials & other inmates. In prison he kept himself informed about political activities in India, Canada, England & USA. P.S. Gill was paroled on 11/20/1940 and on 07/01/1946 he became a completely free person.

He tried to do farming in Phoenix, Arizona and again in the Imperial Valley but was not successful. At the age of 62, in 1951 he married Juliana, the widow of his former partner Mota Singh Sandhu. It was not a marriage of convenience as by now Panjabis were no longer alien ineligible for citizenship. However the marriage did not last long. He followed the fate of Indian National Army in Burma and raised funds for the 3 INA officers on trial in 1946. In mid 1950's he was elected president of El Centro Sikh Temple and continued community work there. In mid 1950's P.S. Gill became a naturalized U.S citizen. In 1955 at the age of 66 he married 18 year old Mexican girl Alicia. Between 1955 and 1962 he fathered 4 sons; when his youngest son was born, he was 73 years old. His sons have done well, one is a lawyer.

Armed with an American Passport, P.S. Gill visited India in 1970. He met his relatives and visited his old school. When a native son returns after 62 years, there are bound to be emotional reunions. He praised the modern California Society as being fair, just and basically a meritocracy. He advised his grandnephews & grandnieces to migrate to California. He commented that in 1925 if he had killed two white men in India, England or Canada, he would surely be hanged, whereas a reasonable U.S jury found him guilty of 2<sup>nd</sup> degree murder because they felt there was enough provocation & his action to some extent was justified. After about one month he returned to California, on Jan 10, 1971 he visited his nephews & grand nephews in England in August 1971. He visited the grave of Maharaja Dalip Singh. He stayed in England for two weeks.

In 1971 he was 82 years old. In 1973 his health began to deteriorate. He was diagnosed with Lymphoma and died at Scripps Clinic LaJolla at 09:00a.m. On Sept 9, 1973; he was 84 years old. At that time there were no crematoria in Southern California; his body was taken to Yuma, Arizona. The caravan passed through the Imperial Valley towns including Calipatria. The journey which had started with a train ride from Ludhiana in 1908 ended 65 years later, half-way around the world in Arizona desert.

# Analysis

As is evident from the biography of P.S. Gill, the pioneer Jutt Sikhs of California had to struggle hard to gain respect and acceptance in the society. Many legal and social sanctions and restrictions were placed on them. Hard working pioneer Anglo farmers met their match in equally hard working and persistent Jutt Sikhs. In spite of all the hurdles, they were successful in raising profitable crops such as cotton, lettuce and alfalfa on hundreds of acres. Even though many were illiterate they had the wisdom to organize and support movements such as the Gadar, Chief khalsa Diwan and Singh Sabhas. Sikh Gurudawaras played an important role providing a venue for social political interaction. Since there were not many East Indian women and they could not go to India to get married, many married Mexican women who played an important role in helping them get established. After 1946 (Lucy-Cuellar Law), the California Society was changing albeit slowly. As in the rest of the country, multiethnicism and multi culturalism was taking root. After the passage of civil rights act of 1964 and desegregation in the south under J.F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy's encouragement heralded a new era in America. The previously persecuted, disadvantaged and disenfranchised minorities such as the Chinese, the Japanese, African-Americans and East-Indians, as if released after years of bondage, started to realize the American dream like the Europeans had done before. After the 1965 immigration amendment act, people from Asia started migrating to U.S. in relatively large numbers. East Indians mainly came as much sought after professionals e.g. doctors, engineers and scientists. But the Panjabi farmers settled in the Imperial Valley and in rural California elsewhere also sponsored their relatives and provided for them to start a new life in California. This new wave of Panjabi immigrants had a significant impact on the Mexican-Panjabi couples and their children.

# Discussion

The California Society has come a long way in the matter of diversity, equality and tolerance. Today it represents the model for the rest of the country. Gone are the days of Alien Land Law and other restrictive laws both at the personal and institutional level. Today the minority groups are prominently represented in all academic, professional and business entities and are enjoying the fruits of free and just society. It is really a meritocracy. California really has become a melting pot where various ethnic groups freely intermingle socially and professionally. No wonder

California is the most populous state in the union. It is a tribute to the change which has occurred in the American and particularly the Californian Society that the progeny of P.S. Gill, a convicted felon has done as well or better than the progeny of William R. Thornburg, the third intended victim of P.S. Gill. One of P.S. Gill's sons is a lawyer; the other three sons are also successful in real estate and have management positions. They seem to have been completely assimilated in the American "melting pot."

## Conclusions

At this time, the American Society is probably the best in the world; it is basically a meritocracy which gives a fighting chance for success to a prepared and disciplined mind and is still a land of opportunity. However, the present situation should not lull us into complacency; there is need to stay vigilant lest the latent prejudice may surface again (1).

The newly arrived immigrants from India whether farmers, businessmen or professionals should always remember the sacrifices made and political struggles carried out by Panjabi farmers in the Imperial Valley and rest of rural California. Above all they should never forget the contributions made by courageous and stout-hearted Mexican women who defying the law married aliens ineligible for U.S. Citizenship and enabled them to gain a foothold in the Imperial Valley and rural California. By the same token, the present generations of Panjabi- Mexicans are our people; we should always extend a hand of love and friendship towards them.

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