



## South Asian Canadian Historic Places

# Historical Context

# Thematic Framework



clockwise from top left: Sikh delegation returning to the Komagata Maru, 1914 (BC Archives d-05577); Banghra dancers (asia.ubc.ca); Gur Sikh Temple, Abbotsford (author photo); B.C. woman in a sari, date unknown (Vancouver Public Library multicultural collection)



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South Asian Canadian Historic Places  
**Historical Context Thematic Framework**

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South Asian Canadian Historic Places  
**Historical Context Thematic Framework**

**Historical contexts:**

- *Identify and explain the major themes, factors and processes that have influenced the history of an area*
- *Provide a framework to investigate and identify historic places*



Paldi Sawmill, Paldi, B.C., 1941  
(forestry.mosaictraining.ca)

South Asian Canadian Historic Places  
**Historical Context Thematic Framework**

**Introduction**

This document is a historical context study of the experience of South Asian Canadians in British Columbia. The context study is written as a thematic framework, identifying six themes adapted from Parks Canada's National Historic Sites System Plan.<sup>1</sup> Its overall purpose is to guide the evaluation of publicly-nominated South Asian Canadian historic places in the province by providing a succinct but comprehensive view of South Asian Canadian history that can encompass all potential South Asian Canadian historic places. While recognizing the diversity of South Asian histories in British Columbia, the themes seek to distill major aspects of South Asian Canadian experiences and contributions to the province.

The six themes identify major aspects of the historical, social and cultural experience of South Asian Canadians in B.C., and the impact South Asian Canadians have had on the province. Each section includes a theme statement that includes a series of related sub-themes. The themes were presented at a one-day public workshop held by B.C. Heritage Branch and Heritage BC to collect information, values and stories related to South Asian Canadian history and historic places in B.C. Input from the workshop has informed the context study, making it in part a community-based document.

Concurrently, a nomination process was undertaken during which anyone could nominate a South Asian Canadian historic place for potential commemoration at the provincial level. The importance of those places not selected for provincial recognition is acknowledged through a publicly accessible interactive map. A table listing the nominated historic places and the theme(s) they embody can be found in Appendix B.

<sup>1</sup> The Parks Canada System Plan can be found at <http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/docs/r/system-reseau/sites-lieux1.aspx>

South Asian Canadian Historic Places  
**Historical Context Thematic Framework**

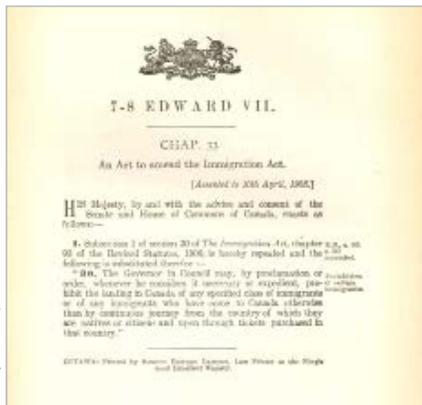
Since their arrival in British Columbia, South Asian Canadians and their descendants have contributed to the economic growth, intellectual pursuits and political and cultural development of British Columbia, influencing communities throughout the province and the province as a whole.

South Asian Canadians have established their lives and homes across British Columbia, in small towns and urban areas. The places associated with their communities reveal that the presence and story of South Asian Canadians is as widespread as other settlement histories. It is connected to the British imperial expansion, and is intimately linked with the formation of the province.

Key aspects of the themes include:

- Voyaging to and settling in B.C.
- The economic, cultural, political and social contributions of South Asian Canadians to the province
- Struggles against the challenges of racism directed against people of South Asian heritage
- Ways in which South Asian Canadian communities continue to contribute to the culture of B.C.

Developed with community input, it integrates the stories and voices of South Asians, producing an understanding of their contributions that may assist current and future generations to appreciate the community's heritage from South Asian perspectives.



## Theme 1 Journeying from South Asia

South Asian Canadians have emigrated from diverse places around the world and have settled across British Columbia in rural and urban areas. This mix of cultures has influenced the diversity of the South Asian communities in British Columbia. Early arrivals came for economic reasons and providing hardworking low-cost labour in industries such as lumbering, farming, fish packing and railway construction. Recent residents and future immigrants are followers of these early arrivals and are contemporary owners of their early struggles.

The theme of journeying from South Asia offers a historical context to the original and ongoing arrival of South Asian workers and immigrants to B.C. and their desire for work and a new life. It situates movement and migration against the discriminatory policies enacted by the Canadian government that regulated and prohibited South Asian immigration, settlement and the vote until 1947.

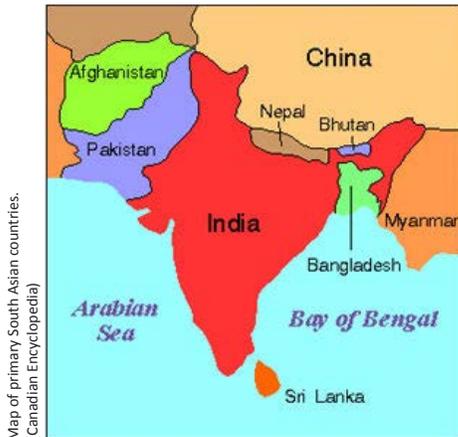
Substantial South Asian migration to Canada and the United States began in the early 1900s, with the first South Asian migrants to Canada arriving in Vancouver in 1903. Immigration increased quickly. By the end of 1908, there were over 5,000 South Asian migrants in Canada, most of whom lived in British Columbia. All of these immigrants were men who had temporarily left their families to find employment in Canada. Most of these were Sikhs, primarily from the agrarian region of Punjab, and while many of them remained in British Columbia, others in numbers returned to India permanently.

Japan won the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, fought between the Russian and Japanese Empires over rival imperial ambitions in China and Korea. This victory became a symbol of Asian power against European imperialism and resulted in an increase in anti-Asian movements and laws in many parts of the British Empire, including anti-Asian riots in Vancouver in 1907. In response to local and global anti-Asian sentiment, the Canadian government moved quickly to limit immigration from both India and Japan.<sup>1</sup>

### South Asian and British imperial migrations

South Asian immigration to B.C. is a part of a larger South Asian working diaspora that was influenced by British imperial rule in India from the 18th century onwards. The first South Asians to visit British Columbia were Sikh soldiers from Punjab who arrived in 1897 while travelling from India to the United

1 John Price and Satwinder Bains. "The Extraordinary Story of the Komagata Maru: Commemorating the One Hundred Year Challenge to Canada's Immigration Colour Bar." p.1



Kingdom to attend the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. They returned to India with stories of an attractive land waiting to be settled by British subjects. The second group arrived in Vancouver in 1903, most of them Sikhs who had heard of Canada from British Indian troops in Hong Kong. These troops travelled through Canada the previous year on their way to the coronation celebrations of Edward VII in Britain and were attracted by the new opportunities and higher wages offered in British Columbia.

### **Diverse origins**

South Asian Canadians in British Columbia come from many parts of the world including, India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, East Africa, Nepal, Pakistan, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. These communities reflect the enormous cultural variability of people from South Asia. The term “South Asian Canadian” refers to a subgroup of Asian Canadians and can further be divided by nationality into Indo Canadian, Bangladeshi Canadian, and Pakistani Canadian, or by ethnicity, such as Tamil Canadian and Gujarati Canadian.<sup>2</sup>

While South Asians may share a historical past and many cultural values, individual identity is often tied to ethno-cultural roots in their countries of origin. The presence of many diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups has historically been a feature of South Asian communities and is highly valued by B.C.’s South Asian community. South Asian-Canadians make up the largest visible minority group in British Columbia.<sup>3</sup>

About half of South Asian Canadians were born in India, where 20 major languages are spoken and hundreds of discrete ethnic groups exist. B.C.’s South Asian community considers India to be a vast and diverse sub-continent, rather than a single country. Historically and even today, immigration from India has come primarily from the Punjab region.

Bengali immigration began in the 1950s with the Canadian government’s agreement with Pakistan (which then included Bangladesh) to establish a quota of 100 individuals per year. Some sought political asylum during the war of independence which created the People’s Republic of Bangladesh in 1971. The first immigrants from the region that would later become Pakistan were among the pioneers who migrated from British India to B.C. as early as 1905, with a second wave arriving in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Many Sri Lankans citizens arrived in Canada in 1983 in response to riots and eventual civil war in Sri Lanka.

### **The regulation of South Asian immigration to Canada**

From the late 1800s up until 1947, racism against South Asian immigrants and residents produced many government attempts to restrict and prohibit South

2 Statistics Canada. The South Asian Community in Canada, 2001

3 NHS Profile, Canada, 2011 . Statistics Canada.

Asian migration. Some provincial and Dominion politicians insisted that South Asian immigrants should not be allowed to enter Canada, others acquiesced to public opinion to keep Asians out and to persuade those already here to leave.

South Asians, especially Sikhs, had been an important and loyal force that fought for the British Empire. As British subjects, they expected to receive equal treatment from the British and colonial governments, and the same rights as those as extended to Britons and other white immigrants. British officials advised the Canadian government to avoid introducing overtly racist restrictions that would engender and exacerbate anti-colonial sentiments in India.<sup>4</sup> However, South Asian immigrants still faced discriminatory legislation, by-laws and orders-in-council enacted by the federal government.

The following are the primary acts of legislation that were aimed at prohibiting the entry of South Asian immigrants.<sup>5</sup>

- *1869: Immigration Act*  
This act focused on ensuring the safety of immigrants during their passage to Canada and protecting them from exploitation upon their arrival, as Prime Minister John A. Macdonald set an open immigration policy to encourage the settlement of the West.
- *1906: Immigration Act*  
The Immigration Act of 1906 maintained many of the provisions of the first federal Immigration Act of 1869, but significantly expanded the list of prohibited immigrants. While the Act did not specifically restrict immigrants based on their culture, ethnicity or nationality, it stipulated that the Governor-in-Council (the federal cabinet) could prohibit any class of immigrants whenever it was considered necessary or expedient. A key feature of the act was the legislative framework it provided for deporting undesirable immigrants. Any individual in one of the prohibited classes was subject to deportation within two years of arriving in Canada.

While there was generally little control or restriction on immigration from most countries to Canada at this time, recruitment tended to focus on European countries, particularly Britain.

- *1908: Continuous Journey Regulation*  
The “continuous journey regulation” was an amendment to the Immigration Act. It prohibited the landing of any immigrant who did not arrive in Canada by continuous journey from the country in which they were a citizen. Immigrants were required to purchase a through ticket to Canada from their country of origin or otherwise could be denied entry.

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4 “The Extraordinary Story of the Komagata Maru” p.1

5 Van Dyk, Lindsay. Canadian Immigration Acts and Legislation, Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21. h [www.pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/canadian-immigration-acts-and-legislation](http://www.pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/canadian-immigration-acts-and-legislation)

In practice, this regulation primarily affected immigrants from India and Japan since the Canadian government prohibited steamship companies from continuing their direct transpacific routes from these countries.

An accompanying report recommended restricting immigration specifically from India noting that many South Asians in Canada were unemployed and impoverished and were incompatible with the Canadian climate and ways of life. However, the explicit exclusion of Indian immigrants based on their citizenship was impracticable because of their status as British subjects.

The Continuous Journey regulation allowed the Canadian government to restrict both Indian and Japanese immigration without appearing to exclude people on the basis of race, nationality or ethnic origins. Canadian Pacific was the only shipping company to offer direct steamship service from India to Canada, but following the passage of the regulation, the government prohibited the sale of through tickets to Canada. It was challenged in 1910, 1913, and 1914, eventually resulting in the detention and deportation of the *Komagata Maru*.

- *1910: Immigration Act, PC 926*  
Orders-in-council passed later in the year further enhanced restrictive immigration policies. All immigrants of Asiatic origin were required to have \$200, almost a year's wages, in their possession upon arrival before being permitted entry.
- *1947: Canadian Citizenship Act*  
This act came into effect in January 1947 under the government of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King following the formation of the United Nations. The act established Canadian citizenship to be a distinct category and allowed residents of Canada to obtain citizenship regardless of their country of origin. It gave South Asians already in Canada the right to vote, to sponsor families to come to Canada and to travel freely.  
Immigration was not to be open-ended or equal. The Prime Minister assured Canadians that the European character of Canada would be preserved. The preferred list of countries for immigrants included the United States, Britain, France, Belgium, Scandinavian countries and Germany. Those not welcome were Asians and Africans. The country maintained restrictions on South Asian immigration, setting almost negligible annual quotas for immigrants from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
- *1967: Immigration Regulations Order-In-Council*  
In 1967, the federal government amended Canada's immigration system with the Immigration Regulations Order-In-Council PC 1967-1616. These immigration regulations established new objective standards for



evaluating potential immigrants, including a system in which independent immigrants were given points in specific categories relating to their education, occupational skills, employment prospects, age, proficiency in English and French and personal character. Individuals receiving 50 points or more, out of a possible 100, were granted entry, regardless of their race, ethnicity or national origin.

### **Routes and patterns of South Asian migrations**

The patterns of South Asian migration to B.C. were complex and varied, even during the early years. Originally, the only route from the Indian subcontinent to British Columbia was via steamship from Calcutta across the Pacific Ocean to East and Southeast Asia. Travel routes within South Asia, many with several stops, connected travelers to seaports where they could board a vessel en route to B.C. One such route began in Punjab to Calcutta, Rangoon to Hong Kong, and finally Vancouver. Many immigrants also travelled from Calcutta to Hong Kong or Japan and then to San Francisco or other west coast American cities, and then to Vancouver or Victoria. Many made return trips to India or other home countries, often due to economic or family circumstances. Some left permanently, others returned to B.C.

South Asian immigration to B.C. generally occurred in several waves:

- 1905 to 1914, the earliest immigrants arrived prior to the full enforcement of exclusionary legislation
- 1914 to 1947, prohibitory legislation was in place and there was significantly less immigration
- Post-1947 after the Canadian Citizenship Act
- 1960s after the review of the immigration order in council and a third wave of South Asian immigrants from England and Africa
- 1970s after the introduction of multiculturalism

A final wave can be considered the out-migration from the more remote areas of B.C. and resettlement in the urban centres of the province. This coincided both with the decline of the forestry and fishing industries in the late 1960s,<sup>6</sup> and the movement of the educated second generation into larger cities such as Vancouver, largely for social and economic reasons.

As markers of these journeys, passports, immigration documents and citizenship papers are valued as potent symbols of early acts of discrimination, struggle and belonging in British Columbia.

### **Bringing families from overseas**

The earliest migrations and settlements were tied to economic opportunities. Many South Asian men arrived in B.C. searching for higher wages. The early South Asian Canadian presence in B.C. is an example of the practice of

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Nayar. *The Punjabis in British Columbia: Location, Labour, First Nations and Multiculturalism*. p. 176



Celebrating Indian independence, New Westminster, 1947. (SFU, Kohaly Collection)

labouring overseas to support families at home. Prior to 1947, there was a disproportionately large number of males to females. This gender imbalance was partly due to restrictive legislation and to early patterns of male-only migration patterns.

After the Citizenship Act of 1947, South Asian Canadians were able to bring their families to B.C. The first pioneer immigrants struggled on their own to build their communities. Through patterns of family immigration, the second and third waves of arrivals were able to take advantage of family sponsorships, joining relatives who were already established. The relation between migration and family was varied. Parents and grandparents came to live closer to their children, women arrived as new brides, and wives came to join husbands, with new immigrants integrating into established South Asian communities and homes.

### **Impact of events at home**

Overseas events have had a significant influence on the decisions of South Asian immigrants to migrate to B.C. Events at home have also shaped the cultural, religious, and political priorities of communities residing in B.C. Even today, from across the world, South Asian communities continue to feel the impact of events unfolding in their home countries.

Some South Asian men, including those working in British Columbia, moved to California to take part in the formation of the revolutionary Ghadar Party, a group planning to initiate a pan-Indian mutiny in the British Indian Army. The party was created in 1915 near the beginning of World War I as a response to British imperial rule, as a way to free India from the British Empire and to fight against discriminatory laws against South Asians in Canada. Anti-British militancy expressed within the small expatriate Indian community on the Pacific coast of North America had become a major concern to the British government in India.<sup>7</sup>

The party was active in California, India, in the Indian diaspora in East Asia and Africa and in B.C., but the British presence in this province made it difficult for Ghadars to make plans without being detected.

The Ghadr Party and its message presented South Asian pioneers collectively with choices about whether to stay in Canada, to support one leadership faction or another, whether to adopt militancy or peaceful protest and whether or not to put one identity ahead of any other.<sup>8</sup>

With the passage of the Indian Independence Act of 1947, Pakistan and India became separate sovereign nations. The independence of India and Pakistan, and the partition of Punjab and Bengal was considered to be the beginning of the end of the British Empire. Punjab was partitioned along religious lines with

7 Hugh Johnston. "Group Identity in an Emigrant Worker Community: The Example of Sikhs in early Twentieth-Century British Columbia." p.13.

8 Hugh Johnston. Keynote address abstract, University of the Fraser Valley.



the Muslim-majority in the West becoming part of the new Muslim state of Pakistan. The Hindu and Sikh East remained part of India. Partition produced violence on both sides of the border, the residues of which remain today.

India's independence in 1947 and Canada's changing immigration laws that same year allowed immigration from India. Unmarried children were permitted to come to B.C. and many families were reunited. In 1983, ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka led to communal rioting that forced almost 500,000 Tamil people to forcibly leave their homes. Canada provided refugee status to tens of thousands of Sri Lankans fleeing the conflict.

Operation Blue Star was an Indian military action ordered by Indira Gandhi in 1984. Gandhi was trying to establish control over the Golden Temple, the holiest Gurdwara of Sikhism in Amritsar, Punjab, and remove the alleged militant religious leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Four months after the operation, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards. This event had a substantial effect on South Asian Canadians in British Columbia, many of whom are Sikh.

### **Immigration and the impact of multiculturalism**

In the 1950s, a large proportion of South Asian immigrants arrived in B.C. Many were relatives of the original South Asian settlers. In the 1960s, as racial and national restrictions continued to be removed from the immigration regulations, South Asian immigration expanded, especially from Punjab. The 1960s also saw sharp increases in immigration from other parts of India and from Pakistan.

After the 1967 change to immigrant regulations, when newcomers were assessed on skills rather than their ethnicity, immigration increased. These new immigrants were culturally diverse, and many were professionals such as doctors, teachers, university professors and scientists. They settled primarily in larger urban areas.

In an October 1971 statement to the House of Commons, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau announced multiculturalism as an official government policy. Multiculturalism was intended to preserve the cultural freedom of all individuals and provide recognition of the cultural contributions of diverse ethnic groups to Canadian society.

These liberal policies are important for the growth and recognition of South Asian communities in Canada. While discrimination and racism would remain, the social impact and economic influence of these more recent migrations reflected a somewhat new attitude and have transformed Canadian cities, communities and the country's national identity.

Settlement of Paldi in the 1920s. (Cowanichan Valley Museum 1997:2.5)



South Asian woman with children c.1936. (CVA 300-23)



## Theme 2 Settling in B.C. and Establishing Communities

This theme describes the cultural, religious, and political ties within the diversity of South Asian Canadian communities, and their relationships with other communities and groups in British Columbia. It also describes the movement of South Asian Canadians within B.C., as they looked for work and established their lives. South Asians have immigrated to B.C. for a number of reasons. Political unrest, economic decline, and the promise of a new future were motivators for some. Others were joining relatives already established in the province, or searching for economic stability or new experiences.

Formal policies and informal social norms often excluded South Asian Canadian residents from mainstream society and power. It wasn't until 1947, when India gained independence from Britain, that the federal government changed Canada's immigration system allowing South Asians the right to citizenship and the right to vote. In response to racial and political attitudes, early South Asian arrivals to B.C. developed supportive communities within-communities. They celebrated cultural traditions based on their distinctive South Asian heritage.

According to the 2011 National Household Survey, Canadians of South Asian Heritage are the largest visible minority category in Canada. More than 1.6 million Canadians identified as being of South Asian descent, constituting five percent of the Canadian population and 32 percent of Canada's Asian Canadian population. British Columbia has one of the highest populations of South Asian Canadians in the country.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the vast diversity of the Indian subcontinent and other South Asian countries, communities that established themselves in British Columbia tend to be more homogeneous. These immigrants have created distinct areas and enclaves within the overall population. Adapting to life in British Columbia, and responding to societal exclusion, South Asian communities have developed a unique identity and way of life that is distinct from those in India and elsewhere.

South Asian Canadians today value the new culture that their communities have brought to British Columbia. Struggles against racism have shaped these communities. The hardships endured, the challenges of adjustment and assimilation have formed relationships, as has the satisfaction of seeing the first South Asian Canadians in prominent roles. An understanding of settlement and re-settlement gives South Asian communities today a better idea of the struggles faced by the early pioneers and their sacrifices that have

1 Statistics Canada. Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity in Canada. www12.statcan.gc.ca



given them the lives they have today. Freedom, inclusion, and acceptance have come at a high price, and it is important to know the price that was paid by earlier generations.

### **Why we're here - adapting to British Columbia**

Over the past century, South Asians have offered a variety of reasons for immigrating to Canada, and staying in British Columbia. Some common themes include:

- Family ties. Many tried to join relatives. Some were barred from entry due to Canada's restrictive immigration legislation. British Columbia was considered to be a good place to start a family and raise children. Many wanted better lives for their families. Parents joined children who settled and married in B.C.
- Economic opportunities for work and for creating a better life.
- The opportunity for freedom, equality and living a quality, valued life.
- To live among a host of different cultures and religions, a strong sense of community, the ability to feel at home.
- Education. Some immigrants came as graduate students in the 1950s to study at UBC. Others came temporarily to study, then stayed and found work.
- Adventure and curiosity.
- Good schools, social, legal, child services and support.
- Clean environment.

Adapting to life in B.C. has involved political and cultural challenges (racism, discrimination, and the need for resilience) as well as environmental changes (acclimatizing to a cold and rainy climate after arriving from a warm region) and the discovery of B.C.'s natural beauty and wilderness.

### **Settlement, re-settlement and land ownership**

Early South Asian settlement was predominantly in Vancouver, New Westminster, Abbotsford, and on Vancouver Island. Due to Canadian immigration policy and the racist attitudes of British Columbians, most South Asians were prevented from bringing women and children to Canada. Despite challenges to immigration law, many were unable to establish families in B.C. until after the Second World War. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the South Asian community was made up primarily of men living a "bunkhouse life" alongside First Nations, and Chinese and Japanese men.

Settlement patterns in B.C. followed the forest industry along with the railway, the associated resource industries of fish canning and pulp and paper operations and to farms in the Fraser Valley. South Asian Canadians were major contributors to all of these, both as employees and employers. Logging, sawmilling and fish canning camps and towns often developed with enclaves that were organized along ethnic lines. South Asian Canadians built homes and



communities in these spaces.

South Asian Canadian communities were prominent in logging and sawmill towns. Up until the 1950s, prominent families lived on Vancouver island in Paldi, Duncan and Lake Cowichan, over time moving further into the interior, to places such as Prince George and Williams Lake, and throughout the Kootenay region in response to changes in the forest industry. Small towns offered economic opportunities and were often considered to be more accepting of South Asian immigrants.

In urban areas, such as Vancouver, and later, Surrey, South Asian enclaves were established around Gurdwaras, shops, and services. Today, the majority of South Asians live in Surrey, in part because new immigrants can no longer afford to live in Vancouver or Richmond. The Punjabi Market on Main Street in Vancouver and Little India in Surrey are examples of South Asian urban enclaves that have drawn residential settlement.

South Asian Canadian communities were sometimes segregated from the ethnic European settlements. They often lived along the margins that included other groups that also faced racism including on and off reserve First Nations, Japanese Canadians, Chinese Canadians, and African Canadians.

South Asians, particularly from India, arrived in B.C. with a landowners' culture that was 'sensibly brought here.'<sup>2</sup> A long history of investing in real estate has characterized the South Asian community, almost since its arrival in British Columbia. Some South Asian Canadians settled in Queensborough (New Westminster) because the purchase of a house came with a quarter-acre of land came that could be used for large vegetable gardens. Land ownership was also a sign of independence. There was an expectation that the younger generation would eventually establish separate households. A young man was expected to demonstrate his maturity and reliability as a potential family provider by saving money and investing in property to provide a separate residence for his future family.<sup>3</sup>

In the latter half of the twentieth century, many South Asian Canadians relocated from rural to urban areas. This was partly a response to the declining economic viability of sawmills, pulp mills, canning and other industries, which had consequences for the vitality of rural B.C. The shift from rural to urban areas required considerable adjustment. People who had formed their identities in the more inclusive environment of small towns in B.C. now had to adjust to greater insularity and segregation along ethnic lines in larger cities.<sup>4</sup> Educated second generation South Asian Canadians began moving

2 Workshop participant.

3 Michael Ames and Joy Inglis. "Conflict and Change in British Columbia Sikh Family Life." p.40.

4 *The Punjabis in British Columbia*. p.237.

Gur Sikh Temple, Abbotsford.  
(University of the Fraser Valley)



Punjabi Market street sign.  
(www.seattlepi.com)



into cities on their own accord, to take advantage of increased opportunities in employment, business, and education.

### **South Asian communities, a piece of the home country**

South Asian Canadian experiences in Canada included prevalent racism and discrimination within settlement communities. Often, Canadians of European descent did not want them living next door. This produced a loss of identity, community disruption, and a common immigrant experience of fears of disappearance. South Asians actively fought and resisted racism and exclusion, from the early twentieth century onward. The prevalence of racism allowed them to establish a strong collective community in B.C., often centred around religious institutions. The Vancouver Khalsa Diwan Society, created in 1907, established the first permanent Gurdwara, or temple, on Second Avenue in Vancouver in 1908. Within a decade, Gurdwaras had been established in other communities, including Victoria, Nanaimo, New Westminster and Abbotsford.

Benevolent societies and associations formed an important foundation of early South Asian Canadian society, providing support and social welfare to immigrants in need. They also assisted South Asian Canadians to fight against racism in BC.. Ultimately, these associations became a political force and symbolized the consolidation of South Asian Canadian society.

One small town that is often identified as epitomizing the South Asian rural experience in B.C. is Paldi, a small logging community on Vancouver Island, located between Duncan and Lake Cowichan, Originally called Mayo, it was founded by Mayo Singh, co-owner of the Mayo Lumber Company. Paldi was multi-cultural town that included Japanese, Chinese, Europeans, and South Asians. The first Gurdwara in Paldi was opened in 1917. The town had a school, company store and post office. The population began to decline after the construction of a new, modern mill in Nanaimo in 1965, as many moved to be closer to their new place of work.

Other communities that have been identified as key sites of settlement include: Fraser Heights and Fairview in Vancouver, Abbotsford, Mesachie Lake, Kamloops, Golden, Nanaimo, Ladysmith, Williams Lake, Prince George, Terrace, Kitimat, Prince Rupert, Fort St. James, Fort St. John, MacKenzie, Quesnel, Williams Lake, Houston, Donald, Burnaby, Duncan, New Westminster, Rosedale, Chilliwack, Kelowna, Oliver, Vernon, Victoria, Port Alberni, Williams Lake and Prince George.

### **Forming relationships**

Working and living in B.C.'s small communities, the South Asian community was part of an ethnically diverse population that included First Nations, Italians, Japanese, Kanakas, Blacks, and Chinese. After their communities were better established, and people began to feel more settled, they worked with the

South Asian Canadian Historic Places  
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Punjabi women and First Nations job action at BC Packers New Oceanside plant, c.1982. (Prince Rupert Archives P2003-093-3397)



natural curiosity of their new communities to build bridges and bring people closer together, making efforts to integrate with indigenous, European, and other Asian communities.

Early South Asians had many connections with First Nations. As British subjects, the two shared a history of racism and exclusion.<sup>5</sup> The two worked together in mills and canneries. There were sometimes animosities between First Nations and South Asians. This was largely due to claims made by European Canadians that South Asians were industrious and threatened indigenous livelihoods. Solidarities and hostilities were present in B.C. towns and in sawmill and cannery camps and workplaces. First Nations and South Asian Canadians have aligned around many political issues. For example, in 1982, Punjabi women took job action alongside their First Nations co-workers at the B.C. Packers Oceanside plant.

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5 Renisa Mawani. "Specters of Indigeneity in British Indian Migration, 1914," *Law and Society Review*, 2012.

## Theme 3 Working in a New World

From their earliest arrival in the early 20th century, South Asian Canadians and their descendants have worked hard and in a wide variety of ways to sustain their families and communities while also contributing to B.C.'s economy. A central theme in the history of B.C. is the legacy of South Asian Canadians' contribution to work and the economy. The entrepreneurial spirit and nature of the South Asian Canadians British Columbia is a highly significant part of the story and is a considerable source of value within the community. South Asian Canadians take pride in the hard work, political struggle, and entrepreneurial spirit of past generations, from the early lumber mill owners to real estate moguls today.

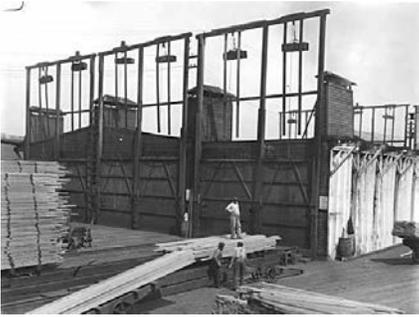
Many came and worked in a new land, in commercial and professional pursuits that included fishing, canning, farming, forestry, and mining. Others were employed in various service industries, manufacturing, technology, education, and as entrepreneurs.

Up until 1947 and the freedom of citizenship, South Asian Canadians fought against racism and discrimination in order to be treated fairly, equally, and with respect. Many pursued higher education, creating opportunities not just for themselves but for other members in their communities and beyond. Many became entrepreneurs and thus created work for others. Although South Asians have faced legal discrimination because of skin color, cultural practices and religious beliefs, they have been important in the growth of B.C.'s economy.

B.C.'s early economy was based on the extraction of resources, including minerals, timber and fish, and technologies including sawmills and fish processing. South Asian workers were key to these resource-extraction industries from early on. The first wave of South Asians included semi-skilled men that helped develop B.C.'s economy. Most small towns had bunkhouses for these working men, with work places and living quarters racially segregated. Subsequent waves of South Asian Canadians fought against racism and overcame professional and economic restrictions in order to participate as professionals in the provincial economy.

There has been a generational progression in the employment of South Asian Canadians. Beginning as immigrant semi-skilled labourers, from about the 1930s onward, South Asian Canadians became independent and highly successful sawmill and farm owners beginning in the , with a shift to retail and entrepreneurship in the 1970s and 80s. Second and third generations would take over the ownership of successful businesses or become present-day professionals such as lawyers or elected officials.

Sikhs Loading Lumber at BC Mills Timber + Trading Co. 1919. (VPL 12452)



Indo-Canadian women pack fish at BC Packers in Steveston (Richmond Museum)



Hamman Singh in a hayfield in Abbotsford, 1952. (New Westminster Museum and Archives IHP266-1060)



In the early twentieth century, South Asian workers were often targeted as “unfair competition,” particularly during times of economic uncertainty. Many used these arguments to exclude South Asian men from working in certain industries. These anti-Asian sentiments, which were also directed at Chinese and Japanese workers, was used to promote B.C. as a “White Man’s Province,” a place that reserved privileges and rights for white citizens alone. In the 1960s, changing forms of racial discrimination were used to limit economic opportunities for South Asian Canadians, especially Sikhs that wore long hair and turbans.

Today, South Asian Canadians place considerable value on the struggles and opportunities hard-won by earlier generations to pursue livelihoods, secure, affordable housing, and to establish communities.

### **Farming and agriculture**

South Asian Canadians have made significant contributions to agriculture and food production in B.C.’s economy, a key industry that reflects their hard work, ingenuity and expertise. South Asian agriculturalists were and are some of the greatest farmers in the province.

Many South Asian Canadians who immigrated to B.C. in the early 20th century, especially from Punjab, came from the rural farming and labouring middle classes in their home countries. There was a large and expanding market for food products and South Asian Canadian proficiency in farming ensured a steady supply of fresh vegetables for communities. South Asian businesses developed food distribution networks and retail outlets for residents in many small towns.

South Asian Canadian families purchased farms, initially in the Fraser Valley, particularly Abbotsford. From the 1960s onwards, the south Okanagan also became a destination for South Asian farmers. South Asians established dairy, cranberry and blueberry farms in the Fraser Valley, and later, in Richmond and Delta. Immigrants in the 1980s continued to bring farming backgrounds and knowledge to B.C. Initially employed on established farms and working collectively, South Asian Canadians purchased and leased land, creating mixed fruit, hay and vegetable farms that are successful and profitable today.

### **Lumbering, sawmills and pulp and paper**

Since the early 20th century, South Asians in British Columbia have made significant contributions to the lumber industry. They are still active in this industry, both as workers and mill owners, operating sawmills, shingle mills and lumber camps during the first half of the 20th century. The earliest sawmilling jobs were located in Vancouver, in mills on Burrard Inlet in North Vancouver and Vancouver’s Hastings Mill at the foot of Dunlevy Street, but most sawmilling work opportunities were located in the B.C. interior,

Vineyard sign, Osoyoos. (author photo)





Vancouver cloth house. (globeandmail.com)

Vancouver Island, central coast and the Skeena region. The forest industry also generated other types of entrepreneurship including contracting, trucking and the wood fuel business.<sup>1</sup>

South Asian Canadian lumber barons, of past and present, are of considerable significance to the B.C. economy and the heritage and imagination of the South Asian Canadian community. Sohan Gill's Yukon Lumber Company, Doman Singh, foreman at the Hillcrest Lumber Company near Duncan and later owner of the Doman Lumber Company, founded in 1953, are just two of the names in this important aspect of South Asian Canadian history in B.C.

Other important South Asian names and places in the forestry business are:

- The Mayo family sawmill in Paldi, B.C.
- Doman Industries (which also included farming and trucking)
- Sawmills in Victoria, Ladysmith and Lake Cowichan
- Kapoor Mills and Goldwood Industries
- Rayonier and MacMillan Bloedel

### **Fish canning, road and railway building**

South Asian salmon cannery workers were essential to the industry, employed in the Lower Mainland at plants such as BC Packers in Richmond, as well as in northern B.C. canneries, such as Prince Rupert, Ocean Falls and Port Essington. South Asian labourers were involved in the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and later the Pacific Great Eastern Railway. Alongside Chinese men, South Asians also worked in an unregulated labour environment that was marked by racism and exploitation.

### **Marketing and retailing**

South Asians have been involved in marketing and retailing in both small towns and larger cities. Patel's building on Commercial Drive near Kingsway and on Fraser Street was a spice retailer and cinema that provided services and goods for South Asian Canadians, shops in Vancouver's Chinatown were a source for Indian vegetables such as bitter melon, and Famous Foods on East Pender Street in Vancouver was an early place to buy whole-wheat flour and other Indian groceries. In some cases, food distribution networks and small grocery stores became large successful food businesses. For example, Teja Foods, a family business based in Richmond, is one of the largest suppliers of South Asian grocery, spices and giftware products in Canada. Other South Asian-owned shops and retail outlets include upscale clothing and fabric stores, jewelry stores, beauty salons, warehouse or distribution centres and many other retail enterprises.

### **Other work**

South Asian Canadians have been involved in many other types of work across

1 The Punjabis in British Columbia p.50.

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Terrace Lumber Company, Moe Takhar, president (right) and Terry Bennett, general manager, 2006. (Logging and Sawmilling Journal)



B.C. Some of these sectors include:

- Trucking and transport
- Justice system, police, army, health care, medical research, hospital and rehabilitation services
- Bus drivers, transit, taxi and limousine drivers
- Restaurant, wedding and banquet hall owners and operators
- Engineering, construction, steelworking
- Planning, education and teaching
- Law and medicine
- Real estate, business and entrepreneurship
- Manufacturing and electronics
- Quarrying and brick making
- Hotel owners and employees
- Tailoring and sewing
- Care givers and nannies working in private homes

**Women in the work force**

After the first wave of South Asian immigrants who were all men, women became a significant and important part of the work force. Many worked in fish canning and processing, both in the Lower Mainland and in B.C.'s northern canneries. Working in the public sphere allowed South Asian women to adapt to a new country with a different language and its own distinctive social norms and institutions. Beginning in the 1950s, the female children of immigrants were often encouraged to pursue education and join professions such as nursing, community health, teaching and other jobs. Today, South Asian women are active participants in the economy in a variety of jobs and professions across B.C. and a large majority of South Asian women aged 20–45 have paid work.

**Forming unions and workers' organizations**

Farm workers suffered racial discrimination and inequity in pay and hours. These barriers forced people to work harder. Sometimes farm workers were also exploited at farms owned by South Asians, who were taking advantage of lack of employment regulations. South Asian farm workers often discussed racism and employment inequity with family and friends and at meetings at Gurdwaras. In some instances, these conversations lead to the establishment of farm workers' associations.

South Asians often took on political roles. Several were representatives in the B.C. Federation of Labour. Some of the earliest South Asians to arrive in BC were involved in labour organizing. By the mid-20th century, as South Asians became increasingly involved with labour unions, and as they relied on unions to organize South Asian Canadian workers, labour movements began to reject racism in B.C. and among their members.



### **Entrepreneurial and professional successes**

Despite the racism, discrimination, and exclusion faced by South Asian Canadians, men and women worked in a variety of white-collar and blue-collar jobs. The participation of South Asians in business has always been high. Some owned businesses such as taxi services, Indian restaurants, sweet shops and grocery stores. Some of these were businesses passed down through generations.

Professional and highly educated South Asian immigrants are an important part of the community today. Many educated upper to middle class South Asians who immigrated to B.C. and Canada between 1960 and 1985 are currently practicing professional and business people.

Some notable business successes include sawmill owners Asa Joyal and Mayo Singh, trucking industry pioneer Rosie Basran and community activist and entrepreneur Jack Uppal. Some of the places that represent the economic successes of South Asian Canadians include:

- Kashmir Lumber
- Youbou Lumber Mill
- Kapoor Singh's Lumber Mill
- Terrace Lumber Company
- Tod Inlet
- Cranberry farms in Richmond
- Punjabi Market in Vancouver
- Kashmir Lumber
- Guru Nanak Mining and Trust Company
- Rokko Sarees and Fabrics, Vancouver

Evolving from the semi-skilled labourers who arrived at the beginning of the 20th century, and due to their struggles for inclusion, subsequent generations of South Asian Canadians have pursued higher education and have had enormous success in various professional fields in B.C.

Contemporary contributions to the provincial economy made by South Asian Canadians include professions and fields such as law, engineering, education, sales, marketing, finance, medicine, accounting, media, technology, science, real estate and business. Associations such as the B.C. South Asian Business Association and the Association of South Asian Professionals of B.C. provide a platform and professional support for the South Asian community.



## Theme 4 Fighting for Equality and Justice

This theme discusses the ways in which South Asian Canadians and their descendants have struggled against racism and discrimination in British Columbia and the Dominion of Canada.

Many struggles were waged against colonial administrations and government institutions, the political process, law and the military, and against the hostility and protest against decisions and acts of government. Despite these barriers, South Asian Canadians have made considerable achievements.

The long struggle to counter racism in the form of discriminatory laws and policies in British Columbia is central to understanding the South Asian Canadian experience. South Asian Canadians were repeatedly challenged in their efforts to settle in B.C., in their perseverance for full rights and recognition as citizens of B.C. and Canada, and more recently, in their participation in all levels of public administration. Racism and discrimination are themes that resonated most deeply with people in the community. Many saw this as having the greatest impact on the South Asian experience in B.C.

### Confronting economic discrimination

Discriminatory practices from the early 1900s until 1947 meant that there were fewer employment options for South Asian Canadians. Racial intolerance and fears of competition from Asian labour gave some politicians and trade union groups the rhetoric necessary to pressure the Dominion Government to severely restrict and eventually prohibit immigrants from China, Japan and India from 1906 onwards.

For those South Asians already in Canada, there was blatant discrimination in the workplace. Some of this was based on the unfounded fears that South Asian workers would take available jobs or be promoted over white workers. Systemic racism was evident in segregated working areas and lunchrooms, in graffiti and racial slurs.

From the 1970s onwards, South Asian Canadians entering professional fields continued to face 'glass ceilings.' Despite their qualifications, some were not promoted, while others were unable to move into certain professions.

### Facing social and legal discrimination

From the early 20th century up until 1947, systemic racism directed at South Asians was evident historically in government policy and legislation and in socially sanctioned hatred based on appearance, colour, customs and traditions. Racial discrimination was connected to language and on assumptions based on appearances.

The *Komagata Maru* has become an important symbol of the racism directed

Komagata Maru memorial, Vancouver.  
(Centre for Indo-Canadian Studies,  
University of the Fraser Valley)



Air India Flight 182 memorial, Stanley Park.  
(The Canada Project)



at South Asians in B.C., Canada, and in the English-speaking worlds. The ship was chartered by Sikh entrepreneur, Gurdit Singh, who chartered the *Komagata Maru* to sail from Hong Kong to Vancouver with 376 Punjabis onboard. The ship arrived in Vancouver harbour on May 23, 1914. It was denied entry under the newly amended continuous journey provision, and remained in the Harbour for two months, while local lawyers and South Asians challenged the legality of Canada's immigration law. The case was heard by the Immigration Board and was then appealed to the Supreme Court of British Columbia upheld. The Court unanimously upheld the Board's decision and the *Komagata Maru* was escorted out of the harbour on 23 July 1914 and sent to Calcutta. Between 1910 and 1920, only 112 South Asian immigrants were allowed to enter Canada.

The story of the *Komagata Maru* resonates beyond 1914 and beyond Canada. It is closely linked to freedom movements in India and the right of South Asians to vote in Canada.<sup>1</sup> The ship is a reminder of the struggle and resilience of the first wave of South Asian Canadians. The memories of the *Komagata Maru* have been kept alive in pioneer families through community storytelling, which is passed on from one generation to the next. Some of these archives include oral histories, personal anecdotes, unpublished manuscripts and family albums.<sup>2</sup>

In May 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau formally apologized in the House of Commons for the *Komagata Maru* incident. This carries enormous symbolic value for many South Asian Canadians who have been fighting for a political apology and for acknowledgement of their experiences of racism. Apologies are certainly important as they suggest responsibility and accountability. However, there is concern that this apology, like others that have preceded it, will be used as a form of closure, so that nothing concrete needs to be done to address Canada's long history of colonialism and racism.<sup>3</sup> For many South Asians in B.C. and across Canada, the aftermath, and investigation into the Air India disaster was also marked by racist overtones.

### **Defending B.C. and Canada**

B.C. has recently commemorated the contributions made by South Asian soldiers during the First World War. Punjabi Sikh soldiers fought shoulder-to-shoulder with Canadians and suffered enormous losses. In death, they are commemorated in cemeteries around the world. These soldiers enlisted in Canada after the declaration of war against Germany and her allies on Aug. 4, 1914. Ranging in age from 22 to 35, the men were from Toronto, Smiths

1 Hugh Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru*, 2014. Renisa Mawani, "Law and Migration across the Pacific."

2 *Komagata Maru: Continuing the Journey*. [http://komagatamarujourney.ca/Memory\\_and\\_Memorialization](http://komagatamarujourney.ca/Memory_and_Memorialization)

3 Renisa Mawani, "The Legacy of the Komagata Maru," <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/the-legacy-of-the-komagata-maru/article30066572/>

Harjit Sajjan, Minister of National Defence. (cbc.ca)



Falls, Vancouver, Winnipeg and Montreal. While the first century of Canadian history was marked by the explicit restriction of Asian immigration, the active participation of South Asian soldiers in the Canadian armed forces resulted in a post-war endeavour to end some aspects of state racism. Immigrants serving in the First or Second World Wars were eligible for Canadian citizenship after one year.

Today, South Asian Canadians participate fully in the defence of Canada. In his 2016 apology for the *Komagata Maru*, Prime Minister Trudeau noted that before entering politics, Minister of National Defence Harjit Sajjan was the commanding officer of the British Columbia Regiment Duke of Connaught's Own, the same regiment that forced the *Komagata Maru* out of Canada in 1914.

### **Finding a political voice**

A growing number of South Asian Canadians have entered Canadian politics at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels. Others remain connected, and in some cases involved, in politics in their home countries in South Asia. For example, many Sikhs have supported the Khalistan movement for an independent Sikh state in Punjab.

In 1986, Moe Sihota became the first South Asian Canadian to be elected to a legislature in Canada. Mr. Sihota was a member of the New Democratic Party, and represented the riding of Esquimalt-Metchosin in the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. He held this position until 2001. In 2000, Ujjal Donsanjh became the first South Asian Canadian premier of any province or territory in Canada.

South Asian Canadians in B.C. are now engaged in politics and government at all levels, with involvement at neighbourhood, community, city, regional and provincial levels.

### **Honouring achievements**

Honouring those who achieved great things in the province's political arena is important, as is recognizing the experience of many early pioneers who lived in and contributed to B.C. under exclusionary policies. Some of these include:

- Sadhu Singh Dhani, author
- Ujjal Donsanjh, NDP MLA, Attorney General, Premier of BC, MP, Minister of Health
- Moe Sihota, MLA
- Setty Pendakar, Vancouver city councillor
- Wally Oppal, Supreme Court judge
- Jenny Sims, BC Teachers Federation and shadow cabinet MP
- Herb Dhaliwal, MP and federal minister
- Naranjan Sing Grewal, mayor of Mission

Surrey's Corporal Taj Aujla, the first Sikh serviceman to guard the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. (Ottawa Citizen)



A Sikh Canadian soldier in the First World War I. (Grayhound Information Services)





## Theme 5

### Building South Asian Community and Society

South Asian Canadians and their descendants have contributed to many aspects of B.C.'s social and cultural life. Their participation in groups, institutions and organizations have enriched communities and assisted those in need throughout the province. This section focuses on all kinds of South Asian Canadian social and cultural practices - temporary and long-lasting, formal and informal, independent and connected to government. The main themes include identity, culture, dignity, and perseverance.

South Asian communities are rich in their diversity, their expression of experiences and values, and in sharing stories and history. Traditionally, many communities are mandated through religious beliefs and values to support the less fortunate through social activities and through supporting government institutions through taxes. South Asian communities frowned on social assistance until the influx of immigrants in the 1980s. Prior to that, the community took care of their own, not wanting to be a burden to the Canadian government.

South Asian communities are numerous, strong and active in their own way. Indeed, it is inaccurate to speak of "the" South Asian community of a given place, for there are likely to be many, with varying places of origin, language, religion, political orientation, and so on. Contacts between communities are most frequent when communities are small or where culture, language and/or religion are shared. South Asian Canadians have widely varying backgrounds and few generalities can be made about their social and community life. One critical cultural commonality is that all come from places where extended families, kinship and community relations are extremely important.

Despite the diversity of South Asian Canadian ethnicities and religions in B.C., communities are connecting and integrating with each other as well as with Canadian culture. Today, through work, social and community life, and in inter-ethnic marriages, South Asian Canadian communities are joining together, with only perhaps few families affected by inter-racial or inter-ethnic marriages these days.

South Asian communities, while fully Canadian, are still very much connected to their home countries, through political, culture, religion, art, news media, language, marriage and family and within their thoughts and imaginations.<sup>1</sup>

#### Cultural identity and changing traditions

First generation immigrants, often unaware of the cultural and generational effects of migration, discovered, in the midst of raising their children, that their children receive conflicting messages. There are societal pressures on

1 Satwinder Bains. Email communication.

their children to fit in and familial pressures to stay true to their own cultural ideals.<sup>2</sup>

There is a generation of South Asians caught in the middle of western and South Asian values and cultures and struggling to find a median point. For many, the challenge to fit in often took place at the expense of culture. Some were deemed “too Indian to fit in” and others no longer “Indian enough” for their communities in B.C. and in India. Living between two cultures meant that one could be told they are not Indian when visiting India and not Canadian in Canada.

South Asian Canadians number 1.6 million across the country, with four cohorts in B.C.. The first immigrant families from 1900’s are now the 4th and 5th generations and are largely ethnic Canadians. The large group of immigrants from the 1970s have strong roots in their home countries. Their children are the largest second generation of South Asian Canadians children in Canada, and while many have not visited their parent’s homeland, the home country persists in their imagination. New immigrants are arriving and settling in British Columbia. Changing values mean there is not one particular South Asian Canadian identity.<sup>3</sup>

### **Participating in society at all stages of life**

Many South Asian countries are characterized by a deep-rooted patriarchal social order in which authority is vested in the men who takes the responsibility for maintenance of the family. In the early twentieth century, South Asian women were seen as a threat to Canada through their relationship to South Asian men. Politicians and others argued that the presence of South Asian women would encourage increased migration from India and other parts of Asia. South Asians who brought their wives would establish permanent homes in the country.

The 1967 legislation granted married women greater authority over their status. Familial, especially spousal roles and relations are changing, as women acquire greater access to economic and social resources beyond their homes and communities. Additional changes to families are likely, particularly in regard to intermarriage, as the second generation matures and settles down. Many South Asian communities continue to practice arranged marriages. In more traditional family structures, women stay at home and care for children and the elderly while men work in the public realm.

Second and third generations of South Asian Canadians (teenage boys and girls) are challenging traditional family structures while also bringing familial values into schools, universities, and places of employment. Their parents’ histories of struggle in Canada and India have encouraged the new

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2 Farha Shariff. “The Liminality of Culture: Second Generation South Asian Canadian Identity.” p.70.

3 Satwinder Bains. Email communication.

Cariboo Gur Sikh Temple in Quesnel.  
(www.indookanagaintimes.com)



2016 memorial in Vancouver for Sikhs  
who died fighting the Indian army in  
1984. (Georgia Strait)



generations to lead by example and to expect more out of life.

### **Temples and religious ceremonies**

South Asian-Canadians come from very diverse religious backgrounds, including Sikh, Hindu, Muslim and Christian. Minority religions include Buddhists and Jains. Despite this diversity, South Asians functioned early on as a single community in B.C., with the first gurdwaras serving as the meeting places for all people from different home regions, and of all religions and ethnicities. The central importance of the gurdwara evolved from the ability of the higher population of Sikh immigrants to erect and maintain temples or community centres, and because Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and others naturally participated in each other's festivals and patronized each other's places of worship.<sup>4</sup>

Today, throughout B.C., places of worship including Hindu and Buddhist temples and Islamic mosques can be found. For all South Asian cultures, places of worship are important for maintaining religious and cultural traditions and for building and preserving community. They are places of culture, social relations, and prayer.

People occasionally came to Canada because of its religious freedoms. For example, Muslims who were persecuted for practicing their faith in Pakistan and in India believed that they would be able to practice it openly in B.C. Recent events since 911 have made these freedoms more restricted.

South Asian communities vary in the emphasis they place on religious activities. Groups with high ethnic consciousness maintain a full round of activities, whereas other groups do not. The Sikh identify, for example, is both ethnic and religious, with their institutions in place since the first Sikh Gurdwara (temple) was founded on Second Avenue in Vancouver in 1908. They have been very successful in establishing and preserving their religion in B.C. Other early Gurdwaras were located in New Westminster, Abbotsford, Victoria and Golden. All Gurdwaras have a langar hall, where people can eat vegetarian food without cost. Some also have a library, nursery, and classroom. Gurdwaras do not have to conform to any set architectural design. Many were established in existing, and often modest buildings, such as the Cariboo Gur Sikh Temple in Quesnel, and a Safeway store in Prince George.

Ismaili Muslims are both an ethnic and a religious group that has founded strong religious institutions. The Hindu community has established multi-community temples which are used by a range of different ethnic groups for ceremonies and prayer. Other groups such as Pakistanis and other Sunni Muslims also stress religious, cultural and family maintenance.

South Asian temples were built to create safe and cohesive communities. They were havens against racism. They brought all South Asians to one

<sup>4</sup> Hugh Johnston. Group Identity in an Emigrant Worker Community." p.14 and Satwinder Bains, personal communication.

location so they could feel that they were part of something larger. Anyone who came to B.C. could stay at the temple for free, until they found a job and got settled. The temple was responsible for their well-being.

Early South Asian communities buried and cremated their deceased. Funerary rituals often emphasize ways to assist the soul to leave the body quickly. The performance of aarti, the ritual of worship that forms part of puja, in which an oil lamp is passed over the remains, reciting specific prayers and hymns, placing a necklace, garlands or flowers around the neck are other sacred rituals related to funeral ceremonies.

### **Forming associations and institutions**

Most South Asian communities support a variety of activities and institutions such as language classes and cultural activities. In some groups, religion remains central to life, and is emphasized over ethnic bonds. Volunteers play an important role in South Asian communities. Philanthropy and service are important values.

Some associations and places that express these values include South Vancouver Neighbourhood House, Fraserview Hall in Vancouver, the Khalsa Diwan Society, India Mahila Association, Greater Vancouver Bangladesh Cultural Association and the Indo-Canadian Women's Organization.

### **Developing language and educational systems**

While most Canadians of South Asian heritage can speak one of Canada's official languages, the majority have another mother tongue such as Punjabi, Tamil, Urdu, Gujarati and Hindi. Language has often been a barrier and constraint to many South Asian communities. Public adaptations for language are beginning to appear across the province. For example, in Prince George, at the request of the two local Sikh temples, Punjabi has been added to some signs in the city, both for cultural reasons and for the ability of worshippers, particularly native Punjabi speakers to easily find the buildings.

Education is highly valued by South Asian communities with early racism and discrimination a motivating force to educate people in the community. Current initiatives to encourage public education about South Asian history and culture include publications, tools, films and school curricula, in particular, British Columbia's new kindergarten to grade 12 curriculum. Archival material is also important to the history of the South Asian community in B.C., and has been retained through photographs, writing, genealogies and oral histories at institutions such as the University of the Fraser Valley and Simon Fraser University.



## Theme 6 Embracing South Asian Canadian culture

South Asian Canadians and their descendants have expressed their sense of identity throughout the province in their many contributions to the knowledge and cultural wealth of B.C., including intellectual pursuits, artistic and cultural expressions, and athletic achievement. From celebrations, festivals, food, music, ideas and the visual arts, the integration of South Asian Canadian arts and culture is valued for the richness it brings to B.C.. South Asian Canadian arts and culture offers an important means by which to engage with historical memory through ceremonies, celebrations, dress, food, arts, literature and creative writing.

Telling the stories of individuals and families, and remembering the sacrifices and contributions of people to South Asian Canadian communities and the province as a whole, is an important aspect of the histories of South Asian Canadians in British Columbia. Contemporary versions of centuries-old cultural traditions keep communities connected to their culture.

South Asian culture encourages learning and integration between communities on a daily basis. The community is proud of their culture, hospitality, generosity, spirit, festivals, food, and dress. The value of this culture extends beyond the Lower Mainland and Victoria to the many smaller communities in B.C.

Wanting to maintain their own cultural and societal roots, South Asian immigrants developed a cultural life in their settlements. This cultural life was organized primarily around the gurdwara or temple, but also included musical societies, benevolent associations, language schools and associations, sports groups, dancing and music groups and other community groups intent on providing support and cultural richness to the South Asian community. Local newspapers in larger communities promoted awareness of South Asian affairs in the province and beyond.

In 2002, the Government of Canada signed an official declaration to designate May as Asian Heritage Month, in part to build a community where Pan-Asian arts, culture and economic contributions are an integral part of society. Communities throughout B.C. celebrate and reflect on the rich history of Asian Canadians and their contributions to the province. It also provides an opportunity for all British Columbians to recognize the challenges and hardships faced by early pioneers in their efforts to build the province into what it is today.

In the last decade, with the official recognition of Asian Heritage Month, South Asian Canadian institutions, such as South Asian foods and restaurants, and specialty importers of fabrics and goods, have been increasingly

Hockey Night iPunjabi.  
(Vancouver Sun)



Richmond Kabaddi Cup 2012.  
(www.livekabaddi.com/)



appreciated by British Columbians. A vital part of South Asian cultures includes communication, respect, independence, sharing and caring, which remain important across generations today.

### **Enjoying sports and leisure**

Kabaddi is a game played by many communities in India. It offers a recent example of how British Columbians of many backgrounds have embraced and transformed a popular activity associated with ethnic South Asian Canadians in many other parts of the world. A dedicated kabaddi field, Kabbadi Park, was constructed in Surrey to host tournaments. Soccer and cricket are popular in South Asian communities, while Hockey Night in Punjabi offers play-by-play announcing of Vancouver Canucks hockey games. A card game known as Seep is an important leisure activity, popular in both India and Pakistan, and has travelled to B.C. with patterns of South Asian migration..

Gathering places such as Central Park in Burnaby and Bear Creek Park in Surrey are considered important for social life and South Asian festivals, ethnic celebrations, music concerts, sporting events and family functions.

### **5b Media, cinema and writing**

South Asian language newspapers have helped to share news of India, Pakistan, and the Indian diaspora with communities in B.C.. One of the earliest South Asian newspapers was established in 1914. Since the 1990s, Vancouver and the Lower Mainland have had many South Asian newspapers, such as the South Asian Post, Indo-Canadian Voice, Punjabi Tribune, The Link, Indo-Canadian Times, Charhdi Kala and many others. Most of these are based in Surrey B.C.

The Ghadar movement, launched in 1913 to fight for the Independence of India against British rule, relied heavily on journalism and literature. Realizing the importance of media and the press, the Ghadar Movement published over 20 newspapers in Punjabi, Urdu, Gujarati and English in the United States and Canada. Ghadar poetry was an integral part of the Ghadar movement and played a key role in conveying the message of the revolt.

South Asian programming on radio and cable television has expanded rapidly with dedicated programming and channels, especially in major centres. Punjabi and other language television stations are contemporary examples of South Asian language mass media. Prior to cable television, video stores in small towns helped to bring South Asian cinema and culture to the community.

Mehfil Magazine served the Canadian South Asian community from 1993 to 2010. It was a full colour glossy magazine, a first for the community, highlighting the achievements and successes of South Asians in Canada. In 2014, the magazine published a special edition, *100 Year Journey*, which profiled the stories of 100 early South Asian families. The book documents

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Dohi drum. (www.surreyvaisakhiparade.ca)



Histry wall at the 2016 DARPAN Awards in Surrey. (darpanmagazine.com)



the experiences of some of the first South Asians in Canada, detailing how they provided shelter and support to new immigrants, fought for the voting rights of all communities, and spent years away from their loved ones as they set up new lives for themselves and their families.

There is a significant community of South Asian writers, artists and literature in British Columbia. Much of this creative practice details the struggles of early South Asian immigrants and their resilience in a new land. South Asian Arts was founded in 2005 to develop individuality through the arts. The organization has been active in promoting South Asian dance, music, and culture through dance and music classes, professional performances, workshops, guest lectures and children’s cultural summer camps. Travelling across British Columbia, South Asian Arts has taught over 30,000 students in both elementary and secondary schools. The Vancouver International South Asian Film Festival is an annual event established in 2010, showcasing films by South Asian writers, directors and actors.

Dance academies in the Lower Mainland and around the province provide Bollywood influenced dance and music training. Bhangra, a popular music combining Punjabi folk traditions with Western pop music and Dhol drumming are an important part of South Asian contemporary culture and a key expression of identity and community.

**South Asian Canadian arts**

The decorative arts are important among South Asian communities. These include henna, which has been used since antiquity to dye skin, hair and fingernails, along with embroidery, colourful fabric, bangles and bracelets, the traditional jewelry worn by South Asian women in India, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Jewelry, especially yellow gold, is handed down over generations. Passing down gold is a way of maintaining wealth and is a form of wearable currency. Bangles and other gold jewelry are often given to brides and other family members at South Asian weddings.

Due to fears of racism and discrimination, South Asian women often avoided going out in public in their traditional dress. Today, there is a growing appreciation of the variety of South Asian clothing as these designs become mainstream. Fabrics and cloth are sometimes seen as records of family history. Local fabric stores have been important sources for traditional clothing, especially for weddings. Much of this is handmade and imported from India. Since the 1950s, the Punjabi Market on south Fraser Street in Vancouver has been an important area for people around the province to get traditional South Asian clothing, food and jewelry, but today Surrey is a hub. Rokko Sarees on Fraser Street was one of the earliest stores supplying South Asian Canadians in Vancouver.



### **Civic culture, celebrations and food**

Holidays and events are very important to South Asian communities. They have been taking place for centuries and were introduced to B.C. with some of the earliest immigrants. Today, South Asian festivals that celebrate days of worship, heritage and the cultural value of giving, attract thousands of people.

Weddings are particularly important. Many South Asian families and communities place high expectations on marriage. Young people are often asked, “are you married yet?” Colourful, extravagant, and expensive, South Asian weddings are a thriving enterprise in which all local businesses are invited to participate. Sikh weddings are very large events that bring together family and close-knit communities for nights of enjoyment. There are numerous wedding halls, mainly in Surrey, including the Royal King Grand Taj, Crown Palace, Mirage, Riverside Signature, Aria, Diamond, Chrystal, South Hall, Fraserview, Bollywood, and Bombay Palace. These are popular venues for weddings and parties, with size of the halls a testimony to their importance in servicing South Asian events and communities.

In the 1950s, South Asian families began integrating western traditions into weddings. Many weddings are a negotiation of several cultural practices, for example, flower girls and bridesmaids have been integrated into traditional South Asian wedding ceremonies.

Festivals, religious and non-religious, folklore, dances, plays and parades take place throughout the province and play an important role in maintaining South Asian cultural practices. The Nagar Kirtan procession is a Sikh custom involving the processional singing of holy hymns within a community. While this may be practiced at any time, it is customary in the month of Visakhi. Surrey and Vancouver each have their own Visakhi celebrations. Diwali is the Hindu festival of lights celebrated every year in autumn in the northern hemisphere. Eid occurs several times a year, including the end of Ramadan, and marks an important celebration for Muslims.

Food is a significant part of South Asian Canadian cultures. There is great importance placed on having traditional ingredients and eating venues available. Cafes, restaurants and teashops are present in communities throughout B.C. and at many fruit stands in the Okanagan.

Some features of South Asian food and cooking include:

- Restaurants and Banquet Halls that serve meals and snacks appropriate for the season
- Sweet shops that sell Indian sweets that are bought and shared on holidays and celebrations
- Pizza shops with ‘Indian pizza,’ including tandoori and butter chicken pizza, and fusion cuisine

- Ghee is an important ingredient in South Asian cooking, used to make Karah parshad and other dishes and is often required in abundance
- Traditionally, most of the cooking, including traditional savoury dishes and sweets, was done at home
- Traditional lunch boxes commonly used by South Asian immigrants include suitcase lunch kits or tiffins
- Household items include steel glasses and copper bowls
- The tradition of the langar hall in the Gurdwara, a common kitchen or canteen where free food is served to all visitors without distinction of faith, religion or background

### **Honouring achievements**

Honouring those who achieved great things in arts, culture and sport in the province is important. There are many South Asian Canadians practicing in these fields. Some of those identified include:

- Ranj Dhaliwal, novelist
- Khursheed Nurali, singer
- Irshad Manji, writer
- Renée Sarojini Saklikar, poet
- Belle Puri, TV personality and radio host for CKNW
- Robin Bawa, hockey player in the NHL
- Bobby Singh, football player for the BC Lions

## **Coda**

South Asian Canadians have had enormous influence in the development of the province of B.C. They have established lives and homes across British Columbia, in small towns and urban areas, contributing the economic growth of the province, and have brought a new and enriching cultural understanding. The nominated historic places represent a diverse presence and multiple stories of South Asian Canadians and their contributions to the formation of the province.

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