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Punjabi American Heritage Society  
(PAHS)

Yuba City, CA





Becoming American Permanent  
Museum Exhibit  
Community Memorial Museum



## Punjabi Americans Impact California



### LEAVING HOME

Text describing the initial journey and challenges of immigrants.



### LEAVING HOME

Text describing the initial journey and challenges of immigrants.



### CHALLENGING

Text describing the difficulties and hardships faced by immigrants.



### LIVING IN CALIFORNIA

Text describing the life of immigrants in California.



### EARLY ARRIVAL

The first immigrants from India, arriving with very little money, took a difficult journey to the U.S. through the mountains and the great distance. They carried their possessions in boxes packed in the hold of the ship. The journey was long and hard. The first immigrants were men, and they were often treated poorly. They had to work hard to make a living in a new land. They had to learn a new language and a new way of life. They had to face discrimination and prejudice. They had to build a new life for themselves in a new land.



### LEAVING HOME

Text describing the initial journey and challenges of immigrants.





*Becoming American - The Story of Pioneer  
Punjabi's and South Asians*

It is my pleasure to send my good wishes on the opening of the "Becoming American" exhibit at the Sutter Community Memorial Museum in Yuba City, California.

Showcasing the story of the Punjabi American and South Asian migration to the United States is a valuable and needed resource for current and future generations. I congratulate all the individuals and families along with the Punjabi American Heritage Society of Yuba City for their dedication and hard work for the successful completion of this project.

Sincerely,

*Jerry Brown*  
EDMUND G. BROWN JR.







# Maharaja Ranjit Singh

In 1801, Ranjit Singh became Maharaja (ruler) of Punjab. With his well-trained army, which included some Europeans, he united various factions in the region into one united Sikh kingdom. Though he ruled in the name of the Sikh Gurus, he included Muslims and Hindus in his administration. In 1802, he took control of the holy city of Amritsar, and began the beautification of Harmandir Sahib, the "Golden Temple." His kingdom survived just ten years after his death in 1839, under pressure from the British.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh, ruled undivided Punjab and northwest region of Indian Subcontinent from 1799 to 1839. Photo courtesy of Dr. Raghbir Singh Bains.



# Ranjit Singh's Family

## Maharaja Dalip Singh



Maharaja Dalip Singh (1838-1893).  
Portrait commissioned by Queen Victoria.  
Franz Xavier Winterharter, artist.

Ranjit Singh's youngest son, Dalip Singh, succeeded him as Maharaja at age 5. Political leaders and generals took advantage of Dalip Singh's youth and began seizing power. The kingdom soon fell apart. British and Sikhs fought two fierce battles called the Anglo-Sikh Wars. The British gained control of Punjab in 1849. To prevent the Sikhs from rebelling further, the British took Dalip Singh to England where they controlled his education, religious beliefs, social status, and business dealings. Despite all their efforts, as an adult he claimed stake to the state of Punjab. For Punjabis, Dalip Singh represented the independence of their state as well as its loss to Britain. Being exiled from his homeland, he took refuge in Paris where he later died.



Photo courtesy of Dr. Narinder S. Kapany.

## Maharani Jind Kaur

Mother of Dalip Singh.

## RANJIT SINGH'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Amritsar holds a special place in the heart of all Punjabis. Founded in 1574, it is home to several significant historic and religious sites. Most important is Harmandir Sahib, popularly known as the Golden Temple, which is the spiritual and cultural center of the Sikh faith. Amritsar was, and remains, the commercial and political center of Punjab.



Harmandir Sahib (popularly known as The Golden Temple)

Leaving Home

### **Sikhs Allowed to Land.**

The four Sikhs who arrived on the Nippon Maru the other day were permitted yesterday to land by the immigration officials. The quartet formed the most picturesque group that has been seen on the Pacific Mail dock for many a day. One of them, Bakkshlied Singh, speaks English with fluency, the others just a little. They are all fine-looking men, Bakkshlied Singh in particular being a marvel of physical beauty. He stands 6 feet 2 inches and is built in proportion. His companions—Bood Singh, Variam Singh and Se-hava Singh—are not quite so big. All of them have been soldiers and policemen in China. They were in the Royal Artillery, and the tall one with the unpronounceable name was a police sergeant in Hongkong prior to coming to this country. They hope to make their fortunes here and return to their homes in the Lahore district, which they left some twenty years ago.

From: San Francisco Chronicle, 6 April 1899

At the time this article appeared, immigrants from India were a rarity. The author of the article found the Sikhs strong, vigorous men, but he had a hard time pronouncing their names.

## LEAVING HOME

During the 1800s, Punjab included the northwestern part of present day India and Pakistan. After two costly wars with the Sikh kingdoms, the British took control of Punjab in 1849. British rule brought prosperity to some, but high taxes to others. Unstable local economies pushed many Punjabis into joining the British Indian Army. Soldiers returning from overseas operations shared stories of higher wages and other opportunities in places like California. Many Punjabis decided to take the risk and migrate to the U.S.



Citizens group photograph: SIKHS 1910. Source: California State Library Photograph Collection.

# Journey To A New Land



## JOURNEY TO A NEW LAND

Sustained Punjabi migration to California began around 1900. Events in India and the U.S. combined with numerous immigration laws created several different waves of migration. Members of the Sikh faith made up the majority of the pioneer Punjabi immigrants, though small numbers of Muslims and Hindus also made the journey. Due to immigration barriers, these pioneers were mainly men unable to bring their families. As laws changed, women and children were also able to come to the U.S. Regardless of which era they came, these Punjabi immigrants willingly took enormous risks and worked hard to make California their home.



Bakhshish Singh Dhillon Family, 1915.

# Early Arrivals



## EARLY ARRIVALS

The long and arduous journey from Punjab, combined with immigration restrictions, made it difficult to reach the U.S. Immigrants from India were often grouped with other Asian people and anti-Asian sentiment in California peaked just as Punjabi immigration began to pick up in 1907. A small number of Punjabis came through the Angel Island Immigration Station while others, following seasonal work, traveled south from Canada or north from Mexico. Later legislation eventually slowed immigration from India to just a few people per year.

Immigrants on Angel Island (1916) Photo courtesy of California Department of Parks and Recreation, Angel Island State Park files - DPR File #311086



Nand Singh Johl, arrived in 1906 Chanan Singh Johl, arrived in 1908 from Jandiala, Punjab, India



Gandi Singh Heir, arrived in 1914

# PUNJABI AMERICANS IMPACT CALIFORNIA

Punjabis were among the first immigrants from the Indian subcontinent to come to California. They settled in farming regions, including the Yuba-Sutter area. With hard work and determination, they built a strong community that preserves the traditions of their homeland while becoming an important part of the state. A look at their faith, traditions, and experiences settling in a new land are key to understanding the role Punjabi Americans play in the cultural fabric of California today.



Stockton Sikh Temple built in 1912 and remodeled in 1929 (this was the first place of worship built by the Sikhs and the first property owned by South Asians)

# Komagata Maru

# KOMAGATA MARU

## The Komagata Maru Episode

The Komagata Maru, a Japanese steamship, became a symbol of Indian exclusion in North America. Chartered by a Punjabi businessman, Gurdit Singh, the ship carried 376 men to Canada in 1914. Canada, like the U.S., placed restrictions on immigration from India beginning in 1907. Indians argued that as British subjects they should have the right to move anywhere within the Empire, which included Canada. The voyage of the Komagata Maru tested this argument. Upon arrival in Vancouver Harbor, Canadian authorities refused to allow the passengers to disembark. The ship remained docked in the harbor for three months while a legal battle waged in the courts. Punjabis in Canada and on the West Coast helped the fight by sending food and money. In the end, the passengers lost and the ship was forced to leave for India. Many innocent passengers were either imprisoned or executed by the British upon their return. In 2008 the Canadian Parliament offered their apology for this incident.



Gurdit Singh in the white suit with his son and fellow passengers, 1914.

Gadar Revolutionary Party



# Gadar Revolutionary Party

Punjabis in the U.S. supported the efforts to end British rule in India. In 1913, the Pacific Coast Hindustani Association, later known as the Gadar Party, formed and established its operations in San Francisco. The Gadar Party advocated rebellion against the British. Many California Punjabis were Party members and gave money to support the fight for Indian independence. By 1917, increased pressure from British and U.S. authorities forced the Gadar Party to change its tactics. The organization remained active, but less vocal, until Indian independence in 1947. Some patriots returned to India to fight for independence from British rule and were imprisoned or executed. Kartar Singh Sarabha, a student at the University of California, Berkeley, became a celebrated revolutionary in India. At the age of nineteen, he was executed by the British



The Sikh Sansar, USA-Canada: Gadar Issue-Part 1. Photo courtesy of Echoes of Freedom.

# Challenging Exclusion

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## IMMIGRATION LAWS

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California had a long history of racial discrimination toward Asians. The fear of Asian immigrants taking jobs or owning and cultivating land created a strong anti-Asian movement in the state. Politicians latched on to the movement and under pressure from California senators eventually pushed the U.S. Congress to pass the Immigration Act of 1917. The act prohibited immigrants from a barred zone, essentially all of Asia, including India, from entering the country with only a few exceptions. Legal immigration from those countries slowed to a trickle. The Immigration Act of 1924, which denied entry to all people from Asian countries, closed all loopholes. This meant Punjabis already in the U.S. could not bring their families to join them.

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# ORIENTAL EXCLUSION ACT 1924

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Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924 stops most immigration from Asia including India.

Bhagat Singh Thind

# BHAGAT SINGH THIND

## U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind

Bhagat Singh Thind was one of the first Punjabis to challenge U.S. citizenship laws. Thind came to the U.S. in 1913 and attended the University of California, Berkeley. After serving in the U.S. Army during World War I, he applied for and received citizenship. However, the Bureau of Naturalization appealed and a court revoked his citizenship. Thind fought the decision and the case eventually came before the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1923, the Court ruled that although he was Caucasian, he was not white and could not be granted citizenship. As a result of the Thind decision, 45 others lost their citizenship because of their skin color.



Bhagat Singh Thind served in the US Army in World War I (1918).  
Photo courtesy of Thind Family.

T. 1291/26/398

20th February, 1926.

SIR,

I am directed by Secretary Sir Austen Chamberlain to state, for the information of Mr. Secretary Anson, that it was recently decided by the Supreme Court of the United States, on appeal in the case of United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind, that British subjects of Hindu race were not eligible for naturalisation as United States citizens, even though they had lawfully entered the territories of the United States.

2. It seems clear that the United States authorities propose to treat the "naturalisations" of such persons as null and void ab initio, and Sir Austen Chamberlain is advised that it can be assumed that such "naturalisations" have not affected the British nationality of the persons concerned.

3. Such persons are consequently entitled to receive the protection and passport facilities usually accorded by British authorities to British subjects. And I am to enclose to you herewith a copy of a circular despatch upon the subject which is being issued to British consular officers abroad.

Yours, etc.

A. (Signed) G. R. VANNER

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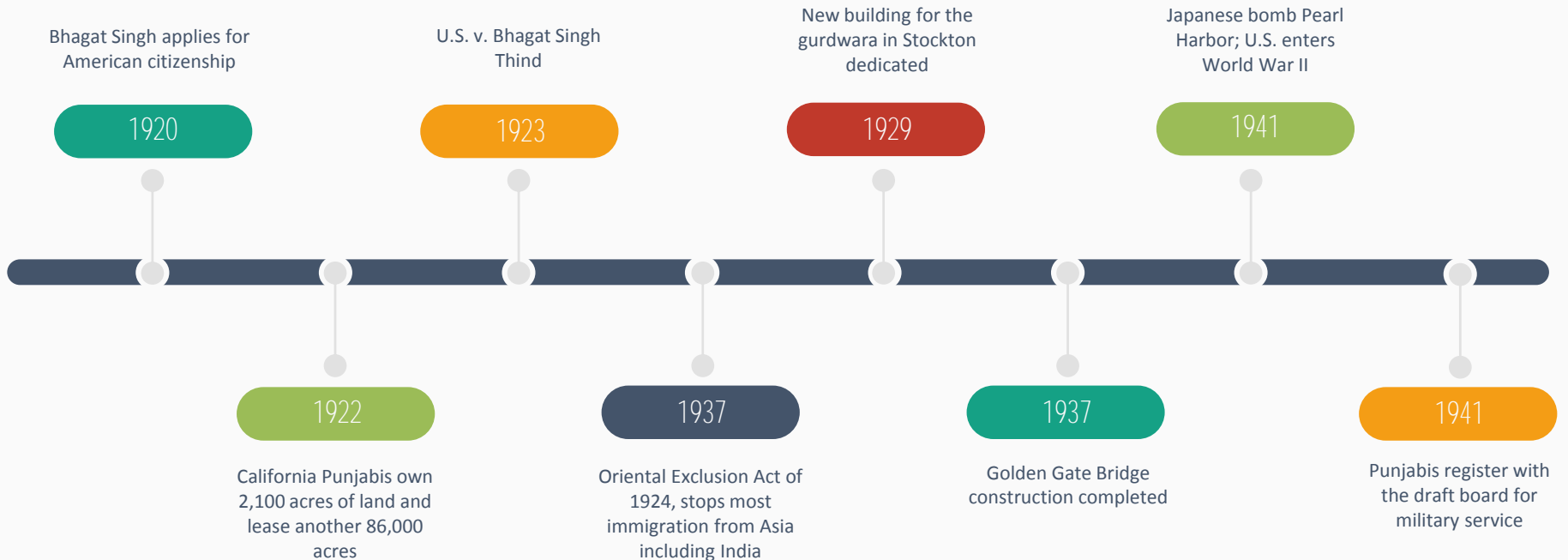
## CHALLENGING EXCLUSION

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Letter from Secretary of State, Foreign Office; Hindu Race (people from India), not suitable for US citizenship (February 20, 1926).

# CHALLENGING EXCLUSION

Punjabis challenged their exclusion and legal status in the U.S. by filing petitions in courts and lobbying in Washington D.C. At the same time, they were concerned with the political turmoil in India. They supported efforts to challenge British rule there, often citing America's own struggle for independence. The community, though small in numbers, organized itself and provided funds for both issues.





# Living in California



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## LIVING IN CALIFORNIA

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Even in the face of restrictive laws and discrimination, Punjabis adapted to their new lives in California. They built successful businesses and excelled as students. They established a network of community organizations and served with distinction in the armed forces. Immigration restrictions made it difficult for Punjabi women to come to the U.S. Men who wanted to have families often decided to marry Mexican Americans. Some men chose to remain as bachelors.

# Finding Work

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## FINDING WORK

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Punjabis found work in lumber mills, railroad construction, factories and foundries. Most gravitated to farm work since the majority came from farms in Punjab where expertise in agriculture dates back thousands of years. Groups of Punjabi workers often banded together as a work crew traveling from farm to farm and began acquiring land of their own. The California legislature passed the Alien Land Law in 1913, preventing non-citizens from owning property. Punjabis, like other Asian immigrants, found creative ways to work around the unjust laws to obtain land and establish their own farms, such as leasing in someone else's name.



# Punjabis Drafted Into Military

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# MILITARY SERVICE

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Baldev Singh, the first post WW II Kesadhari (with unshorn hair) Sikh to serve in the US Military. He was drafted during the Vietnam War and his father Jarnail Singh Purewal was instrumental in changing the law so that Sikhs did not have to cut their hair if they were drafted.



Bud Singh Dhillon, c. 1945. Born a US citizen, Bud Dhillon volunteered for the army to fight against fascism in World War II. Courtesy of Kartar Dhillon, Berkeley.

# Favorable Immigration

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## Luce-Celler Act of 1946

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Punjabis finally saw an improvement in their legal status as Americans and a slight population increase with the signing of the Luce-Celler Act in 1946. Punjabi and other Asian activists lobbied hard for this bill. It permitted them to become citizens and established a small quota for new immigration from Asian countries. Bigger changes came with the Immigration Act of 1965, the Hart-Celler Act, which allowed for a dramatic increase in immigration from Asian countries including India. The arrival of women, extended families, and skilled professionals led to a transformation of the Punjabi community



PRESIDENT TRUMAN SIGNING THE LUCE-CELLER ACT 1946



# IMMIGRATION LAWS



Hardial Singh Hunji (1947)



Hari Singh Everest (1953)

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# FAVORABLE IMMIGRATION

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Didar Singh and Santi Bains (Poonian) wedding picture. June 21, 1964. Photo courtesy of Bains Family.



Kartar Singh Bahawal returned to India in 1951 and married Vrinder Kaur. Courtesy of Neelam Canto-Lugo.

# LIVING IN CALIFORNIA



Lal Singh Rai and Mary Rai (circa 1950). Courtesy of Mary Rai.

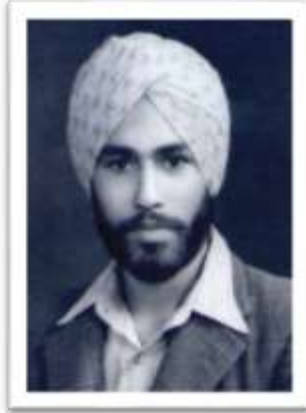


Jawala Singh Bains with family (circa 1966). Mr. Jawala Singh Bains originally came to Canada in 1907 and arrived in Yuba City in 1930. He took seven years to walk an arduous journey from Mexico to reach California and became a US Citizen in 1964. Photo courtesy of Sarbjit Singh Thiara.

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## FAVORABLE IMMIGRATION LEGISLATION

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Mehar Singh Tumber (1944)



Lachman Singh Thiara (1949)



Karnail Singh Takhar (1954)



Sarwan Singh Boparai (1959)



Badur Dean Gors (1950s)



Jagtar Singh Sidhu (1953)



Gurbax Singh Johl (1963)



Lakha Singh Chima (1953)

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# FAVORABLE IMMIGRATION LEGISLATION

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Jarnail Singh Purewal posing in front of his new car, Yuba City 1955. His father Milka S. Purewal came to the U.S. in the mid 1920s via Mexico, after being denied entry at San Francisco.



Harbhajan Singh Takher (1951)



Purewal Brothers - Bakhtawar Singh and Udham Singh



Bachan S Teja came to USA in 1920's. His son Dev (Gurdev) Teja was elected District Attorney of Sutter County in 1962 and he later became a Municipal/ Superior Court Judge.

Settling In

## SETTLING IN



"Noble laureate Tagore, with Indian Students at Berkeley University."  
From: *India and Canada: A Journal of Interpretation and Information* (Vancouver, British Columbia), v. 1, no. 4 (September 1929)

Front row, seated, left to right: S. R. Pande, Mr. Moge, Tara Singh Rai, Partap Singh Gill, Bir Singh Bhandall, M. Misra, Gurbachan Singh; second row, seated: Mrs. Padmavati Chandra, Miss Maya Chandra, Miss Lila Chandra, Dr. Rabindranath Tagore, R. R. Ghai, S. S. Hitashi; third row, standing: M. K. Foridar, Mohammed Ali, Hazara Singh "Hamdam," Labh Singh, J. N. Sharma, Surat Singh Gill, Bal Singh Bajwa, Daleep Singh Dhillon, Sundar Singh Shadi; back row, standing: Thomas John, K. B. Manson, unknown, Bhag Singh.



Muslim Mosque, Sacramento, California, 1949. This mosque, located at 5th and V Streets in Sacramento, was the first constructed in California. It was completed in May 1947.



Yuba College 1947. Left to Right: Gulzar Singh Johl, Dr. Gulzar Singh Johl, Sewa Singh Heir, Resham Singh Bains, Kartar Singh Johl, Gurdip Singh. Photo courtesy of Dr. Gulzar Singh Johl.

# SETTLING IN

## First Asian American U.S. Congressman

Dalip Singh Saund became a U.S. Congressman in 1956 and served three terms with distinction. Saund came to California in 1920 as a student and decided to stay after finishing his degree. Even with a PhD from UC Berkeley, he could only find a job on a farm. He eventually acquired his own successful farming operation. Saund became an outspoken advocate for both India's independence and for the rights of Asian Indians in the U.S. He was involved in the passing of the Luce-Celler Act of 1946 and became a U.S. citizen in 1949. After serving for several years as a judge in the Westmoreland Judicial District, he ran for, and won, a seat in Congress making him the 1st Punjabi American Congressman in the United States serving 3 years with distinction.



Congressman Saund with John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson in Washington.



Congressional Honor to Dalip Singh Saund.



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## LEGISLATION OF 1965

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When President Lyndon Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (the Hart-Celler Act) into law, he dramatically changed the face of the Punjabi American community. Influenced by the growing civil rights movement, the law abolished the national origins quota system established in 1924. To promote racial equality among all ethnic groups, the law allowed thousands of immigrants from all countries into the U.S. every year. The law gave preferences to families and skilled professional workers. The combination of the pioneer families with the new immigrants created a stronger and more diverse Punjabi American community.

October 3, 1965: President Lyndon Johnson visits the Statue of Liberty to sign the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.





Nineteen Eighty-Four (painting by Amrit and Rabindra Kaur Singh) depicts the storming of the Golden Temple, the Sikh community's most important historic shrine, by Indian troops in 1984 ([www.SinghTwins.co.uk](http://www.SinghTwins.co.uk))

Political events and human right violations in 1980's in Punjab and other parts of India caused significant migration of people from Punjab, especially Sikhs to USA (many people sought asylum in USA).

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## EVENTS OF 1984 ON MIGRATION

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# POST 9/11 ISSUES OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY AND LOBBYING EFFORTS



President Bush meets with Sikh Americans, September 2001, to discuss issues faced by Sikh Americans after the 9-11 tragedy. Photo courtesy of The White House.



Sikhs lobbying to educate Legislature on the issue of "Mistaken Identity" and hate crimes post 9-11 (2009). Photo courtesy of Mirin Kaur Phool.

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## POST 9/11 MISTAKEN IDENTITY AND LOBBYING

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Sikhs with Assemblyman Dan Logue in the front of California Capital after the passing of Assembly Resolution 181 recognizing November 2010 as Sikh Awareness and Appreciation Month. Photo courtesy of David Essary.

# Faith and Culture

# FAITH AND CULTURE

## Sikhism



Sikh woman reading Sri Guru Granth Sahib in her home

A Sikh may pray to God directly. No intermediary is needed. Sri Guru Granth Sahib provides all the wisdom and guidance necessary for living a spiritual life, serving as the ultimate guide for Sikhs. Sikhs practice their faith in the Gurdwara, a place of worship, or at home. Each Gurdwara has a Sri Guru Granth Sahib, which anyone is welcome to read. It also has a religious flag (Nishan Sahib) and a community kitchen (Langar).

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# FAITH AND CULTURE

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## Sikhism

Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, established the order of the Khalsa ("the pure") and commanded them to uphold the highest Sikh virtues of commitment, dedication and social consciousness. The Khalsa are both men and women who choose to go through the initiation (Amrit) ceremony. They follow the Sikh Code of Conduct and maintain five articles of faith called the Five Ks. A Sikh's goal is to become a Khalsa.



Sikh Temple Gurdwara of Yuba City founded in 1969. Picture provided by Ranjit Khandola.



Every Gurdwara has a community kitchen known as Langar. Picture courtesy of wikimedia.org.



Sikhs praying at the opening ceremony of Gurdwara in San Jose

A Sikh wedding, called Anand Karaj, marks the joining of the bride and groom in an equal partnership. It is a joyous and festive occasion with religious overtones. Traditionally, family members introduce a suitable partner to their eligible single relative. It is up to the couple involved to make the final decision. More and more young people are choosing their own partners. The ceremony is performed in the presence of Sri Guru Granth Sahib either in a Gurdwara or at the home of the bride, and is followed by a sumptuous meal, music and dance.

## FAITH AND CULTURE

### Weddings



Call them not husband and wife who merely sit together. When two bodies walk on the path to merge into one soul, call them married.  
*Guru Amar Das*



# Preserving Traditions

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# PRESERVING TRADITIONS

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Punjabi Americans constitute a vibrant and thriving community. Some cultural traditions practiced in the Punjab for decades are alive and flourishing today in America, while interactions with other cultures have influenced changes in others. Art, music, dance, and even sports, in the Punjabi American community are a unique combination of long-held tradition and modern influence.



Bhangra dancer at Punjabi American Festival, Yuba City



Traditional Giddha (folkdance) attire



Sikh parade, 2009. Picture courtesy of G S Randhawa

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# PRESERVING TRADITIONS

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Depiction of a Charkha (spinning wheel)



Sikh Boy Scouts of USA. Picture courtesy of Meeka Studio, San Jose.



University of California, Davis students performing at Punjabi American Festival



First Punjabi Musical group of CA (Sangeet Group)

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# PRESERVING TRADITIONS

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First Sikh Parade, 1980



Fireworks at the Tierra Buena Sikh Temple Gurdwara in Yuba City



Traditional Bhangra attire



Jazzy Bains performing at Yuba Sutter Fairgrounds, 2004

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## UC BERKELEY STUDENTS VISITING MUSEUM

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Since the opening of the museum in March 2012 – thousands of people including students have visited the Becoming American Museum Exhibit and our website.

Learn more at

[PunjabiPioneers.com](http://PunjabiPioneers.com)

[PunjabiHeritage.org](http://PunjabiHeritage.org)

Please visit Yuba City on May 24 for the 21<sup>st</sup>  
Annual Punjabi American Festival