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Punjabi American Heritage Society (PAHS)
Yuba City, CA
Becoming American Permanent Museum Exhibit
Community Memorial Museum
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.
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 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.
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.
Leaving Home
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.
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.
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.
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.
Nand Singh Johl, arrived in 1906
Chanan Singh Johl, arrived in 1908 from Jandiala, Punjab, India

Gandi Singh Heir, arrived in 1914
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.
Komagata Maru
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.
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.
Challenging Exclusion
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.
Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924 stops most immigration from Asia including India.
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.
Letter from Secretary of State, Foreign Office; Hindu Race (people from India), not suitable for US citizenship (February 20, 1926).
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
LIVING IN CALIFORNIA

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
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
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
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.
IMMIGRATION LAWS

Hardial Singh Hunji (1947)  
Hari Singh Everest (1953)
FAVORABLE IMMIGRATION


Kartar Singh Bahowal returned to India in 1951 and married Vrinder Kaur. Courtesy of Neelam Canto-Lugo.
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.
FAVORABLE IMMIGRATION LEGISLATION

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)


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.

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.
LEGISLATION OF 1965

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)

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).
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 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
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).
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.
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.

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
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.
PRESERVING TRADITIONS

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)
PRESERVING TRADITIONS

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
UC BERKELEY STUDENTS VISITING MUSEUM
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
PunjabiHeritage.org

Please visit Yuba City on May 24 for the 21st Annual Punjabi American Festival