



Research Paper

One People Two Nations: Diasporic Sikh Community in Canada and ties with India

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ABSTRACT: History has recorded the migration and settlement of people from one part to another part of Globe. The present article traces the process that led to free migration of Sikhs from colonial Punjab to Canada. Over the period of time these Sikhs encountering racial discrimination made Canada their homeland. At the same time ties with motherland were also retained. The relationship between two nations as experienced and forged by the Sikhs has been a focal point of analysis. This aspect has been illustrated within the emergent historiography of Canadian history and specific instances in the realms of community and Institutions. The lived experiences of Sikhs show how they are at home in both nation States.

Key Words: Sikhs, Free migration, Punjab, India, Canada

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The existing scholarship on migration across time and space has explored the role of human agencies, policies and economic pressures in structuring the mobility of individuals and communities in different countries. The existence of diasporic societies in various nations of the world is a living reality. The ongoing changes in the realm of communication particularly in ICT has led to the existence of global village. India has been a part of this experience. Under British colonial rule, Indians as indentured labourers were forcibly sent to various British colonies. The situation in Punjab was different from where Sikhs went to Canada as part of free migration. Over the period of time, they became Canadian citizens and are presently an integrated part of multicultural Canadian nation. Alongside, links with motherland and Punjab in particular are retained. It has resulted in strengthening of ties with families, community and Indian nation. The intervention of Indian nation for strengthening ties with diasporic Indian community across nations since 2000 has also impacted this process.

The main aim of the present paper is to analyse the nature and structure of migration by focusing on the lived experiences of Sikhs since the beginning of the 20th century in Canada and their relationship with Punjab. By focusing on the changes that occurred in both spaces, this paper would explore the role of human agencies and economic resources in shaping the growth of development. The main focus would be on the cultural and social dynamics of change with focus on education.

The paper is divided in several segments. In the first segment, focus on historiography of Canada highlights the nature of existing scholarship on the experiences of Sikhs in Canada. It would be followed by an analysis of changes that were experienced by India during the British colonial rule. The focus on colonial Punjab, attainment of independence and subsequent developments would bring out the role of Canadian Sikhs and the government of India in forging links with diasporic Indian community. In the next segment, the focal point of this paper role of some Canadian Sikhs has been studied to show the nature of ongoing contours of development in Punjab. The role of Budh Singh Dhahan, Harinder Singh Saran and Suneet Singh is the subject of study.

I. HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CANADA

The existing scholarship on Canadian history shows several trends indicating changes in the wake of usage of more sources and use of analytical tools. Initially, the focus was on the British and the French who were seen as the "Founding Fathers" (Carl Berger, 1987). The role of historical Geography and economic resources in the making of Canada was also highlighted (Ralph.r.Kruger, 1982:11-78). The role of individuals

like John Macdonald also engaged the attention of historians . D.G.Creighton called him the “Maker of Modern Canada”. (D.G.Creighton , 1967:50-62)

Gradually shift from political and Economic history to social history was also seen. The exploitation of native Indians and their role as ‘First Nation’ was also acknowledged (Amrit Kaur Basra, 2002:142) .The existence of hierarchical Canadian society was acknowledged by John Potter in his ‘Vertical Mosaic’. (John Potter, 1965). The writings on south Asians also came into existence . In his seminar work Hugh Johnston focused on immigration policies of Canadian government to study Komagata Maru incident. (Hugh Johnston, 1979). Presently the scholarship on experiences of Sikhs who settled in Canada over the period of time is immense . Sadhu Singh Dhami’s novel ‘Maluka’ (Sadhu Singh dhami, 1997) Autobiography of Tara Singh Bains (Tara singh Bains &Huge Johnston,1995), work of Paramjit Singh Judge (Paramjit singh Judge, 1994), Sarinder Singh Sangha Sakroulvi (Sarinder Singh Sangha,1999) Archana Verma to name few vividly portrays the history of Sikhs in Canada.

The focus on gender perspective has also led to study of Sikh women belonging to first and second generation in Canada (Amrit Kaur Basra, 2015)

The relationship with Punjab has also been explored . The documentation by Government of India and details on ‘Pravasi Bhartiya Diwas’ also highlights the aspiration of diasporic community with India. From these sources relationship between Canadian Sikhs and Punjab has been explored. (L.M.Singhvi, et al, 2001) . The contemporary sources like newspapers, documents of chief Khalsa Dewan are also source of information and have been used in several published books. In recent years, valuable work has been produced on Canadian Punjabi Philanthropy . The names of Warne Dusenbury and Darshna Singh Tatla can be mentioned in this regard.

II. MAKING OF CANADIAN SOCIETY

Canadian society evolved over the period of time. In the geographical space stretching from coast to coast , native Indians resided and were part of socio –economic milieu in which natural resources were not over exploited (Bumstead, 2011:10-50). The process of European colonization in eastern Canada commenced with the voyage of Jacques Cartier in 1534(Amrit Kaur Basra, 2002) It led to the establishment of ‘New France’ which was controlled by the British 1763. Thereafter , along with British , Scotts , Jews, Lowlanders and others came to settle in Upper Canada. Gradually the society was becoming differentiated. With the formation of Confederation on 1st July 1867, process of nation building also commenced .The national policy of Macdonald envisaged settlement of Canada West , economic growth, forging of links between east and west by the construction of Canadian Pacific Railways. The construction of CPR was linked with the integration of various regions and British Columbia was integrated on this premise only.

For the purpose of economic growth and political unity, there was need to evolve an immigration policy encouraging settlement of immigrants in the west. The government of Macdonald sought the help of Britain in this regard but the outflow of population from Canada to America could not be stopped. In 1896, liberals under Laurier assumed power and their main focus was on immigration policy. Clifford Sifton who was the first minister in charge of immigration insisted upon attracting large number of peasants from central and Eastern Europe. For construction of CPR, cheap labour was desired so chinese were also welcomed. In 1907, an agreement was signed with Japan which permitted the entry of Japanese labourers, (ibid).

India was under the control of Britain . The process of colonization had started with annexation of Bengal in 1757 and Punjab was annexed in 1849, The Royal Proclamation of Queen Victoria in 1858 had declared that Indians would not be discriminated on the basis of caste, creed , colour , race and religion within British dominion . (shekahrBandhopadhya,) The support of Sikhs who constituted a large proportion in the British Army was also valued (Khushwant Singh, History of the Sikhs,Vol.II).

By the 1890s, Sikh Villagers were travelling in different parts of world either as part of British army or in search of jobs. In Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaya , Sikhs were employed as Policemen, Watchmen and Caretakers. In Malaya they served as dairy men, cart drivers and mine labourers . There was information about Canada also.

In 1880, first Sikh came to work in Columbia River Limber company followed by others. The company remained in operation till 1927. In 1902 Sikh soldiers were part of celebrations marking the eighth anniversary of coronation of King Edward. A regiment with Sikh soldiers came to Victoria on ‘Empress of Japan’ and visited Vancouver and Montreal. On return journey to England and Hongkong, they shared their experiences with other Sikhs. Some left jobs and decided to come to Canada (Sohan Sarinder Singh Sangha Sakroulvi :pp 58-60). Most of them came to British Columbia and belonged to Doaba region. By the beginning of 1908 as per colonial records, there were 5179, ‘South Asians’ in Canada (ibid, 141). Most of them worked in Lumbar factories and faced hostility , racial discrimination and adverse working conditions in host country. But they did not loose heart and through community ties organized their lives. The first step in organizing community life was the formation of the Khalsa Diwan Society in Vancouver on 22 July 1907. Its founding fathers were

Balwant Singh, Arjun Singh Malik, Bhag Singh, Banda Singh and Mit Singh. The collective efforts resulted in the establishment of Gurudwara in Vancouver in 1908.

The initial welcome for Sikhs had given way to social prejudices. They were seen as 'undesirable, sick, hungry and a menace to women and children'. (Peter Ward , 1990 : 83-84,). The Labour riots against Chinese and Japanese in 1907 in Vancouver were followed by an enactment of Immigration Act in 1908. It had a clause of continuous journey which stipulated that immigrants could come by continuous journey from India. It was also stipulated that immigrants coming to Canada must have \$200 in possession. Though outworldly there was no ban on bringing wives, children and dependents by Sikhs settled in Canada but provisions clearly laid out that in such cases, head was supposed to possess finances for their maintenance. It was against this policy that Punjabis raised their voices and fought even court cases. (S.S.Sangha :182)

Hira Singh, resident of Vancouver for four years, went back to Punjab to bring his daughter and wife and reached back to Vancouver on 21st July 1911 via steam ship Monteagle. He was allowed to land as he was a resident of Vancouver but his wife and children were ordered to be deported. He furnished a cash bond of 1000 dollars and his wife and children were allowed to land subject to hearing pending in the court and granting of the writ of Habeas Corpus. Eventually both were allowed to stay as an act of grace. (ibid : 183-184)

The situation became volatile when in 1914 Komagata Maru, a ship chartered by Gurdit Singh, with 376 passengers mostly Sikhs landed at the shore of Vancouver. The immigrant authorities did not allow passengers to land. Local Punjabi community stood up in their support and arranged for finances, to file and fight court case on the behalf of stranded passengers. However, ship had to return back. (Gurdit Singh, Julmi Katha, 1921, reprint, 1997) (imdb.com)

Thus the period between 1902-1914 was marked by efforts of the small Punjabi community to sustain its existence and to fight for their rights. Between 1909-1920 only 118 immigrants reached Canada (S.S.Singh Sangha:168-176). India became independent in 1947 and there was also change in Canadian policies. The experiential aspects of Sikhs going and settling in Canada can be gleaned through the autobiography of Tara Singh Bains, documented by Hugh Johnston. Tara Singh Bains was called by his sister, settled in Canada to migrate. He reached British Columbia in the early 1950s. Over the period of time, he worked in lumber mill and went on to transform his family life. His children got married over the period of time. He retained his identity of baptized Sikh but eventually decided to return back to his ancestral village Kultham in the early 1980s. He has felt at home both in Canada and India (Tara Singh Bains and Hugh Johnson, Montreal :1995)

Much has changed by present times. The process of migration is still going on. Sikhs who went to Canada in early 20th century and those who followed them have gradually integrated themselves in Canadian Society. The official documentation by Government of Canada on Komagata Maru is marker of fact that role of Sikhs in the making of Canadian nation is very much acknowledged. (www.cic.gc.ca) The visibility of Canadian Sikhs in the realm of politics is very much evident. In 1993 three Indo-Canadians were elected to the Parliament. Among them were Gurbax Singh Malhi, the first turbaned Sikh. In the recently held 42nd federal elections (2015) 18 Punjabis including five turbaned Sikhs, Harjit Sajjan, Raj Grewal, Darshan Kang, Navdeep Bains and Randip Saras were elected under the leadership of Justin Trudeau (www.tribuneindia.com/news/canada-federalelections/148783.html) As per the census of 2015, there are 1,355,635 Canadians of Indian origins (en.m.wikipedia.org) and they have strong links with Punjab.

III. PUNJAB FROM COLONIAL SUBJECTION TO INDEPENDENCE

The immigration of Punjabis had commenced when India including Punjab was under British rule. Those who went in search of new avenues never forget the land, people and culture they had left behind. As people of Punjab responded to their needs, aspirations and discriminatory hostile environment in Canada, so did early migrants respond to issues confronting Punjabis. (Sadhu Singh Dhami : pp 1-10, 73). From meager earnings, remittances were sent home. Some became successful and provided employment to Punjabis coming to Canada. Kapoor Singh, a Jat Sikh from Kharondi village, Hashiarpur district and Mayo Singh of Paldi village set up a Sawmill company in 1916 in the Corwichean valley of British Columbia. It was called Pacific Lumber and Mayo Lumber company and came to provide employment to 250 Punjabi men (Verma--2002). Financial help was extended to passengers of Komagata Maru, (Johnston -1979-80) which had been forced to return back in 1914. They participated in Ghadr movement and some of these men returned back to Punjab to take part in the anti Imperialist movement. Support was also extended to Gurudwara Reform movement in 1920s. There was also participation in activities connected with setting up of schools and newspapers in 1930s. In fact, there was close connection between the chief Khalsa Diwan of Vancouver and the one that was set up Amritsar. (Khalsa Samachar, 1910)

When India became independent on 15th August 1947, there was rejoicing among Punjabis in Canada. In the post independent India, links at community levels have been remained strong.

In the strengthening of bonds between India and Diasporic Indian community turning point came when in 2002, Government of India decided to appoint a high level committee on the Indian diaspora under the

chairmanship of Dr. I.M.Singhavi , then member of parliament and foreign High Commission of India to U.K. Its aim was to collect data on the status of PIOS and NRIS, to understand their “characteristics, aspirations, attitudes , requirements, strengths and weaknesses and their expectations from India. One of the objective was to see the potentialities of their role in the economic, social and technological development of India. The committee was directed to recommend a “broad but flexible policy frame work and country specific plans for forgoing mutually beneficial relationship”. (letter of Transmission , 18.8.2000)

The committee collected data on Indians residing in different countries. In case of Canada also, it was found that the immigrants had strong ties with Punjab and they looked forward to participate in philanthropic commercial and socially relevant enterprises. (L.M.Sanghavi : 184-188)

The submissions of report resulted in the starting of Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas in 2003 by the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs of the Government of India. The annual celebrations are meant to honour those PIO and NRIS who had distinguished themselves in specific fields and have made immense contribution. It is also meant to provide a forum to assembled gathering to discuss their issues and concerns. Since 2003, Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas has been held annually and many from Canada have been honoured . In 2003 Ujjal Dosanjn, in 2007 Dave Sukhdip Singh, Hayer member of legislative Assembly of British Columbia, in 2011, Ms Lata Pada ,in 2012 Indo-Canada chamber of commerce and in 2014 Vasdev Chanehlani ,entrepreneur and philanthropist have been honoured (en.m.wikipedia.org)

There is also an overseas Indian facilitation centre set up in 2007 that provide help to PLOS and NRIS who look forward to be knowledge partners with India (ibid)

IV. EDUCATIONAL TIES

Potentiality of Diaspora for development can be gleaned from life journeys of few Canadian Punjabis who have been instrumental in forgoing ties with home land and have contributed in the realm of education, medical, welfare services , development and environmental projects etc.

Among them name of Budh Singh Dahan is notable in many way . As a devout Sikh, it was his belief to follow the principle of “Naam Japo, Kirat Karo te Bandh Shako”. It was his desire to serve his fellow Punjabis that led to the establishment of important institutions in his ancestral village Dhahan in Banga sub division of district Nawanshahr in the Doaba region of Punjab on the Phagwara Chandigarh road.

Budh Singh was born in Dhahan village on 5 December 1925 in a peasant family owning eight acres of land. He passed the Giani education. The family was involved in the Ghadr, the Babar Akali and the Akali movements in the 1920s and it had bearing on young boy. Between 1944 and 1959 Budh Singh held several positions in various local organisations including being President of the Shiromani Akali Dal branch of Jalandhar district. In 1960 he accepted sponsorship from his sister Ajit Kaur and her husband who had settled in Canada and came to Canada. In 1967 he brought his family –his wife and four children. Initially he worked in a sawmill but then ventured into construction work. He set up Dhahan construction Ltd followed by a bigger firm of B.J.K.Holdings. He also played an important role in the affairs of local Sikh community and was elected General Secretary of Khalsa Diwan Society, Gurudwara Ross street- the biggest religious shrine in Vancouver. For some years , he also edited western Sikh Samachar published by a Gurudwara in Vancouver (Carleton.ca/India)

While in Canada, he kept links with his kins at home. His first visit in 1969 was prompted due to his mother’s illness. He came back again in 1976 for finding suitable grooms for his daughters and faced difficulties in finding well qualified professionals of good family background. This made him realize that educational opportunities in Punjab were inadequate . This made his do something concrete in this regard. From 1976 to 1979 he began talking to his family regarding his intention to return to Punjab.

Budh Singh returned to Dhahan in 1979 and called a meeting of local friends to see the possibilities of benefitting the region around his native village covering four districts of Jalandhar, Hashiarpur , Kapurthala and Ludhiana. He decided to set up a hospital to provide medical service to poor and to provide educational opportunities of professional kind yielding jobs for young men and women. His vision resulted in formation of trust under the name of Guru Nanak Mission Medical and Educational Trust , Dhahan –Kaleran , district Nawan Shahr. It was registered in 1979 under the societies Registration Act of 1860. Soon his vision of a hospital and a dream of a nursing college and more instituions became a reality. Dhahan panchayat gave 23 acres land and Kalern village donated seven acres of land. Finances were collected through friends. Budh Singh Dhahan personally visited several countries. Eventually 55 crores were collected with the help of NRIS.

The foundations stone of hospital building was laid on 27th September 1981 and the building was inaugurated on 17th April 1984. By 2009 GNMMET was administrating a 25- bed hospital with 11 medical divisions, employing over two dozen qualified doctors offering facilities for X-rays , several diagnostic services and testing on the premises .Poor patients were subsidized. The trust also set up primary health care unit whose two projects between 2000-2002 extended health education to 70 villages of Aur and Banga blocks of Nawan shahr districts.

The trust formed three societies in the three major countries of the west- the international Akal Mission UK England, India Education Society in Canada and the Guru Nanak Mission Education Charitable Society in the United States. These also helped in expanding activities of hospital. The North American Sikh medical and Dental Association adopted the hospital and has been providing latest health care equipments and the voluntary services of super specialist doctors. The trust adopted Banga town and 100 villages in the vicinity of hospital to issue 'Golden Health Cards' to over 6000 families comprising 38000 people residing there. The use of card entitled 25% concessional rate for availing medical facilities.

In 1987 the trust established a secondary school within the hospital building. In 1992 separate building was constructed offering education to 1400 peoples. The school offers prizes and scholarships to needy students and provides coaching for P.M.T , P.P.M.E.T and C.E.T competitive examinations . The coaching centre was opened from 1st April 2002 at Guru Nanak Mission Public Senior Secondary School providing facilities for religious education and Kirtan training.

A nursing school was started in 1993. It is affiliated to Baba Farid University of Health Sciences, Faridkot and is recognized by Indian Nursing council, New Delhi. The annual intake is 50 students and presently 350 students are on roll. It offer three courses,

- 1)a three years diploma in nursing
- 2)a four year degree in nursing and
- 3)post-secondary basic training in nursing

(Verne A .Dusenbury and Dr. Darshan Singh Tatla, 2009). Budh Singh also decided to offer B.Sc. (Nursing) degree course on the lines of course offered by Christian Medical College, Ludhiana and entered into a partnership with the University of British Columbia in 1999. This has resulted in exchange of students. The first batch of students stating in 1999 graduated in 2002 and begged top position . The Nursing College has emerged as one of the Punjab's eminent college. The trust operates a fleet of 17 buses , 6-7 cars, three ambulances and modern medical equipments. Thus Budh Singh as the founder president of GNMMET has succeeded in realizing his dream of setting up institutions offering medical and educational facilities for the region.

Its ironical that dynamics of power politics resulted in replacement of Budh Singh by the new president . However he was not disheartened by 'Power hungry ' members of the trust . Though wronged, he continued with his mission . On 12th December 2010, he registered a new trust Guru Nanak Mission International Charitable Trust at Nawan Gran-Kulpur in Hoshiarpur district to build Nanak Missions charitable hospital there . A piece of 18 acres was donated by Nawan Gran Village and 7 acres were provided by the neighbouring village of Kulpur. Budh Singh himself purchased 10 acres of private land. The foundation stone was laid on 13th March 2011.

In this way efforts of Budh Singh Dahan has resulted in bringing medical facilities and education to local people.

A different modal is evident in the efforts of Harinder Singh Sarna from Canada. He set up Harvest Tennis Acedemy at JAssowal , his native village in Ludhiana district in 2005. While it provides training to young aspirants and charges free from them , it has also opened its gate to locals who cannot pay fee but can avail of facilities . (ibid)

While the work of Budh Singh Dahan is marked by philanthropy, that of Harinder Singh Sarna is premeated by a desire to earn also.

The government of India has been committed to enhance the quality of education for Indian students . For this purpose , access to ICT has been envisaged. This facilitated the entry of Sunit Singh Tuli into Indian Market and forging of relationship with India.

Sunit Singh Tuli moved to Canada when he was 11 year old along with his brother Raja , 16 year old and father Lakhbir Singh, Civil engineer (www.Sikhachievers.com) He studied computer Engineering from the University of Alberta. His brother graduated in Civil Engineering from the University of Toronto. Both set up Datawind which is a wireless web access products and service developers in Montreal Canada. It developed the Akash tablet computer which is the world cheapest tablet at \$ 37.99/- unit. The tablet was developed at the instance of MHRD. In 2009, the Indian Government had pledged a low cost tablet as a means of using technology to improve the quality of education within the country. Data Wind was awarded tender in 2011 and launched Akash tablet. The Government decided to provide it to Indian students at a subsidized prize. The Ubislate tablet computer was launched commercially to consumer in India in April 2012. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datawind>)

In the above mentioned case, the entry of technology was facilitated by Government of India. Sunit Tuli was honoured on the birth centenary of Bhai Vir Singh on 25th December 2015 at Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan in Delhi.

V. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that diasporic community has life long relationship with home land. In case of Canadian Sikh diasporic community links with home land are multi layered. Many philanthropic and commercial enterprises , few of which have been discussed above have led to human development. This relationship needs to be harnessed further.

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