

A BRIEF HISTORY OF
SOUTH ASIAN PEOPLES
IN THE SQUAMISH VALLEY

“South Asian” has recently been the general term in Canada referring to the people from, or with origins from the Indian subcontinent. In the first half of this century, they were referred to as Hindus, during the sixties and seventies as East Indians, and more recently as Indo-Canadians. The term also includes those of South Asian descent from former British colonies such as Fiji, East Africa, West Indies, Malaysia, etc. and of course, from Great Britain.

The majority of South Asian immigrants to B. C. came from the Punjab in northern India and were middle class landowners/farmers. Until recently, most immigrants were generally uneducated or had limited grade schooling. Their culture and customs are closely linked to their Sikh religion as are their traditional dress (see footnote regarding Sikh names). In recent years, there has been a greater influx of other religious peoples such as Moslems and Hindus.

The first South Asians in Canada were Sikh men who arrived on the West Coast in the early part of the century and worked in the forest industry. They were either single or had wives in India as the immigration laws allowed few South Asian women into Canada. It is believed that some of these new immigrants also worked in the Squamish area in the woods or at the local mills in the 1910's and '20's. These men generally kept to themselves and lived in barracks-type accommodation in the downtown area next to Logger's Lane.

Most of these men worked for wages doing unskilled labouring work but there are records of at least one enterprise. Jaswant S. Mahal and Assa S. Johal, Sr. established a shingle mill around Alta Lake in 1926. They had purchased 300 acres of timber through a broker and operated the mill until 1929 when they sold it to some Japanese. Apparently there was also a “Hindu” mill in Squamish at this time. Other Sikhs also left the valley in the late 'twenties as jobs became scarce, and there are no records of any South Asians in the Squamish area for the next three decades.

The East Indian people returned to Squamish in 1962 with the relocation of the Canadian Collieries sawmill (now Interfor) from Vancouver Island. Like their predecessors, most were either single, or had families elsewhere. Housing in Squamish was scarce in the early 'sixties and most of the men shared suites or houses, or commuted from Vancouver.

The first South Asian family in Squamish was Mohinder S. Mahnger's, who had worked for Canadian Collieries on the Island, and came here with his wife Gian Kaur and young children. Mohinder Singh passed away some years ago but his family is still here, the children (Bob, Terry, and Jesse), now have their own families. For the next five to six years, a few more families arrived including those of Naseeb S. Mahal (nephew of Jaswant), Gurdev S. Biln (author's father), Tersem S. Sahota, Resham S. Lalli (Paul's father), Harbhajan S. Grewal, Amar S. Biln, and Naranjan S. Lasher. Some of these pioneers have passed away but most of their children and grandchildren remained in Squamish.

Referred to as East Indians at the time, these first families got on well with the larger community, whether at the mill, at schools, or in the neighborhood. They typically wore western dress and were friends with their non-East Indian neighbours, socializing frequently at school functions or at special occasions such as International Fair, Fall Fair, and Talent Night. They lived mainly downtown, in Dentville or on Government Road, but a few moved into Garibaldi Estates.

There was no temple at the time, so all religious functions such as weddings, funerals, celebrations were held in Vancouver. Socially, families often visited each other, the children playing cards, while women cooked and chatted. The first South Asian school children in the community were Kalwant K. Biln, Jaswant K. Biln, and Jaswant S. Biln (author) who started in grades six and seven at Squamish Elementary in 1963 after arriving here from the Interior. They subsequently attended Howe Sound and J.S.Biln was the first full East Indian to graduate.

The size of the community grew in the late sixties and early seventies as families and friends of the pioneers continued to arrive. Men such as Kundan S. Sangha, Kirthi Kumar Sherman, Sarwan S. Cheema, Gurmail S. Grewal, and Bhai S. Bir who had shared suites or homes, now brought their own as their families arrived. Other families included the Dhaliwals, the Gills, the Maans, Bhattis, Bislas, and Haers to name a few.

The relaxation of some of the immigration laws resulted in a large number of South Asians arriving in Canada in the mid-seventies, primarily Sikhs from India, and Moslems from Uganda because of the oppression by the Ugandan government. Inevitably, tensions between the more traditional newcomers from India and the larger community, including South Asians, increased in many towns in B.C. The people of Squamish however, were more tolerant and few incidents were apparent. The newcomer Sikhs also convinced many of the pioneers to adopt the more traditional dress and religious lifestyle that many had set aside.

Employment during the seventies was still primarily at the sawmill but some began working at B. C. Rail. Very few women worked but a few of the young ladies worked in the local pharmacies and banks. Majority of the families lived either downtown or in Valleycliff, but some bought houses in Brackendale and in the Highlands.

During the eighties when many communities in B. C. were divided on issues of an independent homeland in the Punjab (Khalistan), the local Indo-Canadian community united to build the Sikh Temple (Gurudwara) at the south end of Fifth Avenue. Although the whole community participated in raising funds, the primary committee consisted of Jarnail S. Dhaliwal, Sakander S. Gill, Kulwant S. Bains, Tara S. Hothi, Naranjan S. Sandhu, .Harminder S.Gill, and Avtar S. Giri. After Jarnail Dhaliwal left, Shamsheer S. Kang joined the group and was instrumental in negotiating the acquisition of the land from Naseeb S. Mahal. The Squamish Sikh Society was incorporated in August, 1980 and the temple was completed in March, 1983.

Also during the eighties, as employment reduced at the sawmill because of automation, and educated younger people returned to the community, many first and second generation Indo-Canadians ventured into commercial and retail businesses. These included Rajinder S. Khalon (True Value Hardware), Kalwant S.(Bill) Biln (Squamish Realty), Parmjit S. Johal (IDA Pharmacy), Surjeet S. Biln (99 Transport), Avtar S. Gidda (Gold Fabrics), Paul S. Lalli (Sea-to-Sky Hotel), Terry S. Mahnger (Eagle Run Petrocan), Money Kissun (Squamish Tire), Tersem S. Jain (Jain Construction), and Avtar S. Giri (Squamish Driving School).

During the nineties, jobs in the sawmill continued to decline but significant new jobs were available in the hospitality sector at Whistler. Buses and carloads of chambermaids and other service providers commute daily to Whistler as many families moved to Squamish just so one or more of the members could get jobs in Whistler.

In the last few years, there has also been increased involvement by South Asians in the public sector and even into civic politics. These have included Mohammed Afsar as Municipal Engineer, Charanjit K. (Nina) Biln as Community Health Councilor, Sukhi Singh as RCMP officer, and Paul S. Lalli as Municipal councilor.

Also in the last ten years, there has been increased involvement by youth in local team sports such as soccer, ice hockey and tennis. Coaches and organizers like Bob Mahnger, Pepsi Tahkar, Jack Bir, Chamkaur S. Dhaliwal, and Parm Johal have increased participation and skill of not only their own children but also others in the community. South Asian youth are also more involved in recreation, community programs, and working in the food/service industry.

In less than four decades that the South Asian peoples have re-settled in Squamish, they can be proud of their place in the larger community. Although they remain unique in maintaining their language, culture and religion, they are also well-assimilated and united with the larger community on major issues. The young people are staying in the area or returning after higher education, indicating that Squamish is a good place to live.

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Sikh Names – The religious middle name for males is “Singh” meaning lion, and for females is “Kaur” meaning princess. Most of the given first names are not gender specific, ie. Jaswant Singh is male and Jaswant Kaur is female. “Singh” is not a surname but some Sikhs do not use their family name because traditionally, a married son would stay at his father’s homestead or village while the daughters would go to their husband’s village taking his surname. Consequently, everyone in the village has the same last name and it typically fell out of use. Marriages are not allowed between residents of a village because everyone is blood related.

Errors & Omissions - Most of the above was developed from the author’s memory and few discussions with friends and family. The document has not been reviewed for historical accuracy and any corrections will be received gratefully.

About the Author - J.Singh Biln arrived in Canada in July,1959 aged 8 with his family and settled in the Interior, where his father worked in sawmills. He moved to Squamish in 1963, attending Squamish Elementary, Howe Sound Secondary, and University of British Columbia. He graduated with a degree in Electrical Engineering and is a registered professional engineer. Singh has worked with B.C.Rail since graduation in 1976 starting his career in Squamish. He has held a number of supervisory/management positions here, in Tumbler Ridge and subsequently at headquarters in North Vancouver. He is currently the Railway’s Chief Mechanical Officer, responsible for managing the department responsible for maintaining rolling stock. He and his wife Marion live in Squamish with two children in high school and two at university.