

# The Sikh Global Village: Brazil

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## PART III®

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### Hope Springs Eternal:

There are references on record mentioning that some Sikhs who wanted to migrate to USA were made to disembark at the Brazilian ports from where they traveled over-land to Argentina. Similarly some of them who were already in Panama and Cuba headed for Argentina via Peru, Bolivia and Brazil. Why they did not establish roots in Brazil is not clear. Some accounts say that the land and climate of Brazil was not found attractive enough by the Sikhs. May be the political climate was not very conducive for the Indians.

Some references are available regarding Ghadar Party leaders' visit and temporary stay in Rio de Janeiro on their way to Argentina or other countries. It would appear no branch of the Party was set up in Brazil presumably because no supporters or cadres were available. In fact Shaheed Bhagat Singh's uncle lived in Rio for some time. In Bilga's account, he mentions that their (Ghadar) leaders had good influence with the ruling Party in Brazil which helped them get export agency for coffee to the Middle Eastern countries. However it is difficult to accept that all the Sikhs would have merely transited through the country without some of them not staying on. In this quest, the author did meet an old Sikh Immigrant's grandson which is covered as a case study later on. There are scattered Sikh professionals and business men in Sao Paulo and some other towns. These are comparatively recent entrants, post Seventies or Eighties. Only a few of them as yet have struck permanent roots in Brazil.

The Sikh presence in Brazil is, indeed, insignificant. One of the earlier establishments of Yogi Bhajan's 3HO in South America was in Brazil. Subhag Kaur Khalsa, an American and her late husband, Gurusewak Singh Khalsa, a Brazilian moved to Sao Paulo in 1987 bringing with them SGGS. They set up a Yoga center in their apartment and finally a separate Gurdwara last year. There are a few turbaned followers of Yogi Ji in Brazil. It is an experience to see them do "Ardas" in Punjabi followed by Portuguese translation. A friend, Arvinder Singh Garcha from London has a beautiful recording of a small group of these Sikhs with white turbans and flowing beards singing the Japji on a guitar on the Brazilian beach. Bravo!

### The Country

Brazil is the fifth largest country in area after Russia, Canada, China and USA and is the sixth largest in population. It is a country known for its Amazon rain forests, exotic Carnivals and the Samba music. Beaches and Bikinis are a national

passion. The original Indian population has dwindled but some areas remain almost unapproachable even today. Portuguese is the language, being the only exception to Spanish in South America. The earlier prosperity came through sugar with the forced labor of African and Indian slaves. Sexual relations between the masters and slaves were so common that a large mulatto population soon emerged. Coffee and rubber were other rich contributors to the economy in earlier times. Economy has had its ups and downs and continues to have extreme contrasts. Politically also it has had more than its share of military dictators, democracy of some sort, kings and their representatives. It is the only country which has had a European monarch ruling on its soil. In 1807 when Napoleon was at Lisbon's door step, the Portuguese Prince Regent decided to sail out with his entire court to Rio to rule from there. Cheap labor and underemployment abound in Brazil. No wonder the Sikhs walked through the difficult country and did not settle in Brazil.

### **Early Immigrants**

As mentioned there are several written and interviewee evidence confirming several Sikhs transiting through Brazil on their way to Argentina. This was not convincing. Hardly any evidence was available till the author's visit regarding permanent settlement of the Sikhs. In certain parts of Brazil farm lands and climate are as good as in Punjab. Brazil also needed immigrants to help develop areas particularly Amazon country and the Japanese migrated in large numbers. Perhaps in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Brazil was not as prosperous and as immigrant friendly on race considerations as Argentina where the British tended to employ the Sikhs preferentially in their sugar and railway enterprises. However there were British Railway Companies even in Brazil and it is difficult to imagine that some of the Sikhs did not seek employment with them.

Pursuing this line, the author was fortunate to unearth information on early Sikh Immigrants to Brazil at the British Library (India Office Collections), London. There is, indeed, evidence of Sikh migration in large numbers. While it is true that some of them chose to return or move onwards to Argentina as they did not find the working conditions suitable enough but several others did spread out to the country side to settle down. There seems to be no concentrated settlement of the Sikhs in Brazil which resulted in isolation. It would appear that most of them lost touch with people back home and with each other. Lack of new immigrants added to their isolation from homeland. These older Sikh immigrants and their descendents need to be located for further study.

### **British Library Papers – some earlier references**

The earliest correspondence available indicates a letter of 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1920, from H. Abbott, the British Consul in Sao Paulo to the Foreign Office wherein he writes, "while on the subject of emigration I may mention that sometime ago I received a letter from a number of Indians in the Punjab who were desirous of coming to Brazil to work as laborers but that before answering I considered it desirable to get into touch with the Secretary of State for Agriculture and Commerce and to hear his views on the subject. He has informed under date of 6<sup>th</sup> instant, that there are no regulations against British Indian subjects coming to Brazil, and that the Local Authorities have already received in the Emigrants Hospice of the Department of Labor, 56 persons who arrived from Genoa on May 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, 1912 by SS Sienna

and Bologna. As these Indians did not adapt themselves to agricultural labor in which they were engaged at different times between the years of 1912 and 1916, they finally disbanded; some coming to the capital and others going further into the interior from whom, however, the Secretary of Agriculture has no further news". In an interesting reference pertaining to repatriation of destitute, the Sao Paulo Consul wrote to London on 17<sup>th</sup> September, 1924, "Indians came to Brazil but living conditions were not suitable so they got visas for Argentina but were refused entry to Argentina. So eight of them wish to be repatriated to India". It can be surmised that other immigrants settled down in Brazil either temporarily or permanently. The eight persons under reference were from Jullandhar and Kapurthala.

In another reference one Captain Francis McCullagh interviewed the President of State of Amazonas on April 30<sup>th</sup> 1924 at Manaos, when he was told by H. E. that the State wants East Indian colonists as white men had given up. He clarified that as per Brazil Emigration Act of 6/1/1921, emigration was allowed on basis of relatives/other persons.

It is clear that some Sikh immigrants did not find Brazil suitable for settling down.

Despite this, there is evidence to the contrary about Brazil continuing to pursue immigrants from India through Immigration Agents. As an example, an advertisement in the Indian National Herald of 20<sup>th</sup> May 1927 is interesting:

**"GOOD NEWS TO THOSE GOING ABROAD  
BRAZIL WANTS INDIANS. FOLLOW JAPAN**

Mr. F De Santa Anne assures about "no racial discrimination and good prospects in a fertile coffee plantation country". Mr. F De Santa Anne has come to India as an Agent for the Brazilian country. He is now in Bombay and has traveled nearly all the countries and has studied the economic and mercantile conditions of all countries. "Mr. F De Santa Anne says that the special want of Brazil is men. Agriculturists and Indians from northern India are honorably welcome. Some years before the Japanese continued immigrating to Brazil and their number is increasing. If such is the case why should Brazil not welcome Indians who are more amicable with Brazilians than Japanese. If anybody wants any further information on the point he can write or seek the undersigned."

ISMAIL BHAI WAHID  
Passport and Passenger Agent  
HO.  
Dhobi Talao,  
Opposite Xavier School,  
Box Number 2022,  
Bombay-2."

A news item of that period mentions, "130 emigrants left as result of advertisement. 15 more booked on 23<sup>rd</sup> September. Actually 16 left per SS Castalia. The Emigration Officer was satisfied with letters received from friends or relatives that there are openings for them". From above it would appear that substantial number of Sikhs did migrate to Brazil. It is also established that some of them went to Argentina. There were no other attractive destinations to go to in the region. As it is, North America had erected barriers against Indian immigration. Of course some Sikhs returned to India but others must have settled in Brazil. What do we know of

them and their subsequent generations, needs detailed investigation? A case study of Wagner Singh is given below.

### **Wagner Sansara Singh**

The author had been pursuing various contacts to get information on old immigrants but without success. But persistence paid, and it was possible to locate an old immigrant's grandson. Wagner's grand father, Sansara Singh is registered as an immigrant arriving in January, 1927 at Santos port. Unfortunately Wagner knows hardly anything about Sikhs but was emotionally moved to meet with a turbaned Sikh. The author was presented several gifts including the watch he was wearing! In an interview on 2nd Sept. 05, Wagner mentioned that his grand father came along with three others, Ram Singh, Ratan Singh and Watan Singh. Wagner feels that there are several more old Sikh immigrants in Brazil but he has no details. Wagner Singh's grandfather Sansara (probably Sansar) Singh was born on 20th March 1902 in village Casado (pronounced: Delado) to Bogovani Singh (possibly Bhagwan Singh) and Aracor Singh (possibly 'Ar Kaur'). Sansar Singh kept wearing turban (white) till his death when he was buried and not cremated. Initially Sansar worked with the British Railways in Sao Paulo. He moved up country to Olympia where he decided to start his own grocery retailing. Wagner remembers him as somewhat subdued at all times. Sansar made no effort to teach Punjabi to his children but used to pray frequently. He was a vegetarian. The grand children remember him as a very loving and caring person. Sansar married twice, first to Judia and then to Waleska Venzel Caramento and had two sons from Waleska, Walter Sansar Singh and Sansar Singh Jr. Sansar Jr. looked like a Brazilian but Walter looked more like Indian.

Walter (now dead) married Iracema Bafero, a Brazilian (presently 77yrs old). They had seven children. Wagner was the second born. Wagner's father Walter Sansara Singh joined a bank as clerk and rose to become the manager. He used to tell his children about the importance of honesty, and exhorted them to do the right things. He used to stress that all things are ours and not mine individually. Walter financed his brother's education, which helped the latter become a teacher, and finally the Headmaster of a School. Walter was somewhat of an intellectual but his wife was not very literate.

Wagner was born on 18th August 1956 at Socotta, where he went to High School. He did not complete his college graduation as he had to take over family responsibilities because of his elder brother's death. Wagner joined a bank in Sao Paulo and worked for ten years. Living in a big city, he had the opportunity to see occasional Indian films as he felt emotional attachment with India. Wagner met Nyela at a beach and got married soon thereafter. He left the bank and moved to De Guariba, hometown of Nyela. After trying his hand at some business, he joined his father-in-law who had a printing press. Wagner had to face problems because of competition with Nyela's two younger brothers. However, his father-in-law chose him as his successor in business.

Wagner is presently also the Director of the local Commercial Association, while Nyela is the President. Nyela knows very little of India and did not have a good image of the country and the Sikhs. The only information they have is through television. India is considered as a backward and poor country. Sikh image was

negative because of Indira Gandhi's assassination and the secessionist movement. When seeing the author off at the airport, they said they were richer now because of two cultural heritages, one of Brazil and another of Sikhs/ Punjab. They felt assured that the Sikhs are prosperous and well educated. Both husband and wife are now keen to visit India.

### **SUBHAG KAUR KHALSA**

Interviewed on 1st September, 3.00pm in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Of special interest is the emotional process she went through before becoming a Sikh and her passion in propagating the Sikh dharma and the difficulties she is facing.

"It all started for me through yoga when I was 21. I was not looking for spiritual path consciously. I was looking for yoga. It makes you feel great and I felt good. During the next five years which I call my crisis years, I wanted to run away from the deep experience that yoga at 3HO was taking me to but I realized that I could not go away from it. So I decided to go to India and try to find another teacher who would not quite shake me up like Yogi Bhajan. Before going to India, I went to Europe for a year mostly working with a 3HO French Group. During this period, I got to do Tantrik in Amsterdam and that is where I met Yogi Bhajan. It was a very penetrating experience, the white Tantra with Yogi himself directing. That was like another rebirth. I was hazy before the Tantrik experience and from that point on I was clearer as to who I was or what my destiny was. On return to USA, I had the opportunity to attend Solicites in Mexico. It was there in Solicites that I had a very deep experience in the Gurdwara and that was another change. **It was a very intense practice for about seven to ten days. I remember the Gurdwara and I could not stop crying. It was another impact-making experience. It was the first time I put on the turban. It was at that time just an act of putting on the turban and taking it off. There was no association of my turban with my role.**

But after a few times when I took off the turban I started to feel strange. For another five years I was in turmoil of having turban and kirpan etc. It did not feel logical. Ultimately you have to throw the logic out of the window. But that is kind of difficult to explain to the whole family. How do you explain to your mother who raised me as a Catholic and I had gone through whole Catholic tradition?

**Over the last twenty years they have started to respect my spiritual choice.** On return from Solicites, I went to India. I was still trying to get away. I had some deep experiences but I was still on the run. In India I did meet some other spiritual teachers and I had the opportunity to switch. But there was no switching for me and it was in India that I finally made a commitment to Yogi Bhajan and Sikh dharma. I joined the Ashram in USA on return. Till that time (I was thirty), it was just a question mark for me in matters like why would any one want to have children. How ever on return it ignited in me to be a mother. Yogi Bhajan had given a formula as to how to find the right mate. He said there are two ways to go about this. One is you can go out and find which is what I was doing. This was not getting me any where. The second option is to sit where you are and do a very intensive "sadhna" and attract the person. This seemed such a far out thing. I was a sort of feminist and the idea of waiting, radiating and attracting and not doing any thing was a whole new game plan.

Nevertheless I decided to do this. I started to do daily a 2-hour *sadhna*. Soon after joining the Ashram I met an acquaintance who asked me to pick up a friend of her's at the railway station. This was Gurusewak whom I ended up marrying. (Big Laughter). He spoke English really bad (Brazilian). It was difficult to communicate. His packaging was different from what I usually went for. He was short and a bit plump. He was not quite yogic looking but he had a beard. He was a Healer. I had lost a lot of weight while I was in India and my metabolism was not good. I was not having my periods. I never go to see Healers. But for three months I had not had my periods, and made an appointment for a forenoon session. And that morning, I had my periods. I kept my appointment and told him that I had a reason for the appointment but I do not have that any more. So I do not know why I am here. Well, he laughed and had a huge smile. He said let us go for lunch and that's where he asked me to marry him. My husband was forty and I was thirty. At the first possible opportunity, we met with Yogi Bhajan when my husband asked for his approval. He had a huge smile on his face and said "Blessings, Blessings". He looked at me and said you get him back to Brazil - he does not belong here.

So here it was! My destiny was signed, sealed and delivered. He said to us that you would do in South America what I did here. The very enormity of the task created a lot of personal stress but the good part was that we made the commitment to put up the Gurdwara. Before getting married in December 1984, Yogi asked me to take "*amrit*" which I did. We had our first baby girl in the Ashram. To keep our commitment to Yogi Ji, we moved to Brazil when our daughter was 11 months old. My husband was uneasy in coming down at that time as Brazil was going through financial and political uncertainties. We were trying to have some money before moving. I guess we had only about \$ 3000 that was all the cover we had for the future. My husband had an apartment in Sao Paulo and we made a commitment to build the Gurdwara. So we brought the Guru and installed it in a very small closet in our first apartment. That was our first Gurdwara. Later on we moved to this beautiful place a little distant from centre of the town. My husband worked very hard to get us established here. He continued to go back to USA twice a year to carry out his healing work. Every time he returned he will bring back \$ 5-6000. One time he brought back \$10,000. Basically that is how the Gurdwara and the Ashram got built. In the meanwhile kids kept coming, Hari Simran Kaur, Ajit Singh and then Gobind Singh. We were training teachers to reach more people quicker. A lot of 3HO followers in USA were shy of introducing Sikh dharma. They questioned whether they were getting a religion or yoga which was their interest. I can understand that very well. **But we present this as "Bhakti" yoga with kirtan.** This is an experience of meeting the beloved. So we founded Kundalini and Sikh Dharma together. So until this day Gurdwara is a part of teacher training. We certify the people in front of the Guru and that's been our way. We had more women but still had a good share with men say in 3: 2 ratio. Yoga started to grow but slowly.

On personal side we were five of us with three rooms only including one for Gurdwara. This pushed us into the Gurdwara project outside the residence area. In 1999 we broke ground for the new Gurdwara building. Two weeks later, our neighbor approached on his own to offer to sell his land which my husband had always wanted to acquire. With more space available the design and structure had to be changed. The first floor was 80 percent complete by December, 2000. My husband

suggested me to visit my mom as she had not seen our two sons. Although we had literally no funds available, we went to the USA in January, 2001.

My husband was going to spend two weeks with us and then go for his healing job. Next morning at my mom's house my husband said he wasn't feeling well. Two weeks later we found out that he had prostate cancer. He was given 2-5 years. Me with three kids and Gurdwara only 80% complete and him not having much time to live! We didn't know what to do unless the Guru decided to do something. We spent eight months in the States. The Guru opened all kinds of doors for the treatment. That was miraculous. We did not even have health insurance. Somehow or the other my husband started feeling good. Later, on our return to Brazil, his health began to deteriorate. I started to get this message from above that this Gurdwara needs to get going. I didn't want to deal with this on my own and hence I told him that we had to move on to the Gurdwara project to which he agreed. So we started the construction of the second floor which was the Gurdwara proper. Last year was a very bad year with Gurdwara construction going on and his health deteriorating. He held himself in the body until inauguration in June of last year. You have seen the photos of inauguration. He held himself somehow or the other till 17<sup>th</sup> August, 2004 when he left his physical form. In the meanwhile, the Sangat has taken over my kids as we had no money. At the Council meeting someone offered help to send the two boys to Amritsar, Miri Piri School. Our daughter was over age and hence she has gone to the Ashram in USA. So the kids will get the benefit of *sangat* which they were missing here.

We have trained a total of about 150 teachers. There is an article which appeared in the Yoga magazine of Brazil which has covered our activities. This would help. The Gurdwara is facing practical issues as there are hardly any followers. Another couple has the SGGS in their home in Sao Paulo. Other than that there is no activity. The task assigned to my husband of propagating kundalini and Sikh Dharma is now in my hands. In South America there is some progress in various countries. Although much is not happening but I see myself as the guardian of Sikh dharma in Brazil. I hold a position internationally as a guardian of kundalini yoga. I participate in the Group international meet twice a year. I am playing my role here to the best of my ability and resources. Rest is up to the Guru.

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**Author's Note:** I have just heard from Ms. Kuvinder Kaur of Sao Paulo that the Sikh community have had a gathering at the Gurdwara and are aiming for holding monthly Sangats. A very satisfying development, indeed.