

The Sikh Global Village: Bolivia

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PART II@

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Misadventure

The lure of land combined with bravado can be a deadly combination which can get one to achieve great heights and occasionally can result in disaster. In Bolivia, the latter was the case of Sikh Immigrants in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, a city in South East of Bolivia where almost a couple of hundred of them migrated in the turbulent 'Eighties, to look for their El Dorados. Many of them have sad stories to tell and most have either returned to Punjab or migrated onwards to North America, etc. Although bad luck is always a factor and an important contributor, unfortunately the worst traits of the Jat Sikhs came into fore as adversity hit them. The remnant immigrants still have their faith in the "Waheguru" and have a Gurdwara (probably the earliest in South America) to turn to for the monthly "sangat", but do not have enough money for a regular "granthi", the earlier one having moved to Argentina. Turbaned Sikhs are almost non-existent. From an all time high of 150-200 or so families in the Eighties and Nineties, at present there are only a few families left with a population of about 40 or so Sikhs.

A very interesting meeting with a Bolivian Sikh lady in La Paz with white turban and white flowing dress was a heart warming experience as to how people find solace through the Sikh dharma and how Sikhism is catching up, albeit very slowly, in South America as followers of Yogi Bhasan's 3HO movement.

The Early Sikh Immigrants

The Sikhs have been passing through Bolivia, en-route to Argentina, from early twentieth century, but they did not establish roots in the country. There are references of Sikhs landing in Chile or Peru and moving on to Argentina via Bolivia. But nothing is mentioned about any of them settling down in the country. Harsh climate, relatively poor economic situation and infertile land might explain Sikhs' not establishing early roots in Bolivia. It is the author's belief though that some Sikhs must have settled but there is no specific information available. Names of some Sikhs as early settlers are mentioned but more investigative effort is needed to get details.

The Country and its Culture

Bolivia is one of the poorest countries of South America and topographically may be termed as the Tibet of the Americas. The Spanish conquest of the country began in 1531 and silver was struck in 1544, mining of which underwrote the Spanish economy. Bolivia won independence from Spain in 1825. However, Chile annexed part of Bolivian territory including its only port of Antofagasta leaving the country landlocked. Since the Fifties, the country has been ruled by "in and out" Governments of civilians, army, leftists etc. Cocaine-production in the country in the early Nineties complicated relations with the US followed by acute recession and unemployment. A huge gulf still separates this divided society, with half the population immersed in the contemporary world and half who remain subsistent peasants. La Paz is the world's highest capital city at 3,600 meters above sea

level. The adjacent city of El Alto, at 4,200 meters above sea level, is growing at a fast pace. Santa Cruz, the commercial and industrial hub of the eastern lowlands, is experiencing rapid population and economic growth.

The Eighties Immigrants

The Lonely Planet Travel Book says: "Santa Cruz' longstanding reputation as a drug-trafficking Mecca is now being eclipsed by an agriculture boom. **The region boasts rice-growing Japanese colonies as well as settlements of Italians, Indian Sikhs, and thousands of German-Canadian Mennonites.** The region has attracted Brazilian opportunists, foreign oil workers, agribusiness tycoons, drug traffickers, scientific researchers, missionaries and environmental activists". Into this conglomerate and diverse environ and a scenario of conflicting interests and politically unstable country, rushed in the Sikhs of Punjab. Jat Sikhs have a passion for owning farm land and what could be more attractive than owning hundreds and thousands of acres at dirt cheap prices - \$30 per hectare. The prospects were all the more tempting for the Sikh immigrants from the Gulf countries with ready cash and the high prices of land in India. **The Sikh problem in India in the Eighties was a powerful trigger for migrating and settling abroad. In this background a proposition of buying land to settle abroad, never mind how far away the location (or in some emotional way the farther from India the better!) struck as an opportunity not to be missed.** In this emotionally charged times, caution was thrown to the winds. There was already a talk by Sikh Separatists of setting up Khalistan Headquarters in Ecuador which was also in South America.

International magazine and news papers had tempting advertisement for vast areas of farm land being sold in Bolivia at cheap prices. Many Sikhs started buying land. The entire project seems to have been master minded by a few groups of Immigrants many of them working in the Gulf countries but some involving even senior Government employees of Punjab since retired. It was a well spread-out network but with limited investigative scrutiny prior to venturing out. Even in the recent interview words were used to claim that "Punjabis are expert farmers!" and that they were bound to succeed. It was with this high moral stand that they rushed in. The initial years were good but instead of consolidating their gains, most rushed into buying more land, machinery and chemical inputs in the hope of harvesting gold. The problems got compounded due to inadequate rains. With heavy loans for machinery and debts for fertilizers, pesticides etc, the Immigrants faced hostile creditors and Government Agencies. Where the original defaulters had run away, the compatriot guarantors were in deep trouble. Some had to face jail terms. With the arrival of bad times, it is clear from the interviews that it brought the worst amongst the immigrant community in terms of personal values, relationships, jealousy, backbiting and generally a poor community spirit despite earlier initiative to set up a Gurdwara. The immigrants do not seem to have done their homework properly and failed to learn lessons from earlier immigrants' experiences. The alternative of buying more costly land but with better irrigation prospects was not pursued by any of the immigrants. There was more of herd mentality and attitude of bravado rather than an investigative and properly planned strategy. Many invested large funds in co-operative ventures where no proper accounting or systems were put in place resulting in all kinds of bad blood, quarrels, legal cases and some imprisonments. Many of the negative traits of the "Jat Sikh" came to fore. However the faith in "Waheguru" still exists amongst those who have stayed back.

The Gurdwara

In the 1980's, Sikhs built a Gurdwara, 60 kms from Santa Cruz in a picturesque location along the rail road track to Brazil. The community cannot afford any more a full time

“granthi” and the earlier incumbent has moved to Argentina. A part time clean-shaven Sikh helps run the place. Although earlier on most Sikhs used to attend the Gurdwara on Sundays, “Sangrads” and Gurpurbs, it is now only the very devout who visit Gurdwara regularly. But “langar” is available for a visitor and it does still provide a gathering venue on occasions.

A Failed Co-operative Venture

This is a story of one of the larger ventures. It would appear that two brothers had master-minded one Co-operative Group of about 35 persons. The project involved units of two hundred hectares each but partners were free to subscribe to any number of units including part units. There were 38 units, each with initial purchase price of \$ 6,000 making a total investment of about a quarter million dollars. Additionally, all partners were asked to contribute about \$ 30 - 50 a month totaling about \$1500. A bulldozer was used to uproot the trees and they themselves would clear behind the dozer saving labor cost. Some of the partners did not migrate themselves but sent their representatives to Bolivia. A tented village about 130 kms from Santa Cruz was set up for living. Provision for water had to be made. There were a lot of mosquitoes and living conditions were tough. It was a slow process of development but money was coming in from the partners. When the funds got exhausted, additional contribution was asked for against which some partners contributed but some did not. The first call was for \$500 per partner which later became \$1,000. This was repeated for two years. The project investment mounted to almost a million dollars. Since no profits were in sight disenchantment set in. Some people went away feeling disgusted. Although initially every one was enthusiastic, fissures started appearing within a couple of years. Infighting, bickering and quarrels became the order of the day. The complaints were in regard to absence of proper accounting by the sponsors. The project was bound to create inter-personal problems due to lack of transparency, cost over-runs, absence of systematic accounting and reporting system. The professionalism needed for a project of this size and complexity was totally missing. It was run more like an H.U.F. by a “Karta” and not as a corporate entity with 38 shareholders. It was decided in 1992 to sell the land and distribute the money so received amongst the partners. It is alleged that only those who were present in Bolivia got paid, some fully but others in part depending upon their clout. The sale price itself was being questioned. Most of the people left in disgust and hardly five to six people were left behind. The sponsors figured that no body would come from India to collect their paltry share of sale money and they decided to buy a Petrol Pump. It is alleged that there were malpractices in managing this new enterprise also. One of the sponsors died and there after the Petrol pump was sold. When the news spread, several partners exerted pressure on the Sponsors to refund their share of the sale proceeds. The story becomes murkier as everyone, including the two sponsors or their inheritors, claim bankruptcy. Consequently one of the sponsors has returned to India and the dead sponsors’ children have migrated to Argentina. A sad ending!

Amarjit Singh Virdi, an earlier land buyer

An excerpt of the interview with him in Santa Cruz is given below:

“I am living in Santa Cruz for last 26 years and came to Bolivia for Agriculture from Germany where I was working. I purchased land to farm but there was no water and the language is also different. Water is 120 to 140 meters deep. The living conditions were not good particularly in 1979 when I came here. There were no tarred roads even. We had to face several difficulties but now, by the grace of Waheguru, we are finally on our feet. While in Germany we heard through newspapers that Bolivia was selling land. Bolivia wanted agricultural manpower and technology and all one needed was a tractor. We Indians are

good at agriculture. Bolivia sent us the necessary forms, etc based on which the land was registered in our name. With these documents we were issued the necessary visa in Germany. I was the first one to arrive in Bolivia for agriculture. One Darshan Singh was the other Sikh, who had come earlier, but he was into restaurant business. He later set up a cinema. In our group 5 or 6 people were interested but only three of them finally bought land in Bolivia - Baljinder Singh, Nirmal Singh and I. We paid \$ 6000 each for the land. I had \$10,000 with me on arrival in La Paz. When I arrived there was a strike in the country so I had to wait for four days in La Paz airport after which I could travel to Santa Cruz.”

“I stayed in a hotel for the first week and then moved to cheaper accommodation by renting a house. Initially I was on a tourist visa with the proviso that it could be extended if I decided to settle down on the land. I came alone to Bolivia because the other two came after 2-3 months as they had gone to India to meet with their families. On arrival I advised them while they were in India, about the initial difficulties, including the language issue, but I did also mention that such difficulties are faced by all new settlers such as the Sikh settlers in Kenya and UP had faced. The land was purchased from Bolivian Land and Forest Company Ltd and is located about 107 kms away from Santa Cruz on the Brazil Road. Our contract stated that if we did not like the land our money would be refunded. Since we were dissatisfied, we approached the Company for refund but the promoters fled away to Costa Rica.”

“The promoters comprised of three partners, a Swiss, a German, and a Bolivian. They sold these lands to Americans, Canadians, and Swiss. They promoted the lands all over the globe including Philippines and Pakistan. I was the first to arrive. Others arrived within the month. Since one-year time limit for refund of money, if dissatisfied, was coming to an end, the promoters fled. The Swiss guy was jailed for couple of days, but he managed to leave the country. Because of language difficulty we could not file suit. We decided to stick out because we had already put in investments. Land is fertile and good for agriculture, but there was no water and the country had no policy for developing agriculture. Inputs and seeds were difficult to get, marketing of produce was difficult. Additionally, during the first five years, we had major problems because of run-away inflation. On arrival at our lands, we had to sleep on the railway station, with no proper shelter, in cold and rain. Local people have no compunction in telling lies and one cannot trust them. So we had to think on our own as no advice was available. In the face of so many difficulties we began to discuss options of going back. But the stigma of failure was difficult to face. We couldn't even go back to Germany because of the changed laws for immigrant workers. Option to go to USA was also ruled out. We therefore decided to make the best of the existing situation. A start was made by clearing six hectares of land. We planted corn and had a good crop of 40 quintals per hectare. Due to inflation we could not sell the produce. We then decided to diversify into poultry and piggery using corn as feed. We faced the same difficulty in selling chickens and pigs. Now we had neither the corn nor the chickens or the pigs. After four to five years we gave up farming and related ventures. In the beginning, our visas were extended for 1-3 months at a time.”

“After a year it was extended for two years and finally I got a visa for indefinite stay. We abandoned the land and decided to move to the city around 1985-86 to carry on some business. During the visit of my elder brother to Bolivia in 1990, I got married to a Bolivian. She is a teacher in a school. I have a son and a daughter. With hard work I have made some success of the business and I was able to visit India with my family last year. I am presently a construction contractor having ten employees. Subsequent to abandoning the land, our ownership was cancelled.

“Majority of Sikhs came in 1984 -85 when the Punjabi population grew to about 400. Subsequent migration was basically transitory, final destination being North America. Several of such immigrants had to cool their heels in Bolivia for four to six years during which period they did odd jobs or businesses. Most of them were on tourist visas, which were easily extended but the authorities have become strict now. Local Sikhs were always very helpful to sponsor their visa extension. Most of these migrants were from the Gulf who did not want to return to India”.

An Angel walks in

Contrasting the scene of Santa Cruz, there is a Sikh lady in La Paz who is teaching Kundalini Yoga and a follower of Yogi Bhajan’s 3HO. Sham Kaur (Gisela), a Bolivian by birth, wearing a white turban and “*khanda*” emblem and white flowing robes, walks into the Hotel in La Paz and the Hotel staff go in a spin. It was truly an angelic entrance. She had agreed to meet with the author.

Sham Kaur, a highly educated lady, provided a contrast in practice of Sikh religion - symbols and all, without belonging to or having been to Punjab against the earlier encounter with the Santa Cruz Sikhs from the land of Sikh religion’s origin and major following. Despite the constraints on her to wear western clothes during working hours as a senior Government official, she believes in and practices the Sikh dharma. She is single handedly trying to propagate Sikh faith in Bolivia. At 34 years, she finds great solace in following the teachings of the Sikh Gurus and the words of SGGS. Her life story is detailed below.

Sham Kaur (Gisela)

Interview on 31 August in La Paz, Hotel Apart Casa Real:

“I was born on 26 April 1971. My family background is mainly Christian, both parents are Christian and I was raised and born in La Paz, Bolivia. I attended school here and later decided to go abroad to Chile where I studied for 8 years. A degree in Industrial Engineering was followed by a Masters degree and an MBA in International Business, all from Chile. There after I joined Brown University in USA for an Environmental Program. Presently I am working for the Government on Green House Reduction Project. I have been working here for past five years and am now running the office since last year. I have also lived in Peru working in natural resources development specializing in climate change.

“I started doing Kundalini yoga three years ago and at that time there was no regular teacher. Some people came to conduct workshops. At that time Nam Nidhan Kaur came from Chile. She was training students to become teachers. I had this nice coincidence that I was in Peru, where a course was getting started.

“I decided it was a wonderful thing for me to do. There was no teacher in La Paz and I thought I could propagate technique to others. I studied in Peru for one year and when I came here I had this opportunity to open a center with some friends to teach Kundalini Yoga which is very new in this country. Since then I have been very involved in these issues. I wanted to know the origin/source of this wonderful and amazing technique and to find out more about Yogi Bhajan and the set up in Espanola, USA.

“I wanted to know about the Sikhs as this was more like a research for me. It was exciting for me to visit a place about which I did not know anything, i.e. Sikhs in Espanola. I stayed there with the community for a week and it was wonderful experience. I took a “Japji” course, and had the opportunity to meet so many wonderful teachers and people. It was amazing to see the radiance of Yogi Bhajan even though he was very ill at the time. In the second “Japji” course Yogi Ji appeared, and it was great to see him, be in his presence and to hear him. I got to

meet Bibi Ji and others. There were many people from Latin Countries (Chile, Mexico, Spain) living there. So I had a warm welcome in Espanola.”

“It was my first time to attend a Gurdwara and to learn about Sikh traditions. It was particularly fascinating as it is so far away from our culture here. I learnt about 3HO from Nam Nidhan Kaur when she came 2-3 times to conduct courses. It so happened that I was in a very difficult situation at work as also in my personal life which was unstable at that time. **When I was very young, I always wanted to know the answers to why I am here. When you are in a reflective frame of mind you tend to look outside for answers. I tried yoga and this gave me an inner consciousness, a different perspective of the world. So far I was into math and real things which do not help.** I started to discover other aspects and it was really a blessing. That was the moment that Nam Nidhan came for the week-end course and I realized that that was the thing I was looking for. Not just the Yoga but also the way you feel when you are meditating and the connection with your inner self. I had the opportunity to attend a video course of Yogi Bhajan and, wow, it was really amazing how you felt with him. It was so strange. All of a sudden there was a certainty and I felt that there was no logical reason for uncertainties. Here it was, I became completely sure that that’s what I wanted to do and practice.

“During my Espanola visit, I got to meet, experience and learn from many people. I wanted to provide access of these teachings to the Bolivians. You know our country has a lot of poor people who cannot go to Espanola, but I felt that they should be able to get help through these teachings in their own country. I was alone in Espanola and I needed help to spread these wonderful things to people, to every body. I did not understand the difference between Kundalini yoga and the Sikhs.

At that time there was a very thin line between Kundalini yoga and Sikh tradition in my mind. There are many Sikhs who do not believe in Kundalini yoga and vice versa. At the beginning it felt strange. When I returned, people here felt that I was strange, and continued to have that feeling because of the way I dressed (with turban). Yogi Bhajan has developed over the years wonderful Sikhs in the West. People are looking for something different and new. So they take to yoga. More women are interested because they are disappointed with their existing faiths/religion and they are looking for something new and different.

“It is mostly women who take to Yoga and its teaching. Almost 80% teachers of yoga in South America are women. For some reason I have got very much involved in this process of teaching yoga. I met Gurubachan Singh Khalsa and started discussing with him and Nam Nidhan how to develop this movement. **We should do subsidiary kind of things as teachers because we have access to mantras, music and the books. Since most of these are in English it is difficult to spread the message as most people do not speak English. Many people in Mexico are working on the translations but not as fast as needed by us.** Many people are trying to serve and help us out in this process.

“Gurubachan was very close to Yogi Harbhajan and they spent a lot of time together. Yogi Bhajan had nominated him to spearhead the movement in Latin America as Yogi himself could not do this. Gurubachan came here once last year and we did a lot of organization work where two or three people would work together. It was decided that Paraguay would be the base. **Someone will take care of the office in Paraguay. A web site has been developed which is already on line and the next step is to start a magazine where all teachers can send photos and articles.**

“This challenge has united us and I have become the representative in Bolivia. Many teachers are willing to come to S. America and La Paz. So in addition to my regular job, I do this work, organize workshops and everything else here. It has not been easy. We have to

maintain the energy.

“There has always got to be a leader. There are many other wonderful teachers but somehow I have taken the above responsibilities of the group in Bolivia. As an example, we recently had 11 women teachers and one young man for a course. Out of this group four or five are really committed. The movement is growing and it is necessary to grow. I was teaching at night as I have a job during the day time. Additionally, I have to travel a lot for conferences, etc. So now I teach only on Saturdays. Rest of the time I devote to organizational aspects and keep pushing on the momentum. It has not been easy. It is hard and tiring and at times I feel as if my energy is finished. On top of that I have become a role model whereby people start looking up to me and want to know what I am doing.

“It is fascinating to see people and teachers grow. The teachers are gradually inducted into wearing turbans although for me it was very easy. I do not wear turban during the day. I have asked for permission at work to wear the turban at least one day in a week but I do not think it will be given. In a Government job, it is difficult to allow that. **That’s understandable. I have to make a decision for the future that I propose to take the vows and “amrit”. And when that happens, I will have to have a different way of earning my living. It will not be easy in this country because there is nobody in this country who wears a turban, not one. It is a process.** There is another teacher who wanted to become a Sikh, she is older and is a psychologist. She is free to wear whatever she wants to.

“There is a wonderful teacher who came recently from Ireland named Harnam Singh and his wife to give a lecture. He wanted to teach in S. America and visited 4 - 5 countries with wonderful course content. He was teaching a little about what it means to be a Sikh and the values related to Sikhism while covering more generally the path people are taking via Kundalini. Harnam Singh said that this path develops courage and shows you how to become a better human being. He was basically describing how it was for him to become a Sikh and to follow the code of Sikhs and in the process become a noble person. It was wonderful as no one teaches you this. With all this happening, I am looking forward to a satisfying future despite the challenges”.

Conclusion

It is sad that an enterprise by adventurous Sikhs failed causing misery to some well meaning Sikhs of Punjab because of lack of professionalism and some bad luck. But what is inexcusable is the in-fighting, back biting and downright meanness by many of them in times of adversity. While it was noble indeed to set up a Gurdwara on priority but the teachings and tenets of Sikhism were given a short shrift. South America though far away from Punjab continues to provide opportunities for settlements on farms but this has to be masterminded on a professional basis.

There is a new hope emerging from Yogi Harbhajan’s followers who are setting up Yoga Centers followed by Gurdwaras in several of the South American countries. These Sikhs are following the Sikh dharma in an exemplary manner. They need to be supported.

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