

Perspectives in the Sikh Diaspora - A Case Study

SWARN SINGH KAHLON*

* Formerly, a senior executive in ICI, Add: 505 Sector 18B, Chandigarh. 1660018.

We take special pleasure in publishing this extraordinary narrative by a senior executive turned scholar who spent a fortune of his own to embark on a Voyage of Discovery with a zen to trace the roots of pioneering emigrant Sikhs half way across the globe, coming up with a wealth of information about the early Sikhs' spirit of adventure and enterprise.

- Ed. SR

Background – A Study of the Sikh ‘Global Village’

*In his spare time, the author wanted to contribute to the field of Punjabi - Sikh Diaspora. He wanted to do something out of the routine which could be more original and contribute to hitherto not-so-well known facts. A study of Sikhs in North America, UK, S.E.A., and Australasia was ruled out as a lot has been written about the Sikh presence in these areas. Furthermore, it was thought that focus on “success” stories alone would not be a true and total representation of Sikhs settled overseas. So in order to complete the **MAP OF SIKH MIGRATION** from Punjab, and to fill in the gaps in Diaspora knowledge, the following geographical areas were prioritized: 1.Latin America 2. Pacific Islands, and 3. Continental Western Europe. - S.S.K.*

PART I

Introduction:

I decided to make a start with Latin America. This was to honour the “Farther the Better” spirit of early migrants. Accordingly, Argentina was the first country to be visited. The project was a ‘*hobby study*’ for which both time and money resources had to be mustered. It turned out to be an expensive but highly satisfying hobby! The most difficult part was to locate the first few contacts in each country. Besides desk survey of published literature, news items, articles and books, extensive use was made of *internet* to ferret out whatever information could be gleaned. Contact was also made with the Indian Embassies. Some help was forthcoming, but the Embassies have their limitations. **In these countries most of the Sikh migrants have got totally assimilated.** Visits were also made to some of the villages in Punjab from where the migrants had originally left. This was a useful experience. One met some ‘returnees’ from these countries, specially Argentina, who are now settled back in Punjab - to their comfort, or otherwise!

Travel was not only expensive but had irritating elements, such as getting visas as a tourist. Until now, the author had travelled on business, where getting visas was comparatively simple and easy because of the business contacts. **However, getting a ‘Tourist’ visa met with general suspicion and disbelief** - Latin American countries not being a popular destination with the Indian tourists. Many Latin countries require references to their Home Ministries for tourist visa clearance, which is time consuming. Embassies want to see confirmed hotel bookings and airline tickets. Ecuador has a special requirement of ‘Indian Police and Medical Clearance’. **All Sikhs, even citizens of other countries need visa, doubtless an act of discrimination.** Travel to these far off countries is not on the routine radar of Travel Agents in India and, hence, the information available with them is somewhat rudimentary. Visa Issuing Embassies required confirmed tickets and hotel

reservations at the time of putting in visa application. Considerable time and financial resources are needed to just get started. Let's face it, "No one wants the Indians". He must struggle at each step. **This experience, however, did give me a glimpse of the plight of migrants who travelled with no language skills and 'meagre' funds in the pocket and with nothing to fall back on. This study is, in a small measure, a salute to these heroes.**

'Sikh & Singh':

My initial plan was to have a broader canvas of studying the Punjabis. An issue regarding the Pakistani Punjabis cropped up, as it was felt that their exclusion would be somewhat unfair. It was therefore decided to focus on Sikhs. In any case, it so transpires that a vast majority of immigrants in these countries (except perhaps Panama which has a large Gujarati community) were Sikhs. Defining a Sikh is not easy because there are various definitions by scholars, SGPC and the government bodies. **The issue of defining a Sikh can become an emotional issue.** It was decided to include all persons of Sikh parentage at any level and those who had some affinity with Sikhism and Sikhs, now or in the past. It was decided not to get too much concerned with the number count, as the idea is to introduce to the readers the historical and other aspects of the migrant stories. It was a help that earlier migrants used 'Singh' as their surname which made scanning of records, including telephone directories, somewhat easy. **It is interesting that in several instances, Singhs whose one parent or grandparent was a Sikh had no clue as to why they were Singh as they had only a vague knowledge of their connection with Punjab and India.**

In the countries visited, most of the Sikhs do not wear turbans. However, the most impressive sight was that of Yogi Bhajan's followers with full Sikh identity symbols. They are the local converts to Sikhism. These Sikhs generally have a surname of 'Khalsa' and keep the five K's. The 3HO (Holy, Healthy, Happy Organization) members are a study in itself. Their devotion to Sikhism against heavy personal, family and social odds is truly admirable. The 3HO followers form a significant part of Sikhs in Latin America.

Gurdwaras:

Sikh websites give slightly exaggerated presence of Gurdwaras globally and at times include Gurdwaras in devout Sikhs' homes. These also include rented premises where Sikhs gather on Sundays/Holidays and important religious days. The Gurdwara and the so called Khalistan Head Quarters in Quito, Ecuador do not exist. In some countries such as Bolivia, the Sikh Sangat is so small that they cannot afford to keep a 'granthi' and yet these places are well maintained.

Gurdwara is a great institution which provides an important link amongst the immigrants. It provides a venue for social gatherings and helps retain linkage with religion, community and heritage of 'Punjabi'. It was interesting to learn that post setting up of the Gurdwara in Argentina, the community has got more connected and the younger generation is getting to develop better linkage with Punjab, Punjabis, Sikhs and Sikhi.

History of Migration and General Profile:

In South American countries, Sikhs were pioneer immigrants except for Chile where Sindhis were the first. In Central America including the Caribbean's, Surinam and Guinea, the first Indians were from UP, Bihar and possibly South India as indentured labour.

Migration in several countries of Latin America has been traced to the first two decades of the Twentieth Century. A reference is available of a Sikh's arrival in Argentina in 1890's. Sikhs came either as direct passengers mainly on ships via Europe or because they were not allowed to disembark at the USA ports. The latter resulted in transit stay in various intermediate destinations before settling down in the final destination of their choice. Many Sikhs walked from Brazil to Argentina, while others walked still longer distances from Panama to Argentina, via Peru and Bolivia. This phase of travel in several cases was even tougher than the sea voyage. It involved walking over thousands of miles in tough terrain with little familiarity of local language and customs and with limited funds. One has to look at the map and the terrain to understand the hardship involved - it really sends shivers down one's spine.

In Latin America, the more popular destinations for long term settlement were Argentina, and Panama. Mexico was always a target country to settle in but with the aim of crossing the Rio Grande at the first possible opportunity. USA was and still is the El Dorado for almost all Punjabi-Sikh migrants. There are several illegal immigrants in recent years and **some have been fraudulently brought to South American destinations against the promised North America entry.**

In 1990's Belize became a popular destination for migration. Since Belize is not very well connected for air travel, some of these migrants have had to charter small aircraft (from Cuba) to reach Belize. What enterprise! Single girls are also venturing out where ever opportunity arises. **Two young girls from Punjab have gone to Belize as students but are now running a sort of a 'dhabha' in a small town hoping to migrate to USA one day.** There are instances of high handedness by the police and immigration authorities, but once you have left the country, there is no turning back in most of the cases whether the immigrant likes the situation he or she has got into. **There is an instance of a Sikh who had been sponsored by his brothers from USA. This guy was asked to come to Belize where a white woman came from USA for less than a day. In a few hours after arrival, she got married to the Sikh, based on which she sought his immigration to USA.** This was achieved after prolonged legal battle. The immigrants' preferred profession originally was to work on farms graduating in time to buying their own farm land. Others worked in Railways in various capacities or in Sugar Mills or as in Panama, at the Canal. Some of them drove vehicles and taxis eventually buying their own wheels eventually setting up large transport conglomerates. Still others carried out 'Pheri', i.e. retail as paddlers and in time set up small sized super markets. Others took to money lending and in due course dabbled in real estate. Several members of second and third generation are becoming professionals and entrepreneurs.

Marriages and Linkage with Punjab, The Turban as Sikh Signature:

There had been some to and fro traffic of Sikhs between countries they settled in and Punjab. For early migrants the first visit home took several years to materialize. Some even returned permanently to India. Most of them migrated as single males and some returned to get a wife. Others who had left their wives called for them as soon as they were in a position to receive the family. Yet others who were single (and even some who were married in India) decided to take on local wives. In some cases this could have been even the maid working in the house. Acceptance was a critical issue and local marriage was the first step in the process of assimilation. It wasn't an easy choice though. One hears only good things about Punjabi-Sikh parents (fathers in most cases) once they settled down. **The general comments from their siblings and others was that the Sikhs were hard working,**

honest, generous but rather strict with the family in terms of the siblings' upbringing. Several of them sent money home, at least, in earlier years of settling down before their local families' needs became more pressing.

The effort of each migrant was to continue to keep Sikh symbols, specially the turban. The British encouraged the post War disbanded Sikh soldiers to migrate and, in some cases, paid for their voyages. So far as the British employers were concerned, it was easier to maintain Sikh identity but in other situations it was a problem. **There was also security in numbers but those who were isolated had to give up the turban sooner than later.** Those immigrants who had spouses from Punjab, persevered with the turban for a longer period. Very few, if any, in second and third generation kept the turban in order to get better social acceptance. Local wives either encouraged or demanded greater assimilation and the men could not put up much of a resistance to what was becoming inevitable. In earlier years cremating the dead was not possible. The dead had to be buried as per the local custom. **Some Sikhs in deference to family expectations had elaborate family burial tombs.**

From 'Sikhi' point of view, the contribution of Yogi Bhajan's efforts has to be highly admired. The linkage with India, Punjab and the Sikhs is, naturally, better where the parents have taken the children to India for varying periods of time. At least the second generation then has some exposure to things Indian. The nostalgia for the homeland continues, as is natural, but better living conditions and financial prosperity is an important compensating factor. It is not easy to return to Punjab especially if you have to accept lack of success. The individual and sometimes family 'izzat' is at stake. Migration of relatives, village mates, and other friends or known persons was encouraged and facilitated to the maximum extent feasible.

Country Profiles:

In the first phase visits were made to Argentina, Bolivia and Brazil in the summer of 2005 followed by travel to Belize, Mexico, Cuba, Panama and Ecuador in 2006. Only one or two significant or interesting features are given against each country write up.

Argentina:

In the early Twentieth Century, Argentina was a prosperous country of South America, earning a sobriquet as the 'Europe' of South America. **So if a Sikh could not get entry into USA and Canada, Argentina was the next best alternative.** Spanish language was a barrier but not a major constraint as most of the migrants were probably equally unfamiliar with the English language. Hew McLeod, tells of one Ram Singh, who came to Australia in 1894, at age 14 years, but returned to India soon afterwards. He came back to Australia in 1998 and in the intervening period had been to Argentina. An Argentinean census shows the presence of five Indians in Buenos Aires in 1890's. However the main migration took place in the first two decades of the Twentieth century. There are several interesting stories of Sikh migrants including the ones who could not pronounce the name of the country which they called "Tina". Some of them were mistakenly or purposely taken in 1914 by a ship from Singapore to Fiji. **These Sikhs had to hire an Australian lawyer to fight their case in courts of Fiji - an example of "Never Give Up" spirit.** Besides coming as direct migrants, several of them came to Argentina with interim stops in Cuba, Panama and other Central American countries. Their walkathon in many cases has been detailed earlier on. Sikhs arriving by boat found work in the Railway workshop in Buenos Aires while others moved upcountry to Cordoba and further north. Opportunities were found in the interior towns like

Tucuman and still further in Salta area where good agricultural land was available. The Sikhs found that compared to Buenos Aires there was less competition upcountry and hence majority of them settled there. **Sugar mills run by the British willingly employed the Sikhs.** Small communities started developing in these areas. At Esperanza Sugar Mill there is a commemorative stone for the World War Dead and prominently engraved is the name of Arjan Singh along with other British soldiers.

In Cordoba, the second largest city of Argentina, there are about 25 'Singhs' listed in the telephone directory. When contacted, all except one did not know either English or Punjabi. The only English speaking family was of Carmen Singh, 65 years age whose father Muncha (Munsha) Singh died when she was 6 years old. Her son Leandra, a law graduate, is named Singh also. Muncha Singh worked with the Railways and married locally. **Since her father's death, Carmen had not met an Indian and was understandably excited to meet a turbaned Sikh from Punjab.** Tucuman has a small population of second generation Sikhs, some of them being professionals. A Gurdwara was built in mid Eighties at Rosario de la Frontiers. Several Sikhs live in the area and are involved in agriculture, transport, retailing and real estate. Besides the religious ceremonies on Sundays and important religious occasions, services are popular on deaths. **Devotees from distances visit the Gurdwara on these special occasions.** San Pedro, Guemes and city of Salta each have pockets of Sikh families. Original migrants' crossing over by land generally settled in these Northern towns.

Bolivia:

The migration here is of comparatively recent vintage. In the early 1980's, Bolivia advertised in the world's leading magazines about the sale of agricultural land at cheap price. It coincided with the period of turmoil for the Sikhs in Punjab and elsewhere. Many of the Sikh workers in the Middle East were earning good wages and were interested to migrate to the western hemisphere. A group of them gathered together and set about buying land in Bolivia in Santa Cruz area. At the peak time in late Eighties there would be about fifty of them. Large investment were made in earth moving equipment to make the forest areas cultivable in the same way the Sikhs settlers had done in 'Terai' area of UP in India. The working conditions were tough but that was no deterrent. Irrigation was problematic. Large investments were made in fertilizers and crop protection chemicals. Major suppliers were impressed with the entrepreneurship of the Sikhs and extended credit liberally. Encouraged by early results, the Sikh settlers started to buy more land. However due to lack of irrigation within a few years, crop returns became meager. Soon repayment of credit became difficult. As the problems got compounded, there were internal dissensions and quarrels. One or two parties started to siphon money, fairly or unfairly, into other investments such as gas station. The financial situation of a number of migrants became precarious and they were forced to leave for other countries. Some even returned to Punjab penniless.

Now only a handful of them are left behind who are eking out a living through some agricultural efforts and running odd businesses. The housewives try to add to family income through small scale retailing from outlets attached to their homes. Some of the Sikhs had to go to jail for reneging on credit payments. In recent times some youngsters interested in migrating to USA had landed up in Bolivia and local Sikhs (including a widow with limited resources) helped them through financial guarantees. When these youngsters reneged on their payments and left the country, the old migrants were saddled with payments against these guarantees.

The Sikhs on arrival had set up a Gurdwara on the Santa Cruz-Brazil road a few miles from Santa Cruz. **For a few years they had a regular granthi but now they are without one due to financial constraints. However they do meet on occasions and more importantly whenever a visitor comes.**

In the capital city La Paz, there is a small community of Yogi Bhajan's followers headed by Sham Kaur Khalsa (Gazelle). **It was interesting meeting her, hearing her life story and how she became a devout Sikh with white turban and all. She is a senior Government Official and is an MBA from an American University.** A complete transcript of her interview is available.

**[End of Part I]
(to be concluded)**

