

# Canada's first white Gurdwara president

**GURMUKH SINGH (HALIFAX)**

IN A 'FIRST' FOR CANADA, Sardar Jarnail Martin Singh was elected the country's first 'gora' Sikh to head a gurdwara. Based at Musquodoboit, near Halifax, in Nova Scotia, Martin Singh was made the president of the Maritime Sikh Society earlier this year.

**The society, set up in 1968, runs the local gurdwara in Halifax where the Sikhs started arriving in the early 1960s. "This gurdwara, built in 1978, caters to about 100 Sikh families in the region," says 33-year Martin Singh who sprinkles his conversation with words like 'uncleji', 'gora', 'pugree' and 'sangat'.**

Born in Halifax to Protestant parents, Martin Singh says that he was a typical teenager. "I mean those few bad things. Then I also believed in God. But I found that the Protestant faith was not my path. As an alternative, I looked at Catholicism, Islam and Judaism because they have similar prophets as Protestants, and they are similar in terms of religious theology. I was 20 then."

However, he found no solace in anything. The young man was in search for something else. "I studied Buddhism, Hinduism, and other religions. But I found that it was not me. In the end, I stopped this elusive search," Then something happened which changed his life forever. "As a Liberal Party supporter, I went to Calgary to attend a leadership conference in 1990. **There I met quite a few turbaned Sikhs who had come from Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary. I was impressed and asked them questions about 'pugree', 'daarhi', and their religion. One Devinder Singh Aujla promised to send me some books. So when I got back to Halifax, I received a packet of six/seven books on Sikhism. I read them, and I realized I had found my path.**"

Soon the young man was on his way to embrace Sikhism. "I felt as if I was always a Sikh. I just didn't practice it. I studied Sikhism deeply and started growing beard and kesh in 1991."

But how did his Protestant parents and friends react to his conversion? "My dad was skeptical. He thought I had fallen into some cult. But my mother was indifferent. She thought it was just one more of those weird things I did at that time. As for friends, I lost none of them because of my conversion. They just asked me some inquisitive questions."

Finally, he was baptized as 'Sardar Jarnail Martin Singh' in Calgary in 1996. Next year, he took another step closer to Sikhism when he visited Punjab and found a Sikh wife for himself. "I went to Amritsar with Mr. Aujla (of Calgary) and we visited the Golden Temple and Guru Nanak Dev University. It was a sort of free time for me as I had finished my chemistry degree and was about to start my chemical engineering degree. During the visit, I got the idea of having a Sikh wife. I foresaw my future in rural Nova Scotia and I thought I needed someone as my partner who was well-versed with Sikhism and the Punjabi language."

Prof Gursharanjit Singh of Guru Nanak Dev University introduced him to Amandeep Kaur who had just finished her MA degree in Punjabi literature. **"She was the one I was looking for. So in July 1997 we got married in Amritsar.** Her immigration took about a year and she came here in May 1998." Amandeep had no problems in adjusting to the new land. The couple has twin sons - Sukh Amrit and Har Amrit, 4 - and a daughter, Arya Deep, 3.

A member of the Maritime Society Gurdwara since 1991, this gora Sikh has been instrumental in bringing many young people into its executive. “We youngsters have embarked on new programs and upgrading the gurdwara. The beautiful thing about our society is that there has never been a contest for any position on the executive. There is no fee for service like Akhand Path or wedding ceremonies. Three times a woman was elected its president.” And this gora Sikh president has his job cut out. “We are trying to bring in very seasoned *raagi jathas* from other places to serve our community. In June, we have planned a multi-cultural festival here. We will showcase our cultural items such as *bhangra*, etc.

We want more and more young people to learn about Sikhism,” explains Martin Singh, who, with his brother, runs the family business of pharmacy in his hometown. He claims theirs is the only pharmacy in all maritime provinces which has what he calls “a whole compliance package” for any kind of medication.

**[Courtesy: Dr SS Sodhi (Nova Scotia)]**

