

Pilgrim's Progress: A Measure of Sikh Presence in North America

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Sikhs now have a rich existence in North America, numbering almost a million in the United States and Canada. We have been here for over a century. Yet, we remain, in many ways, the new kids on the block.

Prior to 1946, Asians, including Sikhs and Indians, could not become citizens, vote or own land in the United States. The doors to citizenship and entry into this society opened slowly. Until immigration policies changed during the waning years of Lyndon Johnson's presidency in the late 1960's, our numbers in this country were miniscule. Our communities started growing across this land only in the mid 1970's, and now Sikhs are a burgeoning presence in North America.

So, it is only the last 30 to 35 years that provide a measurable time frame for our progress and integration into this society. How are we doing? In many ways we still remain connected to the culture, habits and ethos of Punjab, from where most of us originated. How strong are our roots in our new homeland?

One measure of our base here is the number of gurdwaras and other Sikh institutions in America. And we have perhaps as many as 200, although one might rightly argue that many of our gurdwaras here are dysfunctional. But that is a different matter for another day. We came from India, the land of Bollywood, which is second to none in the number of movies for entertainment that are produced annually. And here we are now in the land of Hollywood. So, we have latched on to our craze for movies, and recognizing their power of communication, taken that road to convey our love of Sikhism.

In India, one may possibly count on the fingers of one hand, decent movies on Sikh themes produced by Bollywood's booming film industry. If there is a Sikh character in a Bollywood film, it is for the cheap joke, tawdry humor and easy laugh. In glaring contrast, young Sikhs in North America, products of the diaspora, are coming out with movies - full-length features, docudramas, shorts, and historical vignettes - on all sorts of Sikh themes.

In the movies featuring Sikhs and Sikhism produced in the diaspora nothing is neglected - not love nor life, not our troubles when we first came as immigrants, nor our tribulations after 9/11, when the man in the street mistakenly identified our turban with that of Osama bin Laden. Our practices, our worship, the importance of the visible markers of our faith, including the long unshorn hair, turban and kirpan, even the fine art of tying the turban have been the subjects of educational short films, by a variety of Sikh and non-Sikh cinematographers. The events of 1984, when during three days close to 3000 Sikh men, women and children were slaughtered in India's capital city of New Delhi in mass killings orchestrated by members of the ruling government, were thoughtfully captured by two movies, both made by young women, in the USA and not in India. Keep in mind also the highly touted, successful commercial ventures of Gurinder Chadha from Britain. I don't know what to make of the fact that the majority of these young moviemakers are women. I leave them unnamed, only because I am certain that I'll miss some by mistake.

The number of film fairs that have sprouted in the past four years to highlight Sikh cinematography best illustrates the impact of these movies made in North America. The first "Spinning Wheel" festival was in Toronto. Now such festivals are annual events; this year they were held in Toronto, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Miami. What is needed next is a series of awards for the exceptional films and associated craftsmanship.

Sikhs in the diaspora now are way beyond Bollywood in the quality and imagination of their productions.

We have taken another giant step in the art world that has rightly surpassed the calendar art that is so common in India. Since 1999, several museum-quality exhibits on Sikh art have been mounted. I am pointing to a collection on Sikh immigrant history at the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle, and the unexcelled displays of art at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the Smithsonian in the capital city of the United States, San Francisco's Asian Art Museum, the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, and one that is now running at the Rubin Museum in New York. Museums preserve, educate and inspire. Thus is history not only captured but also made!

In Sikh sacred music, the Australian Dya Singh and the American Snam Kaur have become "rock stars" in North America. They broke fresh ground in merging western instruments, rhythms, and styles into Sikh sacred tradition without robbing it of its sanctity, magic or mystery. The integration is seamless, the results electrifying. There are young people who hold annual musical events where groups come to showcase their rendition of hymns in the *raag* specified in the Guru Granth; they are taking us on a journey to rediscover the time-tested traditional modes and instruments of Sikh sacred music. This is not to diminish the tremendous appeal of the UK-based Rabbi Shergill and his Sufi music, or the recently ascendant rap music in London, which is the new Sikh folk music, reminiscent of the *dhaddi* rhythms and idiom of Punjab that occupy a revered place in Guru Granth.

And then I come to the world of research and publication. From the Sikh diaspora have sprouted several rigorously trained academicians exploring the richness of Sikh doctrine, practice and tradition in the settings of universities; I point to Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, Gurinder Singh Mann, Pashaura Singh, Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, Harpreet Singh, and so many others in Great Britain and North America. Four years ago, San Jose State University launched an annual university lecture on Guru Nanak.

But I would be remiss if I did not also mention the many gifted amateurs in the diaspora whose thoughtful analyses of Sikhism have enriched us all. I do not even try naming them all here, not because they are so few, but because they are so many. I can count nearly two hundred books and monographs about Sikhism published by such amateur scholars based in North America and Britain. I, too, have authored several collections of essays on Sikhs and Sikhism in the diaspora that have been well received. There are many more whose writings and other works, though sporadic, sparkle with wit and wisdom, like the talented cartoonist Vishwajeet Singh.

I am also deliberately leaving out the growing number of non-Sikh scholars who continue to write about Sikhs and Sikhism with enviable understanding and sensitivity. Also, I am not counting here the number of annual symposia and youth camps that are held across North America; their number is surely close to a hundred. Yet, I must not fail to take note of the creative efforts of the Texas-based Sikh Research Institute that has focused on the methodology and the instruments needed to transmit our heritage to a new generation outside Punjab.

Within the past decade the Internet has spawned a plethora of Sikh websites and forums for conversation about Sikhism. On any day, at any time, just about any matter facing us can be freely debated; interpretations of Kala Afghana's writings have engaged us, as have the endemic edicts coming out of Akal Takht, while the debate on the controversial play, Behzti, truly engrossed us. Guru Granth and many other historical or liturgical texts can be downloaded and consulted, in original or in translation. Search engines enable us to locate

just the right citation from Guru Granth and many ancillary texts. Classical rendering of Gurbani by legendary performers can be instantly downloaded for our listening pleasure.

In every major city, there is also a visible community of non-Punjabi Sikhs, who came to the Sikh faith largely via the efforts of the late Yogi Bhajan. There is no community and no profession where Sikhs are not found; they are business tycoons, scientists, executives and physicians at the pinnacle of their professions - even in farming — and in larger cities one cannot fail to encounter Sikh cabdrivers and construction workers. Some Sikhs are surely to be found even in the underworld! To place these matters in context my mind goes back to 1960 when I came to this country, and when there were no more than two or three Sikhs in a multicultural, cosmopolitan city like New York.

Rounding up my survey is the fact that during the past four years, there has been a recognizable Sikh or two vying to find a place in the American political arena. In Canada, Sikhs have achieved much visible success; one sees only few and timid forays into the political system of the United States. But these will surely increase with time, and success, too, will come. Of note also are three growing institutions dedicated to community service: SALDEF, Sikh Coalition and United Sikhs, that are on the cutting edge of the fight for equal rights and community development in this society.

Sometimes I think that in the past four decades, there has been far more creative activity directed at rediscovering and connecting to the essential Sikh message in the diaspora than in Punjab. Some day soon, will it be Sikhs from Punjab who will be looking to our institutions in the diaspora for leadership, comfort and guidance?

Is this a renaissance in the offing? I am reminded of a parable from the life of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith. It is said that once when he visited an assemblage of not so virtuous people, his blessing to them was to stay and prosper. When he visited a community of dedicated, honest people, he blessed them with the wish that they be scattered to the four winds. Why? Because he thought it wiser that evil be contained and not disseminated, while good people would serve best if they traveled far and wide into the world.

Just like children bring home periodic report cards, just as presidents deliver annual addresses on the “state of the union,” I thought it was time for taking the measure of our presence in the diaspora. I confess that I, too, like many others, have often been harshly critical of our community’s seemingly wayward, disorganized ways, particularly in North America. This brief stocktaking today seems dramatically different, but it is not meant to be a paean of praise.

A complete progress report has three elements: acknowledgment of achievements, pinpointing of shortcomings and failures, and a vision of future direction for progress. Today, I celebrate our successes, the latter two will have to wait for another time.

For less than 40 years of community building in the diaspora, the new kids on the block haven’t done so badly. Sikhs have accumulated a handsome record that should be some comfort to us in the diaspora. We have come a long way, but we have a longer way to go.

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