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| Title | Title of Document | Sheila\_Hill\_With\_Balwant\_Sanghera\_110723 Complete |
| Accession Number | Catalogue Number of the File | (Administrator Only) |
| Interviewee | Name of Interviewee (SURNAME, given name(s), middle initial) | Balwant Sanghera |
| Interviewer | Name of Interviewer (Surname, given name(s), middle initial) | Sheila Hill |
| Interview Date | YYYY/MM/DD | 2023/11/07 |
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| Series |  | (Administrator Only) |
| Summary | Brief summary of the interview session (Copy and paste from Form 13 – Session Summary) | Balwant begins the interview talking about the Punjabi community in BC and how they became established. He explains his personal journey to Canada, discusses his goal to contribute to Canada to make it a better place than when he arrived, and speaks about his career as a teacher. Balwant then describes his community work, what Richmond was like when he arrived in 1990, and provides some words of wisdom to current and future Canadians. |
| Keywords | Keywords indicating interview subjects (Copy and Paste from “Keyword” section of Form 12 Interview Summary.) | Punjab, Sikh, India, Sawmill, Business, 1900s, Immigration, Racism, Culture, Hindu, Muslim, Montreal, Vancouver, Khalsa Diwan Society, Komagata Maru, Mission, Montreal Expo, Mike Pearson, South Asian, Teacher’s Association, Teaching, Burnaby School District, Maple Adolescent Center, Councillor, Punjabi Language Education Association, Richmond, NDP, Expo, Gurdwara Nanak Niwas, India Cultural Center of Canada, Richmond Review, Highway to Heaven Association, Film Board of Canada, Global Affairs Canada, Documentary, Suez Canal Dispute, Terminal Forest Products, Asa Johal, Dhillon Family |
| Subject | Subject headings applicable to the Interview. The OHC uses Library of Congress Subject Headings. | Punjab, Sikh, India, Sawmill, Business, 1900s, Immigration, Racism, Culture, Hindu, Muslim, Montreal, Vancouver, Khalsa Diwan Society, Komagata Maru, Mission, Montreal Expo, Mike Pearson, South Asian, BC Teacher’s Association, Teaching, Burnaby School District, Maple Adolescent Center, Councillor, Punjabi Language Education Association, Richmond, NDP, Expo, Gurdwara Nanak Niwas, India Cultural Centre of Canada, Richmond Review, Highway to Heaven Association, Film Board of Canada, Global Affairs Canada, Documentary, Swiss Canal Dispute, Terminal Forest Products, Asa Johal, Dhillon Family, |
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| Restrictions | Details regarding any restrictions on the file’s use (as outlined in Form 6 –Consent) | N/A |
| Rights | Release Information regarding copyright and access through the repository (as outlined in the Release Agreement) | All rights given to the interviewer (Sheila Hill) and the Oral History Centre |
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**Transcription Legend:**

. . . = Ellipses used to indicate where an interviewee does not complete a thought.

[?] = Used to indicate indecipherable words or unknown spelling of words.

START OF TAPE PART ONE OF ONE

[00:00:10]

SHEILA

I'm here with Balwant Sanghera on November 7th, 2023. Thank you so much Balwant for joining us.

BALWANT

You're welcome Sheila.

SHEILA

Maybe the first question I can start you with is can you provide a fairly brief but fulsome history of the Punjabi community in Canada as background information?

BALWANT

Definitely. Sheila, the Punjabi history in Canada can be divided into three main parts. The first part was: in 1880s our Punjabi people came to Canada. They came through America along Columbia Road, oh, along Columbia River. There's a town called Golden, BC about 500 miles from here. There was a sawmill; they worked in the sawmill there. The sawmill burned down in 1927. By that time, CP Rail was also built in 1885. So, some of them went back to the States the way they had come, and others, some came to Vancouver. So that was the first Punjabi communities beginning here.

The second was that in 1897, Queen Victoria had a Golden Jubilee in London. She invited some of the Sikh soldiers to her celebration. So, when they were going back to India, they said "Oh, there is a country called Canada?" because Canada was a dominion as India was under the British too. "Why don't we go visit Canada before we go back home?" So they came to Montreal by ship because there was no airplane at that time. They travelled by rail from Montreal to Vancouver. All along they were treated very well. They were welcomed. They saw Canada as a beautiful country. So, when they came, went back to Punjab the word spread. Some of them decided to come to Canada from then. So, the first people came in 1903, 1904, around that. By 1906 there were almost 5,000 Punjabis. Mostly Sikhs. There were some Muslims, too, and Hindus but majority were Punjabi Sikhs. So, that was the beginning, you can call that. There was also racism at that time. By 1907 there were 5,000 people, Punjabis. At that time there was a lot of racism against Chinese, Japanese, and Punjabis. So, there were race riots and the Canadian Government stopped immigration. So that was the downfall, you can call that. That number dwindled to about 700 only in a few years because no new people are coming. Some who were here, they were facing racism. They went to States, some went elsewhere. The things changed in 1919. You remember the Komagata Maru in 1914?

SHEILA

Yes.

BALWANT

So 1914 was also a turning point for our community. At that time, 376 people came on May 23rd. They were, you know, in the Burrard Inlet and at gunpoint, after two months, they were sent back. That was a very tragic chapter. Anyway, our community didn't give up and they kept struggling. In 1919, the immigration was loosened a little bit. So our people started coming. So that was the other phase, but until 1947 it was a struggle for our community because there was racism, immigration tightness also was there, and not too many jobs. They went through the Depression years 1929, 1930. So it was a tough time for our community. Our ancestors still struggled on. My dad was one of those who came in 1906. He went back in 1928. That was the, you can say, the first part. That was a struggle until 1947. From 1947 to 1970s was a consolidation period when the immigration rules were loosened a little bit, our community started coming and our people got into business. There was a mining company and a few other businesses. You remember Mayo [Singh], he built a sawmill on Vancouver Island.

[00:05:30]

He named the town after his hometown in Punjab, Paldi. There’s still an old Sikh temple there. He started establishing a town there with a mill and all that. So, up to 1970s . . . In 1908, 1906, our ancestors, they established the Khalsa Diwan Society. It was on Second Avenue, 1866 West Second Avenue. That was like our community center and an advocacy group, Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver. That was the first society. That Society did a marvellous job. Even during the Komagata Maru Incident, they helped those people involved with food, with supplies . . . In 1950 one of the Punjabi pioneers, Drinjer Singh Grewall, he was elected consular. We called them aldermen at that time in Mission. He became mayor in 1954 in Mission. That was the induction of our community into the politics. Since then it has, kind of, went on. I came in 1966. My brother, older brother who sponsored me, came in 1955. So, we have been kind of, you can see our generations here. So, 1967 was a turning year for Canada when their Expo 1967 in Montreal. Mike Pearson was the Prime Minister. I had a chance to meet with him.

SHEILA  
Oh, okay.

BALWANT

Yeah. Sit with him and he was a great guy. He opened up Canada. He invited the world to Canada. He said come, Canada, come. That was opening the door for more immigrants. So he encouraged them. He said somebody approached him, you know, “We like this country so much. Can we stay?” That is when he started this process that they could apply to stay here. In 1970s our young people, lots of them came in the ’70s, early ‘70s. 1971, ’72, that was a big influx. That changed the dynamics of our community here in Canada. That has continued because they sponsored their own families, then their relatives and all that. That has really brought in the growth of our community. That growth has continued. So, that’s the third phase, the growth. Today we have one, almost 1.5 million Punjabis alone in Canada. Our community, you can call it the broader community, South Asian community is today the largest minority community in Canada, next to the Chinese community. The Chinese community is still larger than us. Anyway, so our community has struggled but has also come a long way. Politically, Naranjan Singh Grewal was the first one to be elected.

SHEILA

Could you say that more slowly?

BALWANT

Naranjan Singh Grewal

SHEILA  
Thank you.

BALWANT

In 1986, Moe Sahota, you might have heard his name, he became the first Punjabi MLA to be elected in Victoria, in the Victoria area. That was another transition for us, another step forward. In 1991 there were three members elected to the BC Legislature: Moe Sahota again, Ujjal Dosanjh, and Harry Lali. In 1993, Herb Dhaliwal was elected as an MP and he became a minister. So, they started opening doors for our community. I think that way the community has . . . In 2000, if you remember, Ujjal Dosanjh became the first Punjabi Premier of this province. So we have come a long way and it has been quite a struggle for our community, but we’re very proud to be citizens of this country. Punjabis have made a great contribution to Canada and we are very proud to be Canadians.

[00:10:24]

This is, in short, the overall [story] and there was only one Sikh temple, as I mentioned, in 1908. Today, there must be around at least 200 Sikh temples in BC alone. So, you can imagine that how the community has grown. In 1912 there was the first Canadian Punjabi child born in Canada. He was the son . . . He was Hardial Singh Atwal. He was the son of the first priest at Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver, Balwant Singh Atwal. He was his son. That is the progression that we have gone through... Today, our community is active in every field. We have not only in the business community but in education, in technology, in politics, in every community our people are taking active roles and are trailblazers in many ways. So, now I’ll answer your questions.

SHEILA  
Well, it’s a remarkable journey. Thank you for sharing that. I was just wondering about your personal story. I think you said your dad came over in 1906 and returned to the Punjab . . .

BALWANT

In 1928.

SHEILA

What was his experience like?

BALWANT

His experience was very positive. He would tell us stories about Canada, that it’s a great country and, sure there was discrimination, and they all had these, you can say experiences. Some were positive and some were negative but on the whole my dad’s experience was quite positive. He spoke very proudly of Canada.

SHEILA

And that’s what inspired your brother, and then you, to come to Canada?

BALWANT

Yes, to come to Canada.

SHEILA

How was it different from where you grew up? What were your expectations?

BALWANT

You know, India has a very different kind of culture. We came, most of the people have come here to better themselves because Canada, number one, is a very inclusive country. It’s a very multicultural country, and it’s a very welcoming country. That’s what our family really enjoyed. We are very happy here; my brother, my sister, we sponsored her too later on. Most of our family is here but there’s a part in India too, in the Punjab as well. Our experience has been mostly positive. I really enjoyed my participation in the community. I started out as a teacher, then I retired as a school psychologist. From day one since I came to Canada, Sheila, my objective has been to make a contribution to this country, to make it better than when I came. I’ve tried that and I’m really happy about that.

SHEILA

Yes, with your numerous accomplishments and awards you certainly have done that. Could you tell me a little bit more about your career and your community work?

BALWANT

Sure. As I mentioned to you I started my teaching career in Hudson’s Hope, BC. I was active there. I was elected president of the Teacher’s Association in my first year, Sheila. You wouldn’t believe it. Our president, he moved to Kelowna for a job in Kelowna. I was vice president first and then they made me president. So, since then, I’ve been quite active in the BCTF [BC Teachers’ Federation] as well until my retirement. I served in many communities as president of Lillooet Teacher’s Associations and Portage Mountain Teacher’s Association, BC North Teacher’s Association, and also at the BCTF. Our chairperson of the BCTF committee of ombudspersons. So, some BCTF and my teacher’s association. Okay, that was on the side. Also, I was quite active in that community. So, when I moved to Lillooet I was encouraged to run for the council and I did. I served at . . . out of seventeen years there I served as councillor for thirteen years in Lillooet and I was very proud to be of any service to my community.

[00:15:20]

In 1990, in the meantime, so, I had a BSc degree from Punjab University in India and, here, when I started teaching, I went to Simon Fraser University to upgrade myself. Then, I got a Bachelor of Education degree from Notre Dame University, Nelson. There was a private university there. I started teaching in ’68. Then I went to UBC, upgraded myself, and did my masters at UBC. I became a school psychologist. Then in 1990 I moved to Richmond to serve as a school psychologist with the Burnaby School District. I served there for fourteen years from 1990 to 2004 in Burnaby School District at the Maple Adolescent Centre as an educational assessment, school psychologist. That was a very enjoyable experience, too. I retired in 2004, but since then I have been very busy with the community. I served as the president of the Cambie Community Centre for many, many years. I was very pleased for my contribution there with my colleagues there. King George Park, you’ll remember, I had a lot of roles in that working with the board, getting improvements from the city, working with the city. The city has been very cooperative. Also, Richmond Multicultural Community Services, I served and operated there too for many years. Also, I got involved with the Punjabi Language Education Association in 1994. Punjabi became recognized as the second language in BC’s curriculum. My other colleagues and I have been working on that since then as president. There are many other activities that I was involved in. Currently, I’m serving as a member of the board of governors of BCIT. Before that I served on the board of governors of Langara College and many other organizations. So, it is a real honour for me to be of service to my country, to my province.

SHEILA

You have been honoured for that work. I was very impressed to see that you have received the Queen Jubilee Medal as well as . . .

BALWANT

All three of them. Golden Jubilee, Diamond Jubilee, and Platinum Jubilee.

SHEILA

Yes and . . .

BALWANT

The Order of British Columbia.

SHEILA  
The Order of British Columbia and you’ve also been identified as one of Canada’s top 25 immigrants, and that’s only amongst many other awards. So, very, very impressive. Going back, you said you arrived in Richmond in 1990. What was your impression of Richmond when you arrived?

BALWANT

Richmond was more or less a rural community at that time. In 1990 there was a very interesting election for the council because Terra Nova was the main issue. It was zoned for development and housing. I think the previous council had done that and there was a lot of controversy, I understand. So I got involved with the NDP here. I’ve been a member of the NDP for a long time. In that capacity, I was quite active in all the elections. Richmond at that time was a very, you can call, a sleepy community, a very quiet sleepy community. [Audio stopped.]

SHEILA

Let’s go. So, you were talking about 1990 and . . .

BALWANT

Okay, Expo in Montreal in 1967 changed the face of Canada. At that time, Canada was opened to the world. Everybody knew where Canada is, what Canada’s main things are. As I mentioned, Mike Pearson played a great major role in that, welcoming people. That opened up Canada to the world. In the same way, the 1986 Expo in Vancouver opened up BC to the world. Since then, there has been so much development because it attracted international attention. It was like a gem that was hidden but then it became known. Look, since then, since 1986 thousands and thousands of people have come.

[00:20:30]

Look at the buildings all around. Like Richmond has become a towering community. So many towers and so many people moving in because Richmond is a very welcoming community too. I call it one of the best communities in Canada because it’s a very multicultural community, it’s a very welcoming community, it's a very inclusive community. We all love working here and incidentally, Sheila, there’s one more aspect maybe I should mention to you. Here are . . . I’m quite active in this Sikh temple. I’ve been involved for many, many years.

SHEILA

The Gurdwara Niwas . . .

BALWANT

It’s called the India Cultural Center of Canada, Gurdwara Nanak Niwas, Number 5 Road, Richmond, 8600 Number 5 Road, Richmond. I’ve been involved in this Sikh temple for many, many years. About twenty years ago, when I was president of the Richmond Multicultural Community Services, our Nanak Niwas Gurdwara, Sikh Temple, and there were some other places of worship coming up. So, I sent one of my staff members. I said, “Go and look at what’s happening on Number 5 Road.” She did a kind of survey. She went around, talked to the people, the management, of each place of worship and then I wrote a story in the Richmond Review. The Richmond Review stopped printing a few years ago, a couple of years ago. I called it, I said, this is our highway to heaven. So we . . .

SHEILA

Did you coin that term?

BALWANT

I coined that phrase: Highway to Heaven. Now, Sheila, we have twenty-five places of worship between Bridgeport and Steveston along Number 5 Road. We all work together. We have formed an association called Highway to Heaven Association. We meet couple of months, every couple of months here and share stories with each other. We support each other and there are a lot of people who come to visit and we kind of coordinate our visit because in one day you can go to Sikh temple, you can go to the mosque next door, you can go to the Buddhist temple, you can go to the Hindu temple, you can go to Christian churches. In the same day, you can visit all of them which is very unique. So, this is another gem, like Steveston. We call it a crown in Richmond but I think this is another gem for Richmond. So, we have this Highway to Heaven Association. We are very active. We are promoting it. What happened, Sheila, the Film Board of Canada they did a documentary. I understand they showed in Canada international flights. They showed that. They came here to talk to us when they were shooting the documentary. In 19..., in 2017, BBC did a story on our Highway to Heaven. You remember there was a famous, favourite famous places in Canada. Something like that. Our Highway to Heaven was 50th in that range. They picked up all those places. In 2017, BBC did a story on our Highway to Heaven. It went viral. I had a call from Global Affairs Canada because I’m chairperson of the Highway to Heaven Association. So, they called me. They said, “There are thirteen ambassadors from the United Nations coming to Vancouver for a conference of Peace and Defense. They have heard about your Highway to Heaven and they would love to visit you.” I said, “Welcome.” So, when they came to Canada, when they came to Vancouver in November 2017 we hosted them here, right here in our Sikh temple. We had lunch for them. They were very impressed. Then, I had two people, our vice principal from the Islamic academy, this side, and our vice principal from the Jewish day school. They made the presentation about our Highway to Heaven, how things are working, why we came into existence, what we are doing. They were very impressed. The Canadian Ambassador was just beaming. He wrote me a very glowing letter. I’ll give you a copy of that letter. Maybe you can display it.

SHEILA

Yes.

[00:25:13]

BALWANT

Then, you know, all of them were very impressed. And, Sheila, the ambassador from Jordan showed up. She said, “I’m very impressed with what you’re doing. This is a great model for the rest of the world.” She said, “In the Middle East, there’s one main religion and look what’s happening there. Here you’re doing an amazing job. You have every place of worship, major religions, and you work with each other. You support each other and you appreciate each other.” It was really very great commentary. She said, “This is a great role model for others.” So, we were very impressed with that. We were very pleased. So we were doing that, continuing to do that.

SHEILA

That is just remarkable. I have heard so many people talk about the Highway to Heaven and what it means to them, and it means . . . It just makes people very proud to even have it in our community. You have taken opportunities and made opportunities where they don’t exist. I’m just wondering what challenges you faced along the way as you’ve made all these remarkable contributions.

BALWANT

I have a very positive attitude and I try to see, if there’s any problem, any challenge, I like to see it as an opportunity to grow. That has really helped me. So, maybe my basic nature is to be kind and caring. That helps. So, you know, you’ve got to disarm the other person when you treat them with respect and treat them with, you know, all the appreciation. So, you know, it makes a big difference. So, sure, there have been a lot of challenges but, you know, I consider them as opportunities to grow.

SHEILA

That’s a wonderful attitude. What do you wish, though, when people who’ve been born and raised in Canada know, or maybe don’t know? What do you wish they would know about immigrants and people arriving in Canada?

BALWANT

Okay, first, you asked two questions. Number one, for the people who were born and raised here I think they do not appreciate, enough, what this country stands for, what this country has to offer. They take everything for granted. They have to be more appreciative and more open. The people who are coming here, I urge them to respect the laws of the country. This is a very peaceful country. I think Canada is one of the best countries where people can [come]. So long as you are minding your own business you are fine. You have endless opportunities. Look, people who will imagine somebody coming from another country and making the highest levels of government or other organizations. So, which country kind of encourages that? So, Canada has many, many opportunities. We should appreciate that. I think when we come from a different environment, a different culture, we should be respectful of Canadian culture and try to make a contribution to make Canada even better. That’s my advice to them.

SHEILA  
Great advice. Have your views about Canada changed over the years as you’ve learned more?

BALWANT

Canada has . . . Yes, Canada has changed a lot. I think, overall, at the international level Canada was very well respected as a peacemaker. Now, that’s up to the federal government to do that. I think still we need to go back to that. Lester B. Pearson, he’s my ideal kind of guy, you can say. He started this. You remember. He won the Nobel Peace Prize because he acted as a mediator for the Suez Canal Dispute. [Indecipherable.] He was very open minded. I think we need to get back to that because Canada was very well respected as a peacekeeper or peacemaker, not as a combatant. So, I think we need to go there and also we need to maybe raise our profile internationally because Canada is still a very well respected country around the globe. People respect when you have that Canadian badge or Canadian flag or maple leaf. They respect. Canada is very Canadian. Canada is very well respected all over the world. We should maintain that.

SHEILA

Just getting back to Richmond, how do you see that playing out on a local level, or does it?

[00:30:20]

BALWANT

Richmond has changed a lot. I think, okay, one of my concerns, first, let me give you one more before I forget. The contribution of the Punjabi communities to Richmond. It has made two major contributions in farming and in the lumber industry. Farming you must have heard of the name of the Dhillon family [indecipherable], and there were some other pioneer families who were farming in Richmond and they had their base here in Richmond. They are still doing that. The second aspect is Mitchell Island. The lumber industry. People like Asa Johal, the pioneer, the founder of this Sikh temple, he had his lumber industry there, at Mitchell Island, has provided employment to thousands and thousands of people. In that sense, and also there were some other people with Asa Johal, like Asa Johal, on Mitchell Island in Richmond who had their sawmill operations. They still do, and they are providing employment to thousands of people and they’re making a big contribution to Richmond. So, on those two aspects, two fronts, Punjabis have made a great contribution to Richmond and we continue to do that.

SHEILA

The Johal family came over in the ‘50s, approximately?

BALWANT

He came, Mr. Johal, he came here in 1924.

SHEILA  
Oh.

BALWANT

He was born in 1922. He was a two-year-old kid who came with his parents in 1924. He went to school here for a few years and then he started working at age fifteen, started selling wood at the wood stores. I mean, it was the main heating source at that time. He built from there and he started his lumber empire, you can call that. Terminal Forest Products and he built it up there. He became one of the most . . . [audio paused]. So, the people like Asa Johal have made a great contribution to Richmond through his lumber industry, through his generosity. He gave regularly to Richmond Hospital. He gave regularly to Vancouver General Hospital, to the UBC and this place is because of him because he supported this place like you will never believe. He was always there. Even now, the Johal family is there to help. Anytime we need any money, any requirements, they say “No, tell us how much.” Recently, our Sikh temple needed a new kitchen and it was almost $1 million in cost. Mr. Johal said “No problem.” He gave us $1 million to build our new kitchen, renovate our new kitchen. There were so many stories about him. He was so kind, so generous, and he never boasted about anything. Anybody who came to him for help, he never refused. So, it was good. The same way, the Dhillon family has been very helpful, you can say, have been good for Richmond through their farming, through their other enterprises. We have so many other Punjabis both in farming and in the lumber industry and many other areas they are doing their best to contribute to the society, to Richmond, City of Richmond, and to Canada.

SHEILA

In thinking of your family, your father coming over in 1906 and then you coming over in the ‘60s, how have things changed, do you think, for your family over time? You mentioned your father’s experience was very different from yours, which is different from your children’s.

BALWANT

Oh, it was very different. My father was a labourer. He worked in the mill, you know. He would tell us stories about that, but I was a professional. My brother, he worked for Air Canada. So, we had a little different kind of line of work which made a big difference. Our children, or our grandchildren, they’re born and raised here. They are very well integrated. We also tried our best to integrate and to be part of Canadian society, and to make a contribution as I said. I’m very honoured to be Canadian and I have done everything I can to make a positive contribution to Canada.

SHEILA

Yes, and you certainly have. Is there anything you would like to add that I haven’t already asked you?

BALWANT  
I think we covered most of the things, so unless you have any questions . . .

SHEILA  
No, that’s great. Okay, thank you so much.

BALWANT

Oh, you’re welcome Sheila.

END OF TAPE PART ONE OF ONE

[00:35:35]

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)