

100 years spent fighting for rights

IMMIGRATION | B.C.'s Khalsa Diwan Society has been the focal point of Indo-Canadian's religious, political and social activities since 1906



BY KIM BOLAN
VANCOUVER SUN

When people from India first immigrated to B.C. in the early 1900s, they faced a hostile reception full of racism and ostracization.

But instead of being deterred from a new life in Canada, they banded together to form the Khalsa Diwan Society — an organization that would lead the struggle for human rights for decades to come.

This weekend, the society celebrates its centennial with a series of events and a host of dignitaries from across Canada and India, including Attorney-General Wally Oppal, who will speak at a banquet Sunday.

"No single institution has dominated the lives of Indo-Canadians in the last hundred years more than the Khalsa Diwan Society," Oppal said Tuesday. "It sort of promoted the well-being of Indo-Canadians."

Jack Uppal, whose pioneer father was one of the original members, said the society quickly became the centre of the Indo-Canadian community.

Uppal, who came to Canada as a baby in 1925, remembers hearing stories from his father Dalip about how hard the early years were and what an important role the society played in helping newcomers.

"It was the central focal point for all the religious, political and social activities of our community," said Uppal, who is now 81. "It is still a central focal point for our community."

The Khalsa Diwan Society bought land at 1866 West Second in Kitsilano and opened the first temple, or gurdwara, in 1907. Newly arrived men could stay there for free, for as long as they needed a place, while they searched for work in Vancouver sawmills.

"When they were starting to develop that land, there were huge stumps on the property," Uppal said. "Dad used to tell me they had an awful time getting those stumps out of here. You had to do it all by hand then."

Hard manual labour was the least of the problems the new immigrants would face.

Much more difficult was their struggle to bring their families over from India and really establish themselves in Canada as Canadians.

"This was the policy of the time. They didn't want Indians here in B.C. or in Canada," said Sohan Singh Deo, a former society president who has been involved for more than 40 years.



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H. E. SIR ARTHUR KENNEDY K. O. B.



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Jack Uppal, shown here in 1930, is the son of one of the original members of the Indo-Canadian Khalsa Diwan Society.

"They couldn't bring their families. They didn't have the right to vote."

Within a couple of years of the society's formation, the Canadian government changed the laws to try to prevent more immigrants from India, most of whom were Sikhs from India's Punjab province. The new law said that Indians could only stay in Canada if they came on a continuous journey from their homeland. It was a clever move, because there were no ships travelling directly between the two countries.

Again the community, led by the Khalsa Diwan Society, was not deterred.

It supported the move in 1914 to charter the *Komagata Maru*, the ship that would bring 376 would-be immigrants to the shores of Vancouver, only to be banned from docking.

While the ship and its passengers were stuck in English Bay, Khalsa Diwan leaders hired lawyers to fight the government's refusal to let the newcomers stay. Society members provided food, fresh water and clothes to those aboard the ship.

When the *Komagata Maru* was forced back to India by Canadian warships, the society continued its fight with Ottawa.

Today the society is one of the leaders of a campaign to get an official apology from the Canadian government for what happened to the *Komagata Maru* and those aboard.

Deo said the Khalsa Diwan Society spent more than \$147,000 between 1906 and 1921 on its campaign to get immigration rights. That included paying for lawyers and sending delegations to Ottawa to lobby politicians — all in spite of the

fact that most of those donating to the campaign were low wage earners with few assets.

"Some like my Dad couldn't go back to India to join my mother," Uppal said.

In the '20s, the government began to allow Indian immigrants to bring over their wives and children. That's when Uppal was able to make the journey with his brother and parents.

But there were still battles to be won.

The Indo-Canadians still did not have voting or citizenship rights and the quota for new immigrants was low.

And they couldn't go into some downtown restaurants.

Uppal remembers being a teenager and being denied entry to the Fox Theatre on Main Street.

The young people also got involved in the society's youth committee, Uppal said.

"We had to show people in the broader community what the injustices were that prevailed upon us."

He and the other teens organized meetings and put up posters on telephone poles all over town. When city officials removed the posters, they went back and put them up again.

One of the meetings was held at the Orpheum and attended by prominent supporters like Harold Winch, the B.C. leader of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation.

"Winch said that he was glad it was a warm subject because the theatre is very cold," Uppal recalled. "We couldn't afford to turn the heat on."

But the heat was certainly on the federal government.

The Khalsa Diwan-sponsored delegations to Ottawa featuring advocates like Dr. D.P. Pandia, were wearing down the politicians.

Uppal got the call to fight in the Second World War to defend Canada, the country in which he could not yet vote.

"To fight any problem... you should do it with education," Uppal said. "We showed people we were good enough to have the right to vote, the right to walk around this society freely."

The new immigrants in Canada also worked for Indian independence with financial and moral support.

In 1947, franchise was achieved and the Indo-Canadian community could finally get fully involved in the political life of its adopted land. India won its freedom from the British the same year.

"This was all done under the auspices of the Khalsa Diwan Society," Uppal said. "We met every single leader of every single political party at one time or another."

Uppal believes the decades-long struggle to achieve the rights of Canadian citizenship is the key reason Indo-Canadians are so passionate about politics today, having elected more representatives provincially and federally than other minority

Program for Khalsa Diwan Society centennial events:

Oct. 6-8: Exhibition of historic photographs, lobby area of 8000 Ross St.

Friday, Oct. 6: Prayers at the Khalsa Diwan Society temple, 8000 Ross St., 6 p.m.

Saturday, Oct. 7: Seminar on the

society's past, present and future, 8000 Ross St., 2-6 p.m.

Sunday, Oct. 8: Recognition of Sikh pioneers, 8000 Ross St., 11 a.m.

Sunday, Oct. 8: Reception and banquet at Vancouver Convention Centre, 999 Canada Place, 7 p.m.



VANCOUVER SUN FILES

Indo-Canadians pose in front of their first temple at 1866 West Second before leaving for Ottawa in 1939 to lobby for the right to vote.

communities. Uppal said: "This is why we are politically inclined, why we wanted to get into politics."

"For a long time, we couldn't really elect people. I think Moe Sihota was the first."

But the former New Democrat MLA certainly wasn't the last — some of the most prominent names in politics now come from the Indo-Canadian community — Oppal, Ujjal Dosanjh, Herb Dhaliwal and a host of younger MLAs and MPs, such as Surrey Liberal MP Sukh Dhaliwal.

"Today everybody is successful in business and politics. They have done very well," said Uppal, a Vancouver sawmill owner who has helped hundreds of immigrants over the years.

Attorney-General Oppal said the temples established by the society are still very much "community centres" where politics are welcome.

"It is probably the only religious organization that I know of that allows political speeches," he said.

"And that is because it is more than a place to worship, and more than a religious institution; it has played a vital role in the growth of the com-

ve towards human rights and the full rights in a democratic society."

Uppal was president of the Khalsa Diwan Society, starting in 1959, and was one of the key players in buying the land in south Vancouver upon which the society's Ross Street temple sits today.

The land was purchased for

late 1960s, the Indo-Canadian community grew exponentially.

The Khalsa Diwan Society was still there to help the new immigrants integrate into life in Canada, offering social services and a place where they could connect with others.

But when some of the newer immigrants began to support

to use the courts to oust the moderate Sikhs from their executive positions, claiming they were not real Sikhs.

Both Deo and Uppal agreed that the political differences within the Sikh community that began with the separatists' rise in the 1980s has impacted the role of the Khalsa Diwan Society in recent years.

"At one time, we were all united because we were fighting a common cause here — the right to be first-class citizens," Uppal said. "Now there are a lot of divisions between the factions."

Balwant Singh Sanghera, one of the organizers of this weekend's festivities, said a major goal of the centennial is to revitalize the society by getting younger people involved and by attempting to address significant current issues like youth and gang violence.

Many young people do not even know the remarkable history and the long fight for basic human rights, Sanghera said.

"We want to hear from the youth what their issues are about," he said. "We really hope a lot of young people come out this weekend."

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WALLY OPPAL

On politics being welcome at Sikh temples

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\$75,000, Uppal said, and committee members then hired renowned architect Arthur Erickson to design the gurdwara.

Because the society was struggling financially, executive members decided to sell off the little historic temple in Kitsilano, a decision that Uppal still regrets.

When Canada's immigra-

a Sikh separatist movement back home, some of the society's executive members were targeted for their statements against extremism.

Deo and other executive members were once sued by the late Talwinder Singh Parmar, the Babbar Khalsa leader who is considered the mastermind of the June 1985 Air India bombing.



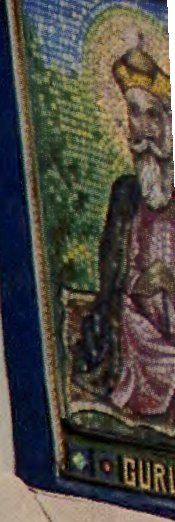
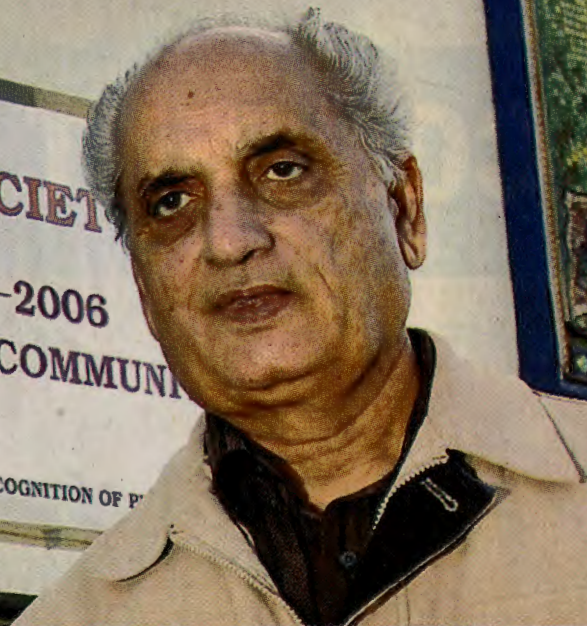
Welcome
KHALSA DIWAN SOCIETY
VANCOUVER, BC

1906

2006

100 YEARS OF SERVICE TO COMMUNITY

PROGRAMMES: Oct., 6th FRIDAY-KAVI DARBAR 6 TO 9 PM
Oct., 7th SATURDAY-SEMINAR 2 TO 6 PM
Oct., 8th SUNDAY-KIRTAN, SPEECHES & RECOGNITION OF P



PETER BATTISTONI/VANCOUVER

Sohan Singh Deo is a former president of the Khalsa Diwan Society and has been involved with it for more than 40 years.