

Harinder Jit Kaur Sunga's Reflections at Ninety

September 14, 2021

I am Harinder Jit Kaur Sunga and today is my 90th birthday. I am the last surviving member of the immediate family of Kartar Kaur (my mother) and Atma Singh Rai (my father). In September 1931, my mother gave birth to me and my twin brother. My older brother, Gian, died in 2019 at the age of 95. My twin brother, Harinder Singh, passed away in 1984, in Delta, British Columbia, from cancer, leaving behind his wife and four children. He was an athlete slated to form part of the Canadian field hockey team for the Japan Olympics on 1964, but was pulled out at the last minute. His daughter Pamela Rai won a medal in swimming at the Los Angeles 1984 Olympics a few months after the death of her father.

My paternal grandfather, Dewa Singh, migrated from India to Yuba City, California. Atma Singh married my mother Kartar Kaur from Budhipind in 1920, and left India for Canada while Kartar Kaur was pregnant with her first child, Gian.

Atma Singh joined his father Dewa Singh in Yuba City in 1923 when he was nineteen years of age. My father had been admitted to an American university and had arrived in the United States on a student visa. Sometime in 1924, his father Dewa Singh passed away. Atma Singh found himself alone in a new land. Fortunately, he had some contacts on Vancouver Island, so he crossed into Canada and found work in the lumber mills.

Back in India, Kartar Kaur returned to her maternal village of Budhipind while pregnant with her first son. She wrote to Atma Singh regularly about her hopes, fears and longings in poetic verses. Atma Singh kept these letters and eventually copied them in his own handwriting as the ink on fragile airmail paper started to fade away.

Atma Singh returned to India in 1929 unexpectedly. Apparently he arrived in Budhipind unannounced, in a three-piece Western suit and fancy boots. When Kartar Kaur saw him and she cried inconsolably.

Atma Singh took her and their son to settle in his village in Moranwali, and he stayed in India until 1934-35. During this period, Kartar Kaur gave birth to me and my twin brother.

In the meantime, Kartar Kaur worked hard to establish a new girl's school in Moranwali, with the support of a government grant. The school was a success. Kartar Kaur encouraged disadvantaged girls to learn reading and craft skills like sewing and knitting at her house.

While continuing her education she discovered that she was ill from terminal cancer and subsequently passed away in January 1941.

Following my mother's death, my older brother Gian, my twin brother Harinder Jit Singh and I were put in boarding schools. We eventually received news in 1946 that my father Atma Singh had been granted Canadian citizenship. He immediately applied for us to come to Canada.

In August 1948, my two brothers and I arrived at my father's place in Vancouver. By then, Atma Singh had recently remarried. In August 1951, I was introduced to Preetom Singh Sunga, a graduate of UBC, who was working for the Canadian government in the Dominion Bureau of Statistics in Ottawa.

During Preetom's vacation in British Columbia we were introduced and three weeks later we were married. Preetom's father had migrated to Canada in 1906, and brought his wife and 6-year-old Preetom to Vancouver in 1929. Preetom and I settled in Ottawa.

I had my first child, Sharon, in 1952. Over the next 16 years, we had three more wonderful children, Paul, Lyal and Seetal.

I completed real estate courses and I worked part-time for the next twenty years. Preetom continued to do well in his career. He worked in a number of governments departments, including Statistics Canada, Urban Affairs, Department of Finance, and most excitingly, at the Privy Council Office. He eventually returned to Statistics Canada where he conducted extensive research and published numerous articles in economics and national accounts.

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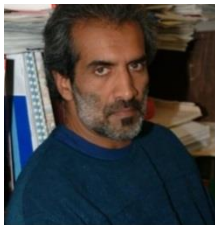
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We had a fantastic social life in Ottawa, as the Indian community continued to grow. During the 1960s and 1970s, Preetom and other community leaders set up the National Association of Canadians of Origins in India, the Ottawa Sikh Society, India Canada Association, and the Indo-Canadian Community Centre. Preetom was dearly loved by all the community, and he was often approached for friendly advice. Anyone who had ever met him even once, remembered him fondly for years afterward. Sadly Preetom passed away in 1991 at the age of 67.

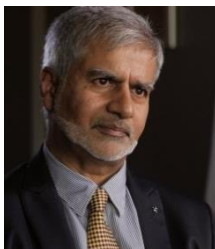
Home life was lively and dinner discussions were always animated as we encouraged our children to question everything. During the '60's and '70's, I faced the many challenges of raising my young family in a transplanted culture. Preetom and I taught our children to be independent and to think for themselves and they each have excelled in their careers and married their chosen life partners.



Sharon Sunga Mylod graduated from York University with a BA Honours (Specialization Film and Television) and went on to become an award-winning video producer working in broadcast television. She is a trained Lean Six Sigma Black Belt executive and currently works as an international ISO management systems webinar trainer for the British Standards Institute. Sharon is also a ceramics artist building wheel-thrown, hand-built and sculptural work. Married, she has two sons and currently lives in Aurora, Canada.



Paul S. Sunga studied philosophy and cell biology at the University of Ottawa and completed his doctorate in medical science at the University of British Columbia. He has served as an international health consultant to the Government of Canada in more than a dozen countries in Africa and Asia and currently teaches medical sciences. Among his published works are three novels focused on socio-political and scientific themes: *The Lions* (1992), *Red Dust, Red Sky* (2008) and, most recently, *Because of Nothing At All* (2022). For further information, please see: [Paul Sunga - Welcome!](#)



Lyal S. Sunga, BA, LLB, LLM, PhD specializes in international human rights, humanitarian law, international criminal law, terrorism / counter-terrorism and transitional justice. Author of two influential books and dozens of articles on these and related topics, he has conducted human rights monitoring, investigation, reporting, training and capacity building as staff member or consultant for the UN, OSCE, EU, Council of Europe and Swiss Development Cooperation among other agencies in 55 countries and he has traveled to more than 70 countries. He lives in Rome, Italy, with his wife and two children, teaches at John Cabot University and comments regularly in the media on breaking news and current events. Lyal's website is at www.lyalsunga.com



Seetal Sunga, BA, LLB, LLM, PhD in ethics and public affairs, has been working for 30 years on law and justice issues relating to Indigenous peoples. She has served in various public law and policy environments including in legal aid in the Mushkegowuk region of Northern Ontario, provincial governments and a number of commissions and inquiries. She was general counsel and policy advisor to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in its early years. Seetal's 2021 doctorate thesis on "The Ethical Obligation of the State to Hear and Address Indigenous Claims for Justice" earned her Carleton University's Senate Medal for Outstanding Graduate Work". She has taught on occasion at universities. Currently, Seetal serves as Senior Counsel at the Department of Justice - Canada, and lives in Ottawa with her husband.