

Indar Singh Gill

Father of Nash Singh Gill

This story relates to those times when farmers in India were not able to earn enough to make their livelihood in India. There was less cultivation and irrigation in those days and it was very difficult to sustain a living. This situation forced farmers to think about going to other countries in search of work and prosperity. In the early nineteen hundreds people were focussed only in going to Singapore, Malaysia and east Africa.

Nash Singh Gill.....

In 1930, Indar Singh Gill village dhudike, Moga was also planning to go and settle in one of these countries with his cousins. Indar Singh Gill and Joginder Singh gill were only 17 years old and 13 years old at that time respectively. Indar Singh Gill's uncle sent 5 sponsorship permit form Canada and suggested them to migrate to Canada. The cost of travelling was very high in those days that one person (indar's cousin) backed out.

Journey begins

During their journey from Dhudike to Canada. They travelled in horse cart from the village to Ludhiana and then they took train from Ludhiana to Calcutta in 14 rupees each in those days. They left Calcutta on diwali and travelled to Hong Kong in 17-18 days in a steam ship of Jardin Company in 44 rupees and then travelled in a steam ship of Canadian pacific company called the empress of Japan to Vancouver in \$90US in 2.5 months.

It took months

The day Indar gill left his home his farms needed irrigation and he worked in the farms till 40' clock in the morning before leaving. He purchased a trunk from Moga for 3 rupees and carried flour (to make roti) and Indian butter as they cooked on the steam ship. They missed the Empress of Japan form Hong Kong due to which they stayed in a gurudwara in Hong Kong for

2.5 months until the ship arrived back. Indar gill entered Vancouver harbour on December 12 at 6pm. Vancouver was a new city in those days. He recall the downtown Vancouver when the

tallest building was the marine building at that has just been built in 1930. If we see the sky line now, the marine building is dwarfed by many of the high rises. There was many of his uncle and friends on the airport.

In the search of work

After staying two days in Vancouver gurdwara they went to Vancouver island to find some work. Unfortunately there was no saw mill working in 1931 due to worldwide depression. Rather than being unemployed they decided to go to Kamloops to pick tomatoes and harvest potatoes for a person named Sher Singh Aluwalia. While working there he earned \$54 Canadian in three months.

Indar gill returned back to Vancouver island when he got a job in the Great Central lake Sawmill where he was being paid approximate. 10 cents per hour. Finally after working hard he sent some money to India for his family. Indar Singh got married at young age of 17 years old. Everyone was living under the same roof. Indar Singh asked his grandfather Partap Singh gill to buy a horse when he first sent the money to his family. Partap Singh bought a horse for himself for 60 rupees obviously it was the respectful thing to do that before you give anything, you give it to elders.

In 1932, Indar Singh gill started working for the Kapoor lumber company saw mill in Sooke lake close to Victoria. The mill was owned by an East Indian named Babul Singh Kapoor. Living in the bunk house on the saw mill, he uses to work 6 days a week and earn 15 cents per hour. They use to go to Victoria to buy supplies by walking because there were no truck or car used to go to Victoria in those days. Indar Singh recalls that they did not see any wedding in the Indian community during the first 15 years of his arrival in Canada. Everyone was in the labour class and working hard to send some money back to India to assist and support their families.

World war period

During the period of second world between 1939 until 1945 there were no ships and no transportation going back to India. Everyone remember the history of wars that any ships that were on seas, Japanese and German submarines were sinking them. So, there were no people who were travelling back to India. Indar Singh gill did not go back to India until 1947 so he stayed in Canada for a period of 17 years. He used to communicate to his wife through letters but basically they were separated for a period of 17 years.

Bringing family to Canada

After the second world war immigration to Canada got weakened and people from East-India and Chinese origin were allowed to bring their families to Canada. During 1947 around 150 people per year were allowed to come from India. Indar Singh Gill went back to India in 1947 when partition was taking place between India and Pakistan. In 1948 a son born in Indar gill's home and he named him Nash Singh Gill. After preparing the immigration documentations he brought his son Nash gill and his wife to Canada. They travelled by steam ship via Honolulu, Hawaii. From San Francisco they travelled on Great Northern Train to enter Canada in white rock on 25 November 1949. The first thing Indar Singh did while travelling back to Honolulu was that he bought a western dress and high heels for his wife as he wants her to assimilate into Canadian culture. They started living in Mission and Indar gill started a trucking business and delivering fuel, wood, sawdust, wooden sawdust to the Fraser valley.

Two daughter took birth in indar gill's home, Malkiet kaur and baljit kaur.

Work field

Indar gill carried fuel under Indar Fuel company till 1958. He had a number of wood and sawdust trucks and he would pick up the raw material from the saw mill located in east of mission at Suicide creek owned by Albert McMahon who was a prominent business man. There was a decline in his business when natural gas came into Fraser valley and everybody started using natural gas instead of fuel. Due to this Indar gill purchased an old saw mill located on Fraser river but the mill was destroyed in 1959. Then he constructed a new modern up to date mill in 1960 on the same site called Fraser valley sawmills. The saw mill employed approx. 40 employees and business grew very fast and the lumber was being exported to United states, Japan and to Great Britain. Later in 1950's Indar gill sponsored his brother-in-law, two of his wife's brothers and 3-4 cousins from the village and they were employed in the mill and that's how they all got the employment.

However on 9 October, 1964 there was a fire at the sawmill and everything was destroyed by fire. The saw mill was never rebuilt on the same site due to the mission bridge. The new mission bridge was being built and the road approaches did not allow for a sawmill to be built on the same site. Later on he decided to build a shake and shingle mill in fort Langley called Langley Forest Industries Ltd. The mill is still operating to the present times, producing shakes and shingles.

He was also involved in raspberry production and some land development during the 1980s. There were very few East Indian people living in that area during that time and they all know each other. The 20-30 families use to live like one family and visit socially each other on weekends. If anybody travelling back to India, they would see them off at the airport.

Religious aspects

With respect to religious aspects there were a number of Sikh gurudwaras in the lower mainland and in British Columbia. In those days each Sikh temple was under the khalsa Diwan society which was incorporated in Vancouver and all the Sikh gurudwaras were branch gurudwaras of that one society. Each gurudwara would hold a religious function celebrating some aspects of Sikh religion throughout the years. Abbotsford gurudwara was given the Sikh celebration for Shri Guru Nanak dev ji's birthday, gurpurab (commemoration based on the lives of one of the Sikh gurus) that basically held in November of each year. Visakhi celebration used to hold in gurdwara located in Victoria. Accordingly other gurudwaras were given other Sikh celebrations.

Abbotsford old gurudwara

Nash Gills (Son of Indar Singh Gill) use to visit gurudwara with his family. The new gurudwara that built across the street now didn't exist during 1950's. The south Fraser road had just two lanes at that time. The wooden flag pole was 70 ft high with a red light on the top of it and there were few fruit trees located on the west side of the gurudwara. The parking lot was on the east side of gurudwara. During those days there wasn't much need of larger parking lot because there were very few people that owned motor vehicles or cars. Wooden sawdust was being used for heating the gurudwara. In the main hall of darbar sahib (gurudwara) men use to sit usually on the right side and women on the left.

During 1950's eastern ladies use to wear western dresses and skirts and they would have a sheet of cloth to sit down and cover themselves but in 1970 women started wearing their traditional dress such that there was no need for cloth sheet. In 1950's a Sikh priest would do all the things required for the guru granth sahib in the morning. Waking up, taking and placing where guru granth sahib is to be placed. The sikh priest is still alive and he worked for Indar gill's tucking company as a truck driver.

Recalling the days back of snow during the month of December in 1950 the climate was much different than it is now. We think if it's snowing 1cm that's a lot of snow but in those days it snowed four feet. Sometimes people were not able to work due to snow they got stuck and also wasn't able to bring sawdust for gurdwara. Sikh priest during snow days if not able to go to work use to sit in gurudwara and read guru granth sahib. After 1970's all gurudwara become independent from Khalsa Diwan society of Vancouver. Incorporation didn't take place until 1970's and there were no actual executive committees for gurudwara. There was no president, no secretary, and no executive council member. Sikh volunteers just go to gurudwara and do sewa, maintenance, make food and serve the food.

Celebration at gurudwara

Wedding pic of nash gill showing the old gurudwara

Nash Singh gill son of Indar Singh gill got married in June 18 1972 in old gurudwara. Nash Singh travelled back to India in 1969 and met his wife rajinder kaur and sponsored her to come to Canada in 1972. This photograph is from Nash Singh Gill's wedding is showing how the old gurudwara looked at that time. During early 1970's many east Indian people travelled to Canada and the gurudwara was fully packed during Nash gill's wedding. People were not only sitting they were standing on the side and it was very tight and which called for a need for building a larger gurudwara. So in 1980 new gurudwara was built with big hall across the south Fraser Street. After the renovation of old gurudwara Nash gill's son got engaged in April 2007. Nash gill took his all three sons to gurudwara when they were born. These photographs are few of Nash gill's collection of his memories about gurudwara.

Pic of Nash gill's son showing the old gurudwara

Abbotsford old gurudwara- The national historic sites

As like other countries it took many years for Canada to grow and develop. There was prejudice and discrimination in Canada during early 1900s till 1950s with East Indian people but it does no longer exist now. The old gurudwara being designed as a national historic site is a feather in the cap of the Indo-Canadian community. This is luckily the only existing surviving original gurudwara that exists of the earlier gurudwara. The old gurudwaras in New Westminster, Fraser Mills and Victoria does not exist. Off all the gurudwaras only this gurudwara one in Canada exists which has original building. During 1970s Indar Singh Gill was the president of the gurudwara. He initiated putting a new shingle roof on the gurudwara. The roof of gurudwara is steep such people tied a rope to a person who had to put the roof and anchored him by taking it around the other side so that he wouldn't fall off.

Volunteers put their efforts to preserve the building. Sometime in back days it was hard to pay income tax so president use to collect money from the community and pay the taxes. Indar Singh Gill was a family oriented man. He did many sacrifices for his family so they his children can live an easier life. In 1954, Indar Gill ordered a truck from General Motors, Oshawa, Ontario and he decided to order an automobile as well. He ordered a candy-apple red 1954 Pontiac. Indar Singh sent one of his workers Johnny Billin to pick up the truck and car. He placed the car in the back of truck and drove back. There were very few people in those days who owned motor vehicle.

To promote the gurudwara for a national historic site it took five years. Sheila Copps from liberal party use to go to gurudwara and meet the politicians and some bureaucrats to obtain the national status. He also met Prime Minister Jean Chretien at that time in the Sikh temple. Abbotsford gurudwara is a history of indo-Canadian community in Canada. It should be maintained, promoted as a place for tourists and visitors who come to Abbotsford and learn the philosophical principles of Sikhism.

If we can get a picture of the prime minister when he met all these people in gurudwara.