



SURJIT KAUR SIDHU

Innovation, Stories, and Legacy

Surjit Kaur Sidhu (nicknamed Seeto) was born to mother Jay Kaur and father Kirpal Singh in Village Ganga, District Bathinda, Punjab, India. Her exact date of birth is unknown as the dates were often mixed up in those days when records were not well managed within the villages.

Surjit's own recollection suggests that she lived in her birth village for twenty years. However, she recalled that her birth was a few years before the partition of India and Pakistan. According to Surjit's daughter Kulwant, her birthdate was approximately around December 4th 1946.

Surjit Kaur grew up alongside her five siblings (one brother and four sisters). Growing up in Punjab, she did not receive a formal education because during that time girls were traditionally not educated and her village did not have a school.

To go to school meant that you would have to travel a long distance, which was looked down upon by the elders. Surjit Kaur is happy to see that nowadays, girls are able to travel more freely, feeling a sense of euphoria that, education is important and she could have learned a lot if she had attended.



Although she did not attend high school, she learned how to do all kinds of housework. She would milk the cows, mill the cotton and do all of the housework. She learned how to make roti from a young age. She learned how to sew – noting that in those days, people who lived in the villages were taught to be self-sufficient- particularly in comparison to those who lived in the cities.

Since she didn't go to school, she spent her time at home doing household work and in her free time, she used to do embroidery, knitting, crocheting, or making durries, spinning charkha etc.



Surjit Kaur started spinning charka and crochet when she was only seven years old. She began making durries when she was between 12-15 old because the work is hard and tedious. She also learned how to make the tapes (naala) at a young age when she was 8-9 years old.

Surjit Kaur recalls passionately the steps on how she made naala's with bamboo sticks called “poris” and the creativity in her designs, including ones with bells, etc.

The naala's with bells and sequence was used in ghaghras. Though she never wore one, she took extra due care in its intricate design. Surjit Kaur even brought one ghaghra to Canada with her (see above image) which she'd stitched herself after learning from an elder woman in the village.

This ghagra was made with 10 meters of black cloth of soof and was decorated with a golden tape called a katoon (gota) placed around the whole rim of the ghaghra.



Surjit Kaur was married in 1961 at which point she moved to her husband, Gurdev Singh's village Pakharwadh, District Moga. During the time of marriage, roughly, it was the time of the winter season and the 9th of Magh month based on the lunar calendar. At the time of her older sister's wedding, her (would be) husband, Gurdev Singh came to their house as part of the marriage party. She had seen him 3-4 times casually at her sister's wedding and later but had no idea that she was going to marry him.

When Surjit Kaur and Gurdev Singh married in 1961, there were no plans for them to move to Canada. The plan to settle in Canada occurred when Gurdev Singh's sister, who had come earlier, came to know that they could bring their relatives (brothers, sisters or parents etc.) to Canada. So her sister in law sponsored Gurdev Singh to Canada.

Surjit Kaur's husband first came to Canada as a visitor and didn't get his Permanent Residency (PR) until a year later. After getting his PR, he worked for one year in a mill and went back to India for visit. At that time, their son was two years old. Her husband saw their son for the first time when he visited the village because there were no phones, no photos and there was not a trend to write letters. In short, there were no means for him to see his child.



Once in a while, if there were any letters exchanged from India and Canada, it was Surjit's father-in-law who wrote the letters and she never even asked him to write anything on her behalf. The postman would bring the letters at home and her father-in-law would respond to the letters himself, posting without asking if something should be written on her behalf.

Thus, the system of sending letters was very complex for Surjit Kaur and her husband. At home, her father-in-law would receive the letter, read and respond himself. He would not read the letter to her but normally tell the family that his letter had come and the message was conveyed through her daughters that all was well.

After not hearing anything about his wife Surjit Kaur's husband started writing to her parents to know how she was doing. He was concerned when his father's letters revealed nothing about Surjit Kaur. It was then that her father in law requested her to send a letter to her husband.

And so, she too started sending letters to her husband written by her nadan (sister in law). Surjit Kaur admitted that she didn't even know what to write in the letters except for the overall well-being in the house, the children, etc. These included notes about how their girls were studying at that time, their son was well, and when they got a new buffalo - all the casual matters of village life. She never wrote anything personal knowing that the letter was being written by a third party and it would further be read by someone else too and when the response would come, it would be read by someone else.

Surjit Kaur felt anxiety in the letter writing process having never written them, or dictated letters in her life otherwise.



Surjit Kaur came to Canada six years after Gurdev Singh, in 1976 with her four children: her youngest son Gurvir was 5-6 years old, her oldest daughter Gurcharan was almost 14 years old and her daughters Kulwant and Jessi were 9.5 years and 12 years respectively.

She had mixed feelings when her sponsorship papers were ready. On one hand, she was happy that her family would be united, while on the other hand she was sad as she was leaving her homeland of more than 21 years.

Surjit Kaur was also deeply attached to her parents and would miss them dearly. When her father along with a few men came to see them off at Delhi Airport she was crying all the way from the village to the Delhi Airport. She was very attached to her parents because they used to visit her a lot especially in her husband's absence and they took good care of her.

Later, she would be joined in Canada by her older sister and children.



Surjit Kaur recalled that white people used to hate seeing them in Punjabi Suits. The kids started going to school in August, and they started wearing pants and shirts for school while she continued wearing Punjabi suits. While going to see the doctor, she wore her Punjabi suits but she was told by her relative that she must try wearing pants because "goray" (white people) used to stare at Punjabi women in traditional Punjabi suits.

On her relative's suggestions, she purchased two pairs of pants. She wore those pants only once or twice because she felt they were too tight.

Other than that, she refused.

With time, when more women started coming to Canada, more women were seen in Punjabi suits even in Gurdwaras.