

Surjit Kaur Sidhu Narrative – BCHF

Conversation between Kusum Soni (SASI Coordinator) and Surjit Kaur Sidhu

Video 1:

Surjit Kaur Sidhu was born in Village Ganga in District Bhatinda, Punjab. She lived in that Village for almost 20 years and she didn't go to school for her formal education because there were no schools in her villages those days but she said, "now there is a school in the village". The school was there almost a mile away in the village Nathana which was a bigger village than Ganga. Those days, mostly in her village, parents never used to send girls to the school, that's why she didn't go to school at all.

Since she didn't go to school, so she spent her time at home doing house-hold work and in free time she used to do embroidery, knitting, doing crochet, or making durries, spinning Charkha etc. this is what she was busy all the time apart from regular house-hold chores like cooking etc.. Mostly her mother used to cook but she also helped her.

Surjit Kaur Sidhu had five more siblings and including her, they were six brothers and sisters. They were five sisters and one brother and now they are only four sisters who are alive; one sister and a brother have passed away.

The reason Surjit Kaur kept herself busy making durries and other embroidered materials was due to the customs those days that at the time of wedding, all those art works were displayed as "Daaj" what the girl made or was given to the girl as wedding gifts. So she kept making all those things and saved at one place. Mostly the elder sisters will make for the younger sisters also, that used to be the custom those days. Surjit Kaur started spinning Charka and crochet from a very young age, approximately 7-8 years of age and started making durries from 12-15 years of her age as that was bit hard and tedious work. She also learnt how to make the tapes (Naala) at young age when she was 8-9 years. She could make them all with her hands such as Naala, Prandis etc. She described very passionately the procedure how to make Naala with bamboo sticks called "Poris" and how creative she was to make different types – the ones with bells and plain etc. The one with bells and sequels was used in Ghagras, even though she never wore a Ghagra but she made one such special Naala with the bell which she explained, was very special with intricate design. She recalled that she brought one Ghagra with her to Canada which she stitched herself after learning from an elder woman in the village. It was made with 10 meters of black cloth of Soof and was decorated with a golden tape called Katoon (gota) put on the whole rim of ghaghra.

When asked at what occasions the ghagras were worn; Surjit Kaur explained that mostly the married women used to wear Ghagra not the unmarried girls. The women would wear a Ghagra while visiting anyone's house or going out to the fields in the morning so the shape of legs were not supposed to be seen in public. Those days, there were no in-house toilets and people used to go out in the fields. But morning and evening when women had to pass through the streets to go to the fields where men were sitting in groups (Satth) then the women were supposed to be properly covering their bodies that their legs were not showing off their shapes also. They Ghagras were used to cover the legs, instead of salwars. The Ghagras were worn on top of Salwars to cover the leg-shapes and some ghagras were made of even 20 yards of cloths. On the top used to be a Kurti and covered with thick dupattas sometimes in doubled-up layers (called Chaadar). The ghagras and big chaadars were worn only by the

married women of the village, not by the unmarried girls. The girls used to wear Salwar and Kurti and head covered with Chunni. The girls also made sure that their heads were covered and their hair were tied in multiple braids called "Middis". The Middis were done on the same day before the dawn when their hair were washed (mostly Sunday) and no girl was allowed to keep their hair loose, which was the custom in all the villages those days. The married women used to have jewellery in their hair tied along with the Middis, called Saggi Phull along with Prandis. Young unmarried girls used to do only Middis (5-10 Middis) and tied into only one braid (no two braids) without any decorative jewelry. The hair were tied for 8-10 days like that and no daily hair combing. After 8-10 days, either the mother or elder sister would open those Middis and then wash hair again. Weekends mostly were spent on hair care only. The hair (Middis) were done either by the mother or by the elder sister. Her elder sister was 15 years older than her and married but whenever she would come and visit parents house would stay for 2-3 months and she would take care of the younger siblings. They would come for some major festivals like Karwa Chauth, Lohri, Teejan etc. If no one was available to do hair in the house on weekends (if the older sister was not visiting) then the girls would go to a women worker house for doing hair – she was called "Nain" who was the community helper in the village. Every household gave them a fixed amount of money whatever was decided for them. The girls would take their comb, threads etc. to make Middis and got it done at her house. And the girls always wore salwar suits with head covered all the time– no capris and no shorts at all, said Surjit Kaur while smiling. Her mother used to purchase loose cloth for suits from the merchants and then got them stitched by the tailors.

Surjit Kaur said that girls used to make lots of Naale and Durries (mostly 4 durries per girl and some girls would make 8 also) for their marriage and that kept them occupied in the house when they didn't go to school. The bed sheets were embroidered. Mostly the beddings were prepared at home and nothing was purchased from outside. When the girls were not doing any other jobs outside the house, so they used to work at home and make things like that.

Surjit Kaur roughly remembered that she got married at about 20 years of her age. She didn't remember her date of birth exactly and didn't remember her marriage date also. She recalled that her birth was before the partition of India and Pakistan – it might be two to three years before that. (Her daughter Kulwant told us her birthday is on December 4th 1946 which is approximate.)

Surjit Kaur remembered her marriage time roughly that it was winter and it was 9th of Magh month as per lunar Calendar which comes in January- February in Solar Calendar. Her marriage was arranged by her elder sister who was 15 years older than her and she brought the proposal for her husband's younger brother in the village Pakkhar Waddh. She shared a story that at the time of her older sister's wedding her (would be) husband came to their house as part of the marriage party. She had seen him 3-4 times casually at her sister's wedding time and later but she had no idea that she was going to marry him. Later, it came to her sister's mind that he will be a good match for Surjit and she was pursuing it for quite some time and the parents also considered the proposal. She said that she had never talked to her husband before marriage even when he had visited their house twice before their marriage.

Surjit Kaur explained how the marriages happened in the same family so commonly which used to be a custom those days. First her aunt (her father's sister) got her older sister married in her in-law's family to her husband's nephew and then her sister got Surjit Kaur married to her husband's younger brother. So three women of their family were married in the same family. Then Surjit Kaur got her younger sister married to a man in the same village where she got married and later the sisters got married their

cousins also got married in the same village – Pakkhar Waddh. The families were known to her father – in-law when she didn't know many families there. All the sisters and cousins got married in Pakkhar Waddh in district Moga, where Surjit Kaur also settled after her marriage.

When Surjit Kaur got married in 1970, there were no plans for her husband and she to move to Canada. At that time, her husband's sister also didn't have any plans for moving to Canada but they moved after many years of their marriage. First, her sister-in-law's husband came to Canada from Nathuwala, then her sister-in-law came and after seeing the Canadian life and seeing that visitors also could go to Canada, after many years they thought of sponsoring Surjit's husband. When Surjit Kaur's husband came to Canada, they already had three daughters and she was pregnant with her son who was born after 1.5 months.

When Surjit Kaur got married in Bhatinda (Village Ganga), both her parents and in-laws were farmers and her husband also was a farmer in Pakkhar Waddh village in district Moga, where she lived for almost 15 years. All her four children were born in that village. The plan to settle to Canada came up later when her husband's sister, who had come earlier, came to know that they could bring their blood relations (Brothers and sisters or parents etc.) to Canada. So her husband's sister sponsored Surjit Kaur's husband to Canada. She sponsored Surjit Kaur's husband first because older sister's husband was not feeling too well those days with some breathing issues and they had a big family with 8 children.

Surjit Kaur's husband came to Canada first as a visitor and didn't get his Permanent Residency (PR) for at least a year. 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 those days there were no phones, and there was not a trend to write letters so frequently and no photos, so there were no means for him to see his child.

Surjit Kaur recalled that her husband moved to Canada in 1970 when they were already married for 15 years. Once in a while if there were any letters exchange from India and Canada, her father-in-law used to write the letters and She never even asked him write anything on her behalf. Postman would bring the letters at home, and her father- in-law would respond to the letters himself and post without asking her if there was something written on her behalf. On the other end, even though her husband was educated and could read and write, but since he was living with his sister till Surjit Kaur went to Canada. Surjit Kaur's husband would take the help of his sister's sister-in-law (Draani) to write letters for him because she was educated (belonged to Jaipur and had gone to school, even when it was not that much of a trend that women were educated). Those days, even the less educated boys from Canada would go to India for marriage and bring educated girls.

So 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 in the family that his letter had come and message was conveyed through her daughters that all was well. In Canada, her husband would read the letters but would take her sister's Draani's help to respond the letters which were a normal "All Well" types of letters. She would send her daughter (Gurcharan) to her father-in-law to ask if all was well in Canada when the letters used to come and her father-in-law would respond in a generic answer, "yes all is well". He would never tell if anything specific was written about her. The relationship of father-in-law and daughter-in-law used to be very closed and limited in communications. Even though she didn't do any Purda from him as he was her Bhua's Jeth in relationship and he had seen her and her sisters before but as a matter of custom they had very limited

conversations. Not hearing anything about his wife (Surjit Kaur), Her husband started writing to Surjit Kaur's parents to know how she was doing as in her father-in-law's letters, there was no mention about her. Then her father sent a message to her that she must send a letter to her husband and she started sending letters written by a girl (her sister's sister-in-law (Nanand)). Surjit Kaur admitted that she didn't even know what to write in the letters except for the overall well-being in the house, children doing well etc. etc. as the girls were studying at that time, son was well and they got a new buffalo – all those casual matters, nothing very special. She never wrote anything personal knowing that letter was being written by a third party and it will be read by someone else too and when the response would come, it will be read by someone else. She also admitted that she was very ignorant about writing letters as she had no experience in writing letters because no one from her family had ever gone out of the house to whom they wrote any letters.

As a rough approximation, Surjit Kaur got married at the age of twenty years, and after 15 years of marriage her husband moved to Canada, so she must be around 35 years of age at that time. She came to Canada 6 years after her husband, that was 1976. She came with her four children. Her youngest (son) was 5-6 years old, and her daughters were 9.5 years (Kulwant), the middle daughter (Jessi) was 12 years and Gurcharan was almost 14 years old. All the three daughters have 2.5 years of gap. Gurcharan had passed her grade 7th, the middle daughter was in grade five and the youngest daughter Kulwant had passed grade three when they moved to Canada. She wanted her kids to study. When her oldest daughter, Gurcharan grew up and was in grade 6-7th, she had started sending letters written by her and she would also read the letters of her father (Surjit's husband). She didn't send her son to school as he was only 5 years old and she knew that soon they will be moving to Canada. At that time, her husband went to India and stayed for 9 months when he prepared all the paper work for their family sponsorship while his stay in India and the whole family came to Canada with him, that's why they didn't send the son to school in India when they knew they were ready to move to Canada anytime.

Surjit Kaur stated that she did not face any difficulties when she stayed back for six years in her husband's absence while he had come to Canada. She explained that her sister lived very close to them which was almost at another end of the big house with shared courtyard in the middle; their children played together all the time and there was a big support from sister and her family even though the farms / lands were divided after they started living separately but there was good emotional bonding in the family. Her Sister's family did their own farming and Surjit Kaur stopped doing farming after her husband's moving to Canada and started giving her farms on lease. Her sister's husband treated her like his real sister and took good care of her in her husband's absence. The household expenses were nicely met from their farm's income as her husband did not send any money from Canada for two years till he did not get his PR. Whatever he earned he used to spend on his living and also used to contribute to his sister for his staying with them and also he paid back all the expenses of his sponsorship and tickets etc. what they spent on him. There was no financial problem anyways because they had their farm income. And she was busy all the time in raising children and they had a buffalo. Surjit Kaur didn't work in the farm but kept herself busy in the household chores and in free time she spun Charkha.

Surjit Kaur didn't do any special preparation to move to Canada as she didn't know what was required. When her husband went back to India, he guided about the packing. They brought Durries and quilts - she meant enough beddings for the family of four. In clothes, she brought Punjabi Suits only and she said she didn't wear any Pants even after coming to Canada. She brought one Ghagra with her which was gifted to her middle daughter now. She also brought a shawl with her which was hand-embroidered

by her. After coming to Canada, the children wore Pants and western clothes when they joined the school but she herself wore only Punjabi Suit even when she landed first time in Canada. The kids also wore Indian clothes when they landed – frocks and Punjabi suits. Their father knew that the kids will wear western clothes when they will start school.

Surjit Kaur came to Canada with her children in 1976. Surjit Kaur told that Gore (Whites) used to hate them to see them in Punjabi Suits. The kids started going to school in August, and they started wearing Pants and shirts for school, and she continued wearing Punjabi suits even when she started working in the farms as she said, “The farms were also owned by Punjabis there were no Gore there”. While going to see the doctor, she wore Punjabi Suits but she was told by her relative (Sister-in-Law’s draani) that she must try wearing pants because Gore stare at Punjabi women in Suits and the doctor was also Gora. On her relative’s suggestions she purchased two pants going with her to the Mall. She wore those pants only once or twice but didn’t like them as she felt tight in them and after that she wore only Punjabi Suits. With time, when more women started coming to Canada, more women were seen in Punjabi suits even in Gurdwaras. Mostly women used to wear pants when they went to see the doctor because doctors were Gore.

Coming back to marriage discussion, when she was asked about her honeymoon, she blushed and said no one used to go for honeymoon those days. They went to visit only the relatives to attend weddings of other celebrations in the families but she did not go to any holiday trips. After coming to Canada she did go back with her children and husband and visited all the prominent Gurdwaras such as Hazoor Sahib, Hemkunt Sahib and Amritsar etc. Mostly her life was busy in household chores and spinning Charkha (when she lived in the village in India), in free time and men were busy in the farms – that was the lifestyle those days.

Surjit Kaur talked about her marriage day, how she was dressed up. She had Saggi Phull on her hair, Pippal Pattiyan and Mama Murkiyan in her ears (more than one hole in ears), she had a heavy pendant with five gold stamps (mohar) heavy gold bracelets (Gajras) and rings, most of the jewelry she wore at the time of wedding and kept wearing in daily life. She possessed all that jewelry till she moved to Canada and brought only some of the items with her and rest were converted into easy wear thick gold chain with heavy pendant for daily use. She used to wear all her jewelry and new suits when she visited relatives of her parents’ house during festivals and Teeyan, Karwa Chauth fast, Lohri etc. in her parents’ village Ganga near Bhatinda.

When her husband moved to Canada, Surjit Kaur spent most of her time at her in-law’s place and only used to visit her parents occasionally for one or two days because kids were also young and it was hard to leave them alone back home, then she had household responsibilities taking care of her father-in-law, buffalo in the house. Her father used to come to bring her to her parents’ home, stay for 1-2 days and he would bring her back home.

Video 2:

Further narrating her wedding story, Surjit Kaur Sidhu mentioned that there was no trend of clicking wedding pictures those days and even if there were any pictures, it was no use because the girl was wrapped in three layers of dupattas (also called Chaadar) while sitting for Laawan- Phere. One of them was Baag also called “Subbhad”, another used to be from in-laws and one from maternal family and one of them was a decorative dupatta – the women of the family would bring the girl to the wedding seat

and make her seated there and there was no custom of doing rounds (Phere) those days. There used to be only Anand Karj in front of Guru Granth Sahib while sitting. Both the boy and the girl sat in front of the Beed. She wore all the jewelry at the time of wedding but no make-up. There were no photographs especially in villages those days, even there were no photographs for her kids, when her son was born. Her husband saw their son for the first time when he visited from Canada.

Surjit Kaur never talked to her husband on phone when she was in the village in India and husband was in Canada (1970's). After they moved to Canada, whenever her husband visited India, he used to call her and the family from Ludhiana to ask their well-being. He sometimes used to go for a month or so to take care of the farms in the village. She said, she didn't feel any need for the phone because he used to visit them frequently in India as he visited four times in 6 years. First time he went after two years when he stayed with them for two months, then he went after one year and again spent 2.5 months there (India), and then again he went after six months so there was no need of phones. Her husband used to visit India more frequently because her father-in-law would send him letters, "Come and see my face" because he was getting old. That way he used to come and meet the whole family (kids and her), that way he visited them three times. Her husband's father wanted that Surjit and the kids should stay in India because he had a feeling, if the kids go to Canada then his son wouldn't visit him because her husband's Bhua ji didn't come back since she left the village. Surjit Kaur's father-in-law insisted that he will not allow the children and Surjit to leave the house till he was alive because her husband was visiting home regularly because of the family was there. Her husband was an obedient son. When her husband visited third time, during that visit her father-in-law passed away with pneumonia, it was winter time. He did his father's funeral with all the traditional rituals nicely (distribution of Gadauda – sweets etc * when an elderly person dies, there is celebration of life by the distribution of sweets in the whole village, or sweet rice and cooking special meals). Her husband came back to Canada after doing father's funeral.

After father-in-law's death, the family in Canada (Her husband's sister and her husband) suggested him to sponsor Surjit Kaur and the family to Canada even though her husband had purchased a farm land in India for their son. The family brought into attention that he must think about their daughters too as the farm will be given to the son. He must educate his daughters and give better living conditions to the family. The school in Pakkharwaddh was only till grade five. He got convinced by the suggestions of his brother-in-law (his sister's husband) and went back to India after four months. Surjit's husband stayed in India for nine months that time and prepared the sponsorship papers for the family and brought the whole family with him. Her husband's visits were frequent so they didn't feel any need of phone calls.

Surjit Kaur said that she was the woman of the house after her marriage as she didn't have mother-in-law because she passed away when her husband was young. Another woman in the house was her elder sister who was married to her husband's elder brother (15 years older than her) but they had very warm relations with rest of the family members and close relatives living in the same village and they used to frequently visit each other in good relations with each other. Her eldest daughter Gurcharan studied in Raunta Village where her husband's uncle used to live and she stayed at their house for two years while studying there. They are still very close to the family to date, and maintain respectful relations between the families.

Surjit Kaur's six years in the village without her husband were not too hard as the whole family was helping her and supporting her to manage the house with kids and cattle. And she also hired a young

boy as helper (almost 12 years old) who used help in the household to take care of the cattle (one buffalo and one cow) and farms were given on lease. Her parents also supported her and helped whenever wanted and he used to visit her every two weeks to see if all was well.

Surjit Kaur had few friends with whom she used to spend her spare time after finishing household chore and they used to visit her house regularly, she used to talk to them and sometimes shared how much she missed her husband. With her sister also they had a common courtyard. All women after finishing their household chores would sit together and rest in the afternoon and had afternoon tea together, and sometimes spin Charkha together in their courtyard. There was no Television those days but later, they purchased big sized radio on which they used to listen all the news and songs and entertainment such as Thandu Ram, Atro-Chatro etc. All used to be very friendly with her.

After immigrating to Canada, they sponsored the eldest daughter of her sister (who was her Jethani also), she stayed with Surjit Kaur till she found a marriage match in Canada and they got her married. The daughter, after getting married, sponsored her mother (Surjit's sister), 4 brothers and one sister, her father had passed away earlier.

Surjit Kaur had mixed feelings when her sponsorship papers got ready. On one hand she was happy that she along with the kids will get united with her husband and on the other hand she was bit sad that it was hard to leave a fully fledged house as for almost 21 years they made so much in the house that it will get all wasted and she will have to leave her parents – she wouldn't get to see her parents in Canada as she was very attached to her parents also. When her father, along with few men came to see them off at Delhi Airport, she was crying all the way from Village to 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 her older sister also came to Canada along with her kids but she recently passed away in Canada.

Surjit Kaur visited India for the first time after 3.5 years of her immigration. She used to remember her house and family when she immigrated to Canada. Surjit Kaur always advocated for her daughters to study further even when the school in the village Pakharwaddh was only till grade 5, so they sent her oldest daughter to Raunta Village for grade six. Her sister-in-law in Canada always advised her to continue studies of her daughters because it would be easy for them to join school when they come to Canada. She also wanted her daughters to study.

When Surjit Kaur came to Canada, she liked it here because the whole family got together.