

Mohinder Singh Atwal

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Interview: September 8, 2022

Edited by Raymond Atwal on Jan 9, 2023

Mohinder Singh Atwal currently lives in Surrey, British Columbia with his wife Jaswinder Kaur Atwal.

Mohinder Singh Atwal was born in his maternal village, Langeri in Punjab, India on July 28th, 1940. His paternal village is Khurdpur, in district Jalandhar in Punjab, India. His parents are Rattan Kaur Atwal (mother) and Hardial Singh Atwal (father). His father was the first Canadian born Sikh. There were 6 children born in the family, 3 sisters and 3 brothers: Mohinder Singh being the eldest. His other siblings in order of their age are: Harjinder Singh Atwal, Harninder Pal Singh Atwal, Rajinder Kaur Atwal, Davinder Kaur Atwal, and Kuljeet Kaur Atwal.

Mohinder Singh Atwal's parents were married in 1938 or 1939 in India. He was born in 1940 in India and his two brothers were also born in India, around 1947 and 1949 (although he does not remember the exact years). His sisters were born in Canada.

Mohinder was 11 years old when he immigrated to Canada along with his mother. Prior to moving to the country, he lived in Village Khurdpur along with his mother and two brothers. All his siblings are currently living in Canada. His one sister lives in Surrey and two of them live in Duncan. One of his brothers passed away in an accident, so he is left with only one brother who also lives in Duncan.

His father, Hardial Singh used to visit India occasionally and he was in India between 1951 to 1952. In his absence, Mohinder Singh, his mother, and the two brothers lived in his maternal village, Langeri and then immigrated to Canada.

Mohinder remembers his childhood in Punjab where he was born, grew up and played with his friends. He missed his village a lot after immigrating to Canada, especially in the initial years when he was not very fluent in English; even though he used to play with "Gora" (White) kids, he did not enjoy that much as he

did in his village. He was in grade 5 when he immigrated to Canada and started grade 6 at school in Canada. Although it was hard in the beginning being a new immigrant in Canada and having to learn a new language, he slowly adjusted to Canadian life after learning English and making Canadian friends. He said, “it was really nice after that”! His friends were of various backgrounds – one was Indian, and rest were White, Chinese, and Japanese. “At that time, four nationalities were living in Paldi - Japanese, Chinese, Indian and White. The Japanese and Chinese students lived in Paldi because their parents worked in Mayo Singh’s lumbar mill. So, their children became Mohinder Singh’s friends. All the children used to mix with each other well and had very friendly relations with each other including the White kids.

In Mohinder Singh’s family, his grandfather Bhai Balwant Singh Atwal immigrated to Canada first, around 1906, then followed by his grandmother, Kartar Kaur Atwal. His grandfather, Bhai Balwant Singh Atwal was the first granthi (Priest) of Vancouver Ross Street Gurdwara, Canada's first gurdwara (located on West 2nd Avenue in Vancouver). Bhai Balwant Singh Atwal was a freedom fighter who was an integral part of the Ghadar movement, a movement focused on liberating India from the British rule.

Mohinder Singh narrated that he doesn’t remember much information about his grandfather Bhai Balwant Singh Atwal, whatever he knows is only through readings in the books and articles and stories passed on from family and friends.

Please refer to these articles :

<https://www.facebook.com/100YearJourney/posts/bhai-balwant-singh-first-priest-or-granthi-of-canadas-first-gurdwara-on-west-2nd/2412580918761089/>.

<https://m.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/jalandhar/ghadarites-at-home-abroad-for-freedom-403939>

<https://www.sikhs.org/100th/part2.html>

Mohinder Singh stated that he was happy to talk about his personal journey and some facts about his parents. His father, Hardial Singh worked at the sawmill operated by the Mayo Lumber Company, on Vancouver Island. The mill was situated between Paldi and Lake Cowichan, at a place called Summit. It was called Summit Sawmill. Hardial Singh started working at a very young age and his family used to live in Paldi. Mohinder Singh, along with his family, also lived in Paldi for 8 years and spent his childhood there, and then the family moved to Duncan where he completed his high school. He was around 20 years old when he moved out of the house after completing his high school when he started college in Nanaimo,

pursuing a program in Heavy Duty Mechanics. He was the only one from his family who moved to Nanaimo while his other siblings were still living in Duncan and attending school there.

Mohinder Singh's mother Rattan Kaur Atwal was a homemaker, and she took care of the family at home. His sisters worked after completing high school and attended post-secondary institutions. His older sister, Rajinder was a Registered Nurse (now retired), Davinder a Care Aide (now retired) and Kuljeet an investigator with the Federal Government.

He visited India for the first time after moving to Canada in 1969. It was a casual visit to meet his relatives and friends, but during that visit he got married to his wife who was from the village Mahilpur in Hoshiarpur District. He was 28 years old at that time.

Mohinder was introduced to his wife, Jaswinder through his parents (arranged marriage) but also by his wife's friend who was Jaswinder's classmate at the college in Mahilpur. Jaswinder's friend was also living in Mohinder's maternal village Langeri. She lived few houses away from their maternal house and was a regular visitor to their house. After the couple married, Mohinder Singh stayed in India for a year and brought his wife Jaswinder along with him in 1970.

Since he stayed back in India for almost a year, he had to quit his job in Gold River and found a new job in Honeymoon Bay once he returned. It was 20 miles away from Duncan and he used to travel by company bus from Duncan.

All three of Mohinder and Jaswinder's children were born in Duncan. The couple has two sons and a daughter – Raymond Atwal (eldest), Randy Atwal (middle) and Sherry Atwal (youngest – daughter). All three of them went to school in Duncan until finishing their high school, and then attended the University of Victoria, and the University of British Columbia. Raymond pursued a Bachelor of Commerce, Randy completed a Bachelor of Economics, and Sherry did her Bachelor of Education at UBC.

Mohinder Singh Atwal's first job was an apprenticeship at the Tahsis Company in Golden River.

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tahsis>)

Here is the information about Tahsis and the company.

<https://thenarwhal.ca/at-the-end-of-the-forest-a-former-vancouver-island-mill-towns-struggle-for-reinvention/>

After working an apprenticeship for 4 years, he wrote an exam for inter-provincial working certificate and got his ticket for Inter-provincial heavy-duty mechanic. His entire professional career of 40 years was working as a heavy-duty mechanic. For 8 years he worked at the Tahsis Company in Gold River and then he came back to Duncan and for next 30 years he worked in different companies, such as BC Forest Products (BCFP), Fletcher Challenge Canada, and Timber West (the company kept changing owners). He worked in the same logging camp under different company names.

Since Mohinder worked as a Heavy Duty Mechanic, he made a good income. When he started as an apprenticeship trainee his wages were around \$1.25 -\$1.50. Later he started getting around \$13-15 per hour (1970's wages).

Even though Mohinder and his wife could financially afford to, they did not visit India frequently due to their busy life and caring for their young children. His second visit to India was in 1976 and they took their first son, Raymond along with them. Since his wife's parents were still in India, they wanted to visit more often.

Mohinder lived a simple life while living in Duncan. He used to work during the week, on the weekend they would visit friends and relatives, and on every Sunday, they would visit the Gurdwara. Sometimes they would go and visit their relatives in Calgary and attend weddings in different towns or locally. He and his wife were also fond of watching Indian as well as English movies. Some names of the movies he said were Chann Pardesi, Humraj, Nanak Naam Jahaz hai.

He lived a comfortably stable life first in Duncan where he and his family lived for 40 years until they moved to Surrey. In 2015, after his retirement, he moved to Surrey because his children had moved to the city for their professional careers. His middle son Randy was the first to move to Surrey due to his employment.

Mohinder did not have any major struggles while growing up or while working and since he was a ticketed heavy-duty mechanic, finding work was also not difficult. He was hired while in the training. He had very good life, made good friends and he was financially comfortable to run the household.

Because of their family roots in Canada since around 1906, many people knew Mohinder's family. They never felt lonely and or faced any significant adjustment issues because there was a community to support each other. There were about 16-17 Indian families living in Paldi those days who were a good support system to each other. Their kids were friends with each other. Some of Mohinder's friends, including

Bobby James, Kenny Yepp, Mohinder Minhas, Mike Mayo (Mr. Mayo's youngest son), were close friends, like brothers.

Raymond (Mohinder's eldest Son) added to the conversation that his father and mother gave a very good life to all three kids. They all received their education and secured professional jobs. Except for a few occasional times, they did not face much racism as they had friends of various backgrounds (White, Asian, South Asian and First Nations) while growing up.

Mohinder also shared about his experience wearing a turban when he came to Canada. His peers used to make fun of him because of his turban and one day he asked his father to have his hair cut so that he did not have to wear a turban to the school. He used to feel hurt when the White kids made fun of him and would take off his turban and he was struggling to put it back on his head.

"When I went to the high school, I told dad that I... (Pause. =. his throat got a gush with tears in his eyes...) I told my dad...." dad...kids are teasing me ... please get my hair cut..." and so he got his hair cut after that and never grew it again. He went to India in 1969 with his cut hair and got married like that. His wife also did not object as she had an idea that boys who come from foreign countries get their hair cut and they are not turbaned.

Mohinder also added that it was easy to find work with cut hair as that was what White people liked. Most of the mills and logging camps were owned by White people they wanted the hair cut for safety while working. After a long struggle, when the turbans were allowed, men started keeping their turbans, and some of those who had previously cut their hair started growing again.

"It is only recently I think when our people fought through the Union and Unions passed a resolution that it was a religious identity to keep the turban and we don't have to cut our hair...just like now our men ride motorcycle with turban, same way they fought for turbans in the sawmills also."

Mohinder doesn't remember his aunts (father's sister) as they had already passed away before he was born. But he knows that his father had two sisters. He doesn't remember much about his grandfather Bhai Balwant Singh Atwal from his father, as his father used to be very quiet, and he did not talk much about his father and his own young age. He knows only after reading books and articles and weblinks and what everyone else knows in the community. But he is very proud of his grandfather, the sacrifices his grandfather made, and what his grandfather did to make a better life for the Sikh community in Canada and India. Mohinder has a book written by Giani Kesar Singh written about his grandfather's life which they would like translated to English.