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SIKHS IN CANADA (A Centennial Celebration)

S. KANWAL INDER SINGH NEEL
B.Sc., M.Ed.
Richmond B.C. Canada

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SIKHS IN CANADA

A Centennial Celebration

(A) Ten Significant Events

INTRODUCTION

Sikhs have been in Canada for about a hundred years. They live and work in every major city and most small towns, and participate fully in all aspects of Canadian life. Yet, little is known about them or their glorious history in the shaping of Canada. I have chosen ten significant events that have had a major impact on the Sikh community and the community at large in Canada.

FIRST SIKH SETTLERS

After the Diamond Jubilee celebration of Queen Victoria in London, England, a Sikh Lancers and Infantry Regiment passed through Canada on their way to India. They were impressed with Canada's landscape and opportunities. Hence, after their arrival in Punjab they encouraged other Sikhs to migrate to this new and adventurous land. The first wave of Sikh immigrants did not arrive until 1904. These pioneer Sikhs undertook many hardships, they did labouring jobs on railway construction, in the lumber mills, forestry, mining, and fisheries. They were paid less than the white men, had poor housing and health care, and constantly faced racial discrimination and segregation.

In 1908, a delegation was sent to British Honduras (Belize) to see the viability of deporting all the "Hindoos" there in order to "keep Canada white." Two local Sikhs Nagar Singh and Sham Singh accompanied J.B. Harkin and William Hopkinson on this fact-finding mission. The country was infested with mosquitoes, and a number of diseases were widespread. No fresh water was

available, and the living conditions were very poor. On return, Nagar Singh and Sham Singh were offered a bribe of \$5,000 to encourage the Sikhs to emigrate to British Honduras. Fortunately, these honest Sikhs told the true story of the unsuitable conditions, and the local Sikh community rejected the proposal and declared their intention to stay in Canada.

GURDWARAS (SIKH TEMPLES)

A Gurdwara is not only a place of worship, but also a part of the social, economic, and political activity of the community. The first Gurdwara was built by the Khalsa Diwan Society at 1866 West Second Avenue in Vancouver. The foundation stone was laid in October 1907, and the temple was completed in the following year. In 1915, Khalsa Diwan Society was registered with its Bylaws. By 1912 there were Gurdwaras in Victoria, Abbotsford, and New Westminster. Mayo lumber company built a Sikh temple near Duncan in 1918. This community was named Paldi after its original village in Punjab. In the early days when the Sikh community was small, special religious celebrations were held in one location, for example Baisakhi celebrations were held in Victoria, Vancouver hosted Guru Gobind Singh Ji's birthday, and Guru Nanak Dev Ji's birthday was celebrated in Abbotsford. Nowadays most Gurdwaras celebrate all Gurpurbs and other occasions. Some Gurdwaras have daily congregations while others have weekly. In Canada, today there are over a hundred Gurdwaras, about half of which are in British Columbia. Each time a new Gurdwara opens, it is usually preceded with a procession and other festivities.

NAGAR KIRTAN (PARADES)

The first religious parade for the Sikhs in Canada was on January 19, 1903. Bands playing, flags fluttering, Ragis singing, a horse drawn carriage carrying Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji marked the opening of the Sikh temple on Second Avenue in Vancouver. In 1969, on the 500th birth Anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Khalsa Diwan Society moved its Gurdwara premises to the present location at 8000 Ross Street. This move was also made

in a huge procession. In 1979 on the quincentenary of Guru Amar Das Ji, a big parade was held in Vancouver. Following that year Khalsa Diwan Society in Vancouver has an annual Baisakhi parade, which has a participation of anywhere from fifty to a hundred thousand people. This annual event goes through Punjabi market and number of Sikhs distribute free drinks and food to all the participants. In 1995 the B.C. Government also officially recognized this event and published a brochure. This year also marked the 400th anniversary of Guru Hargobind Ji and a parade was held in Surrey.

KOMAGATA MARU INCIDENT

The 1914 incident of the *Komagata Maru* (Guru Nanak Jahaz) ship is one of the most tragic and shameful events in Canadian history. Bhai Gurdit Singh had chartered a Japanese freighter (*Komagata Maru*) to fulfill the Canadian Government requirements of a "continuous voyage" and "\$200 per head". On May 23, 1914 the ship arrived in Vancouver. Obsessed with racial bigotry, determined to keep Canada all white, the government flouted every norm of social justice and kept the ship-load of 376 Indian immigrants from landing. These Sikhs, though they were British subjects, they were denied entry into Canada. For two full months the ship stood in Burrard Inlet, its passengers suffering from hunger, thirst and humiliation. On the morning of July 23, *Komagata Maru* was finally pushed out of the Canadian waters with the powerful guns of the Canadian Naval vessel H.M.C.S. Rainbow pointing at it. It was later commented to Prime Minister Laurier that "By strange irony, this nucleus of the Canadian Navy was first used to prevent British subjects from landing on British soil."

Seventy-five years later this reprehensible incident was officially recognized and commemorated by all levels of the Government. Proclamations were declared and then in 1990 a plaque was erected at Portal park which overlooks Burrard Inlet. The plaque reads :

'On May 23, 1914, 376 British Subjects (12 Hindus, 24

Muslims and 340 Sikhs) of Indian origin arrived in Vancouver Harbour aboard the Komagata Maru, seeking to enter Canada. 353 of the passengers were denied entry and forced to depart on July 23, 1914.' This plaque commemorates the 75th anniversary of this unfortunate incident of racial discrimination and reminds Canadians of our commitment to open society in which mutual respect and understanding are honoured, differences are respected, and traditions are cherished.

BHAI MEWA SINGH

Over a number of years an immigration officer William Hopkinson spied on the Sikh community. He used unscrupulous and corrupt means to divide the Sikh community. Three months after the *Komagata Maru* incident sailed away on October 21, 1914, Mewa Singh shot Hopkinson in the Vancouver courthouse. He was sentenced to be hanged. The last statement of this Canadian Sikh martyr exemplifies his cause :

"My religion does not teach me to bear enmity with anybody, no matter what class, creed or order he belongs to, nor had I any enmity with Hopkinson. I heard that he was oppressing my poor people very much... on finding this to be a fact, I being a staunch Sikh, could no longer bear to see the wrong done both to my innocent countrymen and the Dominion of Canada. This is what led me to take Hopkinson's life and sacrifice my own life... And I, performing the duty of a true Sikh and remembering the name of God, will proceed towards the scaffold with the same amount of pleasure as a hungry babe goes towards his mother. I am sure God will take me into his blissful arms..."

Mewa Singh was hanged on the cold drizzling morning of January 11, 1915. Hundreds of Sikhs gathered outside the prison at New Westminister, and his body was taken in a procession and cremated with great honour and respect bestowed to a great martyr. Sikhs in Canada still remember this noble Sikh by having annual Mewa Singh Martyr Day.

EDUCATION (SIKH RELIGION AND PUNJABI LANGUAGE)

Sikhs in Canada have found it a challenge to have their future

generations preserve their cultural, linguistic and religious heritage. Sant (Professor) Teja Singh, an educated Sikh scholar who was studying at Harvard university was called by the Sikhs of Vancouver in 1908. His teachings brought many Sikhs to observe the Sikh principles. Many other societies and individuals, other than the Gurdwaras have over the years held Sikh conferences, workshops, camps to propagate the religion. In addition, the Sikh Chair was established at the University of British Columbia in 1983. Khalsa School, a full time private school was established in Vancouver in 1986. This school teaches the provincial prescribed curriculum but also teaches religious studies and Punjabi language classes. In September 1996, British Columbia schools will be offering Punjabi language in its regular curriculum from grades five to twelve. These courses will be offered in any community or school which has an interested student population wanting to learn the language.

DESCRETION OF GOLDEN TEMPLE (JUNE 1984)

June 3, 1984 was the day Operation Bluestar military attack on the Golden Temple (Sri Darbar Sahib), in Amritsar, India occurred. The attack on Sri Akal Takhat, the highest seat of authority for the Sikhs had a blazing effect on the Sikhs of the world including Canada. A protest denouncing this massacre was held in downtown Vancouver near the Indian High Commission office on June 24, 1984. The military attack followed by the carnage against innocent Sikhs across India in November that year have been the catalyst for a grassroots call for a separate Sikh nation "Khalistan." A number of Sikhs in Canada have become baptised to express their self-determination and fight for injustices in Canada and around the world.

ENTREPRENEURS AND BUSINESSES

Sant (Professor) Teja Singh established the Guru Nanak Mining and Trust Company to organize the economic welfare of the Sikh community in 1909. A large piece of land was purchased in West Vancouver under the name of the trust, but was resold in difficult times. Over the years there have been many business

entrepreneurs. Mayo Singh established his own Mayo Lumber Company in Paldi in 1918. Other Sikhs have established businesses in transportation, forestry, farming, technologies, etc. Vancouver and Surrey have established their own Punjabi markets, these markets serve the Sikh community as a mini shopping plaza. In July 1993, Vancouver Punjabi Market at Main and 49th Street were officially recognized with bilingual signs in English and Punjabi. Over 75 million dollars is annually generated in the market. Khalsa Credit Union was registered on February 19, 1986 as a religious bond financial institution to provide financial services to the Sikh Community. Today there are four branches with assets of over fifty million dollars.

POLITICS

Though the Sikhs in Canada thought that they were allowed to vote, this was soon changed in 1907, when the government passed a bill disfranchising all natives of India not born of Anglo-Saxon parents. Hence, Sikhs could not vote, run for public office, serve on juries, or vote for school trustees. Sikhs did not get the full right to vote until 1947. Slowly the Sikhs have evolved with their role in the Canadian political process. They have been actively participating at the municipal, provincial and federal levels. On March 10, 1988 the Canadian Parliament devoted a whole day to debate the issue of the Sikh's rights and the issue of Khalistan. Three Sikhs were elected to the British Columbia legislature in 1991. Manmohan (Moe) Sihota and Ujjal Dosanjh have held various cabinet posts, and the other M.L.A. is Harbhajan (Harry) Lalli. In 1993 Gurbax Singh Mahil and Harbans (Herb) Dhaliwal were elected to the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa.

DISCRIMINATION

Racism and injustices have been a fact for the Sikhs since their arrival almost a century ago. Strong Anti-Asiatic feelings existed in 1907 to keep Canada "a white man's country." Over the years there have been numerous incidents of overt racism and discrimination. There are two events that deserve special mention.

The first one is the struggle to have a baptized Sikh serve in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (R.C.M.P.). On March 15, 1990 the solicitor General of Canada announced that the RCMP dress code would be amended to have a turbaned Sikh join the force. Constable Baltej Singh Dhillon had the honour of becoming the first baptized Sikh to join the RCMP. There were a number of legal recourses taken to ban the turban from the RCMP, eventually this whole affair was put to a halt in June 1995 when the Federal Court of Appeal upheld the RCMP policy on their new dress code.

Another regretful incident occurred on November 11, 1993, when five Sikh veterans were invited to participate in a Remembrance Day parade, but were denied entry to the Royal Canadian Legion in Newton, B.C. because of the rule banning all forms of headgear. The reason the legion gave for this rule was to show respect for the dead and the Queen. Ironically, during the commonwealth Games in Victoria in 1994, the Queen met these decorated Sikh war veterans. This chapter of discrimination is still open as the National Legion upheld the "no headgear" rule across the country in May 1994.

On a brighter note in 1982 Honorable Wally Oppal was appointed a Supreme Court judge. In 1992 Justice Wally Oppal was appointed commissioner of the Royal Inquiry into Policing in B.C.

CONCLUSION

Today we are a strong, proud, visible and a viable Sikh community due to the hard work and determination of our pioneers. Though Canada has become more tolerant and accepting over the last century, some of us still face prejudice and hostility due to ignorance. Let us exercise the rights we have gained, the right to become Canadian citizens, the right to vote and elect Sikh M.P.'s, the right to learn Punjabi within the public school system, or the right to serve Canada in its armed, police or security forces wearing a turban. To attain these rights our pioneers had to pay a high price; it is now our responsibility as Sikhs to honour their

sacrifices. Practice your religion sincerely, this will be a binding force for you, your character and also your family. Seek the opportunities and see the future generations prosper to the next millennium.

(B) Remembering 100 years with 100 highlights

- 1897 Sikh Lancers and Infantry Regiment visited Vancouver after celebrating Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in London, England.
- 1899 Arrival of some Sikhs in Vancouver and Victoria from Hong Kong.
- 1904 The arrival of the first wave of Sikh immigrants. The census listed 258 Sikhs.
- 1904 *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji* was first brought to Canada by Bhai Arjan Singh. The scriptures were located at a house in Port Moody.
- 1905 For the next three years, 5000 Sikhs came to Canada.
- 1906 A house was rented in Vancouver to start a Gurdwara. A resolution was adopted on July 22 to start the establishment of Khalsa Diwan Society.
- 1907 Sikhs were denied the right to vote when the government of B.C. passed a bill to disfranchise all natives of India not born of Anglo-Saxon parents.
- 1907 Foundation stone of the Gurdwara for Khalsa Diwan Society was laid at 1866 West Second Avenue, Vancouver.
- 1907 A contingent of 901 Sikhs arrived on the Canadian Pacific steamer *Monteagle* in Vancouver on September 12.
- 1907 Race riots were held in Vancouver in which the Orientals and the Sikhs were targeted.
- 1908 On January 8, Order-in-Council designed to stop all immigration from India with the "continuous journey" clause and "possession of \$200" was passed.
- 1908 January 19, the first *Sikh parade (Nagar Kirtan)* took place

- to celebrate the opening of the Gurdwara on Second Avenue in Vancouver. The first Granthi was Bhai Balwant Singh. The first president was Bhai Sewa Singh.
- 1908 Scheme to deport all the Sikhs from Canada to British Honduras (Belize).
- 1908 Arrival of Sant (Professor) Teja Singh in Vancouver on October 17.
- 1908 First *Amrit ceremony* in Canada took place in Vancouver.
- 1909 On February 13, the congregation at the Gurdwara rejected the British Honduras proposal.
- 1909 Establishment of Guru Nanak Mining and Trust company, and plans to buy 440 acres of land in West Vancouver.
- 1909 Khalsa Diwan Society was registered on March 13.
- 1911 The census for that year listed 2342 Sikhs, less than half of that in 1908. *Only three were women.*
- 1912 Gurdwaras were built in Victoria, Fraser Mills, and Abbotsford.
- 1912 Hardial Singh Atwal was the first Sikh born in Canada on August 28.
- 1913 Establishment of *The Ghadar Party* in North America. The "Ghadar" newspaper was published the same year.
- 1914 April 4, the *Komagata Maru (Guru Nanak Jahaz)* departed Hong Kong for Vancouver to challenge the "continuous journey" clause.
- 1914 May 23, arrival of the *Komagata Maru* with 376 passengers, mostly Sikhs, under the leadership of Bhai Gurdit Singh in Vancouver.
- 1914 July 23, the *Komagata Maru* was escorted out of Vancouver under the guard of the Canadian Navy.
- 1914 Bhai Mewa Singh shot William Hopkinson at the Vancouver Courthouse on October 21, to stop the injustices done to the Sikh community.
- 1915 Bhai Mewa Singh was hanged on January 11 in New Westminster. He was given a ceremonial funeral and proclaimed as a Canadian Sikh Martyr.
- 1915 Khalsa Diwan Society was incorporated under the B.C.

- Societies Act on February 23.
- 1918 Sikh population in British Columbia dropped to as low as 700.
- 1918 Mayo Lumber Company built a Sikh temple near Duncan, B.C. at Paldi. This town was named after the village in India.
- 1919 Immigration restrictions on bringing wives and children under eighteen years old from India were lifted.
- 1920 Sikh women and children started arriving from India.
- 1924 On July 13, the Sikh community sent a Jatha (a group of 10 Sikh martyrs) to protest the interference of Gurdwara management by the British Government in India.
- 1925 Khalsa Diwan Society had autonomous branches at Vancouver, Abbotsford, New Westminster, Golden, Duncan, Coombs and Ocean Falls.
- 1925 January 2, the Sikh community sent a Jatha (a group of 39 Sikh martyrs) for the Jaito Morcha.
- 1929 Khalsa Diwan Society invited Charles Andrew, a friend of Mahatma Gandhi and Sir Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel laureate, to see first hand the unfair treatment of the Sikhs.
- 1933 Vancouver Sikhs formed the India Grass Hockey Club. Annual sports in memory of Babar Akali Martyrs were organized.
- 1935 September 7, the opening of the Hillcrest Sikh Temple (4 miles from Duncan).
A parade was held to celebrate the opening.
- 1943 Organized labour helped the Sikhs with the "fair pay to the Sikhs" campaign.
- 1944 Survey of the Sikhs in Canada showed that there were 1756; 98% of them lived in British Columbia.
- 1947 Sikhs were granted franchise to vote and become Canadian citizens.
- 1949 Prime minister Nehru visited the Vancouver Sikh temple with his daughter Indira Gandhi.
- 1950 East Indian Canadian Welfare Association was formed.
- 1950 Narjan Grewall was the first Sikh elected to a city council

- in Mission, B C.
- 1951 There were 2148 Sikhs in Canada.
- 1952 Akali Singh Sikh Temple was formed after the conflict of religious practices.
- 1957 Quotas from India increased to 300 per year.
- 1962 Quota system was dropped in favour of non-discriminatory immigration laws.
- 1965 First Gurdwara in the province of Ontario.
- 1967 New immigration regulation based on point system was introduced.
- 1969 March 30, foundation stone for the Khalsa Diwan Society Gurdwara at 8000 Ross Street was laid.
- 1969 Khalsa Diwan Society celebrated the quincentenary birthday of Guru Nanak Dev Ji at its new Gurdwara at 8000 Ross Street on November 23.
- 1970 April 25, Khalsa Diwan Society officially opened its new Gurdwara at 8000 Ross Street, following a Nagar Kirtan from 1866 Second Avenue.
- 1970 Commencement of Ladies Sat-Sang and Saturday evening Kirtan Diwan at Khalsa Diwan Society.
- 1970 Punjabi classes started at the Gurdwara at 8000 Ross Street in July.
- 1972 Punjabi classes started in the evening at David Thompson Secondary School in September.
- 1974 Celebration of centenary of the Singh Sabha Movement, with a tour of Sikh dignitaries around British Columbia.
- 1974 The tradition to enter a Sikh temple with a head covering (which had been neglected for a few years) was revived by a special resolution.
- 1975 "Sikh Samachar" a newspaper, was published by the B.C. Sikh societies.
- 1975 Commemoration of the Tercentenary of Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur ji.
- 1975 First Ragi Jatha (Bhai Bakhshish Singh Ji) that came from Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (S.G.P.C.)
- 1978 The executive committee of the Khalsa Diwan Society,

- Vancouver was elected for the first time by a ballot voting system.
- 1979 The 500th birthday of Guru Amar Das Ji. Since that year, an annual Vaisakhi Parade (Nagar Kirtan) is held in Vancouver.
- 1979 October 2, Khalsa Diwan Society purchased an adjoining building named "Guru Amar Das Niwas." This building has a school, daycare, museum, Gurdwara and guestrooms.
- 1980 Federation of Sikh Societies of Canada was the first Sikh organization registered nationally.
- 1980 January 6, *broadcast started of the Sikh religious program "Gurmat Sandesh."*
- 1982 Khalsa Diwan Society purchased 28 acres in Richmond, B.C. to build a sports complex.
- 1982 Two Jathas from Canada went to India to participate in the "Dharam Yudh Morcha."
- 1982 Honorable Wally Oppal was appointed a Supreme Court Judge. He later conducted the Royal Inquiry to Policing in British Columbia.
- 1983 *The Sikh Chair was established at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.*
- 1984 *A Sikh Chair was established at the University of Toronto in Toronto.*
- 1984 June 3, Operation Bluestar military attack on the Golden Temple (Sri Darbar Sahib), in Amritsar, India occurred. Thousands of innocent Sikhs were killed.
- 1984 A protest denouncing the Golden Temple massacre was attended by 15,000 Sikhs in downtown Vancouver near the Indian High Commission office on June 10.
- 1986 Metro Toronto Police permitted *Sikhs to wear their turbans* while on duty with the force.
- 1986 *Khalsa School, a full time private school* was established in Vancouver. This school teaches the provincial prescribed curriculum, and also teaches Sikh religion and Punjabi language classes.
- 1986 Khalsa Credit Union was registered on February 19, to

- provide financial services to the Sikh Community. Today there are four branches with assets of over ninety million dollars.
- 1986 *First Sikh elected to any provincial legislature in Canada* was Manmohan (Moe) Sahota from Esquimalt, British Columbia.
- 1987 A steamer named Amelie with 174 refugees, mostly Sikhs landed in Nova Scotia.
- 1987 Protest by 3000 Sikhs against Human Rights Violation during Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit at the Commonwealth Prime Minister's Conference in Vancouver on October 12.
- 1988 February 25, Canadian Prime Minister Joe Clark asked premiers to boycott activities of three Sikh organizations.
- 1988 March 10, the Canadian Parliament devoted a whole day to debate the issue of the Sikh's rights and the issue of Khalistan.
- 1988 Dr. Gulzar Singh Cheema was elected as an M.L.A. to the Manitoba legislature.
- 1989 July 23 marked the 75th anniversary of the *Komagata Maru* Incident. Sikh societies across Canada commemorated this reprehensible incident.
- 1990 A plaque commemorating the *Komagata Maru* Incident was unveiled at Portal Park in Vancouver on May 23 jointly by the municipal, provincial and federal Governments.
- 1990 March 15, the solicitor General of Canada announced that the *RCMP dress code would be amended to have a turbaned Sikh join the force.* Constable Baltej Singh Dhillon had the honour of becoming the first baptized Sikh to join the RCMP.
- 1991 *Three Sikhs were elected to the British Columbia legislature.* Manmohan (Moe) Sihota and Ujjal Dosanjh have held various cabinet posts and the other M.L.A. is Harbhajan (Harry) Lalli.
- 1992 Khalsa school opened its new facility with a Gurdwara in Surrey, B.C.

- 1992 Formation of the Ontario Gurdwara Management Board.
- 1993 Gurbax Singh Mahli and Harbans (Herb) Dhaliwal were the first Sikhs elected to the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa.
- 1993 In July, Vancouver Punjabi Market at Main and 49th Street was officially recognized with bilingual signs in English and Punjabi.
- 1993 A 24 hour radio program featuring Sikh religion and Gurbani Kirtan started to transmit from Vancouver. It broadcasts across Canada and America VIA satellite.
- 1993 Five Sikh veterans were invited to participate in a Remembrance Day parada on November 11, but were denied entry to the Royal Canadian Legion in Newton B.C.
- 1994 Akhand Path and Vaisakhi Day celebrations were held at the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa.
- 1994 The foundation stone for the Sikh Resource Center was laid by the Akal Takhat Jathedar on July 24.
- 1994 Senior Center for the Sikhs was opened on November 29, in Surrey, B.C.
- 1995 The B.C. Government officially recognized the Vaisakhi Parade and published a brochure.
- 1996 February 15, the Supreme Court of Canada reaffirmed a Sikh officers right to wear a turban.
- 1996 In September, British Columbia schools will be offering Punjabi language in its regular curriculum from grades five to twelve.
- 1996 There were over a hundred Gurdwaras across Canada. Fifty of them were in British Columbia.
- 1996 Projected opening of the Sikh Resource Center in Vancouver to celebrate the centennial of the Sikhs in Canada.

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Under this Trust every year Gurmat Examination of College Students is held throughout the country and for this purpose the country has been divided into 8 zones and in every zone prizes are given to the students standing 1st, 2nd & 3rd. Some consolation prizes are also given. For the last two years in collaboration with Jasmer Singh Harnam Kaur Memorial Trust, prizes are also given on All India Basis to 1st, 2nd & 3rd amounting to Rs. 500/-, 300/- and 200/- along with Mementoes. The examination is conducted by Guru Gobind Singh Study Circle, Ludhiana.

4. Giani Kartar Singh Memorial Trust & Giani Ditt Singh Memorial Trust :

Under these two Trusts Writer's & Speaker's Workshops are held at different places. These Workshops are usually organised by Guru Gobind Singh Study Circle, Ludhiana.

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After the death of S. Narain Singh a Trust in his memory was formed and under this Trust scholarships are given to the students of schools.