

Harinder Jit Sunga's Reflections at Ninety (1/2)

Harinder Jit Kaur Sunga's Reflections at Ninety September 16, 2021

I am Harinder Jit Kaur Sunga and today is my 90th birthday. I am the last surviving member of the immediate family of Katar Kaur (my mother) and Atara Singh Rai (my father). In September 1941, my mother gave birth to me and my twin brother. My elder brother, Gian, died in 2002 at the age of 55. My twin brother, Harinder Singh, passed away in 2004, in Delta, British Columbia, from cancer, leaving behind his wife and four children. He was an athlete listed to form part of the Canadian field hockey team for the Japan Olympics in 1969, but was pulled out at the last minute. His daughter Pamela Rai won a medal in swimming at the Los Angeles 1984 Olympics a few months after the death of her father.

My paternal grandfather, Dewa Singh, migrated from India to Yuba City, California. Atara Singh married my mother Katar Kaur from Bathinda in 1932, and left India for Canada while Katar Kaur was pregnant with her first child, Gian. Atara Singh joined her father Dewa Singh in Yuba City in 1933 when he was nineteen years of age. My father had been admitted to an American university and had arrived in the United States on a student visa. Sometime in 1934, his father Dewa Singh passed away. Atara Singh found herself alone in a new land. Fortunately, he had some contacts in Vancouver Island, so he crossed into Canada and found work in the lumber mills.

Back in India, Katar Kaur returned to her maternal village of Badijind while pregnant with her first son. She wrote to Atara Singh regularly about her hopes, fears and longings in poetic verses. Atara Singh kept these letters and eventually copied them in his own handwriting as the ink on fragile normal paper started to fade away.

Atara Singh returned to India in 1935 unexpectedly. Apparently he arrived in Badijind unannounced, in a three-piece Western suit and fancy boots. When Katar Kaur saw him and she cried inconsolably.

Atara Singh took her and their sons to settle in his village in Morenwal, and he stayed in India until 1934-35. During this period, Katar Kaur gave birth to me and my twin brother.

In the meantime, Katar Kaur worked hard to establish a new girl's school in Morenwal, with the support of a government grant. The school was a success. Katar Kaur encouraged disadvantaged girls to learn reading and craft skills like sewing and knitting at her house.

While continuing her education she discovered that she was ill from terminal cancer and subsequently passed away in January 1961.

Following my mother's death, my elder brother Gian, my twin brother Harinder Jit Singh and I were put in boarding schools. We eventually received news in 1946 that my father Atara Singh had been granted Canadian citizenship. He immediately applied for entry visas to Canada.

In August 1946, my two brothers and I arrived at my father's place in Vancouver. By then, Atara Singh had recently re-married. In August 1951, I was introduced to Premjit Singh Sunga, a graduate of UBC, who was working for the Canadian government in the Dominion Bureau of Statistics in Ottawa.

During Premjit's vacation in British Columbia we were introduced and three weeks later we were married. Premjit's father had migrated to Canada in 1906, and brought his wife and 8-year-old Premjit to Vancouver in 1929. Premjit and I settled in Ottawa.

I had my first child, Shaan, in 1952. Over the next 16 years, we had three more wonderful children, Paul, Loni and Seetal.

I completed graduate courses and worked part-time for the next twenty years. Premjit continued to do well in his career. He worked in a number of government departments, including Statistic Canada, Urban Affairs, Department of Finance, and most recently, at the Policy Council Office. He eventually returned to Statistics Canada where he conducted intensive research and published numerous articles in economics and national accounts.

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