

The Gur Sikh Gurdwara in Abbotsford is the oldest standing Sikh Gurdwara in North America.

Photo by: University of the Fraser Valley/South Asian Canadian Digital Archive

# Preserving a community's origin stories

A first-of-its-kind project is working to document the history of South Asian settlers in BC and the contributions they've made to their communities.

By **Joti Grewal** | May 5, 2022 | 5:00 am



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The origin stories of Abbotsford's historic Gur Sikh Gurdwara and BC's other South Asian places of worship aren't documented. Local scholars want to change that.

The idea to collect, preserve, and showcase the contributions of South Asians settlers had been on the minds of members of the University of the Fraser Valley's South Asian Studies Institute (SASI) for years.

But it was a daunting task. Where to begin? What material to include? How to present it?

Nothing of the sort had been done before.

*Story continues below.*

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It was just a matter of getting started, SASI's director, Dr. Satwinder Bains, said.

Earlier this month, SASI launched the [South Asian Canadian Legacy Project](#). It had been five years in the making. But Bains said it was just the beginning.

The project is made up of six presentations: [Haq and History travel exhibit](#); [Union Zindabad! BC Labour Movements](#); [South Asian Canadian Digital Archive](#); [Social History of South Asians in BC textbook](#); [Saffron Threads Learning Resources](#); and [Historical Sites](#).

Researchers first began visiting seven regions in the province, where they spent a considerable amount of time interviewing people in the

communities, said Bains. That work produced the first exhibit: Haq and History.

The other projects followed, including recognizing 15 sites of historical significance across the province. The Gur Sikh Gurdwara in Abbotsford is one of those sites.

The temple on South Fraser Way in Abbotsford was constructed between 1910 and 1912. In 2002 it was designated a national historic site by the federal government, and now recognized provincially through the project. It is known as the oldest existing Sikh Gurdwara in North America.



The Gur Sikh Gurdwara in Abbotsford is the oldest standing Sikh Gurdwara in North America.  University of the Fraser Valley/South Asian Canadian Digital Archive

Commemorating that site, as well as the others, is about more than preserving an old building.

“It’s for interest, it’s also for pride,” Bains said. “It’s for showing that we built this nation as well. And that we have roots, we have service, we have activism, we have cultural ties, we have generational history, that’s all important.”

The main floor of the Gur Sikh Gurdwara was transformed into a museum in 2011. Before that, staff and students at BC’s first Punjabi-language school (Dasmesh Punjabi School), located at the newer Gurdwara across the street, would frequent the historic site. Kids would take part in religious celebrations and enjoy langar (communal meal) on the building’s ground floor. The school later moved to a permanent campus in east Abbotsford, where it still operates today.

The Gur Sikh Gurdwara in Abbotsford may be the oldest standing Gurdwara in North America, but it wasn’t the first in the province. Oral history suggests the first Gurdwara was created in Golden, where the first Sikhs settled in BC, said Bains. Their research suggests it was constructed in 1897.

“No one has even written the history of the Gurdwaras, for example, or the mosques or the Hindu temples,” said Bains. “We know a little bit about how they came about, but the in-depth, kind of historical, chronological knowledge is missing.”

It's through preservation and acknowledgement of these historical sites that Bains hopes will help ignite more conversations about their significance in communities.

"They're living sites of history. We want people to visit them and know that something happened here."

Preserving that generational history is one of the many challenges. At the launch of the South Asian Canadian Legacy Project at Surrey City Hall last month, Bains celebrated her team and what they've accomplished. But her pride was accompanied with a sense of urgency—she said the project was already 50 years too late.

For many of the historical accounts, Bains and her team relied on oral history because the original storytellers had passed away.

"That was our biggest challenge," she said. "We had the second and third iterations of a story, which is fine, but you don't get that finesse. You don't get the depth. You don't get that emotion."

Now that the project is out in the world, Bains hopes it will help start conversations about recognizing and preserving South Asian heritage. But the process of reflection can be difficult for immigrant families.

"Unfortunately for immigrants, sometimes coming to a new country, you want to forget the past because it's either painful, traumatic or you feel it's an unnecessary burden you are carrying with you," she

said. "So to go in and do that digging and deep kind of engagement with the communities takes time. We don't expect to be flooded."

The histories published in the first public history book of South Asian settlers include the stories of 10 families. The stories are not just of Sikh, Punjabi-speaking settlers. The project's goal is to capture the histories of the more than 350,000 South Asians in BC.



Part of the legacy project was publishing the first public history book about South Asian settler. 📷 UFV

But the process of information gathering is complex. It's not just a matter of families coming forward with their stories and scanning their documents.

"We need to find archivists that have the languages, the Bengali, Tamil, Punjabi, Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu languages," Bains said. For one part of the

project, researchers called a Pakistani man who spoke Urdu and Farsi to decipher letters from the 1930s.

The challenges are many.

“But if you keep staying in the challenges, you’ll never get anything done,” Bains said. “This is still the beginning.”

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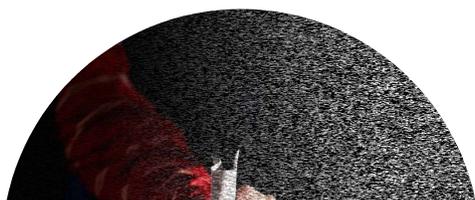


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