

Royal BC Museum and Archives  
in partnership with  
The Centre for Indo-Canadian Studies at the University of the Fraser Valley  
**Report of a Community Consultation for The Punjabi Legacy Initiative**  
Hosted by The Cowichan Valley Museum & Archives  
Duncan, BC, November 19, 2016

This was one of eight community consultations held throughout the province by the [Royal BC Museum and Archives](#) in partnership with the [Centre for Indo-Canadian Studies](#) (CICS) at the University of the Fraser Valley and the [Punjabi Intercultural History Advisory Committee](#). Consultations sought input from the Punjabi community, a pioneer group that has had a significant impact on the province's cultural, economic and social history.

The consultations were coordinated by the two partnering institutions and the local hosts, with guidance and support from the BC Punjabi Intercultural History Advisory Committee, and many committee facilitators and note-takers.

Each group was asked the same three questions, as the first step in creating a provincial Punjabi legacy project that preserves and shares community history.

On November 19, 2016, the [Cowichan Valley Museum & Archives](#) hosted a BC Punjabi Legacy Project consultation in Duncan, in the Cowichan Valley, where the Punjabi-Canadian communities have long established vibrant intercultural lives. The following is a summary of discussions:

1 – What significant stories/events best convey the Punjabi legacy in BC?

- The community of Golden.
- The Komagata Maru incident.
- Ghadar movement.
- Allies like J.E. Bird, who advocated for many South Asians in BC.
- Migration experiences on the Island, including narratives of employment, e.g., Mayo Singh moving from the Fraser Valley to the Cowichan Valley.
- Stories of racism and discrimination, including:
  - when neither Punjabis nor Japanese were accepted in Duncan,
  - Tek Manhas, the only Punjabi attending Lake Cowichan School during the early twentieth century,
  - Punjabi labourers derogatively referred to as Hindus, despite being mostly Sikh,
  - low wages, e.g., ten cents a day in the 1930s, so that it was difficult for Punjabi men to afford getting married in the late 1920s and early 1930s,
  - Punjabi men denied entry into barber shops, except for Japanese barbers, and denied entry into the movie theatre in Duncan,

- Punjabis denied the right to purchase homes in Oak Bay, the first person to do so being Sarjit Sodhi in the 1980s, after fighting City Council; before this, from the 1950s until the 1980s, Indian families were relegated to the poorest neighbourhoods in Victoria and in the Gorge area,
- interactions and intersections between Punjabis and First Nations were also mentioned, especially in terms of intense racism in Port Alberni and Duncan,
- “Keep Canada White” slogans infiltrated the labour force, where employers were discouraged from hiring Punjabis and
- promotions and professional development opportunities were not available to pioneering Punjabi families.
- Participants described forces against racism, including the farm workers movement and other BC organizations working to combat racism, e.g., East Indians Welfare Association formed by Dr. D.L. Pandia.
- The unique community of Paldi was referred to as a cultural mosaic, without racism, where people from the Japanese community lived alongside Punjabi, First Nations, and people of European descent, among others. One participant recalled as a child seeing a bus arrive in Paldi in the 1940s, as their Japanese friends and neighbours were sent off to the camps, and how some families returned to Paldi at the end of the war because they knew that they would be welcomed there. Others recalled the Christian Sunday school and the Japanese Sunday school being in the basement of the gurdwara (Sikh place of worship).
- The story of Punjabi workers at Tod Inlet dates back to early days.
- Work experience in the sawmills, including:
  - men living in bunkhouses to raise enough money to send back home to their families,
  - negative health effects of this work, often forcing early retirement with little recompense and
  - impacts of mills the shutting down, a progressive downturn beginning with Paldi and ending with Youbou, and leading to the breakup of local communities, with people moving to the Lower Mainland and Victoria (only three Punjabi families now reside at Lake Cowichan).
- Stories of adapting:
  - many had their own cookhouses and grew their own vegetables because in the early 1970s the only known Indian grocery store was in Vancouver; stores like Cheap Foods in Victoria gradually began stocking Indian foods and
  - cremations in the area took place in a mill beside a creek until, in 1963, one of the earliest crematoriums in BC was established on Lake Cowichan Road.
- Nostalgic stories from the 1970s:
  - driving from the Cowichan Valley to Victoria on Sundays to watch movies (the Cowichan experience was described as diverse) and
  - young Punjabi men going as a group to the grocery store, where one man would give the others money to purchase food.

- Contributions to the war effort: Indian Army soldiers served in both wars, through Canada to Europe; community participation in Remembrance Day follows Indian Army tradition; a participant mentioned someone's great uncle being buried in France during WWII.
- Women's stories, showing their struggles and resilience, including:
  - migration experiences, e.g., being told to leave all their jewellery behind in India,
  - being pressured to wear western clothes to "keep under the radar" and
  - forming sewing circles where they would make multiple dresses from a made-up pattern, which often had wide sleeves and was very loose on top.
- The significance of sport, kabaddi being a popular sport in the local community.
- Childhood memories, like one shared by a participant when they were often forced to go to the gurdwara on Wednesday nights, but one night met an inspirational speaker whose messages changed that person's life.
- Prominent entrepreneurs like Kapoor Singh Sidoo and Doman of Doman Industries.

## 2 – What artifacts/information are important to preserve for today and for future generations?

- Heritage items and information:
  - a car in the 1940s that Mayo Singh donated to the then mayor of Duncan,
  - the site of Paldi itself, including the historic gurdwara and surrounding grounds,
  - the 115-year-old holy book kept in the Paldi gurdwara; letters from the gurdwara to Dr. Pandia in 1938,
  - original clothing, including dresses and skirts in the 1970s, shawls, long blankets handed out in the gurdwaras so Punjabi women wearing dresses could cover their legs,
  - photos, passage documents, passports, family charts/trees, lumber company records, income tax records, records of employment, property ownership documents,
  - compasses, watches that were worn at work, military medals, metal trunks, musical instruments,
  - Doman's transport trucks,
  - recipes, cooking utensils, grills, rolling pin,
  - bedding, patchwork, packaging (cloth, stitched, sealed with wax) and
  - streets named for Punjabi pioneers, e.g., Johal Road.
- Intangible heritage, such as the need for language retention: participants felt there was a need for language revitalization through oral histories and intergenerational conversation.

## 3 – How might we create a legacy project to make Punjabi history in BC available to all British Columbians?

- Participants expressed an overall need to preserve the stories of the older generations, and bring those stories forward.

- School curriculum materials with Punjabi, Japanese and Chinese stories were suggested. The materials could be complemented with audio/visual materials, such as three-to-four-minute YouTube video vignettes of family stories in both Punjabi and English.
- Teacher training or professional development could include a focus on the Punjabi-Canadian pioneering experience and history.
- A book or publication highlighting the diverse Punjabi pioneering experience could be developed, and could also be used to support curriculum design changes.
- Documentaries/history minutes could be produced bilingually to be accessible to those inside and outside the Punjabi community.
- Others suggested that museums need to engage and take an active role in including Punjabi-Canadian stories and narratives, which have not yet been told.
- Journal writing was discussed.
- Suggestions related to the tourist industry included self-guided walking tours about various historical sites, as well as making audio tours available online.
- Including the Punjabi migration experience in the Canadian citizenship test or materials was also mentioned.
- Some participants emphasized the differences between Island versus Mainland stories, suggesting that Vancouver Island community and history is older than that on the mainland (although Lower Mainland is now ascendant).
- Cultural suggestions included videoing performances of interactive theatre, dance or music. Videos could be copied onto DVDs, which could be shown in schools.
- Funding awarded for legacy projects should be given to Punjabi communities to use locally.