

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 Surrey Museum
Surrey, BC, September 18, 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 September 18, 2016, [the Surrey Museum](#) hosted a BC Punjabi Legacy Project consultation at the Newton Seniors Centre in Surrey, where the Punjabi-Canadian communities have established vibrant intercultural lives. The following is a summary of discussions:

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

- Dr. Durai Lal Pandia's long history helping South Asians in BC gain the right to vote, and many other legal battles related to immigration policies, as told by his daughter Aruna Pandia.
- Prominent Punjabi families including Mayo Singh (founder of Paldi), Prem Singh Vinning (elected to office in 1985), Kanwal Neel (hosted the first children's math television show), Arjun Singh (in 1904 he was the first person to bring the Guru Granth Sahib Ji to BC), Jazzy Bains (singer recently inaugurated into the BC Entertainment Hall of Fame Starwalk on Granville St.) and the late Col. Pritam Singh Jauhal (denied entry into the Newton legion in Surrey in 1993).
- Key stories included:
 - gurdwaras (Sikh places of worship) across British Columbia (for example, the 1981 Houston, BC, gurdwara, about which little is known),
 - unity of the early community under the Khalsa Diwan Society,
 - migration, the journey on ships, return,
 - mill workers, farming/agriculture, fishing all over BC,
 - chain migration (where families in Canada sponsor family members from India, and that family arrives in Canada and subsequently sponsors their family members, and so on),

- overcoming racial discrimination and surviving, e.g., not being able to wear traditional Punjabi clothing, or not hired because of the turban or based on race,
- stories of gender, power and privilege,
- the Komagata Maru incident,
- small BC communities with Punjabi populations (Kelowna, North Okanagan, Kamloops, which has three streets named after Punjabi families),
- Expo 1986, an important memory of intercultural experience and
- stories of Punjabi soldiers and their contributions to the world wars.
- Participants shared personal experiences, including:
 - building the first gurdwara in Prince George,
 - racism and success in Kamloops,
 - difficulty in finding employment,
 - playing sporting games, such as cricket,
 - perceptions of the Punjabi diaspora in 1970s and the differences from earlier immigration and newer immigration and
 - the rallying spirit of the Punjabis, e.g., in Port Coquitlam, where the first Hindu-Punjabi stood to be an MLA, and despite many people of European descent being opposed to it, the Punjabi community rallied support and voted for him, resulting in his election win.
- Some shared a specific interest in the reasoning behind immigration (e.g., the army), as well as the village connections to the Punjab.
- Changing attitudes and perceptions over time about Punjabis, when in the 1970s Punjabis were viewed as trustworthy, reliable, etc., and now they are seen with suspicion and contempt.
- Some shared unique stories such as the earliest Punjabi women in BC who would wear skirts or dresses to the gurdwaras, and so the gurdwaras would often carry blankets for the women to cover their legs.
- Others spoke about the general spirit of the small BC communities or the intra-provincial movements of Punjabi migrants, where they forged intimate support networks such as for cooking or food procurement. Every community member had a role in these small community settings; for example, one participant spoke about her mother's role, to read airmail letters for people.
- Many of these Punjabi communities across BC cooked all their traditional food at home from scratch with whatever ingredients were available. Because Punjabi markets or Punjabi food stores were scarce, one group of Punjabis would travel from northern BC and other small communities to Main Street in Vancouver to purchase culturally specific foods.
- Many participants shared stories of small communities, and emphasized that despite the perception of racism in the smaller communities, they didn't recall racism but rather remembered all members of these communities getting along, for instance:

- Kitimat in 1969, when the only known five Indian families helped new migrants to cope with everyday stresses,
- families coming together for annual picnics and
- seasonal trips to Abbotsford in the summer where families would work in related industries.
- Recent success stories of Punjabis in BC include:
 - some of the first, and the most successful, builders; buildings opened for business and the community for Syrian refugees and
 - the first South Asian doctors, engineers, professors, or the first bhangra dance troupes, e.g., at Williams Lake.
- An anecdote from the 1970s, of a turbaned Sikh man being able to walk into a bank and be approved for a loan based on the honour and respectability attached to his wearing the turban.
- The significant role of women behind all these successes.
- Punjabi communities today have deep connections and interest in the stories and politics of Punjab.
- Some people's desire to identify caste — such issues did not seem prevalent in the early pioneering periods.

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

- Participants shared a vast range and breadth of materials, artifacts and connected stories, such as a digital museum already stored at Simon Fraser University, and others, including:
 - clothing: ethnic/cultural cloth and materials (sewn garments); clothes reflecting the shift from women wearing dresses (e.g., white wedding dresses) in the 1960s to more traditional clothing again in the '70s and onwards; Punjabi men and their three-piece suits; the turban, and handkerchiefs used as head coverings,
 - photos: of families, the community of Paldi, Houston, Khalsa school youth camp, intercultural activities with First Nations people,
 - books, airmail letters, records of personal histories,
 - flight tickets, paychecks and paystubs, sponsorship letters, T4s, multiple passports over generations,
 - luggage, military uniforms and trophies,
 - khesi/rugs, hand-made tools and implements, e.g., masala box,
 - hospital records (Duncan),
 - immigration laws and connecting documents,
 - Punjabi newspapers preserved, and community newspapers such as Black Press newspapers, *The Williams Lake Tribune*, *Houston Today*,
 - foodstuffs, e.g., mangoes from Mexico, introduced into major grocery stores (Chinese stores had some),
 - theatre and language, songs, bhangra items,

- hockey, as immersed in Punjabi culture and
- social media and video content, e.g., YouTube videos.

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

- Many participants wished to see an overall theme highlighting community values and creating a sense of pride, as opposed to individual narratives, names and specifics.
- Some wished to see the use of multiple languages, which would appeal to a range of demographics and ages.
- Other suggestions included:
 - exhibits, e.g., showing how the first people lived in bunkhouses,
 - travelling exhibits across BC and
 - multilingual (Punjabi/Hindi) physical materials, such as magazines.
- Some noted the importance of putting peoples' stories in the context of world events, to be reflected in parallel timelines; resources could be provided for inter-generational interviews, so young children could ask their elders stories and questions.
- Many discussed connecting with BC teachers and the curriculum, including the need to create resource packages for teachers. Some advocated for locating champions in every BC school district in order to include workshops for teachers, and narratives in individual schools through school assemblies and through curriculum design.
- A suggestion was made to compose children's literature in the Punjabi voice.