

The Sikh Global Village - Argentina

It is well known that at the end of 19th and in the early 20th century, Sikhs started looking outward, mainly towards South East Asia, China (including Hong Kong) and even Australasia, followed soon by North America. However, it is less known that at the same time, they also started to migrate to Argentina. Be it because besides USA and Canada, it was the only other prosperous country in the Americas, or because although not English-speaking, Argentina had British influence, especially in the industry, commerce and business. Whatever the reason, it was a fascinating journey and Argentina remains one of the few countries in the world (apart from California and Canada), where out of the total number of Indian immigrants, Sikhs formed an overwhelming majority. Trust a Sikh to choose the farthest possible country from Punjab to emigrate to!

In his book “Unfole Warke”, written in Punjabi, the famous Baba Bhagat Singh Bilka writes that Sikhs came to Argentina in 1910-11 and started working in the sugar mills and railway workshops of Buenos Aires and Rosario up North. The economic conditions, though poorer than North America, were better than other Latin American countries and employment was available. So no wonder that by 1925, Argentina became the last destination for many Punjabis.

Sikhs left India in the hope of settling in USA via Calcutta, Burma, Malaya, Indo-China, Japan, Panama but none of the countries allowed them to disembark and hence some had to land in Chile and move on to Argentina via Bolivia. Another group traveled via Bombay, France, Cuba, Mexico, Panama and Brazil to reach Argentina. One has to look at the World Atlas to realize the magnitude of the distances they covered by ship, foot, train or bus under totally alien conditions. It was no less an effort than that of Columbus!

In and around 1930, several senior members of the global Ghadar movement visited Argentina in places such as Rosario, Jujey, Tucuman, Cordoba and Salta indicating widespread presence of Sikhs in Central and North Argentina. Some of these aficionados came to Argentina from Brazil. During the world gathering of Ghadarites in Moscow, out of a total of 71 delegates, about 20% were from Argentina. To place in context, it has to be noted that delegates from several countries particularly from the British Commonwealth countries were denied passage to Moscow. Sikhs became substantially assimilated into local society and sometimes the third and second generations would not even call themselves Sikhs. Turbaned Sikhs are a rarity. Some of the first generation immigrants got married locally and almost all of them have done so in the second and third generation. New immigrants though are more ambivalent in this respect. However, an emotional bond with their heritage still exists, judging by the Gurdwara commissioned in the early nineties in Rosario de la Frontera.

The Country

Despite being the second largest country in South America and the eighth largest in the world, Argentina has always fallen short of being able to establish itself as the major power, which its size and range of industries suggest. Corrupt military Governments and bad economic management has been the problem. Another factor is probably the pattern of immigration in earlier years, as the land was owned by only a small section of the population in the form of huge estates, which encouraged vested interests. The economic crisis earlier in this century forced

devaluation of the Argentinean currency to a third of its earlier parity with US Dollar. Argentina has almost exclusively European population (contrast with Bolivia and Brazil). The country has good farmland, grazing areas, high mountains to the North and West and the southern-most city of the world. Climate is moderate except on the mountains and in the deep South where winters can be severe. Along with other South American countries except for Brazil, Argentina is Spanish speaking. The Spaniards discovered it in 1516, but the local Indians killed the expedition leader. La Plata was really settled successfully only in 1580. Argentina declared independence from Spain in 1816. The country boasts of such charismatic leaders as San Martin, who ranks high as liberator of Spanish America. The country also had such romantic rulers as Peron and Eva Duarte later Eva Peron of "Don't Cry for me Argentina" Broadway musical fame.

The First Immigrants

No definitive information is available but the national census of 1895 shows the presence of six Indo-English persons as per Lia Rodriguez De La Vega, a Buenos Aires Researcher. A house built in village Lagheri, dating back to 1911 by Gunwant Singh on his visit back home would indicate 19th century immigration. According to Baldev(Daniel) Singh of village Bopa Rai Khurd, who lived in Argentina for over two decades, the British who were setting up sugar mills were facing difficulties because of "Veerappan" type brigands and sought the help of Sikhs to provide security for their operations.

There are some striking photos of these turbaned Sikhs in, for example, the Esperenza Sugar Mill. In another version, it is told that the Sikhs were brought in by the British to help build the railroad system. Story of Muncha Singh is mentioned as a case study. Still another version is of the Sikhs wanting to emigrate to USA, were dumped by the shipping lines on the northern shores of South American continent from where they wended their way through Brazil or through Peru/ Bolivia to Argentina. Another channel of emigration was to begin in Cuba and in time onwards via Panama Canal onto the Pacific coast of South America. When the Canal construction got completed in 1914, the Sikh workers were apprehensive of being sent back to India. Looking for new pastures to inhabit, they literally walked their way to Argentina. What an effort!

But why Argentina? There were problems in settling in Canada and USA in the 1910-20 period because of Asian Exclusion policy of USA and Whites only policy of Canada. Many immigrants left for India post severe riots against them (most notorious being in Bellingham, Washington State) both in Canada and USA. The Kamagata Maru incident in Vancouver was another major blow. Immigration Authorities tightened the entry norms and many potential immigrants were not granted permission to land. It would seem Argentina Government was not as hostile as other white dominated countries but distance and lack of regular sailings from India was a deterrent. Language, even though most emigrants did not have command of English, was another disadvantage. Most follow up immigration was through family or friends or village mates. It is stated by several immigrants that Argentina was more attractive than other South American countries because of its climate being similar to Punjab, especially in the North West where most of the Sikhs ultimately settled. The quality of farm land was considered similar to Punjab. Even though good farming conditions may have been the initial attraction, many if not most immigrants are now into non-farming professions. But the lure of land is the biggest magnet for a "Jat" and seems to be the case for the early Sikh migrants.

The Passage to Tina

The earlier Sikhs heard of a country by the name of "Tina", possibly easy to pronounce than by its full name Argentina. This created sometimes-unintended problems. In his biography as an immigrant to Fiji, Tota Ram Sanadhya, Fiji Museum, 1991 (book courtesy Narendra Anuj of Australia) mentions in some detail the legal suit filed by some Sikhs in Fiji. The case of ship "Clansman" was well publicized as a confrontation between a group of Punjabis (Sikhs) and a European lawyer named Berkley.

In 1911 some Sikhs set off for Argentina but they wrongly came to Fiji thinking it was Argentina. Having realized their folly, they were determined to go on to Argentina. Berkley agreed to get "Clansman" fitted to take them on their cross Pacific journey. He wanted a minimum of fifty passengers. Forty six paid up the passage money (Pounds twenty five each) but the ship was not fit enough for the long voyage and Berkley wanted to wriggle out of the contract signed or thumb-impressed by the Sikhs. There are many turns and twists of the case including the death of Berkley in June 1912.

The Sikhs lost their case and were refunded only a quarter of their passage money by December 13, 1912 and the same day they left for Wellington, NZ on their way to Argentina. Prior to their departure the usual Colonial Office warning was given to them that according to the Secretary of State for India, there was little hope for employment in Argentina. One Mr. J. J. Davies escorted the Sikhs till Wellington. An interesting mention by Davies says that the Sikhs had Pounds 2,700 in gold before sailing for Buenos Aires. So this group of about 46 persons should have arrived in Argentina early 1913. In the earlier days, the route to Argentina was from Calcutta via Singapore. They had to spend several days and weeks in both these port cities before they could get their passages. This was true even for emigration to other countries. Gurdwaras in Calcutta and Singapore came in handy for free stay and meals. Some of these folks would find temporary jobs including newspaper vending etc. Most of the emigrants were in small groups of known people, which helped in bearing the hardships together. One can well imagine the hard times the emigrants must have had with limited funds, lack of language skills and no exposure to the problems of long sea voyage in difficult and in some cases possibly inhuman conditions. The voyages were long with seasickness and food problems for wheat eating, land locked Punjabis. Yes, there was a dream that they were chasing where the only thing certain was uncertainty. Bravo!

Early Problems and Settling Down

Just like the early immigrants to other countries, especially white dominated countries, initial problems were colossal. Language and totally alien culture were the main barriers. Lack of funds added to the misery and the immigrants had to seek any odd job that could be obtained. Those who came by boat headed North West from Buenos Aires towards Salta about 1500 kms away.

Those stragglers who reached Bolivia either from Chile or Brazil moved down to nearby Tucuman near the border. It may be conjectured that it was comparatively easy to get jobs in the far out Northwest, as these areas were not as attractive as big cities like Buenos Aires were for the local Argentineans. Living conditions up-country were easier and similar to Punjab. Sugar mills and railroad construction provided initial secure income source before the Sikhs started working on farms and slowly graduating to being owner farmers and Ranchers. Subsequently, trucking and

transport, as is the familiar pattern for Sikhs moving out from Punjab, became the immigrants' new diversification. This was followed by owning shops and Super Markets in due course of time. As the early immigrants settled down, communications were established seeking more compatriots to join from the family or village to which they belonged. For many, the local booze and the pub was a welcome relief from solitude. Initially all immigrants were single. Only very few of them could get their wives to join in due course but at a much late date. Most of them entered into local marriage alliances.

The Subsequent Arrivals

Immigration continues till today but in smaller numbers. There is a case of several Sikh youths who were dumped by the Travel Agents in Buenos Aires a few years ago telling them that Argentina was in fact America, so true but so very misleading. Most of them are waiting to migrate to the real America via USA or Canada. They are now running small retail outlets to be able to survive. A second generation Sikh lady is helping them out. A typical immigrant story is of a young man from Ludhiana, who went on a tourist visa, took off his turban on arrival in Argentina, married the grand daughter of a well established Singh in 1992 in the local Home Gurdwara. The couple returned to India end-1999 for family reasons but have now migrated to North America.

The newer arrivals maintain Punjabi identity much more, which prods the others to keep the connection as well. Balbir Singh from the Guemes village in Salta Province, is passionately Sikh and Punjabi, helping out others to migrate to Argentina. Although clean-shaven himself, his son of 8 years or so keeps "joora". He has a couple of other turbaned Sikh immigrants working with him.

Take also the fascinating case of a so-called "Granthi" Sikh in Buenos Aires, who migrated a few years ago, after working for two years in a garment factory in Korea. He is now a specialist in healing through yoga and natural therapies. His clinic in the center of Buenos Aires has photos of Sikh Gurus and Khanda prominently displayed and Sikh chants from Japji are a part of the healing process.

Some of the Sikhs have moved from Bolivia to Argentina e.g. the earlier Granthi at Rosario. Others have moved southwards from Bolivia through marriage, because of better economic prospects. However for many, if not most new immigrants the final El Dorado is North America. The devaluation of Argentina currency at the beginning of this century to a third of its earlier value against the US Dollar has been a set back for the immigrants.

Second and Third Generation

The second generation of Sikhs who married Argentinians is totally assimilated locally and except for Singh as the surname have very little association with Sikhs or Punjab.

Establishing contacts for a visitor is difficult because of the small numbers and problems of language, as very few of them speak English or Punjabi. During the author's visit to Argentina in August, 2005, he met with a wide spectrum of Singhs. Except for the first generation immigrants or children of the first generation father and mother from the Punjab, the first names are local e.g. Leandro, Dante, Louis, Carmen, Nora, Esther etc. Hardly any of them have visited Punjab but when met by the author, they were exuberantly friendly and wished to know about their Sikh

heritage and Punjab culture. There were several gestures to show their emotional and sentimental pleasure at meeting a turbaned Sikh. A barrage of questions would follow and without exception they had a strong desire to visit Punjab - finances permitting. Some of the ladies even expressed a desire to marry Sikhs from Punjab! Most of the immigrants seem to be quite well off compared with the background of the early immigrants. But there are not many "rags to riches" stories similar to North America or UK. On the other hand, there are no stories of trouble-making or jailed Sikhs. One would place the Sikh immigrants and their newer generations as professionals, middle-middle income group, retailers, farmers and transport operators. They are universally handsome, beautiful and hospitable. They maintain some kind of Indian touch through cooking "daal" or "aloo-mattar curry and yogurt", sometimes wearing Punjabi dress or doing yoga with "keertan" background, and by keeping photos of Sikh Gurus' photos and the "khanda" symbol. There is a cultural gap, which needs to be bridged through literature, books, VCD's on the Golden Temple and Punjab, preferably dubbed or written in Spanish. They are ripe to be inducted into Sikhism and Punjabi culture.

Gurdwara, Contact with Punjab and maintaining of Sikh and Punjabi Ethos

There are very few Sikhs with turbans. Amongst the first immigrants, quite a few of them kept the turban. But majority of them took off the turban due to isolation and to gain local acceptance. Getting a job, except with the British enterprises that respected Sikh identity, could have been problematic. Marriage to local women was another contributory factor.

New immigrants are closer to Sikh and Punjabi culture and these new arrivals, though in small doses, help maintain the culture. Some of the Sikhs, even though clean-shaven, and despite the small size of their homes, keep the SGGS. They have access to recorded "shabad keertan" and of course Punjabi pop and Bhangra music. A third generation girl who otherwise is Argentinian in all respects, wore "Salwar Kameez", though probably as a fashion statement, along with her beautiful mother on her law- degree graduation ceremony. Cooking of Punjabi dishes along with the beefsteak is quite a routine.

A Gurdwara was constructed in the early nineties and is proving to be a great anchor for the community. Regular functions are held on Sundays and "Sangrads". Important Gurpurbs are celebrated. On such special occasions Sikhs come from long distances. Gurdwara also provides for get-togethers on marriages, deaths and anniversaries and is helping bring closer various Sikhs and their families. 'Langar' is always served on all occasions. There is a resident granthi and a guest room has been provided for the visitors. One heard stories of help and support by the Sikhs even from long distances whenever there are serious illnesses or accidents in a family. It is really a sight to see shop hoardings such as "Dasameshpita Norte Supermercado" (Supermarket), "Almacen Singh Khalsa" (Retail Shop) or "Despensa Singh" (Retail shop). The "Singh" surname is well respected and even the third generation is proud to be a Singh. Earlier immigrants had to be buried after death as cremation was not allowed. It was interesting to see "Singh Family Burial" Tombs. Cremation now is possible.

Some Case Studies

During a 10-day visit, the author met a wide cross section of Sikhs of the first, second and third generation. Each meeting was an interesting and somewhat sentimental story. Only two or three are being mentioned, the rest would be the subject of a book being to be published later.

Carmen and Leandro Singh: Cordoba, the second largest city of Argentina had 15 Singhs listed in the Directory. No one except Leandro Singh could speak English. He along with his mother Carmen Elena Singh and cousin Gabriela Dora Singh met up with the author in the evening. Carmen's father was Muncha Singh who married Juana when she was only 15 years of age in 1917 in Cordoba, where Muncha was working with the British Railways. Muncha had 7 daughters and 5 sons. Muncha presumably came to Argentina a couple of years earlier and started working in Buenos Aires, before moving to Cordoba. At his marriage, so far as Carmen could remember, no Sikhs were present. It was a marriage of convenience as Juana was probably a housemaid.

Carmen kindly presented Muncha's photo in India on a horseback before he left for Argentina. Carmen and Leandro were full of excitement and as they said post the meeting "we are richer now as we belong to two cultures, one of Argentina and the other of Sikhs and the Punjab".

They insisted on seeing off the author the next day at the airport. Carmen had not met an Indian till our meeting post Muncha's death in 1943, at the age of 52 years. Juana died in 2001 at age 99. The author provided them with telephone numbers of other Singhs in Cordoba as Leandra wants to establish a sort of "Singh" Club.

Jiwa and Tara Singh: Jiwa Singh (uncle) and Tara Singh (nephew) of village Bopa Rai Khurd, are the leading farm owners of Rosario de la Frontera, a small town where the Gurdwara is located. Besides owning vast acreage of farm lands, they have a transport business and super market and other real estate. They were responsible for initiating and setting up the Gudwara. The story goes that Jiwa wished to migrate to North America but Dan Singh, an earlier immigrant from his village requested him to accompany his mother to Argentina. On arrival in 1958 he started working with Dan Singh and then soon thereafter bought his own truck. A partnership was formed between Tara Singh, Jiwa Singh and Dan Singh(now dead).

Suba Singh This clean-shaven taxi driver in Salta city migrated to Argentina as a teenager in the sixties. The most interesting moment of the visit to Suba, was to see a photograph of five teenage brothers in turbans and striped (night suit type) pajamas in their village (Saleempur Masrooda in the Jalandhar / Phagwara area. Despite their lower middle class background, all five brothers have settled abroad, two each in UK and Argentina and one in Australia. It just symbolizes the Sikh enterprise!

Ajit (Gurmit) Singh:

Ajit Singh left for Argentina at the age 16, in 1951, on the invitation of his uncle Rakha Singh in Jujey Province. The latter had migrated in the early thirties at age twenty or so. Ajit's passage (five other Sikhs also traveled with him) from Singapore to Buenos Aires cost a meager Rs 45 and the ship touched Java and Durban en-route to Buenos Aires.

He had to spend more than two months each in Calcutta and Singapore before he could get a passage. Ajit was married to Norma, an Argentinian whom he left behind when returning in 1994 to his village Jandiala.

Summing Up

Out of all the South American countries, Argentina has the maximum Sikh connection both historically and in terms of numbers. There is total assimilation of the Sikhs into local culture and a vast majority is locally married. Knowledge of Punjabi is disappearing but the setting up of a Gurdwara is providing a meeting point and helping in spreading Sikh ethos and Punjabi culture.

At least ceremonial events are getting to be held in the Gurdwara encouraging community feeling. Sikhs in India (Institutional help is preferred but is hardly available) can provide help through books, literature etc with emphasis on pictorial and audio presentation which should be in Spanish. Many Singhs would like closer association with Sikhs, Punjab and India. Can we rise up to the occasion?

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