

The Sikh Global Village

At the crowded airport of Rio de Janeiro, Gurtaj was making his way towards the exit, excited by the prospective of spending a few days in the most happening capital in the Southern world. It was hard not to notice him. A young guy wearing a turban and a thick beard was not a common sight in Brazil. He was accepting the glances with a smile, but got worried when a man ran to him with a mobile phone in his outstretched hand, requesting him to speak to his friend. His friend was a Sikh living in Brazil and he hadn't spoken to a fellow Sikh for years. In another story, a Sikh student in the US in the late fifties was stunned by the outburst of joy he provoked in an unknown man who stopped him in the street and invited him home for dinner. Several years back in Iraq, another Sikh had loaned to this man some money, without even asking him his address. The distinctive turban and beard sets apart a Sikh as a symbol of Indian identity. At any airport where the Indians have to change flights, watch how an old Gujarati lady with little knowledge of English heads towards a Sikh for help and guidance as they are sure that he, being an Indian, would be helpful.

Other stories about these somehow mysterious beturbaned people take us many years back. A man, probably the first Sikh immigrant in Japan, arrived there from Basra via Moscow and Vladivostok by train with no knowledge of Russian or Japanese languages, with meager resources and not knowing what will happen next. In a more contemporary story, an Indian American took his students to Norway only to discover that the North most light house was being run by a Punjabi, probably a Sikh. Then there is the saga of the Sikhs in Argentina. In the provinces of Salta, Tucuman, San Luis and Santa Fe, there are approximately 1000 people of Indian origin. According to documents, the earliest Indian migrants are reported to have come to Argentina around 1908 and did not go back. Their children and grandchildren are now almost totally integrated in the local community. Several of them speak only Spanish, but others have retained their Indian links, speak Punjabi and visit India. In a town called Rosario de la Frontera, they have built a small Gurdwara-cum-community center.

One has also heard legends about the generosity of the Sikh Immigrants in Fiji from an article by Khushwant Singh or about these who migrated to Mexico or the Pacific Islands... These settlements look so exotic now, but imagine the difficulties these earlier immigrants must have faced. In the old days for a Punjabi to go to Bombay was almost an expedition, what to talk of going overseas! This kind of stories and historical facts excited my imagination to write about Sikh immigrants and their families. How did they adapt? What do they tell their children about their distant homeland? Are they happy and what have they achieved? Hoping that my study will grow into a book on Sikh immigrants, I am searching for compatriots who recognize themselves in these stories or have more amazing ones to tell. I am particularly interested in Sikh immigration in far off places such as the Pacific Islands, Africa, South America, etc. Starting from the roots, I would like to draw the Sikh's family tree spread throughout the world. Note: The above appeared in the Indian Express, New York edition some years ago.