

A TYPICAL SIKH FAMILY STORY – MOVEMENT ABROAD

SARDAR LACHHMAN SINGH

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Sardar Lachhman Singh (1900-1984) from Sialkot/Sargodha Districts of West Punjab was a typical Jat Sikh background who moved from Narowal to Sargodha in the newly set up canal colonies by the British. This was also Migration. Being the only son, the land inheritance was sufficient to dig roots. This got fortified through a degree in Agriculture and a Government job. His sisters got married to Jat Sikhs one with inherited farm land and the other to a graduate with a Government job. Lachhman's wife was from a well-to-do farming family. There was no incentive to migrate abroad because of sufficient farm holdings and because of continuing up ward movement socially through Government jobs. The first exposure of Lachhman outside Punjab was the appointment for 3 years in Bharatpur state of Maharaja Era. Partition of Punjab in 1947 was an upsetting event and the various members of the family had to readjust like several others. There was still no urge or incentive to migrate abroad. However exposure of family members settled in Doaba region was to have an impact but much later. The children by and large did better in financial or employment terms, as will be evident from details to follow, resulting in upwards social status. No migration overseas took place. The next generation moved outwards. Why? Read on and draw your own conclusions. My views appear at the end.

The first foray was by Lachhman Singh's second son, Swarn, to USA for higher studies in 1958. It was an aberration in a way. The commitment was to get a higher degree, get some valuable job experience and return to follow the traditional route of settling down in India hoping for better prospects through overseas qualifications. A full scholarship helped as otherwise it was a "No Go" deal. On return in 1961, there were short term irritating hiccups in settling down, and getting a satisfying job. Being selected by a British multinational, Imperial Chemical Industries, the largest foreign enterprise in India at that time, settled the issue of India v/s USA. These Corporates called Companies provided a western working environ, with good salaries and more importantly excellent perquisites and life style with memberships of elite Clubs, social or golf. You were in India but part of an elite set up with western oriented job and social environ. Expatriate staff was still present in significant numbers. Calcutta was a city with excellent clubs, restaurants and cocktail party culture. This is several decades before this culture became popular with all and sundry (at that time we felt like that). Even money could not buy this life style except for in Bombay to some extent which had plenty of wealth in Indian hands. It was a heady feeling comparable in exclusivity to Army in some ways but more up market in affluence. Childrens' admission to the best schools was not an issue for a "Box wallah". IAS was respected for their power but even they were looking for son-in-laws from the multinationals. IIM's had not yet been set up in India. Despite the initial problems because of American background as against the more prevalent British education, one settled down to an exciting and privileged life. I was perhaps the first recruit, certainly so in the commercial stream, with American degree – something to be pitied because of misplaced American culture when looked through the British eyes. In 1980's I had a

serious look at leaving India but it was not seriously followed up.

The impact of association with ICI on children was that to them a white person was just like any one else. I am mentioning this because even some of the IIM, Ahmedabad, trainees with us were very much overawed, to put it mildly, even up to the 1980's with white expats. So for our daughter Mini to seek to go to USA, Bryn Mawr, Pa., in 1987 for under graduate studies was a natural progression. Mini is now an American citizen.

I have jumped the gun a bit on time horizon. I got married to Livleen in 1967 whose mother was born and brought up in Burma. So there was a foreign connection of sorts. Livleen's "Maasi" got married to a Pharmacist who settled in Canada after trying to find a satisfying livelihood in Bombay.

Back to 1982 when a closer connection with overseas through younger generation developed via Lachhman Singh's older son Harbhajan's (retired as Lt.General, Chief of Signals, Indian Army) daughter Tina got married to an American, Harry Brar. Harry's grand father had migrated (illegally to start with) in the 1930's to California via Mexico. That is a story in itself to be expanded separately. The General was not looking for a match for his daughter in USA i.e. it was not a migration deal but it just so happened. This set in motion a green card for the General and his wife and student sponsorship of their younger son Andy. The later then got married to a recent Sikh Immigrant's daughter and so the clan is now well established as US citizens. To complete the General's story, his older son who is working in Merchant ships is a possible migrant to USA.

Lachhman Singh's oldest daughter Surinder has now interest overseas through her daughter Harpreet's marriage in 1989 to an IITian in Houston, thereby starting another immigrant chain. The only exception is Lachhman's younger daughter Kuldeep Hundal, whose two children have not migrated overseas. Probably there was no strong motivation to do so. Same is the story of Lachhman Singh's youngest son, Manmohan, who had considerable overseas exposure through Merchant Navy but preferred to stay in India. Their elder son is settled in India but plays golf mostly abroad and the younger one is working in the Gulf countries.

There have been major changes amongst Lachhman Singh's nephews and nieces (our first cousins) many of whom are now abroad. The story starts with Sidhu clan where youngest daughter Gurmeet's husband, Dr.Dhillon, emigrated in steps from PAU, Ludhiana to USA. She sponsored two of her brothers to USA for better prospects. Her other brother's widow is in Canada. Only one sister and a brother remain in India.

Lachhman Singh's other sister married to a Chatha have a daughter in Canada while the two sons remain in India having inherited valuable agricultural land which has now been urbanized.

From Lachhman Singh's wife Dhanwant Kaur's side all three of the brothers are abroad but a sister remains in India.

There is the case of reverse migration. Mila, a Bulgarian, has migrated to India where

she is living in Bombay with Gurtaj, son of Swarn and Livleen and grand son of Sardar Lachhman Singh. This is a migration for love or marriage or more likely both.

REASONS LEADING UP TO MIGRATION

Migration is a very personal issue and no two cases are the same in terms of factors leading up to the decision to leave Punjab/India. However there seem to be some criteria which become evident. A major variable is the time horizon. In later years migration became easier and more importantly there was the comfort of increasing numbers of fellow migrants. Initial spear-heading by an immigrant, is soon followed by others so that family presence gets increased and in many cases gets skewed in favor of overseas compared to India.

While earlier major migration from Doaba, Majha and Malwa regions of Punjab were due to economic and financial reasons due small land holdings and because these people had more exposure to overseas through Army and in the case of South East Asia via police recruitment. From Lachhman Singh's family story, the main reasons for migration can be summarized as:

1. This immigration is post independence phenomenon and in fact post 1970's phenomenon which accelerated in the 1980's, 1990's and is continuing to be so. With no children settled abroad, the grand children are almost equally split between India and in this case USA.
2. Earlier going abroad was for studies mainly higher education. Scholarships for graduate work (Assistantships and Fellowships) were easier to get while financial assistance for undergraduate work was difficult and rarely covered full expenses. The situation changed somewhat in later decades when Mini got almost full financial assistance for undergraduate work.
3. In 1960's going overseas was at a more mature age (twenties) for higher education than at undergraduate level (teenage). The chances of returning were more in the former case when one was less vulnerable. It was also difficult to get immigration till liberalization of the mid 1960's. USA appeared on the horizon as a more favorable destination than the UK because of financial support offered to overseas students.
4. Migration to Canada or UK was possible but US laws were more stringent up till mid 1960's and even that to highly qualified persons. Relatives and dependents were allowed a bit later which opened the flood gates to exponential growth in immigration.
5. Marriage was another avenue for migration particularly for girls. In this family case, it just happened that the bridegroom was from overseas These marriages were to professionals and hence were not motivated by migration. In fact there were considerable doubts on getting married abroad. One positive factor of marrying abroad was expectation of better job satisfaction and husband-wife relationship equity (contra to experiences at lower income group or marriages to non professionals in Canada and UK).

6. Some migration such as Mini Kahlon's was basically for life style purposes. She felt the social environ more conducive to her value system and provided her with a wider canvass to explore job opportunities and relationships both at personal and societal levels.

7. In some cases migration took places as a part of job opportunity and upgrading by the husband though initially this was not a factor in getting married.

8. In case of relatives from the villages, the motivation was to have better living standard and to have more income in comparison to earnings in India. The land sub-division amongst children was looming large whereby living standards were expected to be under pressure. More over with other relatives being there as a result of marriage alliances, it was felt that migration was merely shifting from the India based cluster of relatives to overseas cluster with the support system already in place. Better future for off-springs was an added incentive. In Canada the old age benefits were attractive for senior citizens.

9. The motivation per se for each person to strike a new course (and emigration is certainly so) may not be sufficiently strong where local affluence or opportunity is attractive enough. Efforts to migrate at a later age have not been less successful, with men having more difficulty than women. For some years, a woman parent, in fact, is sought after by migrant children for obvious reasons. How long for, is a different matter?

10. Many Sikhs including me had a very strong temptation to migrate during 1980's because of problems as ethnic minority in India. Had I been ten years younger, I would have left India. One or two of my friends did migrate at that stage of their lives.

I would like to have comments on the subject as each person's experience, back ground, motivation, value systems etc. are different. So please do write in.