



The Study of Early Migration from Punjab to Canada through Archival sources (1897-1919)

Amritpal Singh

Assistant Professor of History, PG Department of History, Government Mohindra College, Patiala,

Email: amritkamboj9988@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The migration from Punjab to Canada signifies one of the first and most consequential movements of South Asians to North America. This study analyses the historical progression of migration from Punjab to Canada employing exclusively archival sources, including official government records, immigration files, Canadian census data, assessments of historical sites, newspapers, and personal correspondence. The paper presents an account of the socio-economic and political existence of Punjabi migrants employing archival materials. The study reconstructs migrant experiences, state policies, and the establishment of the Punjabi diaspora in Canada through the analysis of archival data. This article underscores the significance of archives in comprehending migration history.

Introduction

The archival sources constitute the foundation of historical research. The archival sources included a diverse array of documents such as official government records, census data, monuments, newspapers, and personal correspondence. As these archive materials are contemporaneous, they constitute more reliable and authentic proof of historical events. Archival sources enable historians to examine the past systematically and credibly, facilitating the reconstruction of historical events. The archival sources encompassed essential information regarding historical occurrences. Prominent historian E.H. Carr asserts in his work 'What is History' that "The facts only speak when the historian calls on them." He underscored that scrutinising facts is crucial for recreating historical events, and these facts are



available in archival materials. This paper endeavors to examine the initial migration from Punjab to Canada solely via archival materials. This era signifies a crucial chapter in the history of the Punjabi diaspora in Canada. This phase established the foundation of the Punjabi Diaspora. This era involves the initiation of migration from Punjab to Canada, motivated by the economic opportunities in Canada and mostly influenced by historical linkages, as both regions were once part of the British Empire. A notable aspect of this time is the racial discrimination encountered by Punjabi migrants upon their arrival. Despite the initial modest number of Punjabi migrants, the interval from 1900 to 1919 experienced a significant increase in Punjabi, primarily Sikh, migration to the Pacific coast, especially in British Columbia, motivated by employment prospects in timber mills, railway construction, and agriculture. During this period, Punjabi migration progressed through several stages, transitioning from unrestricted immigration to the implementation of entirely restrictive immigration rules by the Canadian government. The private correspondence and official government documents, such as the report by W. L. Mackenzie King, offer significant insights on the Canadian government's viewpoint on Indian immigrants, while the Canada Year Books and the Canada Census of 1901 and 1911 illustrate the magnitude and characteristics of immigration. It additionally illustrates the settlement trend of Punjabi immigration. The historical resources, such as the Gur Sikh Temple in Abbotsford and the grave of Buckam Singh, provide insight into the socio-cultural existence and contributions of Punjabi immigration in Canada. The article aims to investigate the causes of Punjabi migration to Canada, the driving factors, and the Canadian government's perspective on this immigration by purely analysing archival materials.

Research Methodology and Database

This study aims to employ a qualitative historical methodology to investigate Punjabi migration to Canada during the early twentieth century. The study is predominantly archival and interpretive, concentrating on an analysis of migration within its extensive socio-political and economic framework from 1900 to 1919. The current study relies solely on primary sources. These primary sources encompass newspapers, official records such as the 1911 Census of Canada, governmental documents like the Mackenzie King Report, and material evidence including the Gur Sikh Temple, as well as memorial evidence exemplified by the grave of Buckland (Buckam) Singh. Data was gathered via archival research and document analysis, using digital repositories and historical sources. The study utilises thematic, comparative, and content analysis to examine migration patterns from Punjab to Canada, the racial prejudice faced by Punjabi migrants, and the establishment of the Punjabi diaspora community. Nonetheless, the research is constrained by its significant dependence on official government documents and personal correspondence, which may exhibit colonial biases.



The Beginning of Migration from Punjab to Canada

The migration from Punjab to Canada commenced in the final decade of the 19th century, specifically in 1897, when a contingent of Punjabi soldiers from the Hong Kong regiment of the British Indian Army traversed Canadian cities such as Ottawa, Montreal, and Vancouver en route to India after attending the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria in London. The majority of these soldiers originates from Punjab and came from agricultural backgrounds; hence they were enthralled by the expansive plains of Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. They recounted stories of the expansive territories and the promising employment prospects in Canada to their comrades. Major Kesar Singh of this contingent was recognised as the first Sikh settler in Canada. In 1902, the Punjabi soldiers of the Hong Kong battalions of the Indian British army visited Canada en route to England for Edward VII's coronation ceremony. Several soldiers who travelled to Canada between 1897 and 1902 chose to emigrate to Canada permanently upon their retirement. Subsequently, migration from Punjab to Canada began.

Study of Early Migration through Archive

While scholars have proposed other explanations for the onset of international migration from Punjab, the predominant factor is the financial distress in Punjab resulting from British economic policies following its conquest in 1849. These economic policies led to increased indebtedness among the peasantry of Punjab. The peasants were compelled to pursue opportunities elsewhere for survival. The preferred recruitment from Punjab following the 1857 uprising provided an opportunity that subsequently acted as a catalyst for the onset of foreign migration from Punjab. The notable archival source supporting this assertion is the economic survey conducted by H.H. Calvert and Anchal Das, which emphasised that the residents of Jalandhar district were inclined to emigrate for livelihood preservation owing to economic hardship (Calvert & Dass, 1931).

The foremost archival reference about Sikhs in Canadian archives was discovered in the form of private correspondence. This document is dated April 9, 1867, during the tenure of Sir John A. Macdonald, the first Prime Minister of Canada. He composed a letter to his friend Sir Henry Sumner, who was in India serving as the legal member of the Governor-General of India. In this correspondence, in addition to discussing confederation-related actions he emphasised the necessity of a Sikh army to safeguard Canada. The relevant paragraph states: "War will come someday between England and the United States and India can do us yeoman's service by sending an army of Sikhs... across the Pacific to San Francisco and holding that beautiful and immortal city with the surrounding California as security for Montreal and Canada". (Macdonald, 1867).



The subsequent archival document about migration from Punjab to Canada can be discovered in a newspaper. The migration from Punjab to Canada commenced in 1897 when a contingent of Punjabi soldiers from the Hong Kong regiment of the British Indian Army traversed the Canadian cities of Ottawa, Montreal, and Vancouver en route to India after attending the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria. The Diamond Jubilee celebrations occurred in London on June 22, 1897. A newspaper titled 'The Colonies and India' from June 5, 1897, listed the names of Punjabi soldiers scheduled to arrive in London for the celebrations. The newspaper, on page 26, mentioned the following individuals: Risaldar Faiz Khan; Risaldar Mir Haider Shah Khan; Risaldar Mahir Khan; Risaldar Major Khan Bahadoor; Risaldar Kadam Khan; Risaldar Gardett Singh; Risaldar Major Sher Singh; Risaldar Major Hakam Singh; and Risaldar Major Kesur Singh (“Arrival and Departure”, 1897). Multiple reports indicate that Major Kesur Singh of this contingent was intended to be the first Sikh settler in Canada. The subsequent archive reference was likewise presented arrival of another contingent of Punjabi soldiers. The June 3, 1902, edition of the Canadian newspaper 'Victoria Daily Times' reported the arrival of a contingent of 40 Punjabi soldiers from the Hong Kong British Indian Regiment in Canada. They were en route to London to take part in the coronation ceremony of Edward VII (“Soldiers arrive on way to London”, 1902).

The ensuing archival reference was a significant governmental document as it furnishes the entire count of Indian immigrants who landed in Canada until 1935. Prior to 1903, migration from India to Canada was minimal. As their numbers increased, Canada's Dominion Immigration Office began to document them. The official count of Indian immigrants who arrived in India between 1904 and 1935 is documented in ‘The Canada Yearbook, 1936’ on page 196. The quantity of Indian immigrants documented as East Indians during this timeframe. The statistics demonstrated the true nature of the discriminatory practices implemented by the Canadian government against Punjabi immigrants. The process commenced with unrestricted immigration, transitioned to a complete halt due to the controversial Continuous Journey Act of 1908, and subsequently resumed in limited quantities following the resolution of the Imperial War Conference in London in 1918, which permitted the families of existing Indian immigrants to reunite with them, a practice that persisted until the mid-20th century (The Canada Yearbook, 1936, p. 196). Consequently, this data enables us to assess both the total number of Indian immigrants who arrived in Canada and the influence of discriminatory immigration regulations on migration from India post-1908.

The following historical reference outlines the racial discrimination experienced by Punjabi migrants upon their arrival in Canada. In the early years, the Canadian province of British Columbia



served as the primary destination for Punjabi migration. The depiction of Punjabi immigration by British Columbia's press was evidenced in these archival documents. The Indian community is the third Asian community to arrive in Canada. The initial two were Chinese and Japanese. They encountered pervasive racial discrimination in Canada, extending from societal to governmental. The Canadian government imposed various limitations, such as a head tax, to deter their immigration. Against this backdrop, migration from Punjab to Canada began. They remained undetected until their numbers were few. However, upon the increase of their population, they became the targets of white supremacists, labour unions, political leaders, and the media in British Columbia. The white supremacists aimed to maintain Canada as a predominantly white nation. Canada's immigration rules historically favoured immigrants of white European heritage. The Canada Census of 1901 indicated that around 96 percent of the overall population of Canada was of European descent. Upon the arrival of migrants from Asian countries in Canada, opposition ensued. The labour unions of British Columbia believed that Asian immigration could usurp their employment opportunities. They alleged that they were employed at low rates and labelled them as strike-breakers. Furthermore, Punjabi migrants arrived in Canada during a period of economic recession in British Columbia. A number of politicians from British Columbia endorsed these trade unions to obtain electoral advantages. Consequently, they also disseminated anti-Asian narratives. Consequently, under the aforementioned circumstances, the British Columbia press also played a role in fostering widespread animosity towards Punjabi immigrants. They released articles including insulting headlines that present a poor image of Punjabi migrants. On September 1, 1906, the daily 'Vancouver World' featured a story on its main page titled "Horde of Hungry Hindoos Invade Vancouver City" ("Horde of Hungry Hindoos Invade Vancouver City," 1906). Likewise, another publication, 'The Vancouver Province,' released a report on the same date titled "Hindoo Hordes Make Themselves at Home Annex Choicest Part of the City" ("Hindoo Hordes Make Themselves at Home," 1906). Consequently, Punjabi migrants were characterised as both physically and morally contaminating, and their entrance was represented as an invasion in the British Columbia Press.

Although the majority of Punjabi immigrants who arrived in Canada during this period were illiterate, some possessed a higher level of education. These educated persons have the acumen to comprehend the ramifications of the adverse depiction of Punjabi immigration in newspapers. Among these educated individuals, the worth mentioned is Dr Sunder Singh. He hailed from Amritsar, Punjab, and arrived in Canada in 1909 after residing for a time in the United Kingdom and the United States. In Canada, he advocated for the advancement of the Punjabi community and articulated their concerns through media, public addresses, and direct appeals to government authorities. He initiated two



periodicals, 'The Aryan' and 'The Hindustanee,' which advocated for better treatment of the Indian community. He was a member of the delegation dispatched to Ottawa in 1911 to advocate for constitutional rights for Punjabi migrants. His endeavours for the advancement of the Indian population were frequently featured in publications around British Columbia. A brief news article was published in the 'Victoria Daily Colonist' on March 26, 1911. The title of the report is “Friends of the Hindus.” The document detailed a meeting scheduled for 4 pm, during which Dr. Sunder Singh delivered a statement on the lamentable conditions and unjust legal restrictions imposed on the Indian community (“Friends of the Hindus,” 1911). The newspaper conducted his interview on May 12, 1911, and published an article titled “CLAIMS HINDUS LIVE UNDER DISABILITIES.” In this interview, Dr. Sunder Singh articulated dissatisfaction with the treatment of the Indian population by Canadian authorities. He also provided reports of the imperial service performed by the Sikh community and the immigration limitations put upon them (“Claims Hindus Live Under Disabilities,” 1911). During this period, when the British Columbia press disseminated disparaging portrayals of the Indian community, educated Indian migrants endeavoured to counter this propaganda by expressing their perspectives in the press and through their own publications.

The subsequent archival reference to Canada’s Punjabi community is the official government report released in 1908. As previously said, early Punjabi migration went unnoticed due to their limited numbers. Nonetheless, their presence became significant when their population surged, particularly in 1906 and 1907, with around 4,700 Punjabi migrants entering Canada. Their entrance coincided with an economic crisis, leading to widespread unemployment in British Columbia. In September 1907, trade unions in British Columbia organised a rally opposing Asian immigrants, culminating in the anti-Asian riots in Vancouver. Subsequent to these riots, the Canadian government established a commission led by W. L. Mackenzie King to investigate the factors contributing to Asian immigration to Canada. W. L. Mackenzie King presented this report on July 11, 1908. This was the first time the Canadian government tried to find out why Asians were moving to Canada. The report has three sections, each focusing on the Japanese, Chinese, and Indian groups, respectively. The Commission discovered the following reasons for migration to Canada from India in their findings:

1. The distribution throughout certain of the rural districts of India, of glowing accounts of the opportunities of fortune-making in the province of British Columbia, visions of fields of fortune so brightly hued that many an India peasant farmer, to raise the money for the journey, had mortgaged to the lender of the village his homestead and all that it contained at a rate of interest varying from fifteen to twenty percent.



2. The activity of certain steamship agents who were desirous of selling transportation in the interest of the companies with which they were connected and of themselves profiting by the commissions reaped.
3. The activity of certain individuals in the province of British Columbia, among the number one or two Brahmins, who were desirous of exploiting their fellow subjects; and certain industrial concerns which, with the object of obtaining a class of unskilled labour at a price below the current rate, assisted in inducing a number of the natives to leave under actual or virtual agreements to work for hire.

This report not only found reasons but also gave several recommendations to control Indian immigration which includes financial requirements, control over labour recruitment and stricter immigration screening upon arrival. These recommendations became the basis of the Continuous Journey Act, 1908 (King, 1908). The report serves as a highly useful archival resource for examining migration from Punjab to Canada. It offers the current government's official perspective on Indian immigration and aids in comprehending the racial attitudes and administrative issues of the Canadian government. This document serves as principal evidence about Indian immigration, as it includes testimonies from Indian immigrants, their interviews, and statistical data pertaining to Indian migrants residing in Canada. The research also elucidated the role of the labour contractor in recruitment and the shipping routes to Canada. This report offers substantial archive evidence regarding various aspects of Indian immigration to Canada, encompassing its reasons and proposals for its curtailment.

The subsequent archival source is the 1911 Canada census. This was the first census that documented the overall number of Indian immigrants in Canada. This census documented 2,342 Indian migrants residing in Canada labelled as Hindoo. The titles East Indian and Hindoo (Hindu) were used interchangeably for Punjabi immigrants in Canadian official documents during this period. The reduction of 2342 from a total of 5200 Indian immigrants by 1911 indicated the effects of limits on fresh Indian immigration and the racial discrimination faced by existing Indian migrants in Canada. During this period, Punjabi immigrants constituted over 90 percent of the total Indian population. This census was pivotal in comprehending the settlement patterns of early Punjabi migrants, as the majority resided in the British Columbian cities of Vancouver and Victoria. It also illustrates the demographic characteristics of the existing Indian population, the most of whom are male and residing in Canada as bachelors, without their families. Therefore, these census data functioned as a fundamental archival resource for comprehending the origins and composition of the Punjabi community in Canada (Canada Census, 1911).



The next archive references are presented as monuments. The earliest archival reference that testifies the presence of Sikh community in Canada is the Gurudwara Gur Sikh Temple, Abbotsford. The Gurudwara holds significant importance for Sikhs. It is the location designated for congregational religious worship. It is asserted whenever Sikhs migrate to a new site, they establish a Gurudwara there as well. The same is true for the Sikhs who emigrated to Canada. In 1906, when the Sikh population reached 2,500, they resolved to construct a Gurudwara in Canada. The inaugural Sikh organization in Canada, the Khalsa Diwan Society, established in July 1906, was responsible for the construction of the first Gurudwara in Vancouver, which was completed by January 1908. Vancouver was the epicentre of Punjabi immigration during the initial period. Punjabi immigrants soon migrated to the adjacent cities of Abbotsford and Westminster in pursuit

of employment. The Sikhs arrived in Abbotsford in 1905, and by 1909, a small group of Sikhs had settled in the area. In 1909, the local Sikhs decided to build a Gurudwara in Abbotsford, and its construction was completed by the end of 1911. The inaugural ceremony of Gur Sikh Temple in Abbotsford occurred on February 25, 1912. This Gurudwara is the oldest extant Gurudwara in Canada and was designated a national historic site by the Government of Canada on July 31, 2003 (Abbotsford Sikh Temple National Historic Site of Canada). It is the first Sikh temple outside of India and Pakistan to get the designation of a national historic site. The Gur Sikh Temple in Abbotsford serves as a significant archival and historical resource for examining migration from

Abbotsford Gursikh Temple (Photo Courtesy: South Asian Studies Institute)





Punjab to Canada. It is not just a religious site but a living archive since it preserves physical and cultural evidence of the early Punjabi diaspora.

The final archival reference to this early period of Punjabi migration is the graveyard of Buckam Singh (also rendered as Bukkan Singh in some sources). This graveyard was located in Mount View Cemetery, Kitcher. The historical significance of this cemetery is underscored by the presence of Buckam Singh, one of the ten Sikh soldiers who served Canada during World War I. Buckam Singh, originally from Mahilpur village in Hoshiarpur, Punjab, immigrated to Canada at the age of 14 in 1907. After residing in Victoria, British Columbia for six years, Buckam Singh opted to relocate to Ontario to pursue fresh economic prospects. In 1915, motivated by the occurrences of World War I, Buckam Singh and nine other Sikhs resolved to enlist in the Canadian army. They were subsequently joined in the 59th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. He, along with nine other Sikh troops, fought for Canada in World War I on the battlefields of France. He was injured twice during the first World War. In March 1917, he was diagnosed with TB and returned to Canada. He passed away on August 27, 1919, at Freeport Military Hospital and was buried at Mount Hope Cemetery in Kitchener, Ontario. The epitaph on his gravestone included his name, service number, and date of demise. The grave of Buckam Singh is the sole burial site of a Sikh soldier in Canada who served in World War I. His grave holds significant archive value. It functions as a unique resource and memorial repository of the early Punjabi diaspora. The burial of Buckam Singh serves as a significant representation of early Punjabi migration. It also shown that despite experiencing racial exclusion in all aspects of life, the Punjabi community remains dedicated to contributing to Canadian society in every conceivable manner (Veterans Affairs Canada).





Graveyard of Buckam Singh at Mount Hope Cemetery in Kitchner, Ontario

Photo Courtesy: Veterans Affairs Canada

Conclusion

In conclusion, the history of early Punjabi migration to Canada is extensively recorded through many archival sources, such as governmental papers, census data, and monuments. The study of the early migration from Punjab to Canada uncovered a complex interplay of economic hardship in the homeland, an abundance of economic opportunities in Canada, imperial ties, and racial discrimination in Canada, all of which collectively facilitated the establishment of the Punjabi diaspora in Canada. Contemporary archival materials elucidate the influx of Punjabi migrants into Canada, the extent and characteristics of their migration, and the Canadian government's policies regarding them. Additionally, these archival documents elucidate the hardships and discrimination encountered by Punjabi migrants while also underscoring their perseverance and contributions to Canadian society. Collectively, these sources illustrate that, notwithstanding prejudice and stringent immigration legislation, Punjabi migrants established enduring social, cultural, and institutional frameworks in Canada. The formation of religious and community institutions, alongside involvement in the First World War, attests to the persistent presence and legacy of the Punjabi diaspora. Overall, these archival sources furnish a comprehensive overview of Punjabi migration to Canada, their settlement patterns, and the community's growth, providing essential insights for historical research.

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