

Visit to Centre for Indo Canadian Studies, University of Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, British Columbia

A Report by Manpreet J. Singh

As the recipient of the South Asia Diaspora Fund Fellowship for the year 2015-16, from the Indo Canadian Studies Centre, Mumbai University and Centre for Indo Canadian Studies, University of Fraser Valley, Canada, sponsored by the British Columbia Province, Canada, I



am working on facets of Sikh identity. The topic of research is *“Reconstructing Sikh Identity: Images and Representations in Indian and Indo Canadian Literature, Popular Culture and Social Media.”* My work involves studying the trajectories leading the community to its contemporary formations, analyzing the images constructed around it through media and popular culture, and studying the cultural mutations in cosmopolitan urban environments. The research involves a study of the said facets in relation to the community in three urban centres of India, and a study of the community in British Columbia as a representative study of Sikh diaspora. The methodology includes first hand interaction with

community members, reference to previous research works, and analysis of representations of the community in literature, popular culture and social media.

As part of field work, I visited University of Fraser Valley, Abbotsford from May 6- May 25, 2016, during which period, I also travelled to Vancouver, Victoria, Surrey, and Mission. The purpose of the visit , among other things, was to meet members of the community in formal and informal settings with the aim of understanding the dynamics that operate in processes related to shift and resettlement, to delve into the different trajectories operating under the common identity of Sikh community, to study local media constructions surrounding the community, to observe community initiatives at creating cultural memory banks, and to look at the gender paradigms operating within the community.

Logistical help from the Centre for Indo Canadian studies in UFV ensured interaction with a diverse set of people from the Sikh community through interviews conducted at the centre, visit to Sikh homes, trips to Gurudwaras to observe the microcosms of Sikh social life, and even attending a Sikh wedding. Interaction with members of community at close quarters provided an opportunity to grasp the dynamics between people who have come to Canada at different points of time, with different aims, to varying socio political



responses in the host country. Sikh diaspora in BC reflects a combination of influences of these different trajectories, and provides scope for analysis of the starkly opposing results beneath the common epithet covering them. It also provides an understanding of opposing trends among the community, such as the ones reflected in relinquishing articles of faith by some to reverting back to radical Sikhism by others, from Sikh names among “best students of the month” to their being associated with drugs and violence in schools, from the community’s enthusiastic participation in cultural and religious programmes to their disconnect with the community back home. Visiting BC has provided invaluable insights into the history, struggles, successes, adjustments, and shifts experienced by the Sikh community. Abbotsford with its heritage Gurudwara, Vancouver, with its memorial to the members of Komagataru and Surrey with its surreal feel of replicating a Punjab town were crucial to an overall understanding of the story of Sikh diaspora in Canada.



The work in progress at the CICS gave an insight into how scholars from the community are trying to archive Sikh history in Canada. They are also claiming the country as home, through attempts to have Sikh presence included in the archiving of Canadian national history. Research areas also give insights into the desire to retrieve cultural roots in a social setting which encourages hybridity. Work is being done on different facets of Sikh religion and culture. Research around oral traditions and representations of a feminist understanding of Sikh religion are some initiatives which provide an insight into the fusion of the old with the new.

The opportunity of attending the installation of a Sikh soldier’s sword and medals in the British Columbia legislature at Victoria, in the presence of MPs and ministers, some of them Sikhs, provided an understanding not only of Canada’s multicultural policy, but also of the sure strides the community is making into its political system. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau public apology to the community, for the



excesses committed by Canadian governments in the past, reflected a much firmer entrenchment in Canadian systems. However the response among the community also yielded insight into the many areas where they still hope for better integrative practices.

A study of gender operatives within the Sikh community reveals the dynamics of empowerment, and most importantly, disempowerment, in the aspiration of a better life. First hand interaction with women who have been used by families as means of entry into Canada, against those born in Canada and finding it difficult to live within the traditional community paradigms, provided a glimpse into several levels of changing female response, many times held responsible for crumbling family structures in the community diaspora. Interaction with girls on campus revealed a better future for girls who are entering the country through university programmes instead of marriage alliances, thanks to changing male attitudes in rural Punjab. They come across as better equipped to grapple with the unique cultural demands of the community, while still being capable of asserting themselves.



A study of these facets, and many more, is aided by a simultaneous look into cinema, music and literature being produced around the community. Deepa Mehta's movies like *Heaven on Earth* and *Biba Boys* provide sensitive portrayals addressing crucial issues facing the community and were recommended by many in the community as windows to understanding specific issues. Literary works by authors like Shauna Singh Baldwin, and Anita Rau Badami also provide insights into the nuances of Sikh life in Canada. Inability to meet these authors given the short span of the visit will have to be compensated by analysis of their works.

The insights gathered during this time are crucial to the research being undertaken. I hope to constructively incorporate these in the overall structure of the work in process, besides presenting them as a report to the centres involved.

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