

Sifts Rule in California's Central Valley

By LEA TERHUNE

When the first Sikh immigrants arrived in California's fertile Central Valley more than a century ago, they were reminded of the plains in their homeland, the Punjab. Their farming skills, their willingness to work, and their drive to get ahead ensured their rise in status from humble migrant laborers who picked fruit in the hot sun to significant landowners who **today control much of the agriculture in California.** But agriculture was just the beginning. Today an estimated 250,000 Sikhs live in California, and they are **found in all businesses and professions,** making a major contribution to the socioeconomic fabric of the state.



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Didar Singh Bains' (inset) success in agriculture is legendary. His great grandfather emigrated to North America in 1890, ultimately settling in California's Central Valley.

Bains Ranch land on the outskirts of Yuba City, California. The Buttes rise in the distance. Bains is a noted grower of peaches, almonds, walnuts and prunes.

The Yuba-Sutter area is not a hot tourist spot like the wine-producing counties 160 kilometers to the west, but it has some of the best agricultural land in the United States, placed between the Sierra Nevada mountains to the east and the Coast Range to the west. The weather is fine. This was one reason Sikh pioneers settled here, the Bains among them. The Bains Ranch office, surrounded by orchards on the outskirts of Yuba City, is well-appointed but unpretentious. Trucks and tractors are parked outside near a large, aluminum-sided barn. It is the business hub of one of the largest farmers in the Central Valley, Didar Singh Bains.

At 66, Bains looks like the patriarch he is with his long, white flowing beard and bright orange turban. His great grandfather migrated first to Canada in 1890, and to California in 1920. Bains' father arrived from India in 1948 and Bains himself followed in 1958, 18 years old, fresh from Nangal Khurd village in Hosiarpur. Those were long, hard days. "You know, we came here empty-handed, and I worked like a manual laborer," he says. "We worked really hard, borrowed, struggled, took risks our whole life. God is always good to us." He is known as the top peach grower, but also cultivates prunes, walnuts and almonds. "Some crops are pretty good, walnuts, almonds, still get a return. But peaches, no, because there is too much manual labor and the cost is too high." He supplies peaches to big distributor Del Monte, but has recently dismantled one of his canneries in Yuba City.

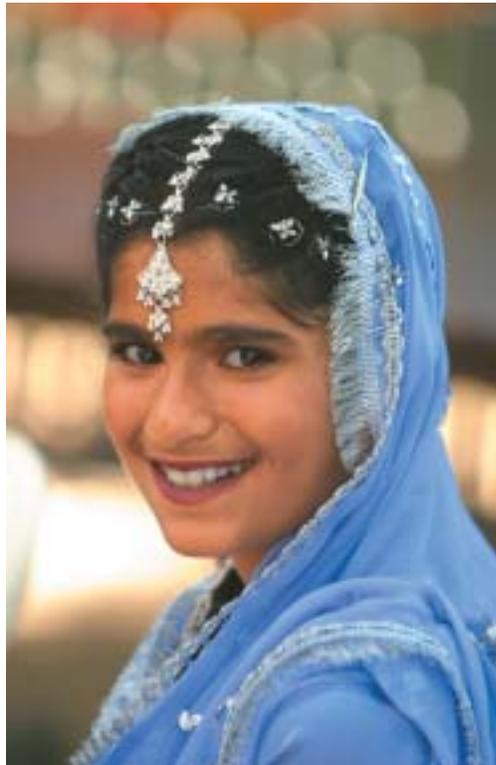
A few years ago Bains began selling parcels of land to housing and commercial developers. "When I saw the way that agriculture is going, not too much profit, then I thought I'd start to downsize." He still owns about 6,000 hectares of prime California land in the Sacramento Valley and further south, near Bakersfield, most of it near cities. He sees development as a good thing, yet he keeps his hand in farming. "I love farming, but I like to see it make some money on the other end."

The Punjabis' hard work and clean living gained their neighbors' respect, but the earliest immigrants still faced social and economic hurdles. The same attitudes that oppressed African Americans in the South were too often applied to the turban-wearing "Hindus" or "East Indians," so called to distinguish them from indigenous American Indians. They couldn't own property and were forced to make *benami*-like arrangements with trusted associates to buy land. They were barred from marrying local women, except for Mexican women, who were often immigrants themselves. Legislation eventually

rescinded harsh anti-miscegenation laws and the Alien Land Law. Restrictive immigration quotas for South Asians were relaxed when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Indians could bring their families, and immigration from all over South Asia increased. "In the beginning there was some hate," says Didar Bains, "but you start a dialogue, then people start accepting." After more than 100 years, he says, "people are very familiar with us now. We are part of the community here. We are part of the economy here in California. We have people all the way to Los Angeles."

Newcomers also do well. Harbhajan Singh Samra, 46, came to dominate okra farming in record time. He arrived in California with an M.A. in economics in 1985. What drew him? "Friends convinced me. I listened to their stories and I thought, let me make my own story." He began supplying produce to Indian restaurants and stores in the days when *tinda*, *methi* and *moolee* were hard to come by. He sold produce out of the back of his pickup truck. Later he opened a stall in the downtown Los Angeles 7th Street produce market. "You have to find your own niche. It's hard in the beginning to start from scratch, but once you create something, you have the confidence," he says.

After 10 years of building his business, the next step was growing his own produce. His first okra crop, planted in 1994, failed. There were serious setbacks. Debts caused him to lose his farm, but he recovered. He bought several hundred acres near Indio in Southern California. Now Samra Produce & Farms, which farms about 120 hectares, has customers for Indian vegetables throughout the United States, Canada and Britain. According to a 2001 *New York Times* report, Samra's annual



Pride in being American as well as Sikh, belief in shared values.

Left: A young girl in her finery at the annual Punjabi American Festival in Yuba City.

Right: A professional dancer from Los Angeles entertains the crowd. Some entertainers are brought from India.

turnover exceeds \$10 million, although he declines to be specific. He credits the American system for helping him succeed. "If you are determined, you can do anything in the world. But in some places in the world it is rough, and in others it is smooth. In America you can do things smoothly," he says. "But you have to work for it."

Dr. Jasbir S. Kang, 42, a physician practicing in Yuba City, comes from a long line of farmers, and while he is proud of his roots, he says, "We're not just a farming community. There are 20-plus physicians in this community. In Yuba City there is not a specialty where there is not a Sikh physician." He enumerates the small businesses, gas stations, mini-markets, restaurants and hotels where Sikhs are prospering. They are in construction, banking, engineering. "You name it, they are doing everything," he says. Dr. Kang himself joined with a number of enterprising physicians to purchase land and build the large medical center where he has his office.

A common feeling among Sikhs who have settled in California is appreciation of America and pride in being American as well as Sikh. One reason for this is a belief in shared values. Didar Bains compares the principles of the Founders, embodied in the U.S. Constitution, to those of Guru Nanak. So does Dr. Kang, who says, "The Constitution of the United States expresses the same ideals as Guru Nanak. It reads like the Guru Granth Sahib. Both advocate equality and justice for all." Dr. Kang came to the Central Valley from Chicago in 1991. Hailing from Patiala, he attended Patiala Medical College and completed his qualifications at the University of Chicago, where he came face to face with American urban realities during



Prominent American Sikhs, including several from California, were invited to the White House on August 14, 2004, to mark the 400th anniversary of the Guru Granth Sahib, celebrated on September 1, 2004. Singh Sahib Darshan Singh, former *jathedar* (priest) of Akal Takht at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, led prayers in Punjabi. Kirtans followed. Speakers included Tommy G. Thompson, then U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, and Uttam Singh Dhillon, Associate U.S. Attorney General, whose ancestors migrated to America a century ago. In July 2004 the Smithsonian Institution opened the Sikh Heritage Gallery, a permanent exhibition in the Natural History Museum in Washington, D.C. The exhibition, entitled "Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab," features items of Sikh heritage and culture, combined with information on the religion and history of the Sikh people. □



his residency at Cook County Hospital. He is among the new, progressive generation who believe in raising community awareness about who Sikhs are. "When I came here, as a physician I had the opportunity to interact with all kinds of people," he says. "I realized there was a lot of ignorance. I knew Sikhs were here for a hundred years, but still people knew very little about Sikhs."

Sikhs interacted with their neighbors, but not in ways that conveyed much about their culture and values, "which I think are very much American values," says Dr. Kang. "I felt there was a need for an organization that is dedicated to help our fellow Americans to understand us better." He adds, "I don't want them to see us as Indians, I want them to see us as Americans of a different shade or different flavor or whatever."

To bridge this information gap, Dr. Kang and other like-minded people formed the Punjabi American Heritage Society. In 1993 they organized an event for local teachers at a Yuba City

high school. This "Teacher's Appreciation Day," a dinner party that featured a slide show and Punjabi performing artists, was a painless way to better acquaint the general community with Punjabi culture. "It was overwhelmingly successful," he says. They decided to organize a bigger event, and the Punjabi American Festival was born. The older generation of Sikhs had already instituted the Sikh Parade, a religious festival started in 1979 and held on the first Sunday in November to commemorate Guru Nanak's birthday. Didar Bains, a large donor and one of the founders, says tens of thousands come from all over the country to hear the reading of the Guru Granth Sahib, *kirtans* and demonstrations of martial arts.

"It's a great event," Dr. Kang agrees, "but sometimes people tend to treat religious events like they are just for Sikhs, although for the Sikh Parade everybody's welcome." The Punjabi American Festival is now an annual spring *mela*, complete with

Zero Tillage in Indo-Gangetic Plains

Eco-friendly and cost-efficient farming takes root

Across the vast fields of India's breadbasket, millions of farmers anxiously count the days between their wheat harvest and rice planting season. Too many lost days could cost a month's earnings. And farmers desperate for a fast crop turnaround often end up turning their fields into smoke stacks. Burning harvest residue is a better option for them than taking time to plow the land. But that's not the right way. "This is terrible for the environment and the land, but in their minds, it saves them money in the short term," says Raj Gupta, India coordinator for Rice-Wheat Consortium for the Indo-Gangetic Plains (RWC).

Now a major agricultural transformation is sweeping across India's northern rice- and wheat-growing belt and helping farmers save time as well as conserve precious natural resources. The method, called "zero tillage," utilizes a seed drill that can cut through crop residue. The seed is then dropped directly into the soil. Farmers no longer have to engage in expensive and time-consuming plowing. Nor do they have to resort to burning off harvest waste to decrease their time until

A farmer in Karnal, Haryana, who has used zero tillage to plant wheat in his field.

Courtesy RWC





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bhangra, folk dances, songs and plenty of good food. “It took off so well that right now our event is drawing more people than the capacity of the fairgrounds.” Dr. Kang also helped start a local TV program in Punjabi called “Apna Punjab,” still running after more than a decade. It provides public service information and a forum to discuss local issues.

Then came September 11, 2001. Of that, Dr. Kang says, “I was very hurt about what had happened to our country. And then I was doubly hurt that we were blamed for something we had nothing to do with. So I felt rather than getting mad at other people, that, as I was an educated person of the community, it’s my obligation to help other Americans understand.” He, along with other Sikhs, wrote articles, gave speeches and sent e-mails. They raised seed

Dr. J.S. Kang, a founder of the Punjabi American Heritage Society, in his Yuba City clinic. The stained glass panel behind him incorporates a motif taken from the Golden Temple.

the next planting. This practice saves 75 percent or more on tractor fuel, obtains better yields and requires up to 30-50 percent less water.

RWC, formed in 1994, started zero-till farming in Pantnagar in Uttar Pradesh. In the past, the zero-till project in the Indo-Gangetic Plains of South Asia—covering Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bangladesh—has been funded by the World Bank, British Department of International Development, Directorate-General of Development Cooperation of Netherlands and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The India office of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) stepped in to fund the Indian component of the project in September 2003 when ADB funding came to an end, Gupta says. RWC is now one of the programs of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, a global alliance that mobilizes science to benefit the poor.

The concept of zero tillage was developed in the late 1950s by George E. McKibben at the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In the 1970s James Clarke McCutcheon pioneered and popularized its use in Manitoba, Canada.

Change is often viewed skeptically by traditional farming communities. “Farmers want to see their gains right away,” says Gupta. In the case of the zero-till method, farmers couldn’t help but respond to the results. Arun Bhaku, a

farmer in Uttaranchal who has been using zero tillage for two years to plant rice and wheat, says, “My total yield every season has increased by at least 20 percent, and it saves me so much money. All my neighboring farmers have also started using it.”

“Leaving a protective blanket of leaves, stems and stalks from the previous crop on the surface is actually better for the long-term health of the crops and soil,” says Gupta. Residues provide a natural herbicide, retain nutrients in soil and moderate soil temperature. “By burning the residue, farmers were actually stripping the soil of microbes and moisture that are essential to a crop’s long-term health,” he adds.

Last year, zero tillage was applied to about one million hectares of farmland representing 10 percent of land farmed for rice and wheat and the livelihoods of 10,000 farmers in the Indo-Gangetic Plains of India. USAID provided \$1.5 million in research and development grants to engage private machine shops in adapting the seeder for different crops. The seeder has already been modified for chickpea, maize and sorghum. The special planters required for zero tillage are now being manufactured by about 100 companies in India. In the winter wheat planting season last year, 1.7 million hectares in India were farmed using zero tillage.

According to Gupta, farmers in Haryana and Punjab save Rs. 3,000-3,500 per hectare because of cost reduction in tillage, fuel, labor and water and

enhanced wheat productivity of one to two quintals per hectare. For farmers in eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal, the gains range up to Rs. 6,000 per hectare because of timely planting. The total gains from this during last winter’s wheat season were \$140-180 million, according to Gupta.

Latin America—where one crop with high productivity is generally harvested using zero tillage—has the maximum area under the system. In India, however, the technique is used for a double cropping system. The fact that rice is grown in wetlands—the plants are partially submerged in water—whereas wheat needs drylands was a major challenge, Gupta says.

Between June and September last year northwestern India suffered drought while many parts of the east were hit by floods. Gupta says such unpredictable weather is one more reason why resource-conserving technologies are so important in this region. “Crops survived longer on drought-affected fields where zero tillage or minimal tillage was used and crop residue was left on the surface. The residue also acts as good weed control,” he adds.

With two-thirds of India’s one billion people depending on farming for employment, the benefits of the zero tillage techniques can be widespread. □

Freelance writer **Ritu Upadhyay and Dipesh Satapathy** contributed to this article.

Social welfare and education rank high with Sikhs.

Right: Hardeep Kaur Singh, a real estate agent in Oroville, California, likes the life in America but wants her children to learn and preserve their Sikh heritage. She and her doctor husband are active in local community causes.

Below: Young dancers at the Punjabi American Festival.



he and his brother buy and sell commercial property to developers up and down the Central Valley. They are doing well and he has no wish to return to India. "I was 17 when I got here and it's like home to us."

Women entrepreneurs abound. Those from big farming families shoulder their share of the work and explore new areas of the business, like Bains' daughter Diljit. She is a real estate developer and is on the city planning commission. Others pursue careers in law and medicine. Hardeep Kaur Singh is a successful real estate agent in nearby Oroville. At her canyon-view house in between appointments, she explains that she just returned from the school, where her nine-year-old son was showing his hair to classmates. "Ever since Gurjies has been in kindergarten we have gone

money for a documentary film, *Mistaken Identity: Sikhs in America*, that has been screened at film festivals, police departments, schools and colleges. There were no attacks on Sikhs in the Yuba City area, and Kang credits the work of the local Sikh organizations and Yuba City's *Appeal-Democrat* newspaper, which aided the outreach effort by running informative articles.

Social welfare and education rank high with Sikhs, whose philanthropy is not limited to the gurdwara, but extends to causes that help everyone, from aiding rescue missions for the homeless to running marathons that raise funds for the American Cancer Society. Money is sent to India as a matter of course, often to support schools or hospitals. These concerns go hand in hand with political action, second nature to the Punjabis settled in California, who have been political from the earliest days. They have participated in American politics as candidates, as lobbyists and as campaign contributors. Didar Bains is a member of the Republican Presidential Roundtable, an elite group of business leaders who commit to give at least \$5,000 annually to the party.

Ironically, Dalip Singh Saund, who became the first Asian American elected to the U.S. Congress in 1956, couldn't get a job after taking his mathematics PhD at Berkeley, so he became a farmer. But times have changed, and their strong entrepreneurial

every year and he has shown his hair to the class." With her help he shares why Sikhs keep their hair uncut. "He wants to do it," Singh says. Singh and her doctor husband are active in the Punjabi American Heritage Society and other community organizations, and do their part in outreach. "We want to portray the similarities rather than the differences," she says. She came to America with her parents when she was seven. Her father was born in Dosanj, in Moga, Punjab. She values her Sikh heritage and she wants her three children to master Punjabi. "You can speak or talk, but if you can't read, how are you going to read *gurbani*?" Mothers have been tutoring the kids, and a new gurdwara preschool will help answer this need.

Harj Mahil's boutique, Indian Fusion, fronts the revitalized main street of Yuba City's old downtown. Festooned with saris and *lehengas* from floor to ceiling, it offers a bright splash of color to passersby. Mahil says, "I opened this shop because I wanted to create a fusion of design that could be appreciated by people of Indian and non-Indian heritage alike." Her non-Indian friend Lynn chimes in, fingering an embroidered silk *dupatta*, "I just love it. The work is so beautiful!" She wants to visit India.

Fusion may well be the byword for the active, community-minded Sikhs of the Central Valley. And while many families weathered hard times, their good humored resiliency and balanced view of the world have gained them not only acceptance but extraordinary success. The "okra king" Harbhajan Samra puts it simply: "If you don't have guts you don't get anything done. If you have guts, you can get it done." Undeniably, this Punjabi masala brings a welcome piquancy to the American melting pot. □

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Courtesy Punjabi American Heritage Society

spirit and savvy spells success for Punjabi Americans. They all want to own land and businesses, and many do. John Singh Gill, 42, came with his parents in 1980. He grows almonds on a small farm in Bakersfield; he runs a trucking company, Gold Line Express, in Woodland, whose 70 trucks serve Northern California; and