

# Toronto Then And Now

By Dr. Ram Singh

In January 1929 when I was 8 years old, my maternal grand uncle visited us for a week. He had just returned to India after 30 years of residence in Canada. For one full week, every evening, my sisters and I would huddle together around the fire, eagerly waiting for Uncle Munsha Singh to roll out stories of his adventures in Canada; he spoke of its natural beauty, marvelous cities, its honest and hard-working people and the way he was able to work hard and acquire a 300-acre farm. He said he enjoyed farming more in Canada than at home. He kept repeating that he had become a part of Canada and would die in Canada, which he did and was cremated on the farm. He told us about tall buildings, neat and clean homes, hard-working people, "People stand and work, they do not squat on the floor as we do here in India, but stand most of the time. Most of the work is done by machines. People cook on electric stoves. They are not afraid of soiling their hands." Uncle Munsha Singh's story was punctuated by the joy he felt in living a free and independent life: he was his own master. People there respected hard work. He, with his two sons, was able to save enough money to invest in a farm and buy a small bus for transportation. When he was in the mood, he would boast about how he and his sons would not put up with any trespassers through his property. He would stand up for his rights, and defend their property against any vandals. His two sons stood by him just like two strong arms, tested and sporting. Out of the Western prairies Munsha Singh and his two sons built a little fortune for themselves.

During the second world

erate, white or black, they are all one nation. "Why not visit Canada some day," said my friend, "if you get a chance. I am sure you will like it. His open-ended invitation rekindled my desire to see Canada, especially Toronto, if the opportunity would ever arise.

The chance to visit Canada came in 1949 almost 20 years after my first introduction to Canada through Uncle Munsha Singh's adventures. In April 1949 the World Council of Church's Youth Division invited me for a youth conference held at Whitby. At that time I was studying at Yale Divinity School, New Haven. I was very happy to receive this invitation. It was a fulfilment of my childhood dream. The conference was to last for one full week. After the conference, I was asked to stay on for a couple of more days to speak to church groups around the Toronto, London, and Kingston area. I met several Canadians and a few Indian young people. I also had the opportunity of looking around the countryside, admiring its natural beauty, unspoiled by man, and looking through the eyes of our uncle and Bob Gibson and Art Peacock. Between 1949 and 1951 I made about half a dozen trips to Toronto and Whitby to participate in conferences and to deliver lectures. Every time I visited Toronto I was impressed by its beauty, peaceful life, neat and clean homes and hotels. During my brief conversations with people from the Punjab, I found that many were doing very well. One conversation was with the Taj Mahal Restaurant cashier. He said he was happy to be here. Business here was good. He said that the government here favours independent and enterprising people, young and hard-working, and willing to

could not but feel that the Toronto subway was something unique. The subway cars were spacious, neat, and clean. They were designed for comfortable travelling. They were not littered with cigarette butts, peanut shells or papers like some of the subways I had seen. The subway stations were spotlessly clean, and for travellers' convenience they were planned along with shopping centers. The subway system looked like something out of a picture book.

In the twenty-seven years since I first visited Toronto many changes have taken place. The city has developed into a cosmopolitan metropolis. Its population has increased from less than a million to almost 3 million. There are large high rise building complexes, plazas, shopping centers, and highways. Now there are many more ethnic groups settled in Toronto, including a large number from India and Pakistan, Africa, and the Caribbean. Today, Toronto is the most important business and commercial center of Canada. It has no ghettos or slums, no shantytowns, and it is one of the most scenic and cleanest cities in the world.



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In May 1975 during a visit to the Board of World Mission of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, I was told that there is a considerable amount of ten-

Carolina and seen firsthand racial discrimination there. I had also got a jolt while travelling in England, by being referred to as "that coloured fellow waiting outside." But I found the Mission concern difficult to comprehend, because my experience of life in the United States and Canada had created a very different impression about Canada. To me, Toronto was very tolerant, and that impression lingered on in my mind. I asked the Mission Board to give me time to look at the situation to see whether or not such a study was really warranted. I spent the next two weeks meeting some of my old students and friends in Toronto, students who number more than 60, and discussed the Mission Board's concern with them. During my discussions, I received suggestions for and against the project. Some of the people who complained about discrimination did not think such a study would prove useful, as it might create a "white backlash". But most of them were in favour of bringing these facts into the open and to the notice of the government. Yet there were still other people who outright denied the existence of deliberate and planned discrimination. This group, most of whom had come to Canada before 1965 said that part of the blame for this discrimination must be laid at the feet of the immigrants themselves. They said that it is a two-way process and immigrants must accept part of the responsibility. However, they also said that, given enough time, we should be able to overcome it. After these discussions, I went back to Yale University Library to study the material already available on discrimination, to make up my mind. In the first week of June, I accepted the Mission Board's offer to conduct this study and make specific suggestions how to overcome the problem.

As I was going through this material on discrimination, the