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Local Arts

The history of B.C.'s South Asian communities, only partially preserved in archives, is slipping away

April is Sikh Heritage Month in Canada. To recognize this and celebrate the history of the local South Asian community, the City of Surrey/Surrey Archives is hosting a free virtual talk by Dr. Satwinder Bains.

Shawn Conner

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Group photo of children in front of the Vancouver 2nd Avenue Sikh Temple. South Asian Canadian Digital Archive, University of the Fraser Valley. jpg

South Asian Heritage in B.C.

When: April 14 at 6:30 p.m.



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Where: Online

Info and registration: surrey.ca/archives

April is Sikh Heritage Month in Canada. To recognize this and celebrate the history of the local South Asian community, the City of Surrey/Surrey Archives is hosting a free virtual talk by Satwinder Bains.

An associate professor at the South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley, Bains will discuss the experiences and contributions of the South Asian community in B.C. and the South Asian Canadian Digital Archive. We talked to the professor about the archives and the importance of documenting history.

Q: Have you gone through all of the archives yourself? Is there anything you haven't seen?

A: We know what's there. They hired us two years ago, just before the pandemic. It's not so much what's in the archives, but getting people engaged with the archive. There's lots of archival information out there sitting in briefcases and bedrooms and closets that nobody has access to. What I'm really interested in is making the archive more accessible both in terms of building and utilizing it. We're not even at the stage where people in the South Asian community understand the value of their own archive. We're at stage one. We're just unearthing histories that have been buried for so long. The urgency of it all is what I want to talk about.

Q: There's an archival photo of children standing in front of the Vancouver 2nd Avenue Sikh Temple. What's the significance of the image?

A: That image is really iconic for us. Prior to this photograph, the South Asian migration was mostly of men. A handful of women met the restriction criteria and applied to be let in for humanitarian reasons, but a law prevented women and children from coming to Canada. A homesteading picture like that shows that people aren't just temporary visitors being used and exploited for labour, but that they have a family system where children are being born. The story has so much resonance, it gives us so much courage. Despite so much discrimination, men and women still came to Canada and wanted to make it their home. Maybe a couple of years before this photo there were no children here of South Asian descent. We don't know how our history has excluded us. It hasn't been recorded anywhere, it hasn't been studied, it hasn't been analysed or held to account.

Q: Why is there an urgency around bringing these archives to people's attention?

A: Our libraries are dying. By that I mean the physical libraries, the people. We are losing that access. If we had started this 50 years ago, we would have a much richer and more robust archive. We don't have that because we were in the survival stage. If we want to capture the true first-hand accounts of our history and our heritage, we are still so late. Surrey's population is 35 to 40 per cent South Asian. This needs to be part of the city's work plan. Who are our communities? Who do we represent? If we say we don't know where to get more archives, then put in development phases. We have been told that our heritage doesn't matter. It's not in the history books, it's not in the archives. We have to learn to understand and accept and honour our own histories. Let's get to that stage.

Q: Are you concerned that the younger generations might not care about their history?

A: That's the interesting thing. The younger generation wants to find their history. They're the ones who have the privilege of thriving in this community. They're the ones who will be asking these questions. So it behoves us to respond to those questions.

Q: We talked about the photo, and how it shows the emergence of South Asian families in Vancouver. What else would you like people to know about the South Asian diaspora?

A: That it has a very old and rich history. We've been here over 117 years. Our history is replete not just with challenges but with great successes. We are the beneficiaries of the resilience of our ancestors. We are here to stay and to build the country and, within our communities, a sense of heritage. Our stories need to be examined and understood and recorded and studied. That photograph shows, in the faces of those children, that we're here today because of them. We need to honour the legacy of our ancestors. They may not have been able to tell their stories, but as caretakers of history, we will, regardless of whether it's second- or third-hand. It can at least give us a glimpse into the past and to know that the past is not something to be afraid of or to hide, but to be examined.



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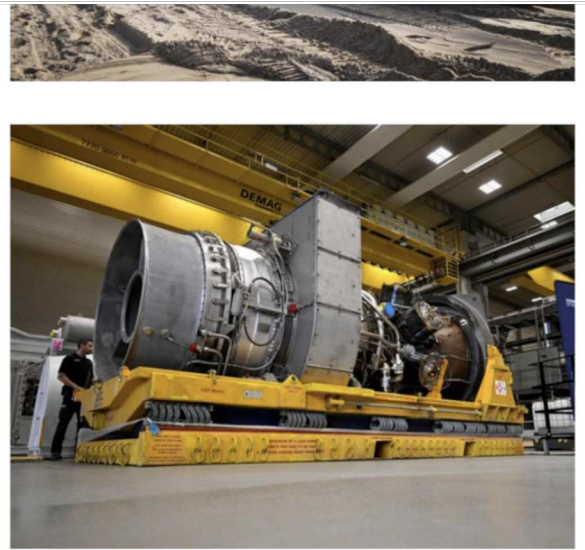
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