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UFV honours South Asian Canadian history by preserving photographer's legacy for future generations

Media Release



Dr. Satwinder Bains and Vimal Bodalia, the photographer's son, look through the collection on the day of the donation.

(Abbotsford) March 4 – Dr. Satwinder Bains, Director of the South Asian Studies Institute (SASI) at the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV), has partnered with the

Royal BC Museum and the BC Archives to sort, preserve and digitize more than three million historical photos. Prolific BC photojournalist Chandravadan “Chandra” Bodalia passed away in 2017, leaving his life’s work in the care of his family. To ensure the preservation of his legacy, his family members have entrusted the 400 carefully stored boxes to SASI.

The collection includes photos, invoices, business cards, and event posters. Some are from organizations that disbanded years ago, the only photographic proof they existed at all. They document hundreds of South Asian cultural events, political rallies, parties and weddings from 1980 on. Each photo fills a historical gap where the stories of over a million South Asian Canadians have previously gone untold.

“Our culture, religion, politics, contributions and practices don’t show up in the Canadian record,” says Bains. “Chandra’s work is a national treasure. The photographs show that South Asians were everywhere. We’re not just arrived, we’re not temporary citizens, we were and are contributing partners in Canadian living.”

SASI has enlisted the help of UFV students to sort the large collection. The photos serve as a powerful message to those who see them.

“Now young people can say, ‘This is home,’” says Bains. “We’re always being told ‘go back.’ But this is Canada, this is our life. This is a record, this is evidence. We can say, ‘we were here.’”

Bains appears in the collection herself, smiling next to BC’s former Attorney General Wally Oppal in 2014.

“Although Chandra was a man of few words, he spoke through the photos,” says Thamilini Jothilingam, SASI’s digital asset archivist. “They are a beautiful way of seeing his inner world.”

In the words of the photographer’s son, the pictures are his eyes.

Bodalia kept a meticulous log of every event he ever photographed, often travelling to multiple shoots in one day. He kept every receipt from the London Drugs on East

Hastings where he made all his prints. Bodalia printed duplicates of every photo on his own dime, often giving them to his subjects for free — the overall cost would have been more than \$500,000. He carefully labelled each envelope, then sorted them by date and by category: “Parties” and “Media.” It was an intensive, colossal labour of love.

SASI now pours the same love and care into archiving his work. When complete, the digitized collection will be available to view on the [South Asian Canadian Digital Archive](#). More information about SASI’s work with Bodalia’s photos can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

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