YUBA CITY, CALIFORNIA

American Punjabi Sikhs

Just to the north of Sacramento, California's state capital, in the fertile Sacramento Valley, is one of the largest Punjabi communities in North America. Immigrants from South Asia's Punjab region began to settle in California more than a century ago. Named for its five rivers, the Punjab's rich, arable land has fed the Indian subcontinent for millennia and remains a vital farming region today, in both India and Pakistan. Northern California's own bountiful agricultural land and river systems reminded the South Asian newcomers of the land they left behind.

The Punjabi immigrants who sought their fortunes in the United States at the turn of the 20th century were predominantly Muslims and Sikhs. Early immigrants most often got jobs as railway construction workers or farm laborers. Planting, growing and harvesting crops came naturally to the Punjabis. The first Sikh temple, established in Stockton, California, in 1912, became a social hub where immigrants learned about employment opportunities throughout California's Central Valley. Few of the early Punjabi immigrants brought their families with them, and some Punjabi men married local, often Mexican, women. Over the years, as U.S. immigration laws changed, increasing numbers of Punjabi families settled in the Sacramento Valley.

Top: Sujan Singh and Sunita Nakhwal built the Punjab Bazaar into a thriving supplier of South Asian cooking necessities. © Dean Tokuno

Shared Cultures

Today about 10,000 Sutter County and Yuba County residents are immigrants or descendants of immigrants from the Punjab. Most remain connected to the land, and Punjabi Americans are among California's most successful farmers. Second- and third-generation Punjabi Americans and new arrivals now include doctors, dentists, lawyers, educators, retailers, engineers, bankers and public servants.

There is no "Little India" or "Little Pakistan" in Yuba City or

"EDUCATION IS THE KEY TO THE FUTURE, BUT IT'S IMPORTANT TO GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY, AND STAY CLOSE TO THE LAND."

— Kash Gill

Banker, farmer and city council member Kash Gill was Yuba City's mayor from 2009-2010, the first Punjabi American to hold the office.

Courtesy of Kash Gill

SIKH VALUES ARE AMERICAN VALUES

"Sikh values are the same as American values; the concepts of justice and equality can be found throughout our holy scripture."

© Dean Tokuno

Dr. Jasbir Kang came to Yuba City in 1991, after serving his medical residency at Chicago's Cook County Hospital. A highly regarded physician and a respected community member, he has made it his mission to help others better understand the Sikh religion and way of life, while celebrating the ideals and heritage of his adopted home. "Sikh values are the same as American values; the concepts of justice and equality can be found throughout our holy scripture," he explains.

He and his wife, Sukhjit, want their three American-born children to have rich, multicultural experiences. Kang and like-minded community leaders created the Punjabi-American Heritage Society to acquaint other Americans with Punjabi culture. Kang is a founder of the annual Punjabi-American Festival. His other outreach efforts include writing, public speaking and producing educational videos. After the September 11 terrorist attacks he was a consultant for the independent film documentary *Mistaken Identity: Discovering Sikhs* (2004), which depicts American Sikhs' heritage and distinctive appearance. Since 1993, Kang and his brother Jasjit have produced a weekly local TV program, *Apna Punjab,* where newsmakers are interviewed in Punjabi and English.

Honored as Physician of the Year 2009–10 by the nonprofit Fremont-Rideout Foundation for his work in diabetes education and prevention, Dr. Kang extends his community service well beyond the Punjabi-American community, earning recognition by Sacramento-based public television station KVIE as a "local hero" in 2006.

Dr. Kang says he was drawn to America not only by the prospect of material success but because Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy were his heroes. The United States exceeded his expectations: "I found justice and fairness. I have found human dignity. I found tolerance and love. I found generosity of spirit, a country that rewards hard work."

GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

"Culture is…the passing on of important values: a strong work ethic, constant learning, bettering yourself, giving back to the community." © Dean Tokuno

In **Kiran Johl Black's** orderly office are packages of walnuts bound for markets all over the world: Europe, the Middle East and the Pacific Rim. Black is marketing director for the Sacramento Valley Walnut Growers Association, a cooperative that processes and markets walnuts and is owned by local farmers, including her father. Previously, she was political affairs manager for the California Farm Bureau, and as a director in its national affairs and research division, she lobbied in Sacramento and Washington. It's a generational twist on the family business of agriculture. Black and her two younger sisters grew up on a family farm begun in the 1960s by her grandfather, whose operation now produces peaches, prunes and walnuts in three counties.

Her father, Sarb Johl, got his degree in engineering and electronics, but used his education to expand and diversify the business. He and Kiran's mother, Prabhjot, a schoolteacher, always emphasized academic achievement, leadership and community service — and wanted her to become a doctor.

At the University of California, Davis, she began pre-med studies but, like her father, found growing things and "feeling the soil in your hands" far more appealing. She switched her major to crop science and management. "I waited a bit to tell my dad. But you have to do what you love," she explains.

Being U.S.-born and married to a non-Punjabi — who has joined the family business — Kiran Black is definitely bicultural, but points to what her two worlds importantly have in common. "Culture is more than food, clothing and music and is certainly more than ethnicity," she said. "It is the passing on of important values: a strong work ethic, constant learning, bettering yourself, giving back to the community."

Hari Singh Everest is in the center surrounded by his children and grand-children.
Courtesy of The Appeal-Democrat

THE LATE HARI SINGH EVEREST WAS THE FIRST SOUTH ASIAN TO TEACH IN YUBA CITY SCHOOLS.

nearby Marysville, no special clustering of ethnic restaurants and shops. Punjabis have long been integrated into the community, living among other Americans of wide-ranging ethnic and social backgrounds. It is not so much assimilation as sharing cultures. At Walmart or Starbucks or on Plumas Street in Yuba City's restored downtown, men with full beards and distinctive turbans — traditional for observant Sikhs — are common sights, as are women wearing Punjabi salwaar kameez or saris.

To fulfill foreign-language requirements, students at the local high schools can study Punjabi, as well as French or Spanish. There is Punjabi programming on local cable TV and radio. A domed Sikh temple, or gurdwara, stands on Tierra Buena Road, one of five gurdwaras in the area. Non-Sikhs are always welcome, and visitors on any day are offered a free meal, known as langar.

Since 1980, on the first Sunday in November, the Tierra Buena Sikh temple celebrates the anniversary of the Guru Granth Sahib — the scripture of this 500-year-old monotheistic religion — with an annual parade that attracts 50,000 to 80,000 participants and spectators. In keeping with Sikh tradition, all are offered refreshment at the temple.

The Punjabi-American Festival, held each year on the last Sunday in May, is organized by the Punjabi-American Heritage Society, which was founded in 1993 to encourage cross-cultural understanding in the community. The festival is a secular celebration of Punjabi food, film, music and dance.

A family worships in the Tierra Buena Sikh temple in Yuba City, California.

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Singers perform traditional *kirtan,* hymns taken from the Sikh holy book, at the Tierra Buena temple.

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