

Canadian Punjabis – a personal perspective

by Dr. Balwinder Singh

Circumstances shape the destiny of people. But the uprooted Punjabis, now spread over the entire world, have invariably shaped the circumstances to formulate their own destiny. To shed my eulogizing outfit, and to avoid any debate, let me hasten to offer as much kudos to certain other communities too which have excelled and earned an enviable status in the foreign land.

The Diaspora, the term hitherto associated solely with the Jews, has been, of late, as much in vogue for the Punjabis settled abroad – for good or bad reasons. Having experienced both the enlightened as well as the darkened side of my brethren in several countries from the UK to the USA, from Australia to my present abode – Canada, my inner-self has been loaded with bricks bats and bouquets, albeit not in the same proportion. Exemplification will dispel any doubts: most recently one of us was exalted to the honorable position of Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister of Canada, a place now inhabited by some three hundred thousand people of the same creed, including the former premier of the largest province, British Columbia, a few provincial and federal ministers, extremely successful business people, and the professionals of all hues; the same day two Punjabi truckers were apprehended at the US-Canada border, smuggling marijuana and other banned stuff.

How would you cope with living in the vicinity of this dichotomous environment? Yeah, you can always say ‘I care two hoots’, and get busy with your chores, or show up your sensitivities and find yourself either in the rejoicing and celebrating mood, or seek a shelter to mask your identity lest your colleagues at work and the law governing personnel should recognize you as a specimen of the same breed the bootleggers belong to.

The quintessential busy schedule of life in the West leaves you with the Hobson’s choice and you decide to stay aloof from such events, and their actors, that sadden you. But that is only after such people have been identified that you try to disassociate your self from the proverbial bad apples. It is not that the *Parvasi* (immigrated) Punjabis encounter this phenomenon anew only after they arrive in the foreign countries but it is because most of them left their motherland for this very reason. No matter how hard you try to be objective, the potential immigrants may find some sarcasm in this writing. I offer my sincere apologies to them.

Let me jump out of this situation and I can see Punjabis in myriad roles. One thing that earns respect from all new settlers in the rich counties is the dignity of labour. And that is exactly where most new immigrants start. Truthfully, this could be the reason why they do not despise such work.

Without an iota of doubt, virtually everyone rues his/her decision of leaving a lucrative job or a flourishing business back home, at least in the initial years of his/her entry. Rarely, however, one packs off for the good. Those who tried returned a little after, starting again from the zero level. And they rued again for losing time. It surely speaks volumes of the economic opportunities, mundane comforts and future for their younger generations that Canada, Australia or America has to offer.

Some of the places like Southall (UK), Yuba City (California), Surrey (British Columbia), Brampton and Mississauga (Ontario) are replicas of the Punjab they bade adieu. The Punjabis have especially used the Canadian immigration system to their utmost advantage and filled the surroundings of Vancouver, Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton and Toronto – to name a few – to such great numbers that turban wearing Sikhs and ladies clad in *salwar-kameez* are now a common species. Here, infact, the white people appear to be a minority.

And they have not come here sans their ethos - some dear to them, some strange and funny to the members of other races. The geographical focus of a particular ethnic group is what demographers, sociologists, and planners are concerned about. It adds to their future worries, for this phenomenon belittles and defeats the concept of multiculturalism, Canada so much prides itself on. However, Punjabis tend to land and settle where their relatives and buddies arrived before. While it is quite natural to do so experience shows that it leaves little chance to learn a new language to meet and interact with new people, or understand and appreciate the culture of the immigrants hailing from other parts of the globe.

Such pockets have obviously come up with their own plazas, built and managed by the people of the same area or the same village in Punjab. The new immigrants have mixed feelings about this trend. Some cheer their seniors' achievements; others steadfastly vie. Majority prefers to be self-employed and leave their job at the very first opportunity available. It is not only to earn more but also to be their own masters, a peculiar characteristic of the natives of the land of five rivers. No wonder, thousands of them are into the taxi and trucking business.

Punjabi *Jatts*, primarily associated with farming, have left their ancestral garb (unlike some big farmers in the US) and entered the domain of other castes' occupations. Businesses dealing in grocery, jewelry, sweets, garments, mechanical repair, construction, carpentry, haircutting etc. are galore – owned and run by the *Jatts*. This, however, eschew their business acumen (they genetically lack) and thus turns into a game of unhealthy competition among themselves. This is inwardly affecting all of them.

Religion goes where its followers go. This is so true with the Punjabis now settled in all the rich – and not-so-rich – countries. The places of worship (Gurduwara) have sprung up like the plazas. So has the politics therein. Most such places are individually owned and managed by committees owing allegiance to, and at the mercy of, those who are the legal custodians of the land and the building. Most also portray themselves to have their faith in the separatist movement for the realization of Khalistan, which is arguably more apparent in the West than in where this land is proposed.

The organization of two separate *Nagar Kirtans* (procession) on the same day to celebrate the anniversary of the formation of the *Khalsa*, has lead to great tensions among the members of the Sikh community, making a mockery of thy selves in the eye of the Canadian law. Some immoral practices within the vicinity of the religious places have found the managers in an awkward position to defend themselves or those culprits who come on a visitor's visa.

The life in Canada is very tough – from the beginning to the very end. Unfortunately, the people of Punjab hold a different imagery and they stubbornly keep clinging to it. They refuse to accept the reality (as narrated by their relatives and friends living in Canada) and want to join them at any cost. The cost many pay is beyond

comprehension – financially, but more importantly, morally. Stories of selling all their property, marrying off their young daughters to old-aged divorcees, and marrying even within the blood relations (a practice not allowed in the Sikh or Hindu religion) are now an open secret to the Canadian immigration department. With the number of fake marriages growing, the officials have started suspecting the genuine ones too.

The bare fact that most of the Punjabis living in Canada are better off than what they were, or what they would be, if they did not come here, keeps other Punjabis dreaming of immigrating to the land of opportunities. But the nostalgia of settlers remains. I am not insensitive to that either.
