

NEH PROJECT

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PORTRAITS: Indian Sikhs

ANNOUNCER:

Here in an American setting the Sikhs observe their 500 year old traditions of dress and language, preserved through their religion.

The Sikhs are followers of Sikhism, a religion founded by Guru Nanak, who lived in the 15th century, at the same time as Martin Luther. Guru Nanak called upon people to "worship the One Indivisible God, to live virtuously and to be tolerant of others." The word "Sikh" means disciple or student.

Guru Gobind Singh, the 10th and last Guru, organized his peace loving followers into a military force to defend themselves against tyranny, suppression and social injustice. They adopted five distinctive signs of their faith: not to cut their hair, to wear a steel bracelet, sword, special trousers and comb. The men took the name Singh, or lion, and the women Kaur, or princess. They stood out in defiance of the tyrannical Moslem rulers, the Hindu caste system, superstitions and orthodoxy. They believe in nothing else except one Almighty God and universal brotherhood. They are very western in thinking and actions. However, their dress causes them to stand out in contrast to the American society which they serve

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as expert farmers, doctors, engineers and teachers, but they take pride in preserving their culture.

SHAMSHER PURWAL: (:10)

It is important to preserve your own culture. It's a background; its a way of life. If everybody lost it, it would be lost forever and we'd never get it back.

ANNOUNCER:

Their way of life is based on values that stress family life, hard work and service to mankind. When a young Indian came to America a relative would educate him.

PURON SEDOO: (:30)

Yea, that was in 1923 I and my cousin ~~we~~ move with them in Clovis there and stay there. Later there were three students. They were attending Fresno State at the time and then we were five students with uncle.

ANNOUNCER:

The Ghadar Party collected large sums of money to work for Indian independence and the Khalsa Diwan took care of educational, religious and welfare needs. Consequently the Sikhs have posed little burden on American social services. The Sikh temples were built in Stockton, El Centro and Vancouver. Food and lodging always await the wayfarer at Sikh temples through out the world.

Sikhs have rejected the caste system and to share food is a religious symbol of equality. The shelter and food is provided free at all times without any regard to caste, creed, color or religion. In the Sikh temples no distinction can be made between a Sikh and a non-Sikh, rich and poor.

Sikhs come from the state of Punjab in northwest India. It is a rich agricultural area which produces 60% of India's food with 2% of the population. Sikhs are known for their military courage along with educational and professional achievements, but it was their love of the land and knowledge of farming that attracted them to the San Joaquin Valley in 1907.

PURON SFD00: (:27)

We people are farmers back home, and that's all we know our biggest part, but, huh, farming is one of the very important things too. And, we own the land, yes, we love to take care of our own land, to keep it clean and water it.

ANNOUCNER:

They earned a reputation among the ranchers as strong, robust, loyal and honest workers. Several men could work alone without a foreman. They stood out as models to other workers. They are

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also frugal and with only small wages, they saved and invested in land. Their contribution to the American economy is much greater than their consumption.

When they arrived at the turn-of-the-century, most were illiterate. There were never more than 6,000 Indian men living in groups of 10 to 30, but they stood out and were discriminated against along with the other Asians. Laws of 1913, 1917 and 1923, prohibited land ownership, immigration and revoked citizenship.

Life was hard. One woman found she could not wear her Indian dress or children would throw things at her in the street. Men had to shave their beards and cut their hair and not wear a turban in order to find work, a place to live or a restaurant in which to eat.

Family life was non-existent for all but a few of the 6,000 Indian Sikhs. Only about ten had Indian wives. Some married Mexican women, and a few married American women who then lost their citizenship.

MCU OF MRS. SEDOO

MRS SEDOO: (:04)

When I first married, it was in 1930. I lost my citizenship.

ANNOUNCER:

Many didn't marry at all, and a few waited many years to return to India and marry.

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KEHAR SINGH BRAR:

I am 87 years old. I came to Clovis in 1917... We get married 56 years old...I stay here single for 35 years.

ANNOUNCER:

By 1946, new laws made it possible to bring wives and families from India. Men who left families in India were then allowed to bring them to the United States. With the new arrivals from India came new adjustments. This time in favor of preserving Indian Sikh traditions.

JARNAIL PUREWAL: (:50)

My oldest son, I brought him over to the United States in 1957... In 1968, he was drafted in the Army...He had a turban, beard like the Sikhs have, ya' know. It was a most important sign for our religion...in the Army, they didn't want the hair, and they didn't want the turban...So, I called the commanding officer.. finally, in 1969 I receive a letter from him that he was granted permission to have his beard and turban.

ANNOUNCER:

At last Sikhs, who had served with valor and courage in World War I and II, could do so without foregoing the symbols of their religion.

Striking a balance between the modern American way of life and that of the Sikh heritage is often precarious, but many young Indian Sikhs manage to balance the two very wisely. Jagindar Brar Gill's feelings are expressed about the traditional arranged marriage.

FEMALE ANNOUNCER: (Statement of Jagindar B. Gill)

I've always felt proud and very privileged to be an American. At the same time I've always had strong feelings about my Indian heritage.

Since both of my parents are Indian, growing up in Clovis, California, my brothers and I were always aware of our Indian culture. We were Americans with the extra advantage of a second cultural background.

It was a real treat to change from a pair of Levis into the beautiful Indian Saris and be in a new world.

Religion was also very important to me, important to me, important enough that I wished for my children the choice of learning and reading about the teaching and philosophies of the Sikh Gurus. I really wanted my children to have the advantage I had of knowing another culture.

Therefore, I felt that to hold on to all the things I cherished about my Indian heritage, I would someday marry a man who also cherished

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them.

To meet an Indian fellow, or to arrange a marriage, the usual "accepted" way, is through family or friends. Actually we should call it the arranged meeting, because not all arranged meetings lead to arranged marriages. To be quite honest, my American side was questioning this approach. But my Indian side knew that it was truly what I wanted to do. With all the trials and tribulations that a marriage encounters we have a happy one, two lovely children and much love and respect for each other.

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SNEAK UNDER THEME MUSIC

T H E E N D ' ! !