

Sikh and Indian Australians

TEACHER RESOURCE 2 - MEMORIES OF BABA RAM SINGH'S GRANDDAUGHTER

Harbhajan, 57 years old at the time of interview, is the granddaughter of Baba Ram Singh.

1. When did your family come to Australia?

My grandfather, Baba Ram Singh, came to Australia in 1898. He was in the Bangalow area and sold fruit and vegetables on a sulky and cart. Later, my father [Khatkar Singh] joined his father at the age of 13 in Australia and attended school in Bangalow.

2. When did you arrive and please describe your early experiences in Australia?

I came in 1958 with my mother, [I was] aged about 13 years. To me Australia was a wonderful country. I helped my father with our banana plantation, as did all of the family. Most of the time we were occupied in work and had a Punjabi existence. Sometimes we would go into the town as an outing and then I wore Western dress. I then started living with my grandfather, Baba Ram Singh, and my grandmother to help them as they were elderly. We had a vegetable patch which I helped tend and my grandfather would milk the cow. I didn't know much English and picked up bits from the family.

3. In what ways was the Sikh religion important to your grandfather?

My grandfather was a very religious man. We had a room in the house that was devoted to prayer and which housed the Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh holy writing). Grandfather was the first to bring the Guru Granth Sahib to Australia. I remember he would pay homage and read the holy scriptures just before dawn, as is the custom.

Every year in January, Sikhs from all around the area and other places in Australia would come to our house to partake in *kirtan* and readings from the Guru Granth Sahib and share *langar* (a meal following devotions). The children, women and the elders would all come. On these occasions when I woke in the morning and saw all the vehicles (which were in the main Land Rovers) it seemed as if an army of people had arrived. It was so good to see so many people, as we had an isolated existence on the farm. I enjoyed those days very much. The guests always arrived about 6am, so that there was plenty of time for them to return on the same day.

People came from Woolgoolga - Narranjan Singh, Pritim Singh, Jagir Singh, the brothers William, Jimmy and Frederick Malhi, Booja Singh, Dharon and his wife, Gurmej Kaur, and the Arkan brothers Maluke anchoret (with his wife, Joginder, and children).

4. What do you recall about Woolgoolga in the late 1950s and the 1960s?

I used to visit Woolgoolga with my grandfather. This was because at anytime when an akhand paath was celebrated they would invite my grandfather to take the holy Guru Granth Sahib to Woolgoolga as there was no official place of worship at this time. There were only a few families in Woolgoolga in those years and they worked in the banana [industry]. It was a simple life and the families were all very close. People in Woolgoolga were very friendly and warm; it was different to today. People were very interested in having a place of worship and were encouraged by my grandfather. When the First Sikh Temple was built, Baba Ram Singh attended the opening.

In 1969, when the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara site was acquired, Baba Ram Singh went to Woolgoolga and stayed during the time a marquee was erected on the site to celebrate a sahaj path. He was asked to lay the foundation stone for the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara. On this occasion, Hemet Bhagat Singh Lath, who performed kirtan (the singing of the Sacred Hymns from the Guru Granth Sahib accompanied by music) at the sahaj path. He was very taken with this Sikh and joyous at the religious kindred spirit. On his return home to Teven (a town in northern NSW) he said, "I have been to Amritsar", so highly did he think of Bhagat Singh's kirtan.

5. In what ways did your grandfather influence your life?

Then my grandfather arranged my marriage to the son of Bhagat Singh's sister, Perm Singh Bains, and we were married in 1971. My grandfather, Baba Ram Singh, died in 1983, aged 106 years.

Taken from:

<http://apnaorg.com/books/sikhs-in-australia/Chapter-2/ch-2-page-4.html>

See an explanation of the italicised religious terms below:

The **bold questions** are examples of the types of open questions a students could ask when interviewing of a migrant.

Have students discuss with a partner what questions they would you like to ask a non-European migrant who is now living in Australia:

- their reasons for migrating to Australia
- their first impressions of the country
- how they have adjusted to life in Australia?

A class discussion on the usefulness of oral history can build critical thinking among your students.

Sikh religious terms used in this resource.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh Scriptures, the Living Guru for Sikhs

kirtan is the devotional singing of the praises of God in melody and rhythm.

Akhand Path the common practise of continuous recitation (without any break) of sacred religious texts. It is the non-stop, continuous recital of the Guru Granth Sahib from beginning to end.

Gurdwara (Gurudwara) a Sikh temple., a sacred place of worship for Sikhs which always has the Sri Guru Granth Sahib displayed in a prominent position.

langar - the meal provided to all people visiting the Gurdwara

Amritsar - The centre of the Sikh religion in the Punjab

Sehaj Paath (Sahaj Paath) - The slow reading of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji from beginning to end, with no time-limit for completion.



Guru Granth Sahib ((CC BY-SA 2.0) J Singh, wikimedia commons)