

THINK OUTSIDE YOURSELF

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North American Sikh politicians are rising, having succeeded in the less populated country of Canada, to get into elected office. Think Outside the Box, a well known cliché, means to transform oneself by thinking differently. Here's a new one: "Think Outside Yourself." This truism flows naturally from Sikh teachings. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, at page 474, extols to reach beyond the self to serve others: "*Aap gavaaye sewa karay ta(n) kitch paayae maan.*" TOY captures the traditions of sewa, of mediation, honest work and sharing with others the rewards of life. These fundamental ideals work for new Sikh mayors Preet Didbal and Ravi Bhalla. They now lead the river towns of Yuba City, California and Hoboken, New Jersey on opposite coasts. These small cities have populations under 75,000. The mayors were born and raised in their states, in the Sikh faith, which they credit as helping them enlarge their focus to stepping into the mainstream. At first, they served in various volunteer roles in their localities as native born Americans and children of immigrant families. Community service led each one to public service as city councilperson and now into the elected office of mayor of their cities.

Preet's ascension to the mayor's office was from a challenging path, as an independent no party preference voter in a rural community which has been Republican red for several election cycles. The rural areas of California were for a long time the Democratic Party's stronghold, when the governor was Pat Brown, the father of the current officeholder, Governor Jerry Brown. A Sikh who first came to study at UC Berkeley, Dalip Singh Saund, rode Pat Brown's coattails to serve two terms between 1957 and 1963 in the U.S. House of Representatives from the farm and desert counties east of San Diego and the Mexican border. Preet Didbal took the same journey in that she got a graduate degree, and returned to settle in Yuba City where others who looked like her were, and got involved. They both faced cultural barriers in different ways. Dalip Saund was not able to stay or eat in hotels where his campaign staff were allowed in since he was not white. Preet Didbal wanted to pursue a college education and her parents, immigrant farm workers, stood with her, even after she was raped. She is now a single mother who got involved

with the local planning commission over a decade ago and ran for city council in 2014. Only two years ago when her daughter turned 16, Preet told her about being sexual assaulted in the late 1980s. Women are speaking up about this. Preet has connected with many people.

Look internally at the Sikh communities in America, specifically Yuba City, the county seat of Sutter County, about 40 miles north of the state capital of California, Sacramento. To address community issues, we need to identify them.

The first gurdwara was established in 1969 in northwestern farmland just outside Yuba City. In the early years, windows would be broken at the gurdwara and at homes of Sikhs. Cars were vandalized. It seemed non-Sikhs objected to Punjabi immigrants settling in the area until there were surrounded by Punjabis. An arson that has never been prosecuted took place of a nearly complete mosque just north of the largest Sikh Gurdwara in 1994. With donations from all of the religious communities including local Sikhs, the mosque was rebuilt. Started in 1979 the annual Sikh parade in Yuba City was viewed as just a traffic headache for many years. It has grown into a weekend festival and by welcoming non-Sikhs. Shuttles and parking issues are dealt with and the view of many local people changed. Non-Sikhs bring out lawn chairs to watch on parade day Sunday and go to the Gurdwara bazaar and open house to see this peaceful celebration of the faith and service of humanity. Since it takes place a few weeks before Thanksgiving and just after Diwali, it is an auspicious way to start off the holiday season.



In the Sutter County Superior Court, every few years there is a new lawsuit to remove or replace management committee members or conduct elections. A public preschool was started on existing gurdwara property in the early 2000s. Plans were drawn up and funds collected to grow it into a grade school. Three years later, it was moved off the property and the playground there razed by a new committee. No public preschool continues, nor does any library exist in any gurdwara there. In 2017, a nonprofit community organization opened a Sikh Community Center which intends to offer a place for such needed activities. Online resources to research the founding Punjabi pioneers are hosted by UC Davis, <http://pioneeringpunjabis.ucdavis.edu>, and at a permanent exhibit at the local community museum. However, there was the negative news fairly recently of a stabbing and violence in the parking lot of the largest gurdwara when there was going to be a committee meeting. In fact, Sikh names are well represented on the criminal calendar at the local courthouse. People don't want to become fluent in English, nor do they want to register to vote if they are US citizens, because they want to not serve jury duty. Gurdwara factions are growing, with Ravi Das Sahib groups opening their own places of worship. Chairs and tables in langar hall continue to be an issue for management. When there was a change in committees, overnight the dining hall would be transformed. We have no ready

mediation process for the internal issues which the Sikh houses of worship continue to face, other than to litigate it seems. This may be something that groups who want to see Sikhs divided are encouraging, as they have been doing in Punjab.

Preet Kaur Didbal's rise came after two Sikh men had served on the city council of Yuba



City and in a place known for village values. In Punjab even now, there are few women leaders. In America, the proud Didbal family wanted to their daughter to be a member of the local community. She served on the planning commission for many years. Having been born in that community, she had friends and neighbors who accepted her as a local girl who decided to get educated, come back and stay and create economic growth and jobs for others. Sikhs bring a stimulus in November every year estimated at \$10 million plus to the local economy with the Sikh parade and festival. The growing Punjabi immigrant population practices many faiths now - Sikhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. There are three church services in Punjabi.

Ravinder Singh Bhalla was born in New Jersey and chose to go west to California for an undergraduate degree at UC Berkeley. He chose the law as a profession. After making political connections, he joined a law firm where former (and future) governors of New Jersey have been partners. He married Navneet Kaur, a human rights attorney. Ravi and his brother Amar, also an attorney, volunteered for the Obama campaign in 2008. That was when Ravi saw his chance in a country which elected an African-American as president. He was an unsuccessful candidate for statewide office, but did not let that deter him from winning a council seat in 2009. With endorsements and other connections, he won again in 2013 and is taking office as mayor in 2018 after leaving his law firm. It certainly seems this candidate has plans to seek higher office. In the months leading up to the mayor's race, Ravi raised money in California as well as the East Coast and spent over \$528,000 to be elected the next mayor of Hoboken. Ravi shattered a barrier as the first observant Sikh elected mayor in the United States. With his connections in the party and to New Jersey's U.S. Senator Cory Booker, he will be speaking to and interacting with party leaders in the nation's capital about his experience.



The city of Hoboken is across from Manhattan. In the mid-1980s, there were gangs called Dot-Busters who harassed Asian Indian women in particular in cities in New Jersey.

People who don't want to vote for a turbaned Sikh found their way into the 2017 election cycle by raising alarming false claims in opposition to the campaign of Ravi Bhalla. He was intentionally misidentified by his opponents on flyers before the election as a Muslim. Expect continued opposition to change and to people rising against who they still consider 'outsiders' even when they were born and raised in the United States. Muslims are vilified by opponents around the world. Still, the British elected one as mayor of London a few years ago. To many city residents whose primary concerns are about the city services and good government, religious identification is not a disqualifier now. It appears most voters didn't care about the false messages by opponents if there is a commitment to sewa. However, anti-immigrant sentiment is rising across America and motivating voters again.

The first Punjabis known to arrive in America came by sailing ship and were admitted to San Francisco on April 6, 1899, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Men went to work on the Panama Canal project in 1904. Sikh men also labored in the lumber mills of Washington and British Columbia. In 1907, a newsletter called *Free Hindustan* was published in Seattle. By 1910, most Indian immigrants were from Punjab and were primarily Sikh. Stockton's Gurdwara, the first in America, was incorporated in May 1912. It was where a newsletter in Punjabi was circulated of the first meeting in downtown Sacramento on New Year's eve in 1913 to organize a political movement. The Ghadar Party was for an armed revolution in the Indian subcontinent against the British. Its headquarters were in San Francisco and the first issue was published in November 1913 in Urdu. Astoria, Oregon is its birthplace, having had Ghadarites gathering there in April 1913. Arms and instructions on how to make bombs were to be sent to supporters to liberate India from the British. However, in July 1917, the US government broke up the movement when leaders were arrested. The charge in San Francisco federal court was conspiring against the U.S. and its ally, Britain, by having linked up with the Germans who twice in the 1900s wanted to take over Europe and the world. Trials took place in San Francisco and San Bruno has court records of those proceedings. Sikhs were implicated by party leaders in the trial of party president Ram Chandra, who was shot dead in court by Ram Singh, who was then killed by the US marshal on April 24, 1918. Party leaders took a turn left into socialism and Karl Marx to become a workers' party. When the labor union in Stockton came out for their deportation in October 1919, its members went to countries other than British India. The 1920s were a time that Americans and the courts viewed the free white man to be preferred, and British people as their relations who they had helped and were not convinced India needed independence by the Indians in the United States who were not to be feared because they had advocated American ideas, but were ineffective in their agitation from the West Coast for the British to leave India. Even so, they did highlight the nationalist movement for 'home rule' there.

Sikhs were hired by the timber mills in Washington and Oregon starting in 1906. They were big and tall and known not to miss work due to alcoholism, which was common among the locals employed in the industry. Locals didn't like competition. These 'dusky Singhs' were taking American jobs. In what the local newspaper reported as a riot, the locals pulled them from their homes and jobs on Sept. 4, 1907. Union workers targeted Labor Day as the day after which no more Orientals would be employed at the mill. Law enforcement took some of them to the Bellingham jail for 'their' safety. Sikhs got on trains heading north and south and were driven out of Bellingham and from other west coast cities. <http://www.bellinghamherald.com/>



In 2017, this history is remembered with plans to build a monument, an arch of healing, in the city of Bellingham: <http://archofhealing.org/>.

Bhagat Singh Thind arrived in Seattle Washington in 1913 and worked in a mill. In 1918, he joined the US Army and served in the Great War for the United States. Thind moved to Astoria, Oregon, studied many subjects at UC Berkeley and served as the secretary of the Ghadar Party from 1916 to 1917. He wanted to be a lawyer, but in the United States you had to be a citizen to practice law. In the early 1920s, he won, then lost his US citizenship in a court case in which the Supreme Court of the United States decided he was not a free white man: *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 261 U.S. 204 (1923).

After the immigration law of 1965 was signed by President Johnson, Asian professionals started to enter the country as immigrants. Some had already arrived as students after the early laborers described earlier. The trend in Silicon Valley and similar communities where there were many entrepreneurs and H1B workers is increasingly to go someplace other than the United States to start, expand or grow their businesses. For the sons and daughters of immigrants, they have no other place they know and for them, the United States is home. Sikhs are growing their political power and moving past making financial contributions to others seeking elected office. Sikhs are using their economic power to tell fellow Americans who we are and our issues. Since they are in almost every profession and industry in almost all countries of the world, it was foreseeable Sikhs would enter positions of power including government's highest offices.

Ravi Bhalla's message to his children is this: "Don't just look towards your own career, but make that connection between what you are doing in your professional life and in the community – your block, your neighborhood, your city, your town, really get involved in whatever way inspires you."

Preet Didbal and Ravi Bhalla rode the first wave of change sweeping the United States. Gurbir Singh Grewal was confirmed as the new Attorney General of the State of New Jersey. Lt. Colonel Kamaljit Singh Kalsi of the US Army is an advisor for the New Jersey Governor and very vocal about political issues and a likely candidate for public office.



Women who have had challenging lives are helping each other and speaking up. Minority men and women are joining with the disenfranchised including dreamers and millennials of other cultures, religions and ethnic communities to organize. They are learning to step beyond labels that define friends and strangers and identity politics. They are using new forms of communication and organization to connect with others.

It is likely city voters knew of the years Ravi and Preet spent on the council working on city issues. We like to think Americans want to give a newcomer to the mayor's office a chance to make necessary changes – and that would also include an introduction of their Sikh heritage to the rest of America.

Preet has stated economic growth is the top priority in an interview with the Los Angeles Times. Her rise was important and the news media in southern California, over 400 miles away, are taking notice of her breaking the barrier as the first Sikh female mayor in the United States. To those who are in office, she asks, are you serving the people or your personal agendas? She is truly an independent in not just party affiliation.

Sikh political leaders increase the visibility of Sikhs in mainstream America in 2018. The new mayors broke through ceilings and are serving this country as our Guru's teachings encourage us to wherever we live in the spirit of chardi kalaa which means stay in high spirits and eternal optimism. Go nextgen Sikhs. Be role models for others to TOY.