

A Conversation with Raj Kor

First Sikh Woman to live in Placer County

As told to Kulvinder Singh, Chairman, Sikhs of Placer County, www.placersikhs.org

At the Old St. Mary's Chapel in Rocklin, a panel of women who lived in the time of the founding of Rocklin and Roseville include Mrs. Whitney and Finnish people who settled in the area in the early 1900s. I am not there even though they knew of me but did not know me. My name is Raj Kor, pronounced "core." Raj means empire. Modernly people spell Kor as Kaur and it means princess in Punjabi. British officials in colonial India wrote my name this way.

When I was born, there was a British Raj. India had been colonized by the Europeans. French, Portuguese and Dutch colonies were in Puducherry/Pondicherry, Bengal, Ceylon, Malabar Coast, Coromandel Coast and Goa. Punjab until recently had a King, the great Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He died in 1839. His widow Maharani Jind Kaur was a legend. Her son, the last maharaja, was named Dalip Singh sometimes spelled Duleep or Daleep. He was taken away from her when he was 9 years old when a treaty was signed by his British guardians to raise him in England. They promised to return the Punjab to him when he reached the age of majority but the Queen of England, Queen Victoria, decided not to give him his kingdom. He was her 'Black Prince.' There is a movie made with that title that explores his life started to end. British military viceroys and governors who ran Punjab decided it was the Jewel in the Crown of the British Raj and were not going to let Punjab or any of India to which it had been annexed in 1849 go free. If it did, Britain would be a less powerful, like the Dutch and the French and Spanish were now. Conquest had made the British Empire the one where the sun never sets.

My grandmother remembered the Sikh empire of Maharaja Ranjit Singh of the 1830s. I was born in 1888 or 1892. As a teenager, I was married, the way we lived back in those days. Young teenagers married and had children by the age of 15. I had a daughter and two sons. In the early 1910s, my husband died and I was to marry my husband's younger brother and go and live with him in California. Families took care of children and widows, the family's responsibility. My second husband was my children's father's younger brother Dhana Singh Poonian. He moved

to California arriving between 1900-1909. He had been the head nurseryman of Kingmount Nursery in Loomis, California working for James Brennan on King Road. He started Poonian Nursery in 1911 in Loomis and was very successful with apple and pear nurseries. He was known for shipping 10,000 trees in a single truckload down to Walnut Grove for the Old King Ranch family. I learned this from “Yesteryear” Vivian Rasmussen’s book, chapter 9 about Loomis and surrounding areas volume 1, published in 1993. It goes back in time to the 1850s when Owen King, an Irish immigrant, was the first settler. The land was free (after driving the Native Americans out) just after the Gold Rush. Men from India worked in Placer County.

King’s great granddaughter Mary Elizabeth King had married James Brennan. They owned farms around King Road. The fertile soil made agriculture work profitable. Nurseries and orchards had seasonal farm work. Sikhs started working in Penryn, Loomis and Newcastle.

Dhana Singh Poonian learned his brother had died. He went back to Punjab. We married in 1921. I had to leave Punjab, the place where all my family and friends lived. I had no choice but to look to the future. We brought my boys, Dalip and Paritem, by ship to California. It took 21 days to arrive in San Francisco on July 1, 1921. I had to leave my eldest child my daughter who I would not see again for 35 years. My son Dalip died in California of a childhood illness. My son Paritem, 7, enrolled at Loomis Grammar School. He graduated from Roseville High School in 1934. He worked every day on our farm and nursery six miles southeast of Loomis.

He was the first in our family to finish high school and the apple of my eye and a good boy. My husband Dhana Singh Poonian died in the late 1930s. I was a single mother again. My son, a high school graduate, was proficient in farm grafting fruit trees because he had learned from his stepfather and uncle. We started Poonian Nursery of Roseville in 1957. It was very profitable. In the mid-1960s, we sold it and moved to Roseville. It was in my name. The business was managed by my son. We had farm workers and sold fruit trees all over northern California. A disease attacked the varieties of pears and apples we had in the area. Citrus and mandarin oranges which are everywhere nowadays replaced them when the disease abated.

We needed a daughter-in-law from the Sikh community but there were none near me to marry Paritem. Once Paritem had a wife, I would have grandchildren here in America. No Sikh families were coming to America due to the laws barring family immigration from Asia between 1924 and 1946. Paritem found a young woman who was ready to marry named Irene. Her parents said she would marry him, that Irene was over 15 years of age. Paritem married her in Nevada. She got pregnant right away. They lived with me while she was expecting. We knew a child was going to be born and could not have been more pleased when we found out it was a boy! Irene gave birth to my grandson Dalip Raymond Poonian. Then the trouble started. Irene left with the baby. He was given to me by the courts when Irene filed for divorce in Placer County. Irene was 14 years old. As far as I was concerned, she was my daughter-in-law and we would have kept her in the family and accepted her, but that was not to be.

She decided to divorce my son. After she had the baby, she was made a ward of Placer



County since she was still a minor. She was claiming she was not going to adopt the 'Hindoo ways' of her husband Paritem and wanted to end her marriage. She also claimed she was not the child of the white people who had signed a consent form for her as a minor to marry Paritem. She claimed she was raped by Paritem and then she married him in Nevada and she told the judge in court at the custody hearing that she hated him. The real facts came out in court when other witnesses described our home. We had a house that had furniture which cost \$2000 which was like a upper middle class home and we

could support my grandchild. The judge agreed. The foster home that Irene had been living at since she was born was not good for her and the baby. Apparently her real parents had given her

up when she was born to some white people who had wanted a child and raised her from when she was an infant telling her they formally adopted her, which turned out to be a lie. The fact was Irene was never adopted. She was sold to these people who later consented to the marriage to my son Paritem in writing when that became an issue. They knew of Paritem Poonian since he was a high school graduate and successful businessman in the 1930s. They consented to Irene marrying Paritem when Irene was only 13 or 14 years of age and Paritem was 8 years older.

During the divorce trial, it was revealed that they offered to send Irene back to live with us, the Poonians, for \$1500. This whole divorce and custody case was extortion. Our lawyer proved that and also that Irene's foster father had come over to argue and in fact beat me black and blue in April 1938. I reported it to the authorities but nothing happened to him. He was a white man. The district attorney didn't file cases against whites who victimized non-whites then. I had to testify about living arrangements in family court, something I never expected to do in my life. I didn't know English and had a Punjabi interpreter. The judge believed I was a better guardian for the baby. The divorce was finalized in November 1939 when Dalip was only a year old. The family court judge found that Paritem was not 'at fault' or cruel to Irene as she had claimed. At that time in California divorce was granted only on a showing of fault. Less than 2% of marriages ended in divorce. The judge cleared Paritem of neglect or abuse alleged by Irene. This was reported in newspapers all across California. His mother was white and a child of 14 who had a child right after she married my son in 1938 and divorced in 1939.

I wonder what happened to Irene. She said she wanted to end her marriage because she refused to raise a child with the inferior race of 'Hindoos' as his father and I were not white. Maybe she changed her mind, seeing her future is better with no young child tying her down. As the grandmother of Dalip Raymond Poonian, I was happy. He was an infant in this photo from 1938 where I am holding him, living primarily with me and my son Paritem. He died in 2015 leaving a son Nicholas Poonian. He was the first child born to a Sikh in Placer County.



In late 1939, Paritem's divorce was final in Auburn. We knew we could not go back to Punjab. The Sikhs in California had gathered and agitated to kick the British out, and were all on blacklists which would have got them jailed and tortured and likely hanged if they returned. So, like Dalip Singh Saund who came to Berkeley to study in 1920, the year before I got to



California, we were now unable to go back. We found out about a family in Arizona. The father, Diwan, was a Punjabi Sikh. Diwan was illiterate. He had 65 cents when he arrived in British Columbia Canada in 1906 by ship. He worked his way down to San Francisco, Fresno, Phoenix and Reno and then Imperial Valley where Dalip Singh Saund and others had farms in the 1920s. Diwan and a Mexican lady Cruz Merino, 20 years younger than him, had married. In 1923, Diwan and Cruz had a daughter Janie Diwan, who would marry Paritem in 1939 in Arizona. Cruz died during childbirth a couple of years after Janie was born, leaving Diwan a widower. Diwan married Isabel in 1927, who was also 20+ years younger. When Diwan died, he was given a Roman Catholic funeral by his second wife Isabel. They had married in a church and raised children as Catholics. I didn't know Isabel. She only spoke Spanish. I only spoke Punjabi.

By the time of their children's marriages, this family had taken Diwan as a last name and owned thousands of acres of Casa Grande valley in Arizona. They still grow cotton there. After Diwan died, they gave land to the community for the building of a medical center. Men left widows with businesses and young children. We made it really on our own in the 1930s-1940s in a foreign country. The laws didn't allow women to own businesses. Women could not do banking or find work outside the home until the 1970s. White women only got the right to vote in 1911 in California. As a person born in India, due to my national origin, the only way I could own land was to have a child or grandchild born in America. That is why Dalip Raymond Poonian, named after my son who was Paritem's brother, was a golden ticket to have the

American Dream of owning an orchard and fruit ranch and literally setting down roots. We made a life for ourselves in Placer County.

Janie Diwan became Janie Poonian after marriage. We had started a farm in Roseville, called Poonian Nursery of Roseville, in 1957. They had children. I had granddaughters including Santi Poonian who would later marry Didar Singh Bains in 1964 and become Santi Bains.



I had another grandson named Paritem Poonian, Jr. and he lives in Tiburon. My granddaughters were older than Santi and married before she did. Santi Bains was born in 1944 and is 80 years old now. She also graduated from Roseville High School in 1962 like her father Paritem did in 1934 and so did her brother and sisters. My son moved to Sutter County in 1966 after Santi's marriage to Didar and my death in 1963.

My son Paritem died at the age of 59, like his stepfather and

PARITEM S. POONIAN

Paritem Singh Poonian, 59, a resident of Yuba City and former resident of Roseville, died yesterday in the Rideout Memorial Hospital, Marysville.

A native of India, he came with his parents to California at the age of 7. He was educated in the Roseville schools and became a farmer. Following the death of his father, he and his mother established and operated the Poonian Nurseries of Roseville until 1957. More recently he has been engaged in extensive farming operations in the Sacramento Valley and Arizona.

From 1962 until 1966 he served as president of the Sikh Temple in Stockton. He was then active in the organization of the Yuba City Sikh Temple and served as president in 1970-71, and was its vice-president at the time of his death. He was president of the local Indian Agriculture Society.

He is survived by his widow, Janie Poonian, Yuba City; four daughters, Thanti Powell, Roseville, Banti Baker, Richvale, Santi Bains, Marysville, and Irene Wilkinson, Yuba City; two sons, Dalip Poonian, Sacramento and Paritem Poonian, Yuba City; eight grandchildren, and a sister, Chanan Kaur, India.

Funeral services will be Saturday at 1 p.m. in the Ellrey Memorial Chapel, 817 Almond St., Yuba City, with Darshan Singh of the Yuba City Sikh Temple officiating. Concluding services and cremation will be at 2 p.m. at Sierra View Memorial Park.

uncle Dhana Singh had in the 1930s. When Didar and Santi married in 1964, we gave them 20 acres of farmland. In 1956, we bought a really big house at 400 Coronado Avenue about two blocks from Roseville High School and raised my granddaughters, Dalip and Paritem Jr. there. The girls were cheerleaders and very popular. Raised as Americans, they were aware of their Sikh heritage. In 1966, we moved to Sutter County and sold the house. We had bought it from the Livoli family, the people who had built it on two lots in the 1940s. The Livolis had an olive oil business and had bought one of the lots for \$10 in 1938. When we owned it, the house was on one of the largest lots in the city.

Didar and Santi Bains had three children. The eldest, Ajit Bains, farmed over 10,000 acres in Sutter County in 2000. Daughter Diljit Bains lives in Long Beach and is a commercial real estate broker and has farmland in Canada. The youngest, Karmdeep Singh Bains, in addition to farming, runs Bains Oil and other companies. In 2020, Karm was elected as a supervisor in Sutter County and is an observant Sikh and wears a turban and a flowing beard like Didar did.

Due to my influence, Paritem able to find a Sikh husband for his daughter Santi, my granddaughter. Didar Singh Bains had famously arrived in Yuba City in 1958 when he was 18 years old with \$8 in his pocket following the path of his Uncle Ram who was here already. He was a hard worker and became famous for doing the farm work of 8 men. Uncle Ram left Didar everything as he had never married. Paritem's daughters who were Santi's sisters didn't have good marriages. Two ended in divorce. The second and third divorces or 'Sikh firsts' are also Poonian divorces in the 1960s. The first divorce in 1938 was of Irene Poonian and Paritem Poonian and reported in newspapers across California. Santi's sisters married white men and their families are Christians.

I, Raj Kor, passed in 1963. Paritem passed away in 1974. In 1966, Paritem moved to Yuba City in Sutter County. Sikhs there established a Sikh temple in 1969, the second one in all of the United States, on 30 acres of farmland donated by successful farmers for that purpose. Paritem was the first president of this Sikh temple. Before that, he was president of the Stockton Sikh Temple which had been incorporated in 1912 and is the first one in the United States.

THE HINDUS, WHO ARE CONGREGATING HERE IN LARGE NUMBERS, DEDICATE NEW SIKH TEMPLE ON GRANT STREET

University Professors Assist in the Impressive Ceremonies and 200 Prominent American Residents, Who Were Guests of Honor, Sit on the Floor in Their Stockinged Feet Among the Turbaned Immigrants From the East—Some of the Features of the Sikh Religion



MEMBERS OF THE PACIFIC COAST KHALSA DIWAN SOCIETY IN FRONT OF THE SIKH TEMPLE IN STOCKTON AT DEDICATORY SERVICES YESTERDAY.—Photographed for the Record by V. Covert Martin.

The Poonians gave 10 acres near the land the Yuba City Sikh temple building was constructed in the early 1970s. Other Sikhs generously donated included the Rai and Chima and families.

My daughter-in-law Janie Poonian lived in Yuba City until she passed in 2005. She and her mother Cruz were Catholic. Their primary language growing up was Spanish and attended mass. When she became my daughter in law by marrying Paritem, my influence was very important and it connected the grandchildren with

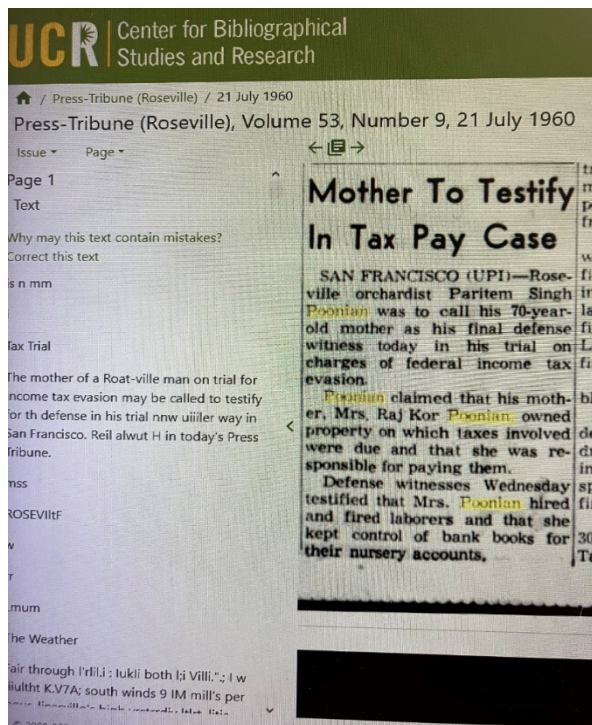
the Sikh faith. My grandchildren, Dalip Raymond and Paritem Jr. and daughters including Santi Bains, have relatives who call themselves 'Mexican Hindoos.' They were born in Punjabi and Mexican families from when Punjabi men could not bring their wives to California in the early 1920s. Mexican women, often sisters, married Punjabi men. The children would be US citizens by birth. Property would be purchased in the names of the children. Fathers would seek guardianship powers in court to manage the farms. Most mixed marriages also ended in divorce when the laws allowed the men to go bring their Punjabi wives or get a new one from India. Often men died as my husbands had before the age of 60. Women, in particular Mexican widows, were Catholic and raised children as Catholics.

My family remained Sikhs. We got US citizenship after the immigration and citizenship laws changed in 1946 and people from Asia who were already living here were able to become US citizens. After he became a citizen in 1949, we helped elect Dalip Singh Saund in 1953 to

the justice court in Westmorland, Imperial County. Judge Saund ran and won a seat in the US House of Representatives in November 1956 and he served three terms. He was a trailblazer, a polymath, and a natural leader. I lived in California from 1921 and 1963. I was fortunate to be able to make a life in a country where I did not know the language nor had any family other than my second husband Dhana Singh who was the brother of my first husband. I returned to Punjab once after 35 years living in Loomis and Roseville. When I left Punjab, I was never expecting to live and have success despite the laws, language and cultural barriers in America. I kept my Sikh faith and traditions. I passed them on to my grandchildren and great grandchildren. My grandparents lived during the kingdom of Punjab ruled by Maharaja Ranjit Singh before it was annexed by the British to India. I didn't go back until the country of India was independent.

My family had the biggest house in Roseville in the 1950s and we were the first Sikh millionaires. A million dollars then was like \$100 million is today. Our profits from the nursery and investments were the reason there was a federal tax felony criminal case filed against Paritem and Janie Poonian in the early 1960s for underpaying the IRS. Paritem lost at the criminal trial. I had to testify in court, again. I was 70 years old and in poor health. We lost in the trial court. My son got a stay on his sentence of a year and a day in jail for tax fraud. The first appeal court reversed the conviction. The IRS appealed that reversal. The Ninth Circuit appellate court found for Paritem again. I was determined to be the owner of the nursery. Taxes that the IRS claimed were underreported were for my business the Poonian Nursery. As a woman I could not bank or get credit. My son Paritem was the manager. The Ninth Circuit appellate court properly found that I was the taxpayer, not my son. His conviction for tax fraud in the federal criminal trial court and sentence of a year a day in jail was reversed and it was final.

In Poonian v. United States (Cir. 9, 1961), 294 F.2d 74, the court reversed a conviction under 18 U.S.C. § 1001, holding there was no material false statement where the defendant was charged with falsely understating his income in his return. Evidence showed he was reporting his mother's income as his own, when he was reporting the taxes for the nursery. Paritem Poonian never had to go to jail. He was not guilty of any crime involving taxes on the business. The newspapers sensationalized it in the 1960s as they did covering the child bride custody



family court case Irene had filed against Paritem Poonian in 1938. He was singled out as an immigrant and prosecuted unfairly. We spent thousands of dollars for legal fees and won court cases. He paid all his taxes due. I didn't it seems.

We were famous for our fruit tree grafting nursery. Poonian Nurseries of Roseville was sold after my retirement due to my failing health. We became land brokers and developers and loaned money to Sikhs across the country. In 1966, Paritem and Janie moved to Sutter County. Loomis, Rocklin and Roseville had been home for 40 years but there were few Sikhs living here

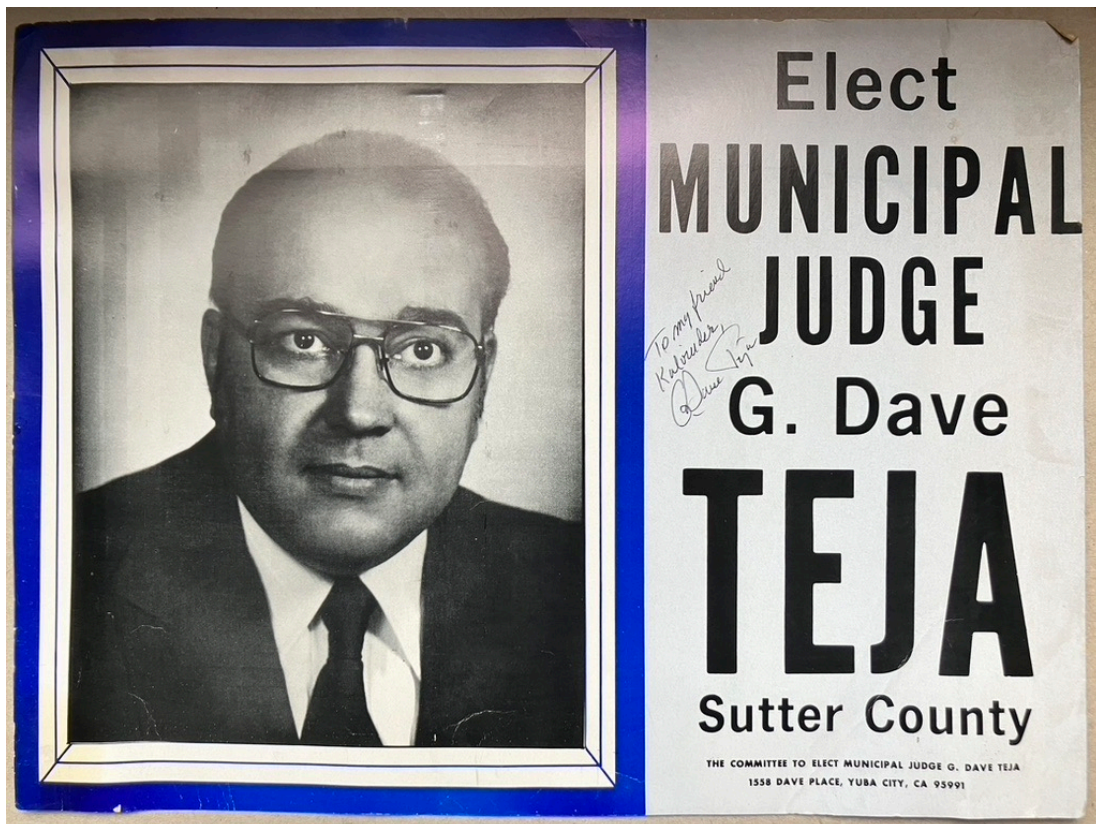
in the 1960s. I was respected as the first Sikh woman to come to Placer County, for being a single mother and owner of a successful nursery business. My son was the president of the Yuba City Sikh temple. My daughter-in-law Janie and my son Paritem were wealthy. I raised Dalip Raymond Poonian, my first grandchild. I had arranged the marriage of Santi Poonian to Didar Singh Bains in 1964, the year after I passed. I gave my blessing. The Bains family has had

success. They came here after I did. My life was a long and prosperous one in Placer County.



The first Sikh teacher in Yuba City was Hari Singh Everest. Mr. Everest came to study at Stanford in 1957 and stayed after finding the Sikh community in Yuba City. His wife and children came to America 14 years later. The

Everests are prominent members of the Yuba City Sikh community. Mr. Everest lived to the age of 96 and was a great storyteller and historian. There were others who shared their experiences with me and are gone now. G. Dave Teja was a municipal court judge, the District Attorney of Sutter County, a Marysville policeman and a lawyer with an established practice when I arrived in Marysville in 1996 as a new lawyer. Dr. Gulzar Singh Johl, the first physician in Yuba City, was still farming and practicing on Live Oak Blvd by his orchard, seeing patients in his part-time ophthalmology practice when he was over 75 years old and he is over 100 years old now. The Bains, Pamma, Johl, Rai, Chima and other Sikh families were early settlers in Sutter County but they were not the first in California. More are being identified located in other parts of the state.



Kulvinder Singh, Esq. www.singhlawoffice.com

Chairman, Sikhs of Placer County www.placersikhs.org

Roseville, CA