

D.S. Saund, A Sikh American and his California Dream

Farmer in Placer County, Justice of the Peace in Imperial County California

then a US Congressman in the late 1950s

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Reading the title/headline above, you may think the Sikhs, a community with origins in the Indian subcontinent, are new in northern California. Not true. They arrived a long time ago. They farmed in the fertile lands here northeast of Sacramento over a hundred years ago and also by the border with Mexico in the southern part of this state. One Sikh studying at UC Berkeley earned a PhD in Mathematics and became a Congressman after becoming a farmer and judge.

In the early 1900s, Sikhs living in Sacramento, Stockton, Berkeley, Yuba City, Los Angeles and Imperial Valley agitated for the British to leave India. They had a political party, a newspaper and a voice in a free country to speak about the British injustices in the Punjab.

Travelers and invaders, sometimes considered explorers, including Marco Polo of Venice, Alexander the Great from ancient Greece and Genghis Khan of the Mongolian Empire, followed the Silk Road and trade routes to India. Many different peoples settled in this northern province in the Indian subcontinent. It is the land of the five rivers, which in Persian is the meaning of the word 'Punjab.' A prince in the cities in these areas of the Indus Valley usually carried the name Singh which in Sanskrit means lion. Patiala, Jaipur, Jodhpur and the neighboring communities had maharajas. The Punjab was a kingdom until 1839 when Maharaja Ranjit Singh died. Within 10 years it was annexed by the British in 1849 and his youngest son made a ward of the British since he was only 9 years old. This last area of the Indian subcontinent fell to colonial rule by Europeans. The year 1849 was also the year of the Gold Rush in California. The British had found Sikh men useful in their outposts around the world. Getting colonies to send their youth away helped them govern as well as provided forces to carry the British flag around the world. Sikh soldiers passed through the West Coast of North America as early as the 1890s. Indians, as citizens of the British commonwealth, could reach Canada by

ship. Most Punjabi immigrants started there and worked down the West Coast. Many also settled in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Hong Kong. Sikh temples were established where British ports were manned by Sikhs.



Sikhs who come down to Placer County saw the open fields and agricultural potential of the Central Valley and dreamed of farming here as they did in the Punjab. Sikh men were able to find work on the railroad which cut northeast through Placer County on its way to Utah and as laborers on the Panama Canal in the early 1900s. Some farmed as tenants in Placer County and other agricultural areas until the laws prohibited them from leasing farmland as noncitizens. A gradual tightening of the immigration laws was a national policy. It started with Chinese exclusion laws, miscegenation laws and then land leasing laws to limit tenancy by noncitizens.

1910 - 1920

Sikh Farmers settle in California



When and where they gathered, Sikhs talked about how to get the British out of India and be free again. Ghadar means mutiny in Urdu. The Ghadar Party was founded in Astoria, Oregon where Sikhs had found work at the mills in the 1910s. It became a larger and more active community group in Berkeley, Stockton and Sacramento by 1913. That resulted in all the advocates and leaders being wanted by the British, if they returned to India, for treason and punishment. For that reason, many Sikhs able to successfully find work and make a living in California did not return to India. They expected to be charged with crimes against the British occupation of India if they had. They were a people without a way back home. So, they chose to become Americans and make the best of things. However, America did not want Sikhs and others who were considered Orientals to become citizens, or to bring their families here.

Laws did not change until the 1940s to allow Asian immigrants to adjust and gain US citizenship and then bring their families and relations. In August 1947, the British left India. The British divided Punjab into two regions, the west being for Muslim Punjabis and the east for Sikhs and Hindus. They gave the capital city, Lahore, of the kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh to Pakistan. An international border is between Lahore and Amritsar, the holy city of the Sikhs

only 55 miles apart. Sikhs have a long history in the Pakistan side of Punjab. The first Guru was born there, other Gurus and historical events took place there. I made a pilgrimage to Pakistan in November 2018 and felt welcome. It is the homeland of Sikh spiritual teachers and saints. Muslims respect the Sikh faith and its followers and Hindus recall how the Sikh Gurus were from Hindu families. Sikh scriptures contain teachings from both of these faiths and other traditions because Sikhs believe there is one God and there are many names for this one God.

Sikhs in Placer County were farmers with names we don't know. Dhana Singh Poonian arrived to work in Loomis we think in the late 1900s. Poonian Nursery opened in Loomis in 1911. Sikhs from this area gathered at the Stockton Sikh Temple which was founded in 1912.

The most educated Sikh was Dalip Singh Saund. He was the 'Congressman from India,' and was elected to represent Riverside and Imperial counties in the US House of Representatives in 1956. He served three terms until 1963 when he had a stroke and returned to California. He passed away in 1973. Upon arriving in California in 1950, dentist Amarjit Singh Marwah recalls how he met Judge Saund and then became his campaign manager. Dr. Marwah was born in 1926. I spoke to him in December 2024. He passed away in January 2025.




Rep. Saund wrote a book titled *My Mother India* which was supported by the Stockton Sikh Temple. His book about India responded to Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* published in 1928, a racist description of how white supremacy, Christianity and British rule in India would


need to continue. It had descriptions of Bengali men as effeminate and weak and on the low status of women and girls in Indian society and her perception of worship of rats and the goddess Kali. Mayo criticized the native Indians on how they treated women, the untouchables, animals, the countryside, etc. A large portion of her book discussed arranged marriages of young girls. This was the cause of an uproar across India. Many Indian newspapers declared the book "scurrilous libel" against Hindus and Hinduism. Judge Saund's book described his Punjab and its value and potential if the country became independent. It was very revealing and also shared personal views on young people marrying. Mayo's conclusions regarding child marriage in *Mother India* was determining the natives to be uncivilized so the British would educate and improve them by keeping British Rule in place. Judge Saund noted that while child marriage was prevalent, the child did not cohabit with her husband until she had reached puberty. Although young Indian wives may have lacked formal education, they were fully trained to run a household and to raise their children. Saund used statistics from the Census Report of 1921 that showed that sixty percent of Indian girls remained unmarried at the beginning of their sixteenth year, as evidence for the situation in India regarding marriage developing. Judge Saund shifted focus onto American culture, writing: "When fifteen to twenty-five girls out of every hundred in any country indulge in irresponsible sexual relationships between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, that country is not in a healthy moral condition. The effect of these early sexual intimacies between young girls and boys is ruinous to their later spiritual growth. How the situation may be remedied is a serious problem, which is not the task of any foreigner, however honest and friendly, to solve."

Judge Saund was very popular after starting his work as a Congressman and would have served many more years and would have been a candidate for the US Senate but for his health issues. His grandson Eric Saund, who is over the age of 65, wrote back in an email that his grandfather was a man who learned to live in his new home, America, and raised his family to adjust to American ways. The Sikh faith was important to him and he made efforts to connect with those Sikhs who came after he did and encouraged everyone to become politically active.


"HON. DALIP SINGH SAUND - FIRST ASIAN IN U.S. CONGRESS"



**PORTRAIT OF DALIP SINGH SAUND IN A TURBAN
COMMISSIONED BY HIS FAMILY**



**DALIP SINGH SAUND MEETS PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY (R) AND
VICE PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON**



CONGRESSIONAL PORTRAIT OF DALIP SINGH SAUND

Breaking Racial Barriers & Speaking in Defense of Civil Rights

Before Judge Dalip Singh Saund became the first Asian to ever serve in the United States Congress (as well as the first Indian and Sikh), he served at Stockton Gurdwara.

Born in the Punjab on September 20, 1899, Dalip Singh Saund earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics at the University of Punjab before emigrating to the United States in 1920.

Saund arrived through Ellis Island in New York City and soon traveled to California. While he attended the University of California, Berkeley, he lived in the Guru Nanak Khalsa Hostel maintained by Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society. The hostel provided free room and board to select students so they could focus on their studies.

Leader in the Stockton Gurdwara

After graduating, Saund maintained an intimate relationship with Stockton Gurdwara as he progressed in his professional life. In 1930, the gurdwara paid him a \$1500 commission to write a book called, "My Mother India." The book offered a history of India and a plea for an end to its imperial occupation by the British.

In "My Mother India," Saund wrote: "Even in our present stage of advancement we find that caste prevails throughout the civilized world. Its ugly symptoms are most prominent in America, Australia, and the white colonies of Africa. In the United States, the lynching of negroes in the South and the strict anti-Asiatic regulations of the state of California, and in Australia the "Keep Australia white at all cost" spirit among the population — both of these show how deeply the spirit of race hatred has penetrated into the system of the dominant white races of the world."

Later, Saund's wisdom was recognized when he was elected to the gurdwara management committee. From 1948 to 1950, he served as General Secretary of Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society.


Earned a Ph. D and U.S. Citizenship

Saund earned a Ph.D. in mathematics from U.C. Berkeley in 1924. In 1925, he moved to southern California to work in agriculture. In 1949, he received his U.S. citizenship after working as president of the Indian Association of America to persuade U.S. Congress to pass the Luce-Cellar Act (1946) to overturn laws prohibiting Asians from naturalizing.

Elected County Judge and then to U.S. House of Representatives

In 1952, Saund was elected as a county judge in southern California. In 1956, he was elected to the United States Congress, where he was soon appointed to the influential House Foreign Affairs Committee. With three successful elections, he served from January 3, 1957 to January 3, 1963. He was compelled to withdraw from his fourth campaign for Congress after suffering a debilitating stroke.

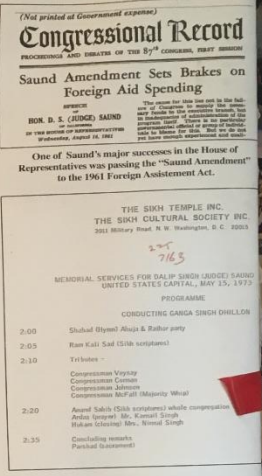
Saund retired from public life to focus on time with his family, especially his devoted wife, Marian. After breaking racial barriers in the U.S. Congress and speaking for decades in defense of civil rights, Saund tragically lost his voice. He died on April 22, 1973.



Bhog
in memory of
Judge Dalip Singh Saund
1899 - Amritsar - 1973 Los Angeles

Sundays, May 13, 1973
11:00 - 1:00 p.m.

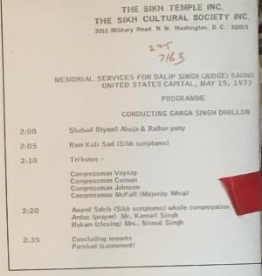
The Sikh Temple
1975 Military Road, N.W.
Washington, D.C., 20010



Congressional Record
PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 87th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

Saund Amendment Sets Brakes on Foreign Aid Spending

One of Saund's major successes in the House of Representatives was passing the "Saund Amendment" to the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act.

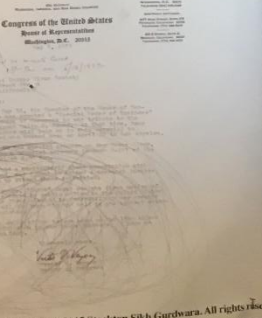


MEMORIAL SERVICES FOR DALIP SINGH SAUND
UNITED STATES CAPITOL, MAY 15, 1973

PROGRAMME

CONDUCTING: GANDA SINGH DHILLON

- 2:00 Shabad Deyari: Ajaai & Bhatti party
- 2:05 Rani Kaur Saal (Sikh scriptures)
- 2:10 Tributes -
- Congressman Virgilio
- Congressman Cantor
- Congressman Johnson
- Congressman Butler
- Majority Whip
- 2:20 Anand Sahib (Sikh scriptures) while accompanied by Anand Sahib, Dr. Kirpal Singh, Brijan Golechha, Mrs. Nirmal Singh
- 2:25 Concluding remarks (Parvati Dasswani)



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C., 20110

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Dalip Singh was 21 years old upon arriving by ship on September 27, 1920 docking in New York's Ellis Island. Dalip's early education had been in a one room schoolhouse that his father and uncles had saved money to fund. His father died when he was 10 years old. Dalip attended boarding school in Amritsar and then at the University of the Punjab, earning a bachelor's degree in mathematics in 1919. While a college student, Dalip supported Mahatma Gandhi and the movement for India's independence. Those ideas of democracy, that he adopted right away, would naturally lead him to the United States. His brother gave him money to study food preservation. His plan was to set up his own canning business in India once he learned

more about food preservation. Dalip was informed that Berkeley had a community boarding house funded by the Stockton Sikh Temple for students to stay for free. He knew Berkeley had a university where he could study tuition free as a graduate student. Dalip Singh excelled at Berkeley. He was a polymath, literally. Among the requirements for his doctorate were courses in foreign languages and the physical sciences. In Punjab he had earned a math undergrad degree and changed majors at UC Berkeley for a Masters in Mathematics in 1922 and then his PhD in 1924.

University of California grad student Dalip toiled in canning factories throughout the state and actively participated in Stockton Sikh temple activities. He was eager to travel to other cities in the Central Valley where Sikhs were living. To support himself he was a farm laborer in the fruit ranches of Placer County - King Road in Loomis, PFE Road in Sacramento and Roseville. There are records of many Sikhs finding agricultural farm labor work here as early as 1900. As the levees and land in Sutter County became available for farming, that county drew Sikhs from all other areas and the largest population of Sikhs in America was there by the 1950s.

After graduating from Berkeley, Dalip Singh Saund could not find employment in his profession or academia. Encouraged by southern California Punjabis already settled and farming in Imperial Valley, he moved there in 1925. He worked on lettuce, alfalfa and other farms and ranches owned by Sikhs. Farm labor in the desert was a big change from Berkeley. Dalip Singh Saund settled for work as a foreman for many years in southern California, at farms with his people because there was no other employment available for him due to his race and national origin. He saw and suffered the Great Depression, married and raised a family. Known now as Dr. Saund for earning his doctorate in mathematics, he looked for ways to become a US citizen and the doors he knew that would open in the future.

After the 1923 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 261 U.S. 204, Dr. Saund could not become a U.S. citizen and was thus unable to buy land. He instead leased and farmed land under the name of an American friend. Dr. Saund grew a variety of crops, including sugar beets and Punjab flax, which were new to the area. In 1928, he married Marian Kosa, the daughter of a friend, who later became a teacher. She lost her citizenship when she married him. They had a son, Dalip, Jr., and two daughters, Julie and Ellie. The children attended colored schools.

After field duties he would read a book from a library and learn about the history of the United States, as well as the laws and regulations of other countries. Always a voracious reader, he liked to read about government and politics and discuss these topics. The Democratic Party was welcoming in his community and so Dalip Singh Saund became an active member. He was known for his public speaking abilities. He often spoke on India and international affairs.

It should be noted during his politicking, his staff and entourage had to stay in different accommodations. People with him who were white could eat and stay anywhere. He was not white and suffered the indignities of speaking to a group but not being able to dine with them. He was at homes of friends or other Punjabis because he was not allowed to stay in most hotels.

In 1942, Dr. Saund helped organize the India Association of America. As president of this group, they went to Washington, D.C., to promote a bill that would make it possible for Asian Indian immigrants to become U.S. citizens. The Luce-Celler Act was passed in 1946 with the help of JJ Singh in New York and other people in Congress that had been lobbied to open US citizenship to Asian immigrants. Dr. Saund became a U.S. citizen in 1949.

Right from his arrival in the United States in 1920, Dalip Singh Saund was looking for ways to serve others. He worked for Glen Killingsworth, the Justice of the Peace of Westmoreland in Imperial County. Dr. Saund was elected to the Imperial County Democratic Central Committee in the summer of 1950. That seat for judge became open when Judge Killingsworth died. People encouraged Dr. Saund to become a candidate. Back then a justice of the peace was not a job that required a law degree. He was not a lawyer. He was a mathematician and a brilliant man who loved to read, so he read the law books and probably could have passed the bar exam. At that early stage, California's legal community was made up of people who 'read the law' in a law office and then sit and take and pass the bar exam and then practice. I think he did that. His family could not confirm. He filed the required papers. Throughout this campaign, he faced overt discrimination. He claimed to know every voter in the district and campaigned door-to-door to build momentum. Many voters stated that they could not accept a judge from India. That did not deter him. He was a great speaker and engaging with his words and views. He won the November 1950 election. However, he was unable to take his seat as a judge when a court vacated his election after it was determined that Dr. Saund had not been a U.S. citizen for a 12 month period. In 1951, Dr. Saund sought to be appointed by the Imperial County Board of Supervisors, but they selected Frank Lyall instead. He waited for the next

election. Dr. Saund defeated Lyall in the 1952 election to become Justice of the Peace of Westmoreland by 13 votes. After 1953, he was known as Judge Saund. As a judge, he imposed strict sentences in an attempt to rid the community of gambling, illegal drugs and other criminal activities. A fair and popular judge, he was well regarded in the communities around Westmoreland and Imperial Valley. Judge Saund ran to replace John R. Phillips, who was retiring, as the United States representative from California's 29th congressional district. On April 16, 1956, a legal challenge was filed against Dr. Saund claiming that he had not been a U.S. citizen long enough to run in the election, but the challenge was dismissed by the 4th District California Court of Appeal. Voters supported Judge Saund, who emphasized his experience as a judge and a farmer, using grassroots campaigning and connecting with everyone in society. He won the Democratic nomination and later in the general election defeated Republican nominee Jacqueline Cochran despite Dwight D. Eisenhower winning the area in the presidential election.

Judge Saund took office in January 1957 and became known as Rep. Saund. He was almost immediately appointed to the powerful House Foreign Affairs Committee, which for a first term representative was rare. As a member of the committee he went on a tour in late 1957 to survey a U.S. foreign aid program in several countries in Asia, including India. He had not been there in almost 40 years. He went back to an independent India, no longer a British colony.

Rep. Saund returned to the United States with suggestions for how to improve this country's standing in Asia. In great demand as a speaker, he wrote his autobiography. Rep. Saund was easily reelected in 1958 and 1960. A 2007 portrait by Jon R. Friedman celebrates Rep. Saund's three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. It quotes his famous words: "There is no room in the United States of America for second-class citizenship."



THERE IS NO ROOM IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
FOR SECOND-CLASS CITIZENSHIP - D.S. Sound

In May 1962, while campaigning for a fourth term in Congress, Rep. Saund suffered a stroke. He never fully recovered. After his second stroke in 1973 he passed away. Photos of him with President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson are everywhere. Today, Rep. Saund is celebrated as the First Asian to serve in the US Congress. He was also the first farm worker, who had toiled in the fields of Placer County, to reach that high elected office. Coming here as a 21 year old, he did farm labor his first summers in the orchards and farms of Placer County to earn money to live and attended UC Berkeley during the academic year. He farmed in the desert until the mid-1950s. He was elected judge and then elected to the US House of Representatives.

Down in the California-Mexico border region, Mexicans and Punjabis had found ways to own land despite the California and federal laws that barred them from doing so. They were all brown people who liked tortillas and beans and didn't speak much English and worked on farms. As a result, Sikhs and Mexicans married. Several families became successful and their next generation, sometimes called Mexican Hindoos by their own people, eventually settled in central and northern California. The daughter of an Arizona Sikh man and a Mexican woman became the matriarch of a family in Yuba City's Sikh community. Her name was Janie Poonian. Her mother-in-law Raj Kor, the first Sikh woman in Placer County, had a remarkable story and life. Janie Poonian's daughter Santi Bains, 80 years old, is the mother of the current supervisor in Sutter County, Karmdeep Singh Bains. He has a beard and wears a turban like his father Didar Singh Bains did. Karm Bains was elected in 2020 and is a fourth generation Sikh farmer.

Sikhs in the United States expect a Sikh will rise to national office again soon. Several candidates advancing in different regions of the country are aspiring to do that. A former Sikh, Nikki Haley, has been a governor in South Carolina. When a Sikh is elected in America, that person will celebrate Dalip Singh Saund being elected to the US Congress in November 1956.

Sikhs are serving both locally and in national positions in the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other countries around the world. India had elected economist Manmohan Singh as its prime minister a few decades ago. He was known for his trademark sky blue turban. Sikhs are rising, and Sikhs serve honorably. In the Great War, known now as WW I, observant Sikh Bhagat Singh Thind enlisted in the United States Army. Many Sikh Americans, both men and women, now serve in all the armed forces of the United States of America.