

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

Farm Worker in Placer County, Justice of the Peace in Imperial County

Elected US Congressman in the 1950s

By Kulvinder Singh, Esq., Roseville, CA, www.singhlawoffice.com

Chairman, Sikhs of Placer County www.placersikhs.org

The Sikhs, a community with origins in the Indian subcontinent, are not new immigrants to the United States. They first settled in California over 120 years ago. They farmed the fertile land northeast of Sacramento after levees and flood protection made agriculture viable and in southern California border region with Mexico after water was available for irrigation. A Sikh at UC Berkeley earned a PhD in Mathematics, became a farmer, a judge, and a U.S. Congressman.

Between 1900-1915, 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 and land was given to them for that purpose.



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 around 1904. 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. Until the 1940s, US law did not allow any Asian immigrants to adjust and gain US citizenship or bring their families and relations. Changes allowed small quotas for Asiatic immigrants in 1946.

In August 1947, the British left India but divided Bengal as well as Punjab into two regions. West Punjab had more Muslims and became Pakistan. The east had more 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 Placer County we think between 1900-1910. Poonian Nursery was founded in 1911 in Loomis. Sikhs would gather at the Stockton Sikh Temple which was established in 1912.

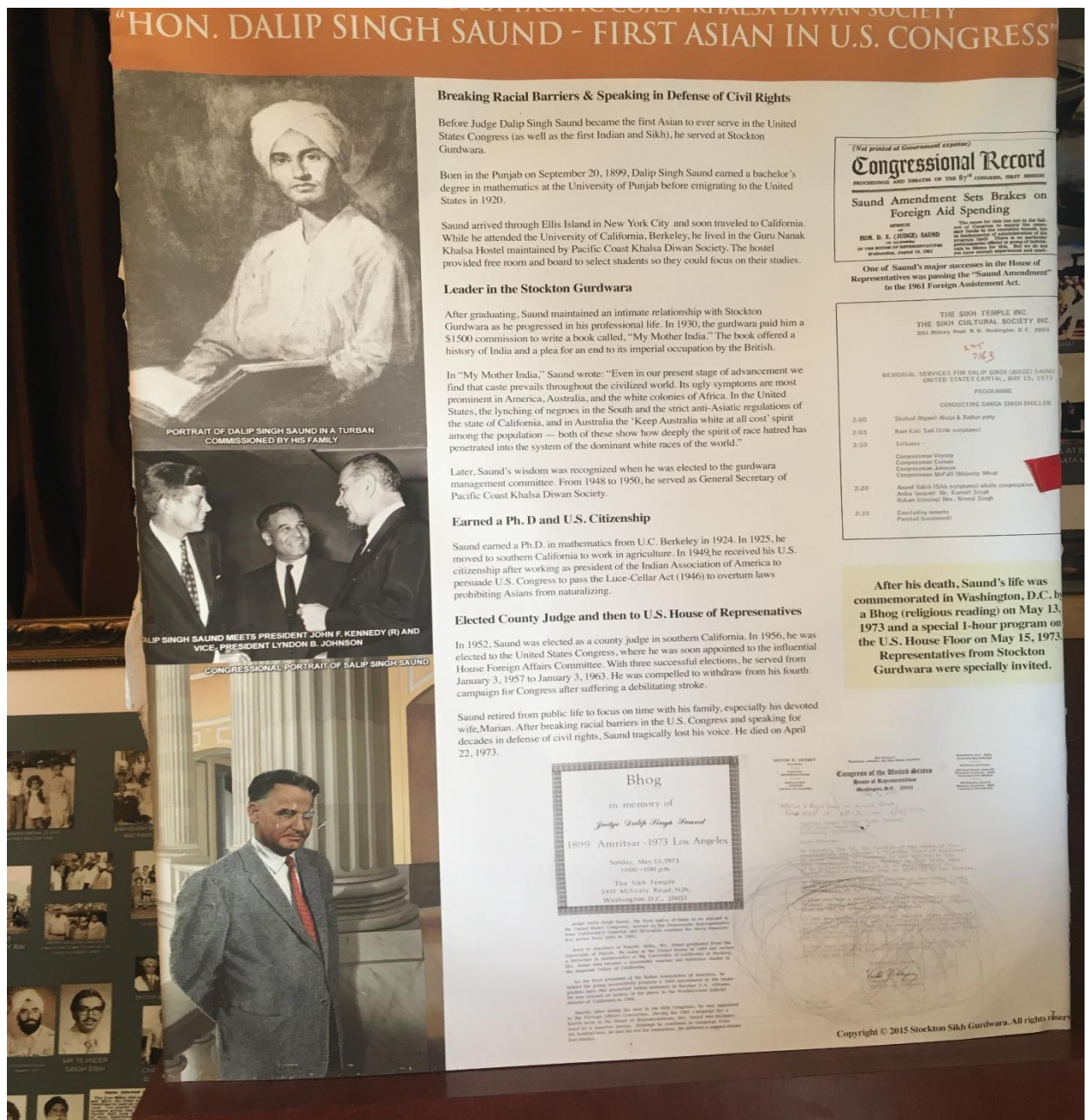
The most educated Sikh was Dalip Singh Saund. He was the 'Congressman from India,' and was elected to represent Riverside and Imperial counties in the US House of Representatives in 1956. He served three terms. In 1962, after he had a stroke, he returned to California and passed away in 1973. Arriving in California in 1950 as a student, dentist Amarjit Singh Marwah recalled he met Judge Saund and then became his campaign manager. Dr. Marwah was born in 1926. I spoke to him in December 2024 about Rep. Saund. He passed away on January 7, 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 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. He accepted the way his cards were dealt and made the best of things. This principle is called 'chardi kala' in the Sikh faith. It was always important to him and he made efforts to connect with those Sikhs who came after he did and encouraged everyone to become politically active.



Dalip was 21 years old when he arrived by ship on September 27, 1920 at New York's Ellis Island. Dalip's early education was 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. At the University of the Punjab, he earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics in 1919. While a 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 aware of a community boarding house owned by the Stockton Sikh Temple in Berkeley for students to stay. He knew Berkeley had a university where he could study as a graduate student tuition free. Dalip was a polymath, literally. Required for his doctorate were courses in foreign languages and the physical sciences. He changed majors from the College of Agriculture to earn a Masters in Mathematics in 1922 and then a Ph.D in Mathematics in 1924.

University of California grad student Dalip during breaks toiled in asparagus fields and canning factories. He actively participated in Stockton Sikh temple activities. He eagerly traveled to other cities in California where Sikhs were living. To support himself, he was a farm laborer in the fruit ranches of Placer County located on King Road in Loomis and PFE Road in Sacramento and Roseville. There are records of Sikhs finding agricultural farm labor work here as early as 1900. With levees, land in Sutter County became available for farming. That county attracted Sikhs from other areas. The largest population of Sikhs was living there by the 1950s.

Despite graduating from Berkeley, Dalip Singh Saund could not find employment in his profession or academia. Called Dr. Saund for earning his doctorate in mathematics, he wanted citizenship. 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 unable to buy land. Invited 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 as a foreman for many years because there was no other employment available for him due to his race and national origin. The desert was a big change from Berkeley. Dr. Saund leased farmland under the name of a neighbor and 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 he first met on the ship that brought them to Ellis Island from Southampton in 1920. Marian, a teacher, married Dr. Saund, knowing she would lose her U.S. citizenship. They had a son, Dalip, Jr., and two daughters, Julie and Ellie. Their young children had to attend colored schools in Imperial County.

After farming, Dr. Saund would read books from libraries to learn about the history of the United States and the laws and regulations of other countries. He liked to discuss politics. He went to Toastmasters meetings. The Democratic Party welcomed him so Dr. Saund became an active member. He became known for his public speaking on India and international topics.

It should be noted during his travels out of town, Dr. Saund's staff stayed in different accommodations. People with him, if 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 stayed in homes of friends, often Punjabis. He was not welcome in most hotels or allowed in restaurants.

In 1942, Dr. Saund helped organize the India Association of America. As president of this group, he went to Washington, D.C., to promote a bill to make it possible for Filipinos and Asian Indian immigrants to become U.S. citizens. The law, the Luce-Celler Act, was passed in 1946 with the help of J.J. Singh in New York and others lobbying the Congress to open U.S. citizenship to some Asian immigrants again. Dr. Saund finally became a U.S. citizen in 1949.

Dr. Saund found ways to serve. He was elected to the Imperial County Democratic Central Committee in the summer of 1950. He worked for Glen Killingsworth, the Justice of the Peace of Westmorland in Imperial County. When Judge Killingsworth died, people encouraged Dr. Saund to become a candidate for judge. Back then, a justice of the peace was not required to have a law degree. Dr. Saund was not a lawyer; he was a mathematician and a brilliant man who loved to read. He read law books and probably could have passed the bar exam. At that time, California's legal community was made up of people who 'read the law' in a law office. Then they sit for the bar exam and then practice law. I think he did or was exempt from the bar exam.

During the campaign, Dr. Saund faced overt discrimination. He claimed to know every voter in the district and campaigned door-to-door to build momentum. Some voters stated that they could not accept a judge from India. That did not deter him. He was engaging with his words and views. He won the November 1950 election but there was a problem to his taking office. A court vacated his election after it was found that Dr. Saund had not been a U.S. citizen for a 12 month period and so was unable to take his seat as a judge. In 1951, Dr. Saund attempted to be appointed by the Imperial County Board of Supervisors, but they selected Frank Lyall instead. Dr. Saund defeated Lyall in the 1952 election to become Justice of the Peace of Westmorland by 13 votes. Three days before the election, a prominent citizen in the town restaurant with over fifty people there heard him in a loud voice ask: "Doc, tell us, if you're elected, will you furnish the turbans or will we have to buy them ourselves in order to come to your court?" The reply was: "My friend, you know me for a tolerant man. I don't care what a man has on top of his head. All I'm interested in is what he's got inside of it." The customers laughed. That story was the talk of the town during his 1952 campaign for judge. After 1953, he was known as Judge Saund. He imposed strict sentences in an attempt to rid the community of gambling, illegal drugs and other criminal activities and became known all across the county.

Judge Saund became a candidate for Congress for an open seat in 1956 to replace John R. Phillips, who was retiring as the U.S. 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. 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-Odlum despite Dwight D. Eisenhower winning the area in the presidential election. His colorful wealthy Republican opponent was a pilot and flew her own plane to campaign stops and hosted a widely advertised barbecue at the Riverside County fairgrounds with stars including Bob Hope and Rin-Tin-Tin. The candidates agreed to a debate. It was publicized heavily and brought needed visibility. Prime Minister Nehru's name was raised by Ms. Cochran-Odlum, who stated Nehru was leaning toward the Communists and would certainly like to have a man from India elected to the Congress of the United States. Judge Saund replied he was presenting himself to the people of the 29th Congressional District as an American candidate for Congress, not as anyone owing allegiance to any foreign country. In November 1956, Judge Saund won by a three percent margin. The Republican candidate's political setback was one of the few failures she ever experienced and she never attempted another run. Those who knew Ms. Cochran-Odlum note that the loss bothered her for the rest of her life. She found it difficult to accept her loss to "a Hindu" probably meant as an insult. It was well-known Dr. Saund was Sikh American.

In January 1957, Rep. Saund was appointed to the powerful House Foreign Affairs Committee, which for a first term representative, was rare. As a committee member, in late 1957 he traveled to study U.S. foreign-aid programs in countries in Asia including India. He had not been back since 1920. Now he was visiting independent India, no longer a British colony. Rep. Saund returned with suggestions for how to improve the USA's standing in Asia. He was in great demand as a speaker and wrote his autobiography. Rep. Saund was a popular and easily reelected in 1958 and 1960. A 2007 portrait of Dalip Singh Saund by Jon R. Friedman celebrates Rep. Saund's three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. Rep. Saund spoke on the House floor against segregation as it existed then in the South. Friedman's portrait quotes Rep. Saund: "There is no room in the United States of America for second-class citizenship."



In May 1962, while campaigning for a fourth term in Congress, Rep. Saund suffered a stroke from which 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. Rep. Saund is celebrated as the First Asian to serve in the U.S. Congress. He was also the first farm worker, who had toiled in the fields of Placer County, to reach that far. Coming here as a 21 year old, he was a farm laborer his summers in orchards and farms of Placer, Sacramento and San Joaquin counties while attending UC Berkeley during the academic year. He farmed in the desert in the mid-1950s until he was elected judge and then ascended to the US House of Representatives.

In the California-Mexico border region, Mexicans and Punjabis found ways to own land despite the California and federal laws that barred them from doing so. They were brown people who liked tortillas and beans, didn't speak much English and worked on farms. As a result, Sikhs and Mexicans married. Kids owned farmland as they were born in America. Several families became successful and their next generation, some called 'Mexican Hindoos' by their own people, eventually settled in central and northern California. The daughter of an Arizona Sikh, Diwan, became the matriarch of a family in Yuba City's Sikh community. She married Paritem Singh Poonian. Her name was Janie. Her mother-in-law Raj Kor, the first Sikh woman in Placer County, had a remarkable life facing great obstacles. Janie and Paritem Poonian's daughter Santi Poonian married Didar Singh Bains. Mrs. Bains is a widow now and her son, Karmdeep Singh Bains, a supervisor in Sutter County, was elected in 2020 and is a fourth generation Sikh American farmer. He has a beard and a turban like his father did. Both his grandfather Paritem and mother Santi graduated from Roseville high school, in 1934 and 1962.

Sikhs in the United States want a Sikh to rise to national office as Rep. Saund did in 1957 from southern California despite all the barriers he faced. Several candidates advancing in different regions of the country aspire to do that. A former Sikh, Nikki Haley, has been a governor in South Carolina. Sikhs elected in local and national positions in the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other countries are ahead of the U.S. The country of India had elected economist Manmohan Singh as its prime minister a few decades ago, known for his trademark sky blue turban. Sikhs serve honorably in the military. During the Great War, known as World War I, observant Sikh Bhagat Singh Thind enlisted in the U.S. Army. Sikh American men and women currently serve in the armed forces, live across the United States and work in almost all professions. I foresee a Sikh woman rising to national office in the near future.