

A Conversation with Raj Kor, the first Sikh Woman to live in Placer County

As told to Kulvinder Singh, Chairman, Sikhs of Placer County, www.singhlawoffice.com

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. My name is Raj Kor, pronounced "core." Raj means empire. My name is a Sikh name. We have many spellings as it means princess in Punjabi, a different alphabet. Modernly people spell it as Kaur. I didn't know English. British officials in the colony of India spelled my name this way.

The time I was born, the Mughals had been defeated a few decades. Countries which now make up British India had been colonized by the Europeans. French, Portuguese and Dutch colonies were started in Puducherry/Pondicherry, Bengal, Ceylon, Malabar Coast, Coromandel Coast and Goa. Punjab had a King, the great Maharaja Ranjit Singh, until 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. When he did, the Queen of England, Queen Victoria, decided not to give him back his Punjab as a kingdom. He was her 'Black Prince.' There is a famous movie made with that title that explores his life start to end. British military viceroys and governors who ran Punjab had decided it was the Jewel in the Crown of the British Raj and were not going to let Punjab or in fact any of India to which it had been annexed in 1849 go free. That would mean Britain would be a less powerful empire, like the Dutch and the French and Spanish had to as independence movements and been diminished. Conquest had made the British Empire the one where the sun never sets.

My grandmother was born during the Sikh empire of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, in 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 then two sons. In the late 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. We were the family's responsibility. My second husband was my children's father's younger brother Dhana Singh Poonian. He had lived in California since the late 1900s. 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 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 Vivian Rasmussen's book 'Yesteryear' in 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 to settle here when the land was free (or almost free after driving the Native Americans out) just after the Gold Rush.

His great granddaughter Mary Elizabeth King had married James Brennan. They owned the farms around King Road and had fertile soil for agriculture. Nurseries and orchards in the area were known for having seasonal farm work. Soon, Sikhs first came to work in the farms and orchards in Placer County around Penryn, Loomis and Newcastle.

Dhana Singh Poonian learned his brother had died. He went back to Punjab to bring me and my two sons to live with him. We married in 1921 in Punjab. I had to leave the country and 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, after I married Dhana Singh, 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 6 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 1940s. 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 when we sold it and moved to Roseville. It was in my name. The business was managed by my son and we had farm workers and sold fruit trees all over northern California. A disease came and attacked the varieties of pears and apples we were growing. Mandarin oranges which are now popular replaced them when the disease abated.

Paritem needed a wife. I wanted grandchildren. Nobody had a daughter in the Sikh community here, which was all men. We tried to find Paritem a wife so I could have grandchildren here in America. Nobody could not bring their wives or daughters to America due to the laws barring family immigration from Asia. Paritem found a young woman who was ready to marry named Irene. Her parents told us she would marry him. We were told Irene was over 15 years of age when Paritem married her in Nevada. She got pregnant right away. Irene gave birth to my grandson Dalip Raymond Poonian.

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! 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 a white 14 year old! As far as I was concerned, she was a good daughter-in-law and we would have kept her in the family.



One day, she decided to divorce my son. Once 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. Maybe this whole divorce and custody case was extortion. We had our lawyer prove that happened and also that Irene's foster father had come over to argue with us and in fact beat me black and blue in April 1938. I reported that to the authorities but nothing happened to him. He was a white man and the district attorney didn't file cases against white people who victimized non-whites then.

The divorce was final in late 1939 when Dalip was only a year old. The family court judge found that Paritem was NOT 'at fault' and NOT 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 any neglect or abuse alleged by Irene.

I had to testify about the living arrangements in the family court. That was 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. This was reported in newspapers all across California. We raised Dalip Raymond Poonian as ours. He lived in Sutter County after he completed his education. He died in 2015 leaving a son Nicholas Poonian. He was the first child born to a Sikh in Placer County. 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. I saw in the newspapers that she wanted to end her marriage because she refused to raise any children with the inferior race of 'Hindoos' as his father and I were not white. Maybe she changed her mind after seeing her future would be better with no young child tying her down. We will never know because she left the area and was not heard from again. My influence as the grandmother of Dalip Raymond Poonian was really as his mother. He was a Sikh and I raised him as one of us. He was an infant in this photo from 1938 where I am holding him. He lived primarily with me and my son Paritem and only saw his mother while he was under the age of majority when she came around.

In 1939, Paritem's future was unclear. His divorce was final in Auburn in November. 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 who had arrived in the United States in

the early 1900s. Diwan was illiterate and had 65 cents with him when he arrived in British Columbia Canada in 1906 by ship. He worked his way down to San Francisco, to Fresno, to Phoenix and Reno and Imperial Valley where Dalip Singh Saund and others had found ways to buy land and own farms by the 1930s.



My son's future wife was the daughter of Diwan and a Mexican lady Cruz Merino 20 years younger than him he 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 than him. When Diwan died, he was given a Roman Catholic funeral by his

second wife Isabel. They were married in the church and raised children as Catholics. I didn't know Isabel. She only spoke Spanish and I only spoke Punjabi. By the time of her children's marriages, the family had taken Diwan as a last name and owned thousands of acres of Casa Grande valley in Arizona and still grow cotton there. After Diwan died, they gave land to the community for the building of a medical center. Diwan's life story is a future article. Another is the life story and journey of my husband Dhana Singh Poonian. Both men left widows with businesses and young children. We women made it really on our own.

We were in a foreign country. We didn't know the language or have family. We didn't know English but we knew 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, I did not have the power to buy or own land in my own name due to my national origin. The only way we could own land was to have a child or grandchild born in America. That is why Dalip Raymond Poonian, named after my son who had died, who was Paritem's brother, was a golden ticket to having the American Dream of owning an orchard and fruit ranch and literally setting down roots. We did just that.

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 a grandson and he was named Paritem Poonian, Jr. and lives in Tiburon. My granddaughters were older than Santi and married before she did. Santi Bains was born in 1944 and is over 82 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. We moved to Sutter County soon after Santi's marriage to Didar.





My son Paritem died at the age of 59 like his stepfather/uncle Dhana Singh had. We were left wealthy widows with money and kids to be married. 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 the girls and Paritem Jr. there. The girls were cheerleaders and very popular. We raised them as Americans and 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 very expensive and on one of the largest lots in the city.

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.

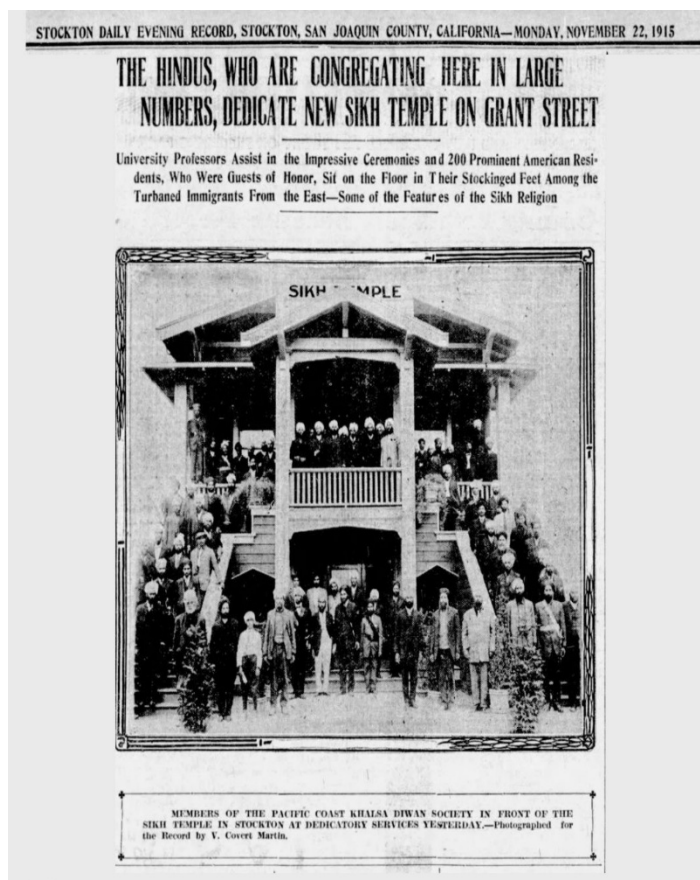
He is survived by his widow, Janie Poonian, Yuba City; four daughters, Thanti Powell, Roseville, Banti Baker, Richvale, Santi Bains, Marysville, and Irene Wilkinson, Yuba City; two sons, Dalip Poonian, Sacramento and Paritem Poonian, Yuba City; eight grandchildren, and a sister, Chanan Kaur, India.

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.

Didar and Santi Bains had three children. The eldest Ajit Bains farms over 10,000 acres in Sutter County in 2000 so it may be more now. Daughter Diljit Bains lives now in Long Beach and is a commercial real estate broker and owns farmland in Canada.

The youngest is Karmdeep Singh Bains and in addition to farming, he runs Bains Oil and other companies. In 2020, Karm was elected as a supervisor in Sutter County. He is an observant Sikh and wears a turban and has a flowing beard like Didar did after being baptized in the 1980s.

Due to my influence, Paritem able to find a husband for his daughter Santi (my granddaughter) who was a Sikh. 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 him everything because he had never married. Paritem's daughters who were Santi's sisters didn't have good marriages and two ended in divorce. The second and third divorces or 'Sikh firsts' are also Poonian family 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 and Catholics.



I, Raj Kor, passed in 1963. Paritem passed away in 1974. After 1966 we lived in Yuba City, in Sutter County. Sikhs who settled there founded 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 Yuba City temple. Before, he was president of the Stockton Sikh Temple founded in 1912 and the first one in this country.

The Poonian family gave 10 acres of land near the land where the Yuba City Sikh temple building was constructed in the early 1970s.

My daughter-in-law Janie Poonian lived in Yuba City. She passed in 2005. She was a Catholic as was her mother Cruz. Their primary language growing up was

Spanish. They had Catholic funerals and attended mass. When she became my daughter in law

by marrying Paritem and having children, my influence was very important and it kept the family with the Sikh faith.

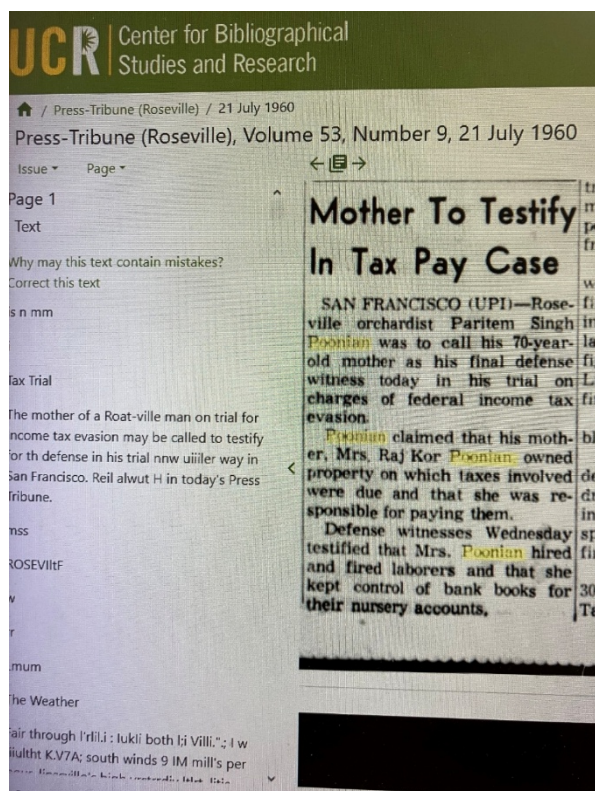
My grandchildren learned about Sikhism and the Punjabi language from me. The children of Paritem, who are Dalip Raymond and Paritem Jr. and daughters including Santi Bains, were all raised in the Sikh tradition as I was in India by my parents. They have ties as well to the Spanish speaking 'Mexican Hindoos' who were a combination of Punjabi and Mexican families from the time when Punjabi men could not bring their wives or marry anyone while living in California in the early 1900s. Mexican women, often sisters, married the Punjabi men and had children who would be US citizens by birth. Property would be purchased in the names of the children and the 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 back and bring their Punjabi wives or get a new one from there. Some 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 due to my influence remained with the Sikh faith. 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. We elected Dalip Singh Saund in 1953 to the justice court in Westmoreland, Imperial Valley after he became a citizen in 1949. Judge Saund ran and won a seat in the US House of Representatives in November 1956 where he served three terms. He was a trailblazer, a polymath, and his life story is remarkable. I was here in California from 1921 until 1963. I am a person who 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 only returned to visit family in Punjab once after 35 years living in Loomis and Roseville. When I came here in 1921, I never expected to return to Punjab.

My story is a story of success despite the laws and language and cultural barriers. I kept the Sikh faith and traditions and passed them on to my grandchildren and great grandchildren. This was given to me by my parents and grandparents who lived during the time of the kingdom of Punjab ruled by Maharaja Ranjit Singh before it was annexed by the British to India. The British left India in August 1947. 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 at a time when a million dollars 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 where I had to testify in court again at the age of 70 years and in poor health. We lost in the trial court level but my son got a stay on the sentence of a year and a day in jail for tax fraud. The first level appeal court found for us and reversed the conviction. Then the IRS appealed that reversal and the Ninth Circuit appellate court found for us. I was determined to be the owner of the nursery and the taxes that the IRS claimed were underreported were for my business the Poonian Nursery. As a woman I could not bank and get credit so my son Paritem

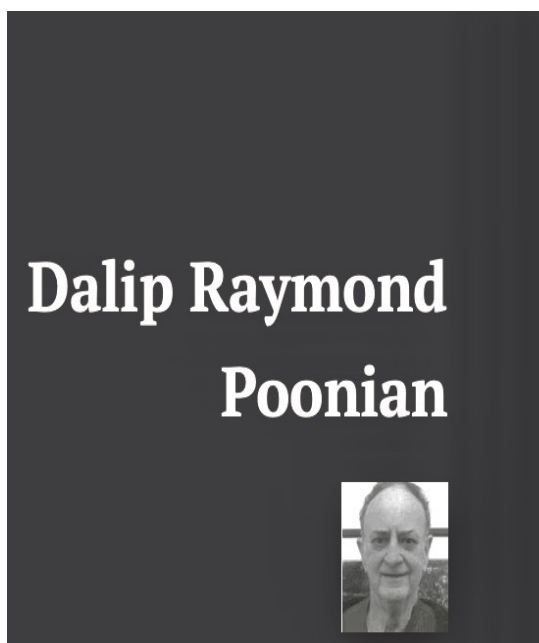
was the manager. The Ninth Circuit appellate court properly found that I was the taxpayer, not my son. His conviction in the trial court and sentence of a year a day in jail was reversed.



In *Poonian v. United States* (Cir. 9, 1961), 294 F.2d 74, the court reversed a conviction under 18 U.S.C. § 1001, holding that there was no material false statement where the defendant was charged with falsely understating his income in his income tax return, but the evidence showed that he understated his income by falsely reporting his mother's income as his own, when he was purporting to report only his own income, and not that of some one else.

Paritem Poonian never had to go to jail for a single day. He was not guilty of any crime involving taxes on the business. The newspapers sensationalized this in the 1960s as they did in 1938 covering the child bride custody family court case since Irene had filed against Paritem Poonian. I think he was singled out as an

immigrant and prosecuted unfairly. We had to spend thousands of dollars for legal fees. He won his court cases. He paid his taxes. He kept going.



Dalip Poonian Obituary

Dalip Raymond Poonian, 76, died Tuesday, April 7, 2015 at Sutter General Hospital in Sacramento California, after a brief illness.

Dalip was born in Sacramento California and was living in Yuba City.

He is survived by his son Nicholas Poonian and siblings Banti Baker, Santi Bains and Paritem Poonian.

Dalip was a very loved, caring and compassionate man that will be missed by his friends and family.

They find peace in that he joins his Father Paritem Singh Poonian, Mother Janie Poonian and siblings Thanti Powers and Irene Wilkinson whom preceded him in death.

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 the late 1960s, we moved to Sutter County where other Sikhs had bought land and lived. Loomis and Rocklin and Roseville had been home for 40 years but there were few Sikhs living here. More lived in Sutter County. I wanted to be with my community. Sutter County was a place I could retire, with so much money and respect as the first Sikh woman to come to Placer County. I had been a single mother and owner of a successful nursery business. My son was the president of the Sikh temple. My daughter-in-law Janie had children with my son Paritem. I raised Dalip Raymond Poonian, my first grandchild. I had arranged the marriage of Santi Poonian to Didar Singh Bains which took place in 1964, the year after I passed, but I knew it was going to happen and gave my blessing. Look at what the Bains family is doing now and how successful other Sikhs are who came to California 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. A great storyteller and historian, Mr. Everest had arrived in 1957 as a refugee. He stayed in northern California after finding the Sikh community in the Yuba City area was where he wanted to live. His family – wife and two children – came to America 14 years later and are prominent in Yuba City. His career as a teacher started after he earned a Masters from Stanford. His children married teachers. Mr. Everest lived to the age of 96.

Kulvinder Singh, Esq.

<http://singhlawoffice.com/presentations/>

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