



Darshan Singh Canadian

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DARSHAN SINGH CANADIAN:

Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal

Introduction

Darshan Singh Canadian¹ immigrated to Canada in 1937 at the age of 19 and stayed here until 1947. He played an active role in organizing workers in the I.W.A. from 1941-1947. In addition to union organizing, he was also involved in the struggle of the Indian community in B.C. to regain the right to vote in Canada as well as India's struggle to gain independence from the British. In this essay, we briefly document his life and his contribution to the struggles of workers and Indian immigrants in Canada during the 1940s.²

The Early Years

Although Darshan arrived here as a student, his reasons to immigrate were similar to other immigrants from India. He recalls: “My father was a very poor farmer. We had a total of four acres of land in our village, Langeri, in the district of Hoshiarpur and even those four acres were spread around the village in 15 different pieces.”³

¹ Darshan's name was Darshan Singh Sangha when he came to Canada. After his return to India, he became known as Darshan Singh Canadian. Therefore, in this article, we are calling him Darshan Singh Canadian.

² In March 1985 We (Sadhu Binning, Dr. Hari Sharma, Sukhwant Hundal and Makhan Tut) recorded an 18 hour long interview with Darshan Singh Canadian about his life in Canada. In addition, we (Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal) spoke to a number of people who had known Darshan and had worked with him. Included in this list were: Maurice Rush, Emil Bjornson, Mona Morgan, Nigel Morgan, Harry Rankin, Roy Mah, Craig Pritchett (son of Harold Pritchett), Kuldip Singh Bains, Margaret Andrusiak and Clay Perry. Most of the information used in this article is from these interviews. We have also looked at the historical I.W.A. documents as well as other media of the time.

³ Interview with Darshan Singh Canadian.

At that time, the population of Indians in Canada was very small and most of them were either farmers or retired soldiers from Punjab. They mainly lived in British Columbia, and due to racial discrimination could only find work in the farms and the lumber industry. Darshan also found his first job in a sawmill. This provided him with the first-hand experience about the poor working conditions in the sawmills and logging camps as well as the racial discrimination faced by non-White workers. Kapoor Singh, the Punjabi owner of a sawmill in Victoria, gave Darshan his first job. Darshan's uncle was working there and helped him to get that job. After he was hired, his uncle was fired from his job. Looking back at this bitter experience, Darshan explains that “When Kapoor Singh gave me the job, he told my uncle to go home. For him, my uncle was an old horse at the age of 60. By hiring me, he got a new 20-year young horse in his place.”⁴

In the mills, non-White workers were paid less than their White counterparts. They were the last ones to be hired and first ones to be fired. They were not allowed to operate any machinery or hold any skilled jobs. Even where the mill owners were Punjabis/Indians, all the high paying jobs and management positions were given only to the Whites.

After working for a while in the mills and logging camps, Darshan became a student at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver. Here he became a member of the Young Communist League (YCL). He spent more time studying Marxist literature than his university course books. According to his own recollection, he found his university course material very difficult to understand, however, he had no problem understanding political theories, especially Marxist writings.

⁴ Interview with Darshan Singh Canadian.

While his relationships with the progressive students at UBC strengthened, he also began to take a very active part in his own community's activities. In the historic gurdwara, located on 2nd Ave. in Vancouver, he would often speak on issues relating to India's independence movement. Through his actions and ideas, he attracted the attention of the immigration department. As a result, they refused to give him the permission to work, which he desperately needed to earn money to continue his studies at UBC. He failed to find work because the mill owners were also informed about his immigration status. He went back to UBC but was unable to continue due to lack of funds.

Acting on the advice of some friends, Darshan went to Alberta with a friend in search of work. They started working in a sawmill about three hundred miles north of Edmonton. Life at this mill was hard, the working conditions were harsh, and they were far enough north that it was constantly cold, day and night. Darshan worked the night shift on the green chain. According to Darshan, “compared to other places in Canada, that place can rightly be called the hell of Canada.”⁵

After working there for a few months, Darshan moved back to northern B.C. and worked in a number of mills. While working near Prince George in a small town called Bend, he learned that in Vancouver, an Indian lawyer, Dr. Pandia had been delegated to handle the immigration cases of illegal Indians. Darshan and a few others returned to Vancouver and with the help of other people in the similar situation formed a committee to raise funds for the legal battle. They collected \$4,000 from the B.C.'s Punjabi/Indian community and gave it to Dr. Pandia. As a result of these collective efforts more than 300 illegal Indians were given legal status to stay in Canada permanently in 1939.

⁵ Darshan Singh Canadian interview

Draft Letter to join the Canadian Army

After Darshan's immigration case was settled, he began to work in Kapoor's mill again. But by this time 2nd World War had begun and the impact it had on Darshan's life and the Indian community was considerable and significant. He was among the first Indians to receive conscription letters from the military. There was heated discussion in the community about the conscription of Indians. They felt that if Canada was not willing to give them equal rights, how did they expect them to fight for Canada? It must be remembered that Indians did not have the right to vote and consequently, had no other rights enjoyed by the rest of the Canadians. A resolution was passed in Vancouver's historic gurdwara that if Canada expected them to join the army, then they must be granted equal rights. However, for Darshan, the immediate concern was whether to join the army or go into hiding and live like a criminal. He consulted with several people and eventually decided to join the army. According to Kuldip Bains, a co-worker and a friend of Darshan, "when I asked him what was he hoping to get out of the army? His answer was, 'you never know when this kind of training can be useful in life.' Darshan figured that army training would be helpful in his own work as a revolutionary."⁶ It indicates that Darshan was preparing himself for a long-term commitment to social change and working towards a revolution in India.

The military training was held for four months in Vernon, B.C.. Darshan recalls that "I was the only Indian among all Whites. You know how things are in a place like that. You hear the bugle. You get up, wash your face, and run. You march here, march there, you creep on your belly, move on your knees. Learn to handle the rifle ... and so on. I learned all the swear words used by the Whites there."⁷

⁶ Interview with Kuldip S. Bains

⁷ Interview with Darshan Singh Canadian

After training he was told that he would later receive a letter to join the army. However, because of the protest within the Indian community, he was never called to join the army. He found a job in Victoria with the Selkirk Lumber Company, which was also owned by an Indian and worked there for the following five to six years.

Work in the Communist Party and Trade Union

As mentioned earlier, Darshan Singh had become associated with the Young Communist League (YCL) and other progressive students while at UBC and stayed connected with the Communist Party (CP) while in Canada. One main reason for his attachment to the CP was that he was successful in his efforts to convince the Party to strongly support the struggles of Indians in Canada to gain equal rights. Because of his intellect and commitment, Darshan received a respectable position in the Party. His excellent oratory skills and exceptional clarity in thinking were just two of the many attributes that helped him advance his career within the CP. Craig Pritchett, a lifelong trade union activist and Darshan's comrade in the CP explains that "Darshan Singh played a very important role in the union and the Party, mainly because he was an excellent speaker. He had remarkable control on the English language. Because he was university educated, he was intensely clear in his writings and was always able to effectively communicate what he wanted to say."⁸ Darshan Singh went on lecture tours across Canada on behalf of the Party. In these lectures, in addition to focusing on the Party agenda, he also tried to shed light on misconceptions held by White Canadian workers about workers from non-White communities.

During early 1940s, the International Woodworkers of America (I.W.A.) had begun to successfully organize in and around

⁸ Interview with Craig Pritchett



Vancouver sawmills. But it had no success on Vancouver Island. The organizers were finding it hard to reach the workers from the minority communities. To solve this problem, Nigel Morgan from I.W.A. met Darshan in Vancouver. He informed Darshan about the movement to organize the lumber industry into the I.W.A.. He said one of the major difficulties that they were facing was that they could not reach the workers from the Japanese, Chinese and Indian communities. Morgan explained that even if they succeeded in organizing the White workers, the efforts would fail without the support of workers from the minority communities. For this task, they needed Darshan's help. After this meeting, Darshan agreed to work as an I.W.A. organizer.⁹

In 1941, Darshan tried to organize the Indian workers but at that time the union had very little sway among Indian workers for several different reasons. First, the Indian community was so tight knit, the workers had both direct relations and regional

⁹ Interview with Darshan Singh Canadian



connections with many of the mill owners. Secondly, these workers had either come directly from villages or the military and the idea of trade union was an entirely new concept for them. As well, there were many stories and misconceptions about the unions that filled the workers with fear. Like in other parts of North America, union organizing in B.C. during the early years of the twentieth century was a tough struggle and organizers were often the targets of state repression. It was common for mill owners or the police to hire thugs to beat or threaten the organizers and often had them punished by the law by creating false charges against them. They were also known to have murdered many effective organizers.¹⁰ These sorts of experiences created fear about unions among the Indian workers. Realizing it was necessary for Indian workers to shed their fears concerning the union, Darshan started to educate the workers about the

¹⁰ Interview with Darshan Singh Canadian

benefits of joining the union and the need to fight against racial discrimination. Darshan also reminded Punjabi workers about their tradition of fighting against injustices of all kinds.

He first started organizing at the mills on the Vancouver Island by contacting the workers at a mill owned by a Punjabi, Indian named Mayo. This mill employed about two hundred and fifty workers. The skilled jobs, such as running the saws were held by about 40 to 50 White workers while unskilled jobs in the mill were held by the Indian and Chinese workers. Initially, Darshan would only talk to old acquaintances that shared his progressive views but slowly, by late 1942, he was able to hold open meetings with workers.

It was difficult for Darshan to talk to workers about the union. The biggest problem was that he had no place to hold the talks. The workers lived in bunkhouses, which were usually next to the mills, located on the mill owner's property and it was simply not possible to talk openly there. The meeting places for the community were the religious centers, the gurdwaras, and the talks couldn't be held there because the mill owners had a lot of power in those places. So, the workers had to be contacted secretly.

Interestingly, the difficulties Darshan had often had a way of sorting themselves out with such as the incident that occurred at a mill in Youbou in 1945. Darshan was holding a meeting with workers in their bunkhouse, and someone informed the mill superintendent. He came and stopped the meeting. He drove Darshan to his office and argued with him before asking him to leave. When they were finally leaving the office, they found more than 80 workers standing outside in the pouring rain. The workers told the superintendent that if Darshan was forced to leave, they would all leave with him. The superintendent was afraid to lose such a large number of workers, especially since he would not be



able to run his next shift. Consequently, he drove Darshan back to the bunkhouse to continue his meeting. This was seen as an important victory and the news quickly spread to other mills and Punjabi workers everywhere in B.C.. They felt a special self-confidence that they had not known before.¹¹

Darshan's work in the I.W.A. was not just limited to organizing the Indian workers, he was the recording secretary for the Victoria local and a Trustee in the district council. With his clear and sharp thinking and being an excellent speaker both in Punjabi and English, he impressed everyone in the lumber industry and inspired them to work for a common goal beyond all color and race differences. According to Craig Pritchett, "the I.W.A., with its knowledge gained from the leftist mode of thinking, was able to defeat the owners' tactics of dividing workers on racial and

¹¹ Interview with Darshan Singh Canadian

color lines. And one of its most effective contributors was Darshan Singh Sangha.”¹²

In the history of B.C.'s I.W.A., the strike of 1946 is considered its most decisive event. The strike began on May 15, 1946 and ended in a big victory for the lumber workers after 37 days. The right to an eight-hour workday, a raise in pay, the end of inequality based on race and many other significant victories were won. The I.W.A. established solid footing in B.C. with this strike. Darshan, with other leading individuals like Nigel Morgan, Harold Pritchett, and Ernie Dalskog, helped prepare workers for the strike. At the end of the strike, there was a huge victory rally held in New Westminster where more than four thousand union members attended. Darshan, who was one of the main speakers, addressed the meeting and presented a report about the various victories achieved during the strike.¹³

In the beginning of the same year (1946), the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) held its annual convention in Toronto. Darshan attended that convention as a delegate from B.C.. He put forward a resolution for the unity of the trade union movement in Canada. This was an important resolution and passed by the CLC at the convention. The fact that Darshan put forward this resolution shows that he also contributed to the labour movement at the federal level and his contribution was not limited to B.C..

Darshan, at the time, was an International Trustee in the I.W.A.. He went on a tour of Alberta to educate people about the union. After returning from this trip, he published his experiences in the *Lumber Worker* on November 4, 1946, in an article titled ‘Alberta Workers Welcome I.W.A.’.¹⁴ He wrote about the low pay, and horrible working and living conditions of Alberta's lumber industry. Based on his experience and understanding he

¹² Interview with Craig Pritchett

¹³ Interview with Darshan Singh Canadian

¹⁴ B.C. Lumber Worker, November 4, 1946



expressed confidence that the I.W.A. would be successful in organizing workers there as well. He wrote, "It is only a matter of time before thousands of Alberta's workers will join the I.W.A. and be successful in gaining better pay, fewer working hours, better working and living conditions and job security."¹⁵

Nigel Morgan, the editor of the *Lumber Worker*, wrote an introduction to Darshan's article. This note illuminates

the significance of Darshan's work in Alberta for the I.W.A.. Morgan wrote, "Brother Darshan Singh has just returned from a tour of the Eastern Provinces where he has been doing a splendid job in building unity between the I.W.A. and the Alberta woodworkers. The following article is Darshan's own first-hand account of what is happening in Alberta at the present time."¹⁶

Because of his ability to reach a wider section of lumber workers, Darshan was able to carve an important place for himself in the I.W.A. and statements given by his co-workers attest to this fact. For example, Roy Mah from the Chinese community who had worked with I.W.A. as an organizer at the time said that, in comparison, Darshan's contribution was much bigger than his own. He said, "I was only an organizer, but Darshan was, for

¹⁵ B.C. *Lumber Worker*, November 4, 1946.

¹⁶ B.C. *Lumber Worker*, November 4, 1946.

many years, a Trustee in the district council and part of the upper layers of the leadership”.¹⁷ Similarly Mona Morgan and Emil Bjornson feel that with his deep political knowledge, Darshan made noteworthy contributions to the labour movement. Mr. Clay Perry, who was the legislative director of the I.W.A. during the mid 1980s, states, “Darshan was an adornment to my union, and an adornment to humanity.”¹⁸

A number of group pictures, periodically published in the Lumber Worker, give proof to the validity of the statements made by Darshan's friends. For example, a picture on the front page of the March 8, 1943, issue of the Lumber Worker can be mentioned. In this picture we see ten officials of the I.W.A. who were elected on March 3, 1943, and they include Harold Pritchett, Ernie Dalskog, Hjalmer Bergern, Nigel Morgan and Darshan Singh Canadian. In addition to these pictures, one can mention the numerous articles that Darshan wrote in the Communist Party paper, the Pacific Tribune, and the Lumber Worker.

Contributions to the Struggle of Indians to Gain the Right to Vote in Canada

When the Indians first arrived and made B.C. their home, they had the right to vote but that right was taken away from them in 1907. For the next forty years, they continuously struggled to regain this right. During his stay in Canada, Darshan Singh made important contributions to this struggle, including being a member of many delegations that met with the government agencies on behalf of the Indian community. His biggest contribution was to garner support for this cause from the trade union movement, and many other progressive sections of the

¹⁷ Telephone Interview with Roy Mah by Sadhu Binning

¹⁸ Clay Perry speech at the Darshan Singh Canadian Memorial in Vancouver

larger community. This was one of the major factors that contributed to the intensification of the campaign to gain the right to vote during the mid-1940's. Many other community leaders and organizations made valuable contributions to this struggle, however, the extent to which Darshan was able to influence political quarters and the public was exceptional.

There was a major difference in the struggle to regain the vote in the 1940's as compared to the previous efforts. In the 1940s, organized labour groups in B.C. strongly supported the Indian community's demand for the right to vote. It should be kept in mind that there was a time when organized labour was dead against the entry of Indian workers into B.C., as illustrated by the infamous Komagata Maru incident in Vancouver. However, the situation had changed in the 1940s and the labour unions, socialist organizations, the CCF Party, the Labour Progressive Party, churches, and teacher's organizations were standing with the Indians. For example, a delegation from the Indian community met with B.C.'s premier John Hart on March 2, 1943. The president of the I.W.A. District 1, Harold Pritchett, was part of this delegation and the inclusion of such a high-ranking leader in the delegation attracted a lot of attention and gave considerable strength to the cause of the Indian community.¹⁹

During the struggle to gain the right to vote, Labour Minister of the Liberal government, George Pearson, gave a statement full of hatred against the Indians in B.C.'s legislature on March 9, 1944. The entire Indian community was angry at his speech and to express the anger felt by them, a delegation met with Labour Minister on March 14. Darshan was part of this delegation along

¹⁹ See, "How Indians Gain the Right to Vote in Canada", (Punjabi) by Sukhwant Hundal and Sadhu Binning, Vancouver Sath Publications, 1997, pp. 33-34.

with other community leaders such as Naginder Singh Gill, Jerry Hundal and Mohinder Singh.²⁰

The long struggle waged by the Indian community in Canada to regain the right to vote ended in a victory on April 2, 1947. The B.C. government passed the law that gave the right back to the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese people living here. The role played by Darshan Singh to gain the support of the organized labour for this cause was very crucial for this victory.

Contributions to the India's Independence Struggle

Along with his work as a union organizer, Darshan continuously worked to educate the Canadian labour as well as the general public about the struggle being waged in India to gain freedom from British imperialism. For example, at the Communist Party convention held in Toronto in 1942 where more than 400 delegates from across Canada were in attendance, Darshan presented a resolution in support of India's Independence. The entire convention stood up and overwhelmingly supported the resolution. Similarly, in November of 1944 at the Eighth International Convention of the I.W.A. held in Vancouver, Darshan presented another resolution in support of India's independence, which was unanimously passed. The November 6th, 1944, issue of the Lumber Worker carried a news item about this resolution with Darshan's picture on the front page. The headline read: "Darshan Singh Supports Unity." Speaking to the resolution Darshan said, "No permanent peace would be possible without her (India's) deliverance. Fascism and imperialism are inseparable twins. With one fifth of mankind in bondage under tyranny, must we keep quiet? ... We are not fighting to make

²⁰ "How Indians Gain the Right to Vote in Canada", p. 29.

world safe for imperialism, whether it be imperialism of the Dutch, French, Americans, British or what have you.”²¹

Rise of New Asia: A book by Darshan Singh Sangha

In 1943, Darshan Singh wrote a book titled 'The Rise of New Asia' (Progress Publishing, 1948).²² In this book, he included his many essays about India, China, Japan as well as about Korea, Philippine, Indo-China, Indonesian, Iran and Turkey. The book clearly indicates Darshan's humanistic thinking from his dedication of the book to Dr. Norman Bethune of Canada and Dr. Dwarka Nath Kotnis of India. Both doctors had given their lives to support the struggle of China and its people.

Decision to go back to India

It seems that with all his activities and achievements in Canada, Darshan was not satisfied with his work because his heart was still with the masses in India. The problems faced by the millions of his countrymen tormented him. He could have lived a very comfortable life in Canada but that was not what he wanted. Darshan's friends Emil Bjornson, Harry Rankin, Mona Morgan and Craig Pritchett all felt that it was a huge personal sacrifice for Darshan to leave Canada when he did.

It is important to understand what was behind Darshan's decision to leave Canada. Was it an emotional decision by an Indian to go back? Or was there some bigger logic that Darshan was following? A letter that he wrote to resign from his position as a Trustee of the union on his departure from Canada answers many of these questions. Parts of this letter were published in the Lumber Worker of December 15, 1947. In it, Darshan talked

²² Darshan Singh Sangha, *The Rise of New Asia*, Progressive Publishing, Toronto, 1948

about his work with the trade union movement in Canada and thanked his co-workers in the movement. He said, “On leaving, I feel quite satisfied to certain extent of my work here and at the same time, I feel a deep sorrow on leaving Canada. The reason for the sorrow is separation from my dear friends in Canada. At the same time, I am satisfied with the thought that in India I will actively work in the trade union movement and I will always feel that we are all working for the same goal – the well-being and freedom of the working class.”

Conclusion

Darshan's work in Canada was essential and needs to be appreciated from a number of different perspectives. After arriving in Canada, he joined the progressive movement and understood the conditions of workers from the left perspective. He used that knowledge to educate the people in his community. In many ways, he helped to raise the intellectual level of the Indian workers, especially those who worked in the lumber industry. Consequently, they saw themselves as equal to other workers and were filled with a new sense of self-confidence and pride. At the same time, he educated the White workers and the general public by destroying many of the misconceptions they held about Indians. This resulted in qualitative changes in the way the larger community viewed the Indian workers. The strong support received for the right to vote campaign from the trade union movement in B.C., especially between 1942 and 1947, was the direct result of Darshan's work. He acted as a bridge to bring communities closer to each other. Through his hard work and dedication, he can be seen as a Canadian trying to improve the quality of life for everyone in Canada. This makes Darshan important for all Canadians, not just for the Indian community.

Darshan's very active life was suddenly cut short by Khalistani extremists on September 25, 1986, near his ancestral village in

Punjab. His many friends in Vancouver gathered in large numbers in I.W.A.'s hall on Commercial Street in Vancouver on October 12, 1986, to pay tribute to the man they admired and loved. His friends Emil Bjornson, Maurice Rush, Harry Rankin, Clay Perry, as well as many others, remembered Darshan Singh Sangha, who was known as Canadian to millions in India, in their speeches and memories. It is important to give meaning to the words spoken by Clay Perry at that time: Darshan Singh “was known in Canada as a Punjabi, and known in Punjab as a Canadian, indeed as the Canadian. We should do what we can now to correct that curious division and call him forever Canadian here. He fought for and was an example of a human spirit that far transcends those boundaries.”²³

For this idea to be reality, it is important to know who Darshan Singh Sangha was and what he did during his stay in Canada. It is important to make sure that he becomes a part of our proud Canadian history.

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²³ Clay Perry speech, October 12, 1986, Vancouver.

Photos:

Front cover: Darshan Singh Canadian with thousands of striking I.W.A. members marching on the legislature in 1946. *Courtesy Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal.*

Page 7: Darshan Singh Sangha in traditional Punjabi dress with fellow millworkers on Vancouver Island in the 1940s. *Courtesy Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal.*

Page 8: Darshan Singh Sangha seated at right. *Courtesy Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal.*

Page 10: Members of the B.C. District Council in Vancouver in 1943. L to R: Mark Mosher, Ernie Dalskog, Darshan Singh Sangha, Winnefred Williams, Bert Melsness, Harold Pritchett, Hjalmar Bergren, Nigel Morgan, Jack Lindsay, Perry Smith. *I.W.A. Archives.*

Page 12: Photo of Darshan Singh Canadian.

Who we are

The BC Labour Heritage Centre Society preserves, documents and presents the rich history of working people in British Columbia. The Society engages in partnerships and projects that help define and express the role that work and workers have played in the evolution of social policy and its impact on the present and future shaping of the province.

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