

# Budh Singh and Kashmir Kaur Dhahan

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Budh Singh and Kashmir Kaur were born and raised in rural India in Punjabi Sikh families. Both of their fathers and uncles knew each other as they were involved in the independence movement. Their parents arranged for them to be married at a young age. They now have five adult children, fourteen grandchildren and two great-grandchildren living in Canada.

Budh Singh's early years were characterized by a strong sense of community ideals that led to a growing desire to improve the lives of people around him. Although his formal education did not extend beyond Grade 8 and Kashmir Kaur did not have the opportunity to go to school, their entire adult lives have been committed to education in the broadest sense. As a young man in the aftermath of the partition between India and Pakistan, Budh Singh worked with refugees who had been dislocated by the partition. He mobilized local people to build shelters and schools, and worked actively on social and political causes to ensure a better life for all. Kashmir Kaur devoted herself to supporting her husband while raising their growing family. During the 1950s, Budh Singh was jailed as a political prisoner eleven times for his community leadership.



Budh Singh came to Canada in 1960 to provide for his children's education. He settled in the lumber town of Port Alberni, British Columbia. In the summer of 1967, Kashmir Kaur, along with four of their children, also arrived from India. In the 1960s Mr. Dhahan worked in the lumber industry and later, in the 1970s, they established a successful construction enterprise in Vancouver. They were pioneering Indo-Canadian home builders in Richmond and Vancouver. During these years they were active in local community causes and at one time, Budh Singh served as the general secretary of the Khalsa Diwan Society in Vancouver, the oldest and largest Sikh organization in Canada. He was active in the executive leadership of the Society until 1979. Under his leadership, new initiatives such as Punjabi language classes, and ESL classes for new immigrants, and programs to help strengthen the relationship between the Indo-Canadian community with the larger community were launched. In 1975 during his tenure as general secretary, the property title to the Sikh Gurdwara in

Abbotsford was transferred from the Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver to the Khalsa Diwan Society, Abbotsford as the growing Punjabi Sikh community in the Fraser Valley wished to have autonomy over its own affairs and the property of the Sikh temple. This Gurdwara was built in 1911 and on July 31, 2002, it was declared a National Historic site by the Government of Canada.

During these years they were inspired by the work of Canadian charities and volunteers. Education for girls and gender equality issues remained close to Mr. and Mrs. Dhahan's hearts and they continued to dream of returning to their homeland to help the poor and less educated. In 1979, they visited Punjab with the dream of bringing health care and education (especially education for girls) to rural Punjab. Over the next three decades (despite the political violence that engulfed Punjab from 1982-1993), Mr. Dhahan, as the founder-president of the Guru Nanak Mission Medical and Educational Trust, helped build an unprecedented rural medical and educational complex in Dhahan-Kaleran through his inspirational vision, his tireless fundraising from Sikhs in Punjab and abroad, and his ability to collaborate with local and international partners. These partners included

the Canada-India Education Society, the University of British Columbia School of Nursing, and the Canadian International Development Agency. The medical and educational complex that he founded is today one of the signature Sikh diaspora philanthropy projects in Punjab, with its 200 bed multi-specialty hospital, a trauma centre, a drug treatment program, a nursing school and college, an elementary and a senior secondary school, various hostels and administrative buildings, a bank, retail stores, a Sikh gurdwara, and a guest house called “UBC Canada House.” The organization was a pioneer in offering a residential drug rehabilitation facility in rural Punjab.

The Guru Nanak College of Nursing was among the first nursing degree programs in Punjab and is noteworthy as the first such college to be established in a rural area. Through mutual student exchanges with UBC School of Nursing, Mr. Dhahan has helped young women broaden their horizons to see themselves as global citizens. There are now about 1,700 graduates of the Guru Nanak nursing programs who serve in hospitals, community clinics, and nursing schools in many parts of India and there are at least 200 graduates living and working in the health sector in Canada, 50 of whom have settled in British Columbia. Through the services provided by the organization, many people have gained secure and meaningful employment in the hospital, school, nursing college, drug treatment centre, and related support services. Economic activity generated by the Guru Nanak Mission Trust has benefitted local retailers and service providers as well as the construction sector in the district for close to 30 years.

His outstanding community leadership has also been recognized by local organizations in other countries who have honoured him for his tireless work and lasting achievements. On June 3, 2004 Kwantlen University College (now Kwantlen Polytechnic University) recognized Mr. Dhahan’s exemplary contributions to Canada and India by bestowing upon him the degree of Honorary Doctor of Law. A visionary bridge builder among diverse cultural and religious groups, he has demonstrated his skills as a peacemaker during difficult and often turbulent times. He turned his idealism and vision into reality by mobilizing groups and communities to cooperate on initiatives that brought about lasting change.

Budh Singh remains actively focussed on community service and his life mission well into his eighties. He continues to serve as a Trustee of the Guru Nanak Mission Medical and Educational Trust and, over the past three years, has embarked on a similar health care and educational endeavour (Guru Nanak Mission International Charitable Trust) in another underserved rural region of Nawangran-Kulpur, Punjab. Kashmir Kaur enjoys being with her extended family in Vancouver.

Budh Singh and Kashmir Kaur have shown that access to quality education and health care are the basic building blocks for social justice and prosperity for all. Their abiding respect for knowledge and a sense of certainty that the mission of Canadian and Indian universities will include finding ways to support knowledge exchange globally has gained widespread support and bi-lateral policy focus from Canadian and Indian governments. The annual Dhahan Lecture and the Canada- India Centre for Excellence in Science, Technology, Trade, and Policy are supported by their children. They are committed to continuing their parent’s mission to create global citizens by opening up educational opportunities infused with a strong ethic of community service and good citizenship.

