Jewels of the Qila

The Remarkable Story of an Indo-Canadian Family

HUGH J.M. JOHNSTON
From the memories and manuscripts of
Jagdis K. Siddoo and Sarjit K. Siddoo
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This is a family history about members of a minority community that has enjoyed remarkable success despite weathering decades of social and legal discrimination. It has taken fifty years and several contributors to bring this book to its present form. And it would not exist had the second generation – the children of immigrant parents – not realized that they had a story to tell and worked to preserve it. The primary locales are British Columbia and Punjab, places of dramatic contrast in climate, topography, flora, fauna, culture, tradition, and history, and yet linked in the lives of immigrants and the relatives they left behind. The family’s background is Sikh, which means that it has belonged to a distinctive and visible minority both in India and in Canada. Its story is about change, challenge, trauma, foresight, confidence, and achievement in two countries that are half a world apart.

This is not a typical Sikh family – if such a thing exists – but it is a family whose lives and actions reflected and affected what happened in their expatriate world as well as their ancestral home. The surname, as it appears in print, tells us something. When writing in English the family spells it as Siddoo, although the common English version is Sidhu. Kapoor Singh Siddoo, the family’s first immigrant to Canada, changed the spelling at the beginning of the First World War after he had been in North America for nearly eight years. He did so because he reasoned that it would help English speakers to get the pronunciation right; and he was being pragmatic in a way that was entirely consistent with his approach to life.
But one should not think he ever turned his back on his past or encouraged his two daughters to do so. As an immigrant who did very well in Canada, he was always mindful of what was going on at home and concerned to help. That attitude ensured not only his continuing involvement with India, but enabled the charity work of his wife and daughters.

His daughter Sarjit Kaur Siddoo began assembling material for a family history in 1959. A letter from an old family friend, William H. Moore of Pickering, Ontario, got her started; and she had time on her hands because she was waiting impatiently for patients to turn up at the charity hospital her family had built in rural Punjab. Moore, her correspondent, was a multi-faceted individual – writer, lecturer, farmer, politician – for whom her father had worked back in the summer of 1914. He and Moore had stayed in touch, and in December 1959, Moore had written to Sarjit after an article appeared in the Canadian edition of *Time Magazine* about the family’s hospital. “You should write a book,” he said, adding that it was a “must” and that she should do it “now.” She immediately began to write about the struggle to launch the hospital. Intending to carry on with the writing, she preserved her notes, her diary, and correspondence from this period of her life.

Over the years, both Sarjit and her sister, Jackie (Jagdis), worked together on the family history, setting down what they knew, keeping clippings of magazine and newspaper articles, saving correspondence (although, with their constant movement from Canada to India, much was lost), retrieving business records, and exchanging information with relatives and friends. In the early 1980s, Sarjit and her husband, Avtar, taped several interviews with relatives and others who knew her parents. Twenty years later, with the project still unfinished, they hired a researcher who collected more material and added a few more interviews. They had a growing manuscript of recollections, descriptions, extracts from periodicals, portions of interviews, and chronologies, which they passed back and forth, adding and correcting. Nonetheless, though the manuscript, as they recognized, was material for a book, it was not a book yet.

I first met Sarjit in 1990 when looking for multiple copies of Mary Lutyen’s biography of Jiddu Krishnamurti for a class I was teaching. She was able to get the copies for me, and at the same time she invited me and my wife for a weekend retreat at the Krishnamurti Centre that she and her sister maintained – and still maintain – on Swanwick Road near Victoria. We had a delightful time there, and for long afterward we received notices of coming events at the centre, but we let time slip without following up. Some years later, Sarjit invited the two of us for lunch at her
home in the Vancouver area. I don’t think she remembered me from the previous occasion. Instead, she had been told that I was an expert whom she could consult about the history of the Sikh community. That first lunch led to many more, spaced at six-month intervals. Over that time, my role in the Siddoo family history evolved from consultant to author, from making minor suggestions to taking on the writing, expanding the research in a major way, and constructing the story as I thought most useful, which was to supply as much context as I could without losing the thread of a family story.

Two earlier books of mine, one on the infamous voyage of the Sikh emigrant ship the Komagata Maru, and another on the life experiences of a Sikh immigrant of the 1950s, provide slices of the story that binds India and Canada. This book has a longer sweep, and writing it has added considerably to the complexity of my own understanding of a now prospering minority with roots in two countries.
Acknowledgments

My great thanks go to my good friend Sohan Singh Pooni for reading this manuscript in his always informed and attentive way, and for passing on documents that he collected and translated – the results of his years of searching for material for his recent book on Gadar heroes, *Canada de Gadri Yodhe*, a work that his fellow Punjabis have welcomed with spontaneous, enthusiastic, and deserved applause. My former student Archana Verma added greatly to my understanding of the Paldi/Mayo Siding community with interviews that she conducted twenty years ago in India and in Canada for her book *The Making of Little Punjab in Canada*. One of the people who helped her at that time was a member of the Mayo family, Joan Mayo, who was then looking for someone to write about Mayo Singh and Paldi, and who finally took on the job herself, producing a most readable and informative account.

It was after meeting Joan Mayo that I had a chance to talk with Mayo Singh’s son-in-law Joe Soroya, who subsequently gave the Simon Fraser University Archives his personal papers and photographs. Some of what he shared has found its way into this book. Also, as I worked my way through my filing cabinet of material acquired over many years, I was repeatedly thankful to Sarj Singh Jagpal, not just for his invaluable *Becoming Canadians*, based on the stories of his father’s generation of Sikh immigrants, but also for some of the documents he retrieved from the closets and cupboards of people he interviewed, documents that he long ago generously helped me to photocopy. In the past few years, I’ve enjoyed the very special experience of spending time with Durai Pal.
Pandia’s daughter, Aruna, and her friend from childhood, Ishar Singh Banns’ daughter Chandra Raglin, as well as with Ishar’s adopted son, Paul Banns, who freely shared what they knew and some of what Paul in particular had researched. Amarjit Hundle, a grandnephew of Kartar Singh Hundal, is another keen family historian whose help I appreciate. My friend Terry Aman kindly read my manuscript in its early stages, and I was glad to have his encouragement.

I give special thanks to my wife, Patricia, who has enthusiastically joined in my involvement with Sikhs and their history, attending gurdwaras (temples), visiting families and friends, scribbling as my unpaid assistant in the archives, listening to what I have written or wanted to talk about, travelling with me to India more than once, living there many months, and charming and befriending the many remarkable people who have come into our lives as a consequence. My three energetic and caring daughters, Megan, Caitlin, and Sian, have given help and encouragement throughout, and Sian has found the time to read and correct each chapter of this book as it emerged.

I am deeply grateful to Jackie, Sarjit, Avtar, and Chanda for the opportunity to write their story using their materials, their carefully written as well as their off-the-cuff recollections, their documents, and their pictures and interviews. I am also grateful for the research that a former student at UBC, Ranbir Johal, did for them a number of years ago while she was in graduate school. For many months I took up daytime residence in Sarjit, Avtar, and Chanda’s Canadian home, and I was with them for a month in India, sharing their meals and their spirited conversations and feeling as welcome as any family member. It was in the comfort of their homes in Canada and India that I talked to many of their relatives and got a rich sense of their lives, which made writing this book a wonderfully inviting and rewarding undertaking.

The maps and the indexing for this book have been paid for with a grant from the Simon Fraser University Publications Fund, which I greatly appreciate.

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Aur, Kharoudhi, and nearby towns
Mahalpur-area villages including Kharoudhi, Paldi, and Skrooli
Kapoor’s world on Vancouver Island
When Vancouver journalist Art McKenzie described Kapoor Singh Siddoo in a 1956 weekend magazine article, his lead adjective was “modest.” Kapoor was then seventy-one. McKenzie had been impressed by the quiet and gracious dignity of someone who was arguably the most influential and successful person in the local Punjabi community. When he did the research for his article, he found Kapoor living in a comfortable but unpretentious two-story house in a mixed middle-class/working-class Vancouver neighbourhood. Kapoor had occupied that house for twenty years, and McKenzie asked why he didn’t build something grander. Kapoor said he had neither the need nor the interest. He had the money, but an ostentatious house he did not want.

By 1956 Kapoor could look back on fifty years in North America. He had been one of seven or eight thousand in the first wave of South Asian immigrants who crossed the Pacific, seeking fortunes in Canada and the United States. The India he left behind was under British rule, but as he later explained, he was not abandoning his native country. His emigration was part adventure, part political act, inspired by a nationalistic teacher who told his students, “Boys, if you ever get the chance, go to America and make lots of money, and come back and free India.” That exhortation was in the back of Kapoor’s mind when, as a young man, he took passage from Calcutta (Kolkata). When he arrived in America and rubbed shoulders in the South Asian emigrant community, Kapoor got to know a mix of students and labourers – Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims. Most were Punjabis but some came from other parts of India. Among them were...
political refugees and other fervent nationalists who coalesced in 1913 in the Gadar (Mutiny) Party, which they formed to wage a war of independence for India. Kapoor had Gadar friends but was not an activist. His daughters, growing up years later, were unaware of his Gadar connection, although they knew he had Gadar sympathies; they did not suspect his involvement until, in their late seventies, they were shown a reprint of an Indian police directory that listed his name. He had not talked about the subject to them. Even so, the police in India believed he was dangerous and kept a dossier on him for decades, as they did with hundreds of other overseas Indians. This had consequences when he returned to India for the first time in 1931, after an absence of a quarter of a century. Although the reasons for his return were innocent and unremarkable, the police kept track of him. He had arrived at Kolkata on the Japanese liner Yuen Sang on 9 November, and the police knew it. He didn’t intend to hurry back to Canada, but after fourteen months a police agent turned up and asked for his passport “for verification.” Fearing that it would be confiscated, Kapoor refused to give it up and returned immediately to Vancouver with his family.

By then, Kapoor’s home and heart were in Canada. This was in spite of the extreme prejudice and discrimination that he and other South Asians faced. He had seen the prejudice of the white community produce severe immigration restrictions against South Asians, and yet he had prospered and made friends beyond his apnai – his own people. He was one of an exceptional few who had landed in North America without difficulty early in the twentieth century and who had stayed and put down roots. In 1906 he had stepped ashore in San Francisco with as little hassle as any European. But he was enjoying a short-lived opportunity. He had not been in North America long before Canadian and American ports began turning back nearly every South Asian immigrant who tried to enter. Immigration barriers had gone up in both countries to exclude all but a few of his countrymen. And that became the pattern of the next forty to fifty years. People managed to get in with false papers and by indirect routes – via the Philippines, Mexico, and Europe – but their numbers were small.

Kapoor had remained in North America when a majority of his compatriots had returned to India. There were about seventy-five hundred on the Pacific Coast of Canada and the US in 1910, and less than three thousand ten years later. In British Columbia the number had dropped below a thousand. Among them was Kapoor, and he was doing well. Men left North America for many reasons. One was the call of home; one
was the conviction that they could help drive the British out of India; and one was loss of employment. The normal economic cycle had forced men out during recessions, and immigration restrictions made it difficult for new men to come in during periods of expansion. But besides this, the job market for Indian labourers was shrinking, a direct consequence of the anti-Asian lobby among white workers and the pressure they put on governments and employers to exclude Asians. By the time Kapoor had been in North America for five years, the alternatives for his people had become starkly simple: farming or working in the lumber industry. For those who stayed in California, it was mostly farming, and in British Columbia it was mostly the lumber industry. During the First World War, with a consortium of his countrymen, Kapoor became a sawmill operator, beginning with a small and marginal mill. So it was that he established the basis of a small fortune while most of his compatriots were leaving.

At the peak of his business, in the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s, Kapoor employed hundreds of white, Punjabi, Chinese, and Japanese men. Among his own people, he was respectfully called Babu ji, a Punjabi form of address for a genteel and educated person, which he was. Whites called him Kapoor or Mr. Kapoor, treating his first name as his last. As a child, his youngest daughter, Sarjit, thought that her surname was Kapoor, and she confused her teachers at Henry Hudson Elementary School by saying that she was Sarjit Kapoor while her sister, a year older, was correctly telling them she was Jagdis Siddoo. The girls saw their father always being treated with respect. He was a handsome man, well spoken, well groomed, and impeccably dressed. A tailored three-piece blue suit was standard for him. Sarjit and Jagdis, or Jackie as everyone always called her, remembered with pride the question many people asked when their parents took them on a tour of Europe: “Is your father a diplomat?” He didn’t look like an immigrant sawmill operator from BC.

Kartar Singh Hundal, who knew Kapoor for decades, and who worked with and for him, was one of the greatest advocates for South Asian rights that his community ever produced. When he was called upon to comment for the newspapers after Kapoor’s death, he described Kapoor as a quiet and humble man who said only what he meant. Kapoor’s daughters state that he was shy, in contrast to his youngest daughter, Sarjit, who has always been outspoken. When the family met with the prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, she did most of the talking. This was in 1957, when they were encountering innumerable obstacles in an attempt to establish a charity hospital in Punjab. They had come down to Delhi from Punjab for an audience with Nehru in his residence. When he entered the small...
study where they waited for him, it was Sarjit who spoke up. She was thirty at the time and a medical doctor, and she had been dealing with the problems first-hand. And yet her personality and her father’s led her to take the lead while he sat back.

But his own people listened when Kapoor spoke, and he did not have to shout. Gurdial Singh Teja was one of the kinsmen he brought to Canada during the late 1920s to work in the Mayo mill at Mayo Siding, near Duncan on Vancouver Island. Gurdial was a big man: six foot two and 225 pounds or more, and the tough guy in the Siddoo clan when factional fights broke out among Punjabis. His son Dave Teja has told the story of one fight at the Mayo mill involving his father, which ended with Kapoor’s intervention. Someone hit Gurdial so hard with a bottle that it dented his skull, and he had to be hospitalized. When he was released, he sought out his assailant, beat him up, and put a pistol to his head, threatening to kill him. Dave Teja said that his father was not proud of this act but had to show that he could not be pushed around. A circle of Punjabis gathered. Kapoor elbowed his way through and told Gurdial to hand over the gun. Dave Teja said that Kapoor was cool and effective. His father surrendered the gun, and though he did have to serve jail time, Kapoor managed to get him released on a bond.

This story becomes more meaningful when one understands that there were two Punjabi factions at the Mayo mill – two groups of kinsfolk who had joined forces to operate a sawmilling business. Kapoor was the principal figure in one group, and Maiya Singh – also known as Mayo Singh – was his counterpart in the other. They were the leaders in a masculine world, an isolated bunkhouse community located on a railway that ran through the old-growth forest of Vancouver Island. In their off-hours, this group spent a lot of time together, sleeping and eating in the “Hindu” bunkhouse and the cookhouse, whereas whites, Chinese, and Japanese went to their own buildings – four ethnic groups, four languages, four cuisines and bunkhouses sleeping fifty or sixty men each. Occasional flare-ups and tensions among the Punjabis were inevitable – as among other bunkhouse men. Remarkably, the Mayo-Kapoor business alliance survived for twenty years before it dissolved.

As an emigrant in North America, Kapoor lived for sixteen years in the rough company of men. He was nearly thirty-eight before he brought his wife, Besant Kaur, from India, and only then did they begin their domestic life together. It happened like this: after they married, she stayed with her own family, which was not unusual for a fifteen-year-old Punjabi wife at the time, and which required no discussion because Kapoor was...
still a student and not living at home. But then he had emigrated and stayed abroad, and they had been separated by Canada’s anti-Indian immigration regulations. In 1919 the Canadian government finally relented and let Punjabi men such as Kapoor sponsor their wives and children. It took some correspondence and planning to bring Besant Kaur over, but she finally arrived early in 1923, escorted by Kapoor’s older brother. Several other women came at the same time, and they made up the second small group of Punjabi wives to come to Canada in a twelve-month period. Others followed. After a couple of years, Kapoor’s partner, Mayo Singh, returned from India with a bride who was nineteen years his junior. And Mayo’s older brother, Ganeya, also brought his wife. Now, in the neat little community at Mayo Siding, with four large bunkhouses and over twenty individual houses, three large family homes stood out. First was Mayo’s house, next to it was Ganeya’s, and then after a space Kapoor’s house – all wood-frame constructions built on the same scale, though Kapoor’s had a different design.

Beginning married life late as they did, Kapoor and Besant Kaur expected no children, but they were blessed with two daughters born during their first three years at Mayo Siding. And they seemed to have surmounted the challenge of starting married life late by creating a very strong union. Kapoor turned out to be a wonderfully domesticated husband and Besant Kaur a supportive wife who brought a mature woman’s leadership and guidance to the little community at Mayo. Jackie and Sarjit remembered with affection their family’s early morning routine, one that shaped itself in Mayo and continued later at their Kitsilano home in Vancouver. “Daddy” would be up at 4:00 a.m., lighting the wood stove, which also heated the water tank. Then he began his prayers. “Mother” would be awake at the same time but, engrossed in her daily prayers, did not get up until she had finished. Before leaving for the mill, Kapoor peeled and chopped whatever food they would eat that day so that Besant Kaur’s work would be lessened. She was a vegetarian, so if meat were on the menu – usually chicken – he cooked it. She did not cook meat, except for the dogs. For them she boiled chicken. Sikh women of her generation were commonly very fond of animals, and she was typical.

It was a very close family circle that Kapoor and Besant Kaur created with their daughters, who grew up to be strong, capable, and accomplished women with a lifetime’s devotion to their parents and their memories. Besant Kaur made no great effort to speak English – she had enough for shopping but not conversation – but she was one of the few literate Punjabi women of her generation and knew four written languages: English at a
minimal level and Punjabi, Hindi, and Urdu very well. When Besant Kaur came out from India, she brought books in the last three languages and attempted to teach the girls to read them. The books were all religious in nature, for faith was the foundation of her life. The girls knew she did not want to be disturbed while at her prayers. That was the most important part of her day. What she could and did share were stories from the Hindu and Sikh traditions, from the Ramayana and the Janamsakhis (narratives) of Guru Nanak, the first Sikh guru. She had a wonderful memory for these stories and a gift for telling them, which she used to mesmerize her daughters and others, leaving the stories themselves deeply and affectionately imprinted in their minds.

Kapoor and Besant Kaur impressed on their daughters the importance of following a spiritual path in life and also of giving back to society, not just in money but in service. Both parents were ecumenical in their view of religion. Besant Kaur’s stock response to anyone of another faith was “Your God is my God.” When it came to service, they wanted their daughters to become doctors, and Besant Kaur particularly wanted them to practise medicine in rural Punjab. The girls were still in school when she and Kapoor bought a lot in the Punjabi town of Phagwara, about twenty-five kilometres from her ancestral village of Aur. It was intended to be the site for a charity hospital that Jackie and Sarjit were to run once they had finished their medical training. The girls’ futures had been mapped out long before they entered medical school.

The sisters grew up with a love of India. From their parents, they knew it as a country rich in history and tradition. From their mother, they understood that Sikhism, their family faith, was a path of respect for all people, men and women, high caste and out-caste; and from their father, they absorbed the idea that the world would be a much happier and more peaceful place if it combined the science of the West with the ancient wisdom of India. At Kitsilano High School, Sarjit was outraged by a social studies class on ancient history – taught by a very nice teacher – in which India was not mentioned. Asia was covered by a single sentence on Assyria, and then it was on to Egypt and Europe. This was just the way it was in Canada, her father explained: “They don’t teach anything else.” Also, Sarjit objected strenuously after attending a lecture by a Christian evangelist. The sisters had been sent by their parents only to be dismayed when the lecturer represented the Indian religious tradition with lantern slides of a hooded cobra, a sacred cow, and a fakir (Sufi saint) on a bed of nails. Sarjit found it degrading and protested to her parents when they got home. On these occasions, “Daddy” would explain that white men used such
images to justify their hold on colonials. But they did not seem to disturb
him, although he was passionate about Indian independence. In dealing
with whites he had long since recognized that they were simply ignorant
about India, not deliberately insulting, and he conveyed this moderating
sense of things to his daughters.

Perhaps the most valued book in the family library was The Wisdom of
China and India, edited by the Chinese American author Lin Yutang, with
excerpts from the great Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian classics. Kapoor
bought it newly published in the early 1940s and prized it because it
illustrated the wisdom of so many spiritual paths. What he said about
spiritual matters, Besant Kaur reinforced, and vice versa. She wanted her
daughters to know about religion but did not distinguish between faiths.
In her home village of Aur, she donated to both Hindus and Sikhs when
they came collecting for their separate causes; and when she was chal-
enged about it by Sikhs, she would say, “What is it to you? We are all
one.” So, when the girls had their tonsils out at St. Joseph’s Hospital in
Victoria, and a nun invited her to pray in the hospital chapel, accepting
the invitation was very natural for her. The nun had seen her at her fa-
vourite pastime, telling the beads of her mala – her rosary. They spoke a
common language that needed no translation.

Jackie and Sarjit remembered that moment in a Roman Catholic
chapel for what it said about their mother: her openness to other faiths
– transcending her limited English. She wasn’t putting up barriers, al-
though barriers did surround her family and her community. At that time,
Sikhs and other South Asians were still second-class citizens in British
Columbia: they were denied the vote in provincial, federal, and municipal
elections, excluded from several fields of employment, unable to sponsor
their relatives as immigrants on the same terms as other Canadians, and
refused service in local barbershops or made to sit in the balcony in movie
theatres. Kapoor himself took a leading role in campaigning for change.
One of the proud pictures preserved in the Siddoo family album from
1939 is of four men who financed and led the fight for the rights of Sikhs
and other Indo-Canadians in Canada. Kapoor is one of the four, sharing
the moment with his former business partner, Mayo Singh, and their
spokesmen and strategists Dr. Durai Pal Pandia and Kartar Singh Hundal.

That picture marked a huge victory in a long struggle for acceptance
and fair treatment. Immigration still remained an issue; and public igno-
rance and intolerance of visual minorities like South Asians was sometimes
unpleasantly obvious – although generally kept in the background. But
Kapoor’s family, and others in the tiny post-war South Asian community,
had done well in a material sense. Kapoor particularly had embraced a social and business world that gave him access to the Canadian mainstream. Canada, he remarked more than once, “was a United Nations in practice.” He made several lasting friendships with Anglo-Canadians, influential and humble, people to whom he could turn for help in business or family matters, and people whom he helped. When he and other South Asians won the right to vote, his daughters were medical students in Toronto, and the family was looking forward to the service they could offer in India. They were in a position to give back to society in both India and Canada, and that was to be a large chapter in their family story. But Kapoor’s success in business had made it all possible. Theirs was an exceptional experience, and at the same time central to the general story of immigrants from India who found their way to Canada a century ago.
Family defined Kapoor and Besant Kaur in ways they could not easily have explained to Anglo-Canadians. They would have had too much to tell them. They came from Sikh families, from a small but conspicuous minority in the predominantly Muslim and Hindu province of Punjab under the British. Their families had lost status when the British took over Punjab, but they still had a special place in village society thanks to the position and rank that their ancestors had possessed under the nineteenth-century Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Kapoor’s and Besant’s families could trace their ancestry back for generations, and he could connect his to the lineage of princes. Their families belonged to the upper gentry of rural Punjab; they numbered among its “grandees,” and villagers around them respectfully remembered the feudal title of jagirdar, which their recent ancestors had held when the Sikh maharaja ruled much of what is now northern India and Pakistan.

Kapoor was born in Punjab in 1885. He was from the village of Kharoudi, only twenty kilometres from the Shivalik Hills, the foothills that skirt the Himalayas. As a boy, looking to the northeast, he could see the low profile of the Shivaliks. To the south and west, the flat plains stretched out indefinitely, a continuous panorama of fields and villages. One can see much the same view today, making allowances for modernization and greater affluence, for tarred roads, motorized traffic, power lines, cell phone transmission towers, new masonry buildings, and a plethora of brick kilns to supply the building boom now under way. It still remains the case that the farther one goes from the mountains, the
drier it gets, until three hundred kilometres away one reaches the thorny growth of the Thar Desert in Rajasthan and the Cholistan Desert in Pakistan.

The farming families of Kharoudi have been fortunate to toil in the “the garden of Punjab” – the green sub-Shivalik region where modest rainfall is supplemented by abundant groundwater from the subterranean run-off from the foothills and mountains. With water from wells and three hundred days of sunshine a year, wheat, maize, millet, rice, and sugar cane all thrive. In the last half century, dug wells have given way to deep drilled wells, and the water table is dropping, but it remains higher than it is farther away, where agriculture depends entirely on irrigation canals that bring water from the distant mountains.1

When Kapoor left Kharoudi, it was about the size it is today, a modest Punjabi village of about 150 homes surrounded by 135 hectares of village land. A Canadian prairie farmer might be surprised to see so many people living within a cultivated area smaller than his own one-family property. Of course, he could not harvest three crops a year as they do; and the economics of farming in Punjab differ greatly from that in Canada – more human labour and less machinery. And villagers today can earn money outside the village or receive support from relatives abroad, so not all are directly dependent on agriculture, although they once were, as landowners and cultivators or as their dependent servants.

Fields and crops, however, dominate the landscape, sweeping out to the horizon. Kharoudi’s fields extend to meet those of adjoining villages: Paldi to the east, Hakumatpur to the west, Nangal Kalan to the north, and Thoana to the south. Beyond these villages and their fields are others. From the abadi, or residential area of one village, to the abadi of the next is less than two kilometres by footpath or track though the fields. Like the Canadian prairie, the countryside is extremely flat, although around Kharoudhi it slopes imperceptibly away from the Shivalik Hills so that, if you go a kilometre to the west, you drop ten feet in elevation; and if you go another kilometre, another ten feet. There are slight rises of land, a matter of a few metres, and here the village elites built their homes for good drainage and to catch the breezes from the west. Other village homes clustered in an extending circle to the east, with the lowest land assigned to the least powerful and most dependent villagers. This process might have started hundreds of years ago, as in the case of Aur, Besant Kaur’s home, or more recently, as with Kharoudi, where the villagers moved the abadi after an outbreak of bubonic plague. The old abadi, with homes
built mostly of mud, has since melted away without a trace into the fields. Kapoor’s family owned land, which still describes 40 percent of the families in Kharoudi today. The remaining families were either tenant-cultivators or servants who worked for the landowners. Among the latter, there were four kinship groups, or clans, and among these the members of Kapoor’s Siddoo clan were the most recent and most important arrivals. An abandoned brick ruin in the heart of the village was once the family home. Its high-walled courtyard is now filled with weeds and crumbling bricks, and the main structure is unsafe to enter, but this was once the domestic space of a one-time feudal fief-holder, a jagirdar, whom local people always addressed respectfully as Sardar ji, a title suggesting military rank. Kapoor’s ancestors were from Harikapattan, a village some distance away. Early in the nineteenth century, Kapoor’s great-grandfather, Sardar Nihal Singh, had been rewarded for his military service to Maharaja Ranjit Singh with a jagir (or fiefdom) of two villages in the Hoshiarpur District, Fatehpur and Kharoudi. When Kapoor’s great-grandfather came to claim the Kharoudi part of his jagir – according to the family story – he stopped to ask for directions at a small village that he thought was on the way. “Sardar ji,” he was told, “You have arrived in Kharoudi.”

During a 1982 interview, Kapoor’s sister-in-law remembered that the revenue from the two villages was a handsome five hundred rupees a year. She was referring to a situation long before her time and passing on information told to her by family members. As jagirdar, Kapoor’s great-grandfather, Sardar Nihal Singh, would have collected what was due him either in cash or in kind, depending on what the village cultivators could muster. He paid an eighth to the state, and the rest was his. He and his family enjoyed this income until the British arrived in the mid-nineteenth century. They changed the revenue system throughout Punjab, eliminating jagirs, appointing village headmen as revenue officers, and paying them just 5 percent of the village revenue. In mixed English-Punjabi parlance, the tax-collecting headmen became known as number-dars, or, slightly corrupted, as lambardars. A sense of the rivalry between the old jagirdars and the new lambardars survives to the present. When Kapoor’s daughter Sarjit married Avtar Atwal, a professor of agriculture at the Punjab Agricultural University at Ludhiana, in 1964, this was a union of jagirdar and lambardar families. Their daughter, Chanda, growing up mostly in Canada but also in India, says she always identified with the jagirdar side of her family because they were servants of the Sikh maharaja, not of the British.
In Punjab, jagirdar families married among themselves, which explains the marriage of Kapoor Singh Sidhu (or Siddoo as he chose to spell it in Canada) and Besant Kaur Sandhu. First came their engagement ceremony when they were children in 1894 and then their marriage eleven years later. Her father had taken the initiative in negotiating the engagement after a relative had seen “a bright and beautiful curly-haired boy” from a village twenty kilometres away. It was usual for the girl’s side to make the first approach, and in other respects as well the two families followed traditional guidelines. They would not match a boy and girl from the same village or the same clan. A Sidhu could not marry another Sidhu or even a Brar, because the latter were really Sidhus. (In reaction to a dispute in the distant past, some Sidhus had changed their name to Brar.) Both families would have looked for someone from their own Jat background – descendants of the Scythian tribesmen who had invaded the plains from the west more than a thousand years earlier and who remained the dominant rural landowning caste in Punjab. In addition, a good Sikh family would want a match with another Sikh family. And both sides would insist on an alliance with a family of equal status and reputation, all of which drew jagirdar families together.

One of the family stories that Kapoor and Besant Kaur later told was that, at the engagement ceremony, when she was four and he was nine, she had pinched him and made him cry, and everyone had laughed. Later in life, when it came to gentle teasing or boasting, she had certain advantages. She came from a big village, a town with a large market, and he was from a small one. He was a country boy by comparison. She could trace her family back seven generations, which was more than he could do, although he knew he belonged to the Harike branch of the royal Sidhu clan, who still ruled in the princely state of Patiala. Her ancestor had also fought for Maharaja Ranjit Singh and had been awarded a jagir, but theirs was five villages, not two. Aur was one of these, and when they had moved to Aur from their former military headquarters at Una in the Shivalik Hills, they built a qila, or fort, with a courtyard large enough to keep twenty-five horses and five elephants. Part of this fort remains the family home in Aur today, although in two centuries it has been so subdivided and built against that tracing its complete outline is now impossible.

Although stripped by the British of his jagirdar’s income and military function, Besant Kaur’s father, Hakim Singh Sandhu, had become the patwari (land record officer) at Aur. In this role he kept the village’s landownership and production records, including a map of its lands and an exact reporting of its cultivation. In every crop season, fall, spring, and...
summer, he inspected the fields and enumerated the data, and he carried out his duties with such efficiency that he was offered a promotion in the revenue service to naib tehsildar (sub-district revenue officer), supervising the work of many village patwaris. The promotion meant a transfer away from Aur and out of the Jalandhar District, and he declined it because he did not want to leave his village.

Hakim Singh was both educated and pious. His family remembered that he was especially fond of his daughter, Besant Kaur – even fonder of her than of his son, Sundar Singh, who, following family tradition, was to become a unani doctor, practising a medical tradition that went back to ancient Greece and that had reached India through the Arabs. At a time when there was practically no formal female education in rural Punjab, Hakim Singh taught his daughter at home. From him, she learned the Gurmukhi script of the Sikhs as well as Devanagri and Urdu and acquired an impressive understanding of Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian teachings.

Her mother, Bishan Kaur, was from Makrayree, a village in the Shivalik Hills near the jagirdar’s headquarters at Una. She had grown up making no distinction between Hindu and Sikh teachings, and she held that view throughout her life. She had a strong constitution and her life was a long one, ending in 1956 when she was ninety-six. By then she had been a widow for more than fifty years, because Hakim Singh had died prematurely of the bubonic plague when it swept Punjab during the first decade of the twentieth century.

The story of his death is one that Jackie and Sarjit know well, although he died long before they were born. Their mother told them that he rested his head on her lap as he lay dying and asked her to recite prayers. This was a family that loved animals, and his little dog was with him on the bed. As death approached, he said, “See, they have come to take me.” Besant Kaur asked “Who?” He answered that two horses stood at the front door, one with a rider dressed in white and the other with an empty saddle. “That one is for me,” he said. She continued reciting, and as she finished, he closed his eyes and was gone. His little dog refused to eat after that and died within three weeks.

Besant Kaur said that she was distraught when her father died, and that she wept until she had a dream in which he told her to go to the diwan khana, where she would find two ladoos (sweets) as prasad (holy food). He warned her not to say anything to anyone, or she would not see him again. In the village home of a jagirdar, as in the great aristocratic homes of Lahore and Delhi, the diwan khana was a room for the men of
Besant Kaur hurried across the courtyard to find the ladoos but was so overcome by excitement and emotion that she immediately told her sister-in-law; and her father never again appeared in her dreams.

Kapoor and his two brothers did not have the same warm memory of their father, Sardar Sham Singh Sidhu, who was six feet four inches tall, a disciplinarian, and away for much of their childhood. When the boys saw his stern figure looming in the distance after a long absence, they ran into the fields to avoid him. Kapoor’s younger brother, Tara, remembered him chiefly for his hard slaps, administered without a word when they were working in the field if Tara had not listened or had touched something he shouldn’t. This was after their father had retired and was living on a meagre army pension of seven rupees. He had been a non-commissioned officer – a havaldar – in the Second Sikh Lancers under the British, serving all of his time within the boundaries of British India. Unfortunately, he was not a dog lover, a fact that had cost him a promotion to subedar (sergeant-major). His English superior officer had gone on holiday with his wife, leaving their dog in Sham Singh’s care. When they came back, the dog had been so neglected and was in such poor shape that the officer rescinded the promotion.

Sham Singh was a sick man during his few years of retirement before dying at about age sixty of pulmonary tuberculosis. As a dying man, he was attended by his daughter-in-law’s brother, Sundar, the unani doctor. Tara, his youngest son, was still a boy at the time. Decades later, as an old man himself, he recalled the moment when the doctor told him that his father would not live and asked if he wanted to go in to speak to him. The boy didn’t. “I was a kid,” he remembered. “What was I going to say?”

The three sons, Tara, Kapoor, and their older brother, Bhagwan, had already lost their mother, Ossie Kaur. When Tara was small, she had visited her home village of Samari and fallen ill with the plague. Tara barely remembered her. She was nice, he could recall, but “katar” (strict). After her death, he sometimes stayed with his massi, his mother’s youngest sister in Fatehpur, sometimes with his father, and after the death of both parents, for a long time with a bhooa, an aunt on his father’s side. Kapoor, on the other hand, was old enough to be deeply attached to his mother and to feel her loss. The aunt who looked after him and treated him as her own was Nikko, another of his mother’s sisters.

Kapoor was the one son chosen to go to school. He was obviously an intelligent and attractive child, his parents’ favourite, and later his aunt’s – even over her own children. When Sarjit interviewed her Uncle Tara
while researching her family history, she asked him which of his siblings his mother liked the most, and he answered without hesitation, “The one who went to school.” Sometimes Tara’s father would send him nearly thirty kilometres to the high school in Bajwara, carrying special food for Kapoor – fruit, yogourt, butter, and roti (bread). Sarjit asked Tara if he ever felt angry that his family gave Kapoor the best clothes and food. “No,” he replied, “he was entitled to it.” Tara himself had never expected to go to school. If a family did educate a son, it was generally just one, and Tara thought his father was exceptional in doing even that. He said that, had his father not been exposed to the world beyond the village, thanks to the army, he might not have educated any of his sons. That was how Tara explained the thinking of his father’s generation and, he admitted, his own as well.

For Tara, the idea of going to school never came up. His duty was to watch his father’s cattle where they grazed in the village common field. That had been Kapoor’s duty too until he reached the age of six. Then he became the para (the one who studies). To attend primary school, he walked eight kilometres to Mahalpur, which was a police headquarters and a town of a few thousand people on the main road to the district capital of Hoshiarpur. At school he did his lessons sitting on a grass mat under the open sky, after leaving his sandals outside the entrance to the walled school compound. He enjoyed school and never described the walk there as a hardship. Instead, he set off in the morning with distinction, wearing a shirt and shorts made of homespun cotton (khadi), but most importantly a coloured turban, not a keski, the simple head-covering worn by boys, but a complete turban, with the colour – pink, blue, yellow, or purple – denoting his grade at school. He always remembered with pleasure the morning and afternoon walk through the countryside, passing through a shady mango orchard at one point and a small bit of jungle or wooded area at another. On the way to Mahalpur, he was steadily angling closer to the Shivalik Hills and to the wooded gullies of the streams flowing out of the Shivaliks, which were conduits for wildlife. There he saw deer, rabbits, and quail, and from time to time, wolves or jackals, which sparked a lifelong identification with nature.

In the orchard that he passed through twice a day was a spiritual teacher, a guru, with a company of his devotees. Kapoor regularly paid his respects to the guru, performing an obeisance, a mattha tekda, getting down on his hands and knees and pressing his forehead to the ground. This regular encounter was significant for Kapoor because it was full of promise. The guru took an interest in the boy and on one occasion read the soles of his
feet. “You have a padam here,” he exclaimed – a lotus. “Either you will be a raja or a fakir” – a ruler or a mystic.

He was ten years old and in the fifth grade when he had a passionately nationalistic teacher who told his students they should go to America and make lots of money so they could come back and free India. A year later Kapoor elected to study English, a prerequisite for a career in the British Indian civil service, which seemed to be the best option for a boy like himself. Like many educated Punjabis of his generation, he was learning to write beautifully in three languages, the Gurmukhi script of Punjabi, Urdu, and English; and he maintained his fluency in all three for the rest of his life. As it turned out, his ability to speak English also helped him to go to America. For high school, starting with grade nine, Kapoor went to Bajwara, which was near the district capital of Hoshiarpur. It was too far away to walk from Kharoudi, but by then his aunt Nikko was looking after him, and he could stay in her village. His mother had died and his father did not live long enough to see him graduate from high school.

After high school, Kapoor attended a business college in Kolkata for training in shorthand and bookkeeping. Given his family’s meagre income, he would not have expected support from his father – had he lived – and did not expect it from his older brother, Bhagwan; but he was helped by his future father-in-law, Hakim Singh Sandhu, who sent him spending money. Hakim Singh, being a good Punjabi father, looked after the boy his daughter was engaged to marry. Soon after she reached age fifteen and Kapoor was twenty, they were married in Aur. She remained there with her family while he pursued his studies eighteen hundred kilometres away in an urban environment that was very different from rural Punjab. He was in Kolkata during an intense period of protest against British rule by the local Bengalis and by Bengali students in particular. If that was an important part of his Kolkata experience, he did not speak about it in later years. What he did talk about were two young English ladies who took a great interest in him and spent time with him reading English literature and poetry.

Punjabis have a strong sense of marriage as an alliance of families, not just of husband and wife. This sense helped Kapoor and Besant Kaur maintain a bond while separated. Even before they married, their two families were turning to each other. When Sham Singh Sidhu was dying, it was Hakim Singh Sandhu’s son, the doctor, who attended him. And after her marriage, Besant Kaur made a regular practice of riding to Kharoudi, with a family retainer holding the horse’s bridle and walking alongside, to visit the women of Kapoor’s extended family. She was a great
favourite because she was the only literate woman among them and a storyteller. When she arrived, they hurried to finish their chores and gather in the courtyard to listen to her tales from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and her stories of Guru Nanak.

In a natural and spontaneous way, she kept up her connection with her husband’s family during his long absence. He must have appreciated it. In an interview he gave for a Canadian paper in 1953, Kapoor said, “The harsh Canadian immigration restriction that kept us apart for 16 years might have wrecked other marriages, but not ours.” When they finally got together, their marriage worked because they were wonderfully compatible, but in the years of separation, her efforts to visit his people made a difference, and their social and cultural environment helped to preserve their bond even when they were on opposite sides of the world.