

In Remembrance

Darshan Singh Tatla (1947-2021)



Darshan Singh Tatla, an internationally acclaimed scholar in the field of Sikh and Punjab Studies and a close friend since the early 1980s, passed away on 4th July in the UK, after developing some unexpected complications during his recovery from a debilitating stroke he had suffered in Punjab. Darshan, as I always called him, despite his being older than me, will remain one of the most important and undervalued first generation contributors to the field of Sikh and Punjab Studies. He will be sorely missed by his friends and colleagues in Punjab, UK and around the world. What follows are my personal reflections on Darshan's life, disappointments and achievements.

To many people who knew Darshan only casually, his life story may appear similar to that of many other young, educated migrants who arrived from Punjab full of dreams but who were unable, for many different reasons, to fulfil their aspirations and were forced to resign themselves to accepting a normal, comfortable life for themselves and their family. Darshan, however, does not quite fit into this narrative, as despite the many setbacks to his academic aspirations, he refused to give up and, right up to the time of his death, he stayed determined to carry on completing his "mission". He used to say he was almost done (but only after he completed the next project), but these projects were never-ending.

Darshan was born into a Sikh family in village Bharowal Kalan located in district Ludhiana, Punjab. His early education was in his locality where he attended his village school, went to high school and then obtained his first degree from Lajpat Rai Memorial College in nearby Jagraon. He gained admission to Punjabi University, Patiala and successfully completed a Masters in Economics. He was eager to continue with his higher education and gained admission to the prestigious University of Cambridge, a rare achievement for a rural Sikh boy. UK universities were always reluctant to accept overseas qualifications as equivalent

to theirs and Darshan joined Fitzwilliam College as an affiliated student. His previous degrees simply exempted him from part of Cambridge's BA degree. In 1984 he was awarded a Cambridge MA., in the time-honoured manner. He was very keen to pursue a PhD at Cambridge but was unable to gain admission. In the meantime, he also managed to complete a Masters degree in Social Science, majoring in Economics, during 1976-1977 at Birmingham University. Unfortunately, despite gaining these impressive qualifications, he was not able to secure a permanent job appropriate for his qualifications.

I first met Darshan around 1980 or 1981. We were both living in London and I came to know about him and his academic interest in Sikh migration from mutual friends. He lived in Southall and was working as a secondary school supply teacher in Economics and Mathematics for the Inner London Education Authority. As I recall, he lived alone in a rented room, away from his family who were in Birmingham. He did not enjoy the job and felt very frustrated as this was not what he had intended for a career. He moved back to Birmingham to be with his family and worked briefly in community relations with Sandwell Council before getting a permanent job as Lecturer in the Department of Languages and Community Studies at what later became South Birmingham College. He worked there for 11 years till 1996 when he took early retirement. It was during this time that he enrolled on a PhD programme at Warwick University and completed it in 1994. This achievement marked the beginnings of a remarkable period in his life and one which fully brought out his incredible untapped research skills.

Before looking at his contribution to Sikh and Punjab Studies, it is necessary to acknowledge his institution-building and organisational skills through his founding, and continued association with, the Punjab Research Group (PRG) and the *International Journal of Punjab Studies (IJPS)* as it was originally known. The PRG was established in mid-April 1984, soon after one of the largest gatherings of Punjabi scholars and writers, community activists and students at Coventry University on 7-8 April 1984. It is worth elaborating further on this well-attended conference as it provided the intellectual roots of the PRG. It was held under the auspices of the Commission for Racial Inequality and Coventry University Students Union. The international guests included Mulk Raj Anand and Sant S. Sekhon, plus such leading Punjabi thinkers and social commentators as Manmohan S Luthra, Amarjit Chandan, Naseem Ali, Surinder Sharma and Amarjit Khera. They expressed concern at the stifling of Punjabi language and culture due to the rise in sectarian and communal politics in both East and West Punjab over recent years. The increasingly divisive politics was also weakening the regional Punjabi cultural identity and *Punjabiya*. Before the conference ended, a significant resolution was passed, calling for the establishment of a permanent Institute of Punjab Studies to further research and promote socio-economic and cultural issues facing Punjabis. In fact, it was resolved that a working party be established and an annual conference be made a permanent feature. Fearing that the Institute or an annual conference were unlikely to happen a number of PhD students and scholars researching on Punjab or Punjabis, including Darshan, organized a separate meeting to mull over the outcomes of the conference and think about our own response to the resolution. After further

deliberations four of us – Darshan, Eleanor Nesbitt, Gurharpal Singh, and myself – decided to commit ourselves to establishing the Punjab Research Group (PRG) with its aim and objectives closely aligned to the underlying intentions of the conference resolution, that is, to promote studies on Punjab and on Punjabis wherever they may be settled. It was also decided that the PRG should meet three times a year – at the end of January, June and October – and encourage the presentation and discussion of 4 or 5 academic papers at each meeting. Darshan became the first Convenor with Eleanor Nesbitt as Treasurer and myself as Secretary. As an important advocate of the PRG, Darshan continued to be its Convenor till August 1989 when he passed the baton on to me. I still have his letter in which he reminded me about the Convenor's role and responsibilities and outstanding issues that needed to be resolved.

As Convenor he took a number of initiatives which conveyed his passion for this kind of work. He started the *PRG Newsletter*, an annual publication which gave important information about recent events, forthcoming conferences, new research projects and books, PhD students etc. etc. The Newsletter was published for about 9 years. It was circulated at PRG meetings and sent out freely to interested parties. Darshan also started the *Punjab Discussion Paper Series* whereby papers presented at PRG meetings were made available to scholars at a minimum price that did not even cover printing and postage costs. By the time we were ready to launch the *IJPS*, we had accumulated a stock of around 46 discussion papers and about ten years ago Darshan left the full set with me as important archival material. In addition to the Newsletter and Discussion Papers, Darshan also published *Directory of Punjab Scholars in Britain* (with Shinder Thandi) and two short volumes which listed all the known *Theses on Punjab*. These were published by Darshan on behalf of the *Association of Punjab Studies* (the legal entity of the PRG and the Journal) and printed by him in India at his own expense. Darshan continued to be closely associated with the PRG and even after he re-settled back in Punjab, he attended PRG meetings during his annual return to the UK. The PRG is now in its 38th year and it continues to meet regularly with the same mission that Darshan had envisioned for it.



[Darshan S Tatla, front left, along with other attendees at a PRG meeting in Oxford]

The second important contribution arising out of the PRG, but almost a decade later, was Darshan's initial work in ensuring the *International Journal of Punjab Studies* found a publisher. Soon after the core members of the PRG had agreed to start their own Journal (in around 1991), Darshan held discussions with potential publishers and eventually came to an agreement with Sage Publishers in Delhi to publish two issues a year for an initial period of five years. He was the sole signatory to the July 1992 legal agreement signed between the Association for Punjab Studies and Sage and we launched the *Journal* during the first international conference on Punjab Studies at Coventry University in June 1994. Unfortunately, we could not extend our agreement with Sage for a further 5 years as they demanded a higher subsidy. Moreover, our editorial board had been effectively reduced from six to four with Darshan unable to fully carry out his editorial role due to his move back to Punjab but agreeing to continue as member of the editorial advisory board and another member resigning altogether to pursue other interests. But the *Journal* survived and after the 10th volume, began to be hosted by the Center for Sikh and Punjab Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Its name was also changed to *Journal of Sikh and Punjab Studies* to better reflect its content and is now in its 28th Volume and hosted by the Global Institute of Sikh Studies in the USA. Darshan continued to offer full support to the *Journal* and to publish in it. His last article 'Fateful Encounter? Sikh Interaction with the Hindu Elite on the Pacific Coast of North America' appeared in a special issue on the Ghadar Party in Vol 26, No. 1 & 2 (2019). It is a fitting reminder of Darshan's contribution to setting up the *Journal* and continued support for it.

Whilst doing his PhD research at Warwick, Darshan was able to undertake extensive fieldwork in the UK, USA and Canada. This enabled him to collect an enormous amount of literature, materials and resources which he was able to use later in his publications. His earlier focus, before completing his PhD was on creating bibliographies, a skill he had acquired while working on a project with Sandwell Council. In addition to publishing *Theses on Punjab* (as mentioned earlier) he also published in 1987 (with 2nd edition in 1994) *Sikhs in Britain: an annotated bibliography*, (CRER, University of Warwick) with Eleanor Nesbitt; *Sikhs in North America: an annotated bibliography* (Greenwood Press, 1991, *Bibliographies and Indexes in Sociology*, No. 19) and *Punjab* (*World Bibliographical Series* No. 180 published by Clio in 1995) with Ian Talbot. In 2003 he published *Ghadar Movement: A Guide to Sources* with Guru Nanak Dev University Press. He also did a survey of the Punjabi Press in Britain, part of which he published later with Gurharpal Singh. He also continued to work on his manuscript on Sikhs in Britain. It is, however, his PhD work and the subsequent publication of his well-known book *The Sikh Diaspora: The Search for Statehood* published by Routledge & University of Washington Press in 1999, which deserve special acclaim. For his PhD research he was based in the Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations at the University of Warwick and worked under the supervision of Harry Goulbourne, who was not a Punjab or Sikh specialist. Darshan struggled to find focus and direction to the satisfaction of his supervisory

team and this was beginning to cause delays in submission of his final dissertation. It was at that time that I happened to meet Robin Cohen, a Professor of Sociology at Warwick, who was at the time external examiner on the MA Third World Studies course at Coventry University, and told him about Darshan's research predicament at CRER. Robin Cohen became very interested in his work and was keen to take him under his wing. He was planning to start a series on Global Diasporas and the Sikh case appealed to him. Darshan submitted his thesis entitled *The politics of homeland: ethnic linkages and political mobilisation among Sikhs in Britain and North America* in late 1993 and successfully passed his viva to gain his PhD in 1994. After some revisions and reorientations, especially post Operation Bluestar, and more interviews with some leading advocates for and against Khalistan, his book was published with a greater orientation towards diaspora support for Sikh nationalism. The sub-title of the book, *Search for Statehood*, conveys this more clearly and fitted well into Robin Cohen's global diaspora series and his book appeared as number 3 in the series. In the Preface of the book Darshan acknowledges Cohen's help and states 'I owe it to Robin Cohen's crucial intervention, for saving this study from oblivion'. Whether or not these details are of interest, it is more important to acknowledge the significance of Darshan's work, not so much as ground-breaking work on formation of the Sikh diaspora but as an excellent empirical study of Sikh community discourses, as played out in the Punjabi vernacular press, on the issue of Khalistan. Darshan's painstaking reading of diaspora-based Punjabi vernacular, as well as English-medium newspapers, such as *Indo-Canadian Times*, *Des Pradesh*, *Punjab Times* and *World Sikh News*, his interviews with editors and other journalists working on these newspapers, his interviews with leaders of secular, political and religious organisations, provides us with detailed and very rich qualitative data on the tense discourses occurring among the Sikh diaspora communities in the UK, USA and Canada. This aspect of his contribution is unique, raised his profile and reputation as an international scholar and will probably remain unchallenged for years to come.

As noted above, Darshan's PhD and publication on the Sikh diaspora were a turning point which launched him as a serious scholar and which gave him confidence to continue writing and publishing on a range of topics in the area of Sikh and Punjab Studies. He completed many book chapters and co-edited several books on inter-related themes covering Sikh internal and overseas migration, political, social and religious linkages that Sikhs maintained with their homeland, including philanthropy, and in later years expanding his study on Sikh pioneer migration to include the Ghadar movement and its main actors, the Komagata Maru incident and on Gurdit Singh. He also maintained an interest in Anglo-Sikh relations and on Punjabi language and literature. Being bilingual allowed him to publish books both in Punjabi in English. Some of his writings were seen as controversial and evoked strong reactions, especially from Punjab/India-based academics, but he always found time to engage with them through a constructive academic dialogue rather than with any personal animosity.

As a first-generation adult migrant, despite holding such high-level qualifications, Darshan found it difficult to penetrate the corridors of higher

education institutions in the UK. This was a familiar story in Britain for many educated, first-generation adult migrants who struggled and were overlooked for academic appointments – a very different experience from the relative success of British-born second and third-generation Sikhs today. Yes, he worked at several universities, but only as an honorary research fellow or research associate, usually tied to a particular research project while it lasted. While some may disagree, this lack of higher education institutional affiliation acted as a major constraint on his ability to pursue further research and also probably forced him to seek institutionally-based co-authors for his work, given the harsh reality of finding publishers.

At the same time, settling back in Punjab and seeking permanent employment in a higher education institution after a long period abroad, also had its limitations. One of Darshan's dream, after returning to Punjab, was to set up a Centre for Migration Studies to focus on internal and overseas migration in Punjab and on the Punjabi diaspora. He talked to some Vice Chancellors and other potentially interested parties about establishing such a Centre and although some made positive noises, they were not willing to commit. I remember at one point Darshan was very keen to establish such a Centre within the World Punjabi Centre at Punjabi University, Patiala soon after it was created, and was even willing to commit some of his own investment into it, but he did not get enough support. In 2003, however, he did fulfil his aspiration and established Punjab Centre for Migration Studies at Lyallpur Khalsa College, Jalandhar. He had high hopes of this centre becoming a premier institution for research on Punjab migration and wanted it closely linked to similar centres around the world. Work started on building resources through collecting published and unpublished materials and old and contemporary newspaper reports.

Darshan started a *Punjabi Diaspora Series* at the Centre focusing on writing memoirs and short biographical profiles of important pioneering figures in Sikh migration history. At least six such short monographs had been published by 2006 – of Gurbachan Singh Gill, Jwala Singh Grewal, Sant Teja Singh, Tut Brothers, and Gopal Singh Chandan written by his son Amarjit Chandan.

Darshan also held conferences there and I attended one which Darshan had jointly organised with Van Dusenbery on Sikh Philanthropy. The conference papers were later published in a book *Sikh Diaspora Philanthropy in Punjab: Global Giving for Local Good*, (Oxford University Press, 2009) which he co-edited with Van Dusenbery. Unfortunately, the Centre closed in 2009 due to insufficient financial support and lack of interest from the College Administrators. This was a great personal setback for Darshan, forcing him to seek opportunities at Punjab universities again. He rejoined Punjabi University, Patiala and worked in various research capacities, liaising with and advising various people, departments and research centres on issues relating to Punjabi/Sikh diaspora. Before his untimely death, he was looking forward to returning to Punjab to start work on the Sikh Archives Project at the Panth Ratan Jathedar Gurcharan Singh Tohra Institute of Advanced Studies in Sikhism, based at Bahadurgarh, Patiala. This project had been cleared and entrusted to him by the

Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, perhaps as belated recognition but nevertheless a very deserving honour to this much undervalued scholar.



[Darshan at home in August 2019 with the lifetime achievement award presented to him for his contribution to study of Sikh Diaspora from the Sikh and Punjab Studies Program at UC Riverside, 2017]

Those who knew Darshan will tell you he was soft spoken, humble, unassuming and fully dedicated to his research and extremely generous with his time and use of library resources and other facilities at his village in Punjab. Some scholars visited him there with their students. He enjoyed this and would proudly introduce his nieces Mandeep and Jasdeep who assisted him in fieldwork for some of his research projects. He would gladly walk visitors around the village, especially his wheat and paddy fields as he felt more at ease and relaxed there compared to his other home in Smethwick, Birmingham where the congested urban landscape, as he would often say, left him feeling very claustrophobic. Whether in Punjab or back in the UK he did an enormous amount of unpaid and hidden 'seva' as he would call it, acting as an advisor and mentor to many students from around the world, whom he very rarely met. Darshan's remarkable contribution and legacy to the field of Sikh and Punjab Studies and wonderful personal memories will live on.

Like other young people from Punjab in the 1960s, Darshan had married early. He is survived by his wife, Gurmeet Kaur, two daughters Hardip and Harjeet, and son Rajwant Singh, and by six grandchildren and one great-granddaughter.

Shinder S Thandi

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Professor Sheila Bhalla (1933-2021)

Sheila Bhalla, Professor Emeritus at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), who had a lifelong and multifaceted engagement with Punjab, passed away on 5th September 2021. She was an internationally renowned agricultural economist with special expertise in Haryana agriculture, and a scholar with deep engagement with progressive and democratic movements in India. She and her husband, Professor G. S. Bhalla, were my teachers at the Department of Economics, Panjab University, Chandigarh (PU), and they were the kind of teachers with whom you keep lifelong contact. Professor Bhalla passed away in 2013.

Sheila, as she was affectionately known, was Canadian by background. She met Gurdarshan (G. S. Bhalla) when both were carrying out postgraduate studies at the London School of Economics. Both were attracted to the socialist vision of reorganising economies and societies; in Sheila's case, she was influenced by her father J. C. W. Scott, a Canadian physicist and radar specialist who was also a committed communist. This shared intellectual and political vision led to Gurdarshan and Sheila getting married and deciding to move to India.

Professor Bhalla came from a large family originating from the village of Badhni Kalan near Moga. To engage meaningfully with her new Punjabi family, Sheila acquired an excellent understanding of the Punjabi language and reasonable proficiency in spoken Punjabi. For a considerable period during their academic careers in Chandigarh and Delhi, Sheila looked after Professor Bhalla's elderly mother who could only speak and understand Punjabi and developed a loving relationship with her.

The Bhallas spent their entire lives combining their superb academic work with multiple forms of support for workers' and peasants' movements and for democratic rights in India. I have so many memories of them but will share just a few of them here. When they joined PU in 1969, I had just entered the second year of my undergraduate studies. On 2nd September 1969, the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh passed away and some of us organised a meeting in the university to pay homage to his revolutionary leadership. Many students turned up but only two faculty members from the whole university joined the meeting, and they were the Bhallas. It was a great boost to our morale and the beginning of a lifelong relationship.

The management of PU was, for a very long time, controlled by pro-Arya Samaj right-wing groups supported by the Congress Party and the Jan Sangh, and later by the Bhartiya Janata Party. Together with her husband, Sheila Bhalla played an understated but critical strategic role in challenging the dominance of these parties. They were assisted in this by their friends Professor Dharam Vir of the Chemical Engineering department (a man of remarkable intellect and moral stature who was a life-long friend of the Bhallas and died almost within a month of Professor Bhalla's death) and Gurbaksh Singh Soch of the English department (who died young, about 30 years ago). They developed the Panjab University Teachers Association (PUTA) from an organisation of virtually no importance to one that had critical significance to the governance of PU. Whenever the history of PUTA is written, their names will feature as guiding stars.

The first course Sheila taught at PU was Microeconomics. This course was taught jointly to students taking the BA Honours School in Economics (the programme I was in) and to students in the first year of the MA in Economics. Sheila delivered the lectures in English, coloured by her Canadian accent. The majority of the students on the two programmes were from Punjab and a very small number were from other Indian states. An overwhelming majority of students had studied in schools where English was not the language used in teaching; some had studied for their undergraduate degree in colleges where lectures were delivered in English but frequently mixed with regional languages – with Punjabi in Punjab and with other languages in the other states. All such students had difficulty comprehending lectures delivered entirely in English but in Sheila's case, this became even more difficult for them because of their unfamiliarity with her accent. There were murmurs of discontentment during her very first lecture but matters came to a head in the second or third lectures when the students walked out of the class. Sheila looked very disappointed and went back to her office.

I understood the students' difficulties but was sad that they had walked out without recognising the fact that Sheila was aware of the problem and had, in fact, provided extensive notes at the beginning of each lecture. These notes also provided detailed instructions on how to consult the relevant chapters and chapter sections of the main textbook. This teaching method was and is common in Western universities but was not used in India at that time.

I explained to my classmates that they had disheartened a dedicated teacher and after some discussion, many of them felt that walking out had been too extreme a step. I proposed that I apologise to Sheila on behalf of the class. This suggestion was accepted, albeit half-heartedly by some students. I went to Sheila's room and first told her that I considered her teaching method the most advanced in the department. I then conveyed the collective apology from my classmates for their behaviour. This episode built a strong personal student-teacher bond between Sheila and me. The matter was settled by the next lecture – the students gradually got used to her accent and eventually became great admirers of her dedicated teaching methods. Sheila must have overcome many other such difficulties during her cultural and linguistic adjustment to Punjab and India.

My MA Honours School dissertation was carried out under the supervision of Professor Bhalla, but I also often sought Sheila's advice. She took a keen interest in the development of my dissertation and sat in the viva. After the viva was over, I did not approach my supervisor Professor Bhalla for his feedback, but rather asked Sheila what she thought of my performance. I still remember the only sentence she spoke: 'You were very articulate'. Coming from a native English speaker, this was not only a great morale booster but also an indicator that my performance must have been reasonable. When the result came out, I had been awarded a distinction. Sheila's appreciation taught me never to forget the significance and value of a teacher's words for a student.

I was moved by the care and interest in my welfare and academic progress expressed by the Bhallas, as well as by Professor S. B. Rangnekar, the head of department. They arranged for me to meet Professor Krishna Bharadwaj during her 1971 visit to deliver a series of lectures at PU. That meeting eventually led to my move to JNU in 1972 to study for my M.Phil under Professor Bharadwaj's supervision. A few years after my move to JNU, the Bhallas also moved there to join the faculty.

During their time at PU, the most important opportunity and breakthrough in the Bhallas' research came with the award of a substantial research project grant by the Haryana government to study the development of the Green Revolution in the state. Their first major publication, *Changing Agrarian Structure in India: A Study of the Impact of Green Revolution in Haryana* (1974), resulted from this project. One important finding of the study was the inverse relationship between farm size and productivity, i.e., when farm size increases, farm output per acre decreases. The study's finding that small farmers are more productive resonates today with the farmers' movement in India, which aims to defend small and marginal farmers against the onslaught of big agro-business firms.

Subsequently and especially after their move to JNU, a division of intellectual labour seemed to develop between them; Sheila specialised in Haryana and other regions of India such as Andhra Pradesh, and G. S. Bhalla specialised in Punjab and Gujarat among other regions. Sheila pioneered the study of agrarian relations in Haryana and published outstanding papers on the subject. Sheila's 1979 paper on "Real Wage Rates of Agricultural Labourers in Punjab, 1961-77: A Preliminary Analysis", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 14 (26) remains the most detailed and insightful empirical study of the subject.

The tribute paid to Professor Sheila Bhalla by the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) recognises the convergence between her intellectual and political work:

"AIKS expresses deep grief at the passing away of Professor Sheila Bhalla, a life-long fighter for the cause of peasants and workers. Her vast array of work helps us to understand the impact of capitalist development on Indian agriculture, the plight of the poor, agricultural labourers, tenant farmers and other peasant groups. An agricultural economist of great renown, after her retirement she continued to live an active life dedicated to studying the changing face of agriculture and the impact of neoliberal economic policies.

She was well acquainted with the AIKS, attending not only Seminars or Conferences but also protests, even at her advanced age. She last attended the 33rd All India Conference of the AIKS at Cuddalore in 2013. She was a regular visitor to the AIKS Centre, engaging in long consultations and discussions on her studies of rural India and their findings. She also went through AIKS documents meticulously, suggesting corrections and changes. She took a steadfast position on the assault on education and the recent attacks of the BJP-RSS on JNU, its students and teachers. She has been a much-loved teacher and inspired generations of students”.

Professor Sheila Bhalla is survived by her daughter Gursharan Rastogi, as well as by her sons Upinder Singh Bhalla and Ravinder Singh Bhalla (all three having achieved doctorates in their respective fields in India), and Yoginder Singh Bhalla (living in Canada), together with eight grandchildren some of whom have gone for higher studies to the country of their grandmother's birth.

Pritam Singh

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