

British Columbia

## Surrey man shares rare book collection on Sikh, Punjab history online in bid to 'preserve the past'



Raj Singh Bhandall says his drive to acquire rare books comes from a desire to understand his history

Kiran Singh - CBC News

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Raj Singh Bhandall says his goal by sharing his books online is to help educate those who want to explore their complex roots in Sikh history. (Kiran Singh/CBC)

Raj Singh Bhandall says he's not an academic, nor does he claim to be an antiques collector. But as soon as he walks you into the hall where his collection is stored, it's difficult to believe that's true.

Walls are lined with shelves that hold hundreds of books in leather jackets of different colours. An antique chessboard with pieces dressed as [Mughal and English soldiers](#) sits in one corner of the room, a workstation with craft supplies in the other. And in the middle of the room, there's one long table holding rare books about the lost Sikh Raj, Sikhism and India during the time of the British Empire's East India Company.

Now, Bhandall, 52, says his collection — which includes items he has bid for and some items he received as gifts — is substantial enough that he wants to share every one of these rare books with anyone who wants to read or study them for free on [his website](#).

Canadian Sikhs who have roots in Punjab can sometimes feel like they don't belong anywhere, leading them to have an identity crisis, says Bhandall, a resident of Surrey, B.C.

By sharing his collection, he wants to help educate those who want to explore their complex roots.



Bhandall holding Military Memoirs of Mr. George Thomas, a rare first edition autobiography of an Irish mercenary from the late 18th century. (Kiran Singh/CBC)

"The younger generation, they need to understand where they came from. What are their qualities, what are their attributes?" Bhandall said.

He says he doesn't recall how or when he started seeking out rare books and other antiques like maps, medals, swords, figurines and parliament documents, but his desire to understand these unbiased histories was what inspired him to keep going.

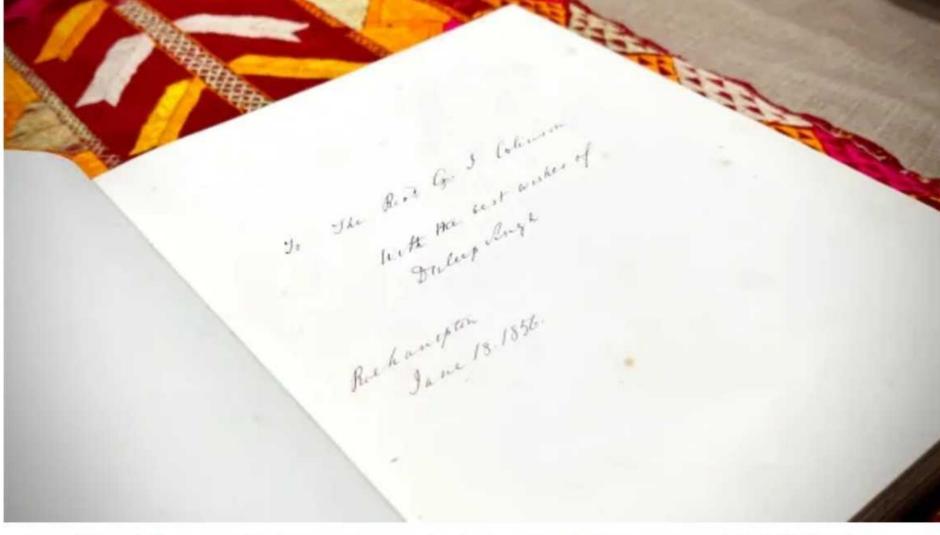


Bhandall's growing collection includes rare books, maps, lithographs, medals, swords and government documents. (Kiran Singh/CBC)

"I needed to understand where I came from. But for that, I needed to understand the geopolitical angle. When did the British come, when did the [Mughals] come to Punjab, how the [Sikh] kingdom was annexed. And how we were dispersed into different lands, to the different beautiful corners of the world," said Bhandall.

His collection now holds some of the rarest books on the topic dating back to the mid-18th century.

"We have one copy here that is autographed by Maharaja Duleep Singh himself," noted Bhandall, showing a book signed by the last emperor of the Sikh Kingdom, dated June 18, 1856.



One of Bhandall's many prized possessions is a book signed by the last emperor of the Sikh Kingdom, Maharaja Duleep Singh, dated June 18, 1856. (Kiran Singh/CBC)

Bhandall's collection includes first editions of the *History of Hindostan* (1768) and the *Annexation of the Punjab* (1897), the first Punjabi to English dictionary published by Bhai Maya Singh in 1895, a glossary of the Indian parliament's judicial and revenue terms printed in 1855, and one rare volume of *Guru Granth Sahib*, the holy Sikh scripture, that was a personal copy of Dr. Kuldip Gill, a B.C.-based social anthropologist.

Bhandall is asking anyone who may have any rare books or antique family heirlooms to save them and keep them as a piece of personal history.

His aim is to preserve what can be preserved and eventually open a free museum somewhere on the West Coast.



Bhandall's ultimate goal is to share his growing collection with the public by opening a physical museum on the West Coast. (Kiran Singh/CBC)

His reasons are simple: "So that when we leave physically, people who come after us, the generation after us, they should look at us as we have contributed something to this great land, and they'll also know our history, where we came from."

CBC British Columbia has launched a [Surrey bureau](#) to help tell your stories with reporter [Kiran Singh](#). Story ideas and tips can be sent to [kiran.singh@cbc.ca](mailto:kiran.singh@cbc.ca).



Bhandall amid his collection. (Kiran Singh/CBC)