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Museum promise gets snagged on definition of 'South Asian' in B.C.

Government 'blunder' in consultation has alienated many with South Asian cultural roots

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Government 'blunder' in consultation has alienated many with South Asian cultural roots, says Mo Dhaliwal. PHOTO BY ARLEN REDEKOP / PNG

It seemed like a good idea at the time: Build a museum that would document the history, art and contributions of South Asian people in B.C.

The breathless campaign promise was made days before the 2020 provincial election. Almost three years later, the NDP has yet to deliver.

“There has been close to zero movement on this,” said Mo Dhaliwal, an entrepreneur and community activist.

Dhaliwal was among a group of about 130 people invited by the provincial government to a “South Asian Museum Community Leaders Gathering,” held at SFU’s Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue in Vancouver on April 13, an event that Dhaliwal called “a blunder.”

The event alienated many and led to questions about the government’s sincerity, said Dhaliwal.

“These aren’t our spaces. Why would you put it in an institution that is not part of our experience, facilitated by a white academic with no real connection to the community that was gathered, who couldn’t guide the conversation in any meaningful way?”

It’s not just the lack of a timeline, capital commitment or adequate consultation plan that has left Dhaliwal and others asking questions.

The term “South Asian” itself is problematic and doesn’t adequately capture the diverse communities of the diaspora, say some community members.

“For a long time ‘South Asian’ has been a term of convenience when referencing a brown community,” said Dhaliwal. “For many, the term South Asian is an erasure. While the vast majority of history and content coming out of this province is Sikh Punjabi, there are many other stories to be told. We have a diaspora that trace their origins to pre-partition India, by way of Africa, to Pakistan, to an entire continent that includes multiple countries and hundreds of languages.”

Not to mention the Canadian part.

“I’m not Indian, I’m a Canadian that has a Punjabi cultural experience,” said Dhaliwal. “There are hundreds of thousands of people like me that derive their ‘South Asian’ experience from their community experience here in Canada not from some exotic faraway country and story.”

“The government has no working definition of what South Asian is,” said Zool Suleman, who broke

the story of the disastrous Wosk Centre meeting in Rungh magazine, saying it suggested the government is “establishing a consultation process to justify a political decision which has already been made.”

South Asian “is used to include everybody without any specificity, a vague pointing to the Indian subcontinent, rather than trying to be more specific and saying, actually what we mean are people who are from India, Pakistan, Fiji or Bangladesh,” said Suleman.

“I challenge the government to provide a nuanced, complete definition of what South Asian means.”

Wide-ranging community consultation was promised when Surrey-Panorama MLA Jinny Sims announced the project four days before the general election in October, 2020.

In a news release tied to the announcement, then-premier John Horgan said, “I can see the exact spot where the Komagata Maru was moored over 100 years ago. The daily reminder of that event reminds me of how much we still have to do to dismantle systemic racism.”

There is a single comment, by Rishi Singh, under a video of the announcement that was posted on Jinny Sims’ Facebook page: “Please define South Asians.”

Satwinder Bains, director of South Asian Studies at the University of the Fraser Valley, said that South Asian is a “landmine term.”

“It is presumptuous of the government to assume we are all on the same page,” she said. “We know that South Asia exists as an economic region over there, as a geographical region, but what does it mean over here?”



Professor Satwinder Bains is head of South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley. PHOTO BY JASON PAYNE /PNG

Through the South Asian Studies Institute at the university, Bains has spent years gathering community stories and histories as part of the Punjabi Legacy project.

“It’s a real question for all of us. It will require dialogue and discussion to come to a common understanding. We don’t have a common understanding about each other’s politics or migration settlement stories”

Bains, who prefers the term “South Asian Canadian” museum to “South Asian Museum,” does not see the issue as a problem, but a challenge.

“Perhaps this is the lightning rod we need to bring our communities together.”

What matters is ensuring community stories, oral histories and contributions to the province become

part of the provincial record, said Bains.

“Our history needs to be told.”

The prospect of a museum that reflects her history is deeply meaningful to Anita Atwal, a Surrey lawyer who attended the April engagement session at the Wosk Centre. Atwal didn't see her family's experience or history reflected in school growing up in Cloverdale.

She wants something different for her own children.

“To have a museum that my children and other children can go to that speaks very clearly to their belonging and the role their ancestors, grandparents and parents played in building this province and country, is one way to not only recognize the immeasurable hardships and sacrifices of those that came before us but say that we belong,” she said.

For Dhaliwal, the disagreements that have emerged will only be surmountable if the process is community-led. “We need to have these meetings in our spaces, led by our people.”

Postmedia requested an interview with Culture Minister Lana Popham, but was turned down.

The minister's assistant sent this statement: “Government is committed to a broad, inclusive and multi-dimensional engagement process and to working closely with South Asian Canadian communities in B.C. to advance this work. We are in the early stages of the engagement process. This will include exploring with the community what the vision is for a South Asian Canadian museum. This will take time. We will release more details on the community engagement in the coming weeks.”

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