

# Dhiann Kaur



A Sikh Girl from India  
(composite)  
1989

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## **Teacher Introduction**

Dhiann Kaur is a “composite character” based on the experiences of Sikh immigrant children to the Hayward area in recent decades. The story was researched and written by Debra Sarver. Ms Sarver, an elementary school teacher at Treeview School, has worked with and taught the local Sikh community for several years.

Like many families in the local Sikh community, Dhiann and her parents immigrated to California in 1986 following the Anti-Sikh riots and killings triggered by the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 by two of her Sikh bodyguards in India.

Sikh separatists took refuge in the Golden Temple, the central Sikh place of prayer. On May 31, 1984, the Indian government launched "Operation Blue Star" in order to quash the rebellion. Thousands of Sikhs were killed. As alleged revenge for this incident, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards on October 31, 1984. The response was Anti-Sikh riots, including the massacre of some estimated 2,000 Sikhs, prompting the immigration of many Sikhs to the United States.

In order to have greater religious freedom and better economic opportunities, many Sikh families came first to Yuba City, California, where a Sikh community had been in existence since the early 1900s. By 1924 there were approximately 6,000 Sikhs in Yuba City, but restrictive immigration laws and natural death lead to a population of just about 1,000 by 1946. In 1946 some restrictions were lifted and in 1965, the ban on immigration for relatives was lifted.

In our story, in 1988 Dhiann’s family moved to Hayward, where many people from her parents’ village had settled recently. The Hayward area offered better work and educational opportunities than rural areas. In the 1990s, the Indo-American population doubled.

The story of Dhiann raises several issues that you as teachers deal with on a daily basis. Debra Sarver offers her perspectives on some of these issues.

### *New immigrant issues*

For immigrant children the conflict between wanting to assimilate and yet retaining language, culture and tradition, and national pride of the old country is common. We refer to it now as creating a salad, rather than blending in. Many of our students "live in their old country" when they are not at school. Increasingly, they are able to watch television, hear radio, read papers and magazines, even shop in their first language.

## Dhiann Kaur

As teachers we need to try to understand what this means for our students. I understood this intellectually for many years due to conversations with the children and their families, but it was attending an Afghan baby shower that really brought it home. When I was there, I had the feeling I get when traveling in a foreign country. The immigrant experience is very different for these children than it was for many of our families. Being non-white, a religious minority, non-English speaking can add many layers of issues, both positive and negative, to the children's experiences.

### *The turban*

Many modern discrimination issues in the United States with the Sikhs in regard to their turbans did not begin with September 11<sup>th</sup>, but in fact date back to the rule of Ayatollah Khomeini, the religious leader who overthrew the Shah of Iran. There is an excellent children's book that can help you in conveying information about boys who wear turbans or any other clothing that reflects religion or culture.

*The Boy with the Long Hair*, written and illustrated by Pushpinder Sigh. Available through the Sikh Foundation in Palo Alto ([www.sikhfoundation.org](http://www.sikhfoundation.org)).

We hope that the story of Dhiann provides both historical background on the Sikh migration to the area as well as an increased understanding of the culture. We would like to thank Savreet Kaur and her mother for advising us on this story and for providing photographs.

## Student section



Hello! My name is Dhiann Kaur.

You say my name like this:

“Dee-ann Car”

In my language – Punjabi – all names have a meaning. My name Dhiann means “deep thinker.” Most girls and women use the same second name Kaur, which means “princess.” Men and boys use the name Singh which means “lion.”

I was born in India and then we moved to Hayward. Life was different here for me and my family, but we were also able to keep many of our same traditions.

Let me share some stories with you from my diary. Mother says keeping a diary is important. It becomes part of history.

**Monday, November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1989**

Dear Diary:

Back to school again. I put my **salwar kameez** in the laundry and go to the table for breakfast. I like to eat breakfast at home, because at home we have **paratha**. At school the breakfast is something like cereal or muffins. I like to have one last reminder of my own culture before I switch to my American culture at school.

Except for their **turbans**, all of the Indian kids at school dress like all the other kids. Once in a while someone will wear a **salwar** with sneakers to school, but mostly they just wear jeans. We keep our hair long, but so do most of my Mexican-American girl friends.

My mom and dad are getting ready to go to work. My mom didn't work before we moved to Hayward, but we are saving money to buy a house so she got a job at a store. My dad works at a gas station. He used to work on a peach farm when we lived in Yuba City. Now he works nights at the gas station and goes to school during the day. The cool part is that he has time off between school and work, so he can take care of us until mom gets home.

Just got home. My brother, Bhavjeet, had a terrible day at school. He's in the second grade. During PE his **turban** started to come off. He didn't know what to do. There weren't any **Sikh** boys in his class who could help him put it back on. The teacher didn't know what to do either. Finally, his friend Parsan, who is also Sikh, suggested that they take him to Mr. Johnson's sixth grade class where Mahaan could help him. Luckily Mahaan helped Bhavjeet. Hopefully his **turban** will not come off again in school.

But I had a great day. We were having a discussion about winter holidays in class. Mrs. Robinson started the discussion by talking about **Christmas**, **Chanukah** and **Kwanzaa**. Then she asked if anyone wanted to share about their special winter holiday. First my friend Fatima raised her hand and told about how her family celebrates the **Posadas**. The kids were so interested in what she had to say, that I felt really comfortable raising my hand and telling them about **Diwali**.

I started to talk about Diwali, but then Rani, who is **Hindu**, started yelling that what I was saying wasn't right. Mrs. Robinson got really confused. It turned out that we both celebrate Diwali, but in different ways because of our different religions. My teacher said that the kids seemed so interested in Diwali, that she would try to learn more and find an art project that we could do for it. It made me really proud.

**Tuesday, November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1989**

Dear Diary:

I think I have a stomach ache, but my mom says I have to go to school anyway. Today we have music. My teacher says I have to sing the Christmas song in the assembly. I don't want to, because I don't believe in Christmas, but she said that if I don't my grade will go down. My mother says I have to get good grades so I can go to college like my uncle Jangjeet and get a really good job like he has. Mother doesn't want me to have to do the kind of work that she and my dad have to do.

I want to explain to her what is going on at school, but I am scared. Everyone else at school just sings the songs, even if they're **Moslem** or **Buddhist** or whatever and I don't want to stick out and be that different. I'm scared my teacher will get mad at me and give me a bad grade or the other kids will make fun of me.

Well, school was as terrible as I thought it was going to be. During music my stomach ache got even worse. Ms. Ackers, my music teacher, thought I was faking to get out of class. She said something really mean to me and then finally let me go to the office. When my stomach finally felt better it was 20 minutes into regular class and I had missed the math lesson. My mom is not going to be happy that I can't do my math

homework tonight. But, we are going to evening prayer at the **Gurdwara** tonight. Maybe she won't notice.



We go to the Gurdwara in Fremont every week. There are 250 children in the Sunday school classes! In class we learn about our religion and learn to read and write in the Punjabi language. There is also a Gurdwara in Hayward where some of my friends from school go.

Just got back from the Gurdwara. Mom was so tired, she fell asleep on the couch. I am trying to do my homework. Maybe if I get to school early tomorrow, my friend Stephanie will help me with it in the cafeteria while she is eating her breakfast.

### **Wednesday, November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1989**

Dear Diary:

Lucky me. I called Stephanie and she said she'd meet me in the cafeteria this morning to help me with my homework. Better run!

Stephanie really helped me out. She's a really good friend. Stephanie is Mexican-American. We were talking about the discussion we had in class on Monday and Stephanie told me about her holiday traditions. I came home and told my mom.

My mom told me about some of the early Sikh immigrants who came to California. They couldn't get Sikh women into California to marry, so some of them married Mexican-Americans. Marriage talk makes me nervous. Some of my friends have been told that they are not going to get to pick who they date and marry. I hope that when I get older that I will get to make those decisions for myself.

### **Thursday, November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1989**

Dear Diary:

Well, off to school soon. First mom and I have to talk about this Saturday. We have so much to do and very little time to do it. We are going to Fresno to the wedding of my cousin Amanpal. She is from Yuba City too, but she left to go to college at UCLA and now she's marrying Lakhbir. He's from Fresno. Usually the wedding takes place

where the bride lives, but Amanpal's parents have many relatives living in Fresno. Since so many people are coming, it will make it very nice to have the wedding where so many of the relatives live.

We need to get up very early on Saturday morning, because Fresno is so far away. The wedding will be in the morning and then there will be a big dinner at a **banquet** hall. Most of the guests came in a couple of days ago and are staying until Monday, but mom says that she and dad can't afford to miss that much work so we're just going down for the day.

School was kind of boring today. All I could think about was the wedding. I'd better try to get my mind on my schoolwork, because I have a spelling test and a reading test tomorrow! I've already done my homework, because we got some free time to catch up in class today, and I was all caught up.

### Friday, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1989

Dear Diary.



Two tests today, and then we get to think about the wedding. The **mehndi** party is tonight in Fresno, but dad needs to work tonight so we are going to have one at home, just me and my mom. My mom said that when she grew up they were too poor to pay someone to come over and do the mehndi at a party, so she did it for all her relatives' weddings. She's really good at it. We looked at some designs last night after I finished studying for my tests and I picked out one that I really liked with little flowers. I'm going to do my hands and my feet.



School was fine. I'm really excited about the wedding, but I had studied enough to do really well on my tests. Mrs. Robinson said that I'd be on the honor roll for sure, and that she thought that I should think about going to college and becoming a doctor.

Tonight, while my mom was doing my **mehndi** for tomorrow, I told her what Mrs. Robinson said. My mom showed me the ads for Indian doctors and dentists in *India Currents* and *India West*, the popular newspapers everyone reads. I never read the Indian magazines, so I didn't know that there were so many Indian doctors and dentists here. My mom says that our religion says that men and women are equal, so I shouldn't think that I can't become a doctor, even though sometimes it seems to me that at our Gurdwara it's always men that are in charge.

**Saturday, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1989**

Dear Diary:

I'm sorry I didn't get to write this morning. We got up really early to drive to Fresno so I didn't have time to write. We drove down Highway 99 most of the way, and it was really boring. Its 4:00 now and we have a break before we head to the restaurant for the big **banquet**. The wedding was really beautiful.

My cousin had on a beautiful wedding set of jewelry with rubies and gold beads. It matched her beautiful burgundy silk **chunni** that she wore over her head. She even had her makeup done to match! The **langar** after the wedding was really great. It was at the Gurdwara. All of the relatives had been cooking all week. All of my favorite foods were there, except pizza of course!

**Sunday, November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1989**

Dear Diary:

The wedding reception was really nice. Everyone was all dressed up and looked very beautiful. I got to see a lot of my relatives that I hadn't seen since we moved away from Yuba City.

I really love Sundays. We got up really early and drove back and then we spent all day at the **Gurdwara**. I have lots of friends at the Gurdwara who live all over the East Bay. I have known them for many years.

This week my friend Gundeep's family is sponsoring the food. That means that her relatives have to buy and prepare all of the meals at the Gurdwara all week. Her cousin Takdeer is cooking the food today, along with his family. They are really good cooks, because they just came from India two years ago and have a restaurant in Fremont. He makes a delicious spicy, creamy **dal** dish. It has these little crunchy things in it. I don't know what they are, but it's really yummy!

My mom bought me a new **salwar** this week, and I get to wear it today. It's so beautiful. Most of my salwar are nice, but this one is really special. My mom says that now that I'm getting older and take better care of my stuff, that I should have a silk one. It is purple, which is my favorite color.

## Dhiann Kaur

Just got back from the **Gurdwara**. Wow, what a long day. Mr. Japbir Singh, the principal of the Sunday school, came in to talk to us about some problems that some kids have been having at their schools. He decided, after listening to us, that he was going to form a committee to work with our communities and school districts on understanding the Sikh religion. Mrs. Sachveer Kaur will be in charge of it.

What a busy, fun week I've had. I'm really tired. Well, it's time to put my salwar away and get ready for another week of school.

Vocabulary

**banquet** – a big feast in celebration of something

**Buddhist** – a person who practices the Buddhist religion

**Chanukah** – a Jewish holiday celebrating the miracle of lights

**Christmas** – a Christian holiday celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ

**chunni** – head covering for women and girls

**dal** – lentils (a type of bean)

**Diwali/ Diwali** – the Indian Festival of Lights celebrated by both Sikhs and Hindus

**Gurdwara** – a place of prayer, temple

**Hindu** – a person who practices the Hindu religion

**Kwanzaa** – an African American holiday celebrating culture and heritage

**langar** – lunch

**mehndi** – designs made by henna dyes that are put on palms of the hands or the feet

**Moslem** – also Muslim, a person who practices the Moslem religion

**paratha** – a type of Indian bread

**Posadas** – a Catholic holiday celebrating the journey of Mary and Joseph on the night Jesus was born

**turban** – a cloth worn wrapped around the head by men and boys

**salwar kameez** - a long dress-like top over pants worn by women and girls

**Sikh** – a person who practices the Sikh religion

**Dhiann Kaur**



**Lesson Plans**

*Classroom Kit:* People: Dhiann Kaur  
Immigration Discovery Kit

**1 – New Kid Journals**

**Activity Goals**

- To understand the underlying theme and determine the emotions of the characters of Dhiann’s story and *The Boy With Long Hair*.
- To write descriptive paragraphs that develops into a story.

**Setting the Context:**

Read Dhiann's story and the storybook, *The Boy With Long Hair*. Using their respective stories, discuss the cultural differences that Dhiann and the boy experienced at school. Dhiann was homesick, and like having to sing Christmas songs when she didn't celebrate the holiday, the boy knew his hairstyle made him different.

**Activity Instructions:**

Class Discussion Topics and Journal Writing

**1. First Day – This Year**

Read *The Boy With Long Hair* to the students. Ask them to remember back to the first day of class this school year. What were they excited about? What did they worry or think about? How did they feel? Were they scared or nervous? Did they know the name of their teacher or the other kids in class? Have them write about their first day in class.

**2. First Day – New Country**

Now ask the students to pretend they are the "new kids" in a school in a different country. Have them imagine what it would be like to not understand everyone, to dress differently, eat different foods and miss home. How would they feel when people looked at them or teased them? What would they wish they could bring to school from home so that they wouldn't miss home? What would they miss about their old school in California? Have them write a journal entry about their "first week" at school in a different country. If the student moved to the U.S. recently, have them write about their real experiences.

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**Lesson Plans**

*Classroom Kit:*                      *People:*                      Dhiann Kaur  
Immigration Discovery Kit

**1 – New Kid Journals**

**3. First Day – Next Year**

Next, have the student think about next year and write a journal entry. What do they wonder about their new teacher, classroom, or classmates? Do they know what they will learn in this new grade? What did they learn this year? Do they think next year will be any different? How so? What are they excited about? What are they scared or worried about?

**4. Compare and Contrast**

Have them compare and contrast all three journal entries. Did they feel the same or different? What were the things they worried about? Were excited about? What does this teach them about how they should treat other people, including new classmates? Do they feel more empathetic? If they were new to a school, what would they want their classmates to do for them? What things can they do to be welcoming to new students? What are ways for them to be nice to their current classmates?

**Dhiann Kaur**



**2 – Mural Stories**

**Lesson Plans**

*Classroom Kit:*

*People:* Dhiann Kaur  
Immigration Discovery Kit

**Activity Goals**

- To gain an understanding of daily life in India through visual images.
- To identify and describe characters and a plot.

**Setting the Context:**

Murals are stories told through a painting. The history of murals can be traced back to Paleolithic cave paintings. Early murals were a product of the community, depicted daily life and were meant to evoke the viewer. They allowed even an illiterate view to understand the story and messages.

**Activity Instructions:**

After reading Dhiann’s story to the class, allow the students to examine the objects and murals.

These murals depict daily life in India. Ask the students to pick one of the images and pretend they are someone in the mural. Have them write a short story about the painting. Who are they in the painting? What are they doing? Who are they with? Where are they? What are they wearing? How do they and the people around them feel? Use the vocabulary below as a starting point.

Vocabulary:

*chunni* – head covering for women and girls

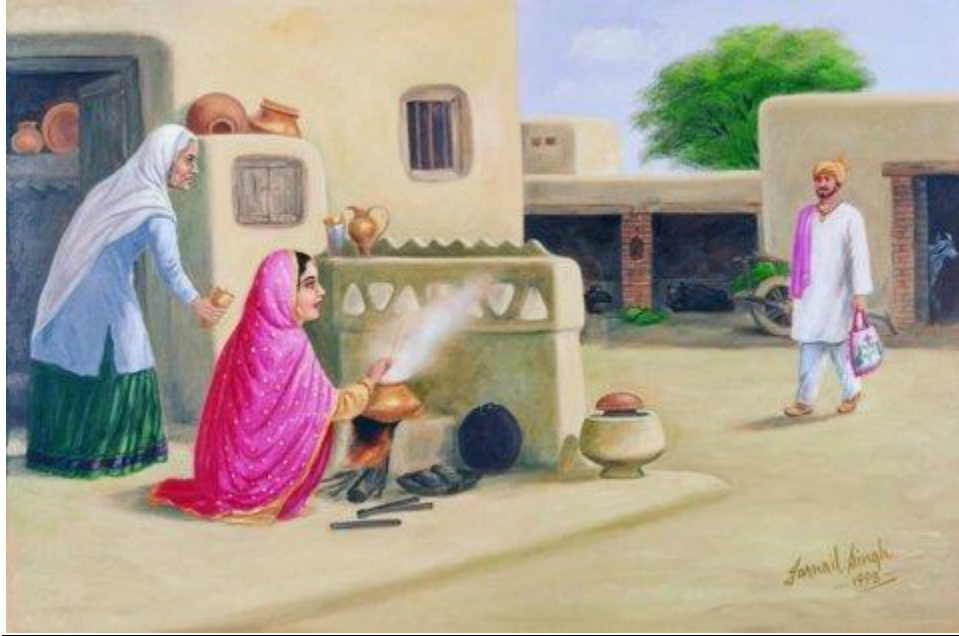
*turban* – a cloth worn wrapped around the head by men and boys

*dal* – lentils (a type of bean)

*salwar kameez* - a long dress-like top worn over pants by women and girls

*mehndi* – designs made by henna dyes that are put on palms of the hands or the feet

Dhiann Kaur



Dhiann Kaur



**Dhiann Kaur**



**Lesson Plans**

*Classroom Kit:* People: Dhiann Kaur  
Immigration Discovery Kit

**3 – Henna Tattoos**

**Activity Goals**

- To create artwork based on observations of objects and everyday life.
- To understand the use of art in cultural events and celebrations.

**Setting the Context:**

Read Dhiann’s story. To get ready for her cousin Amanpal’s wedding, she and her mom had their own mehndi party. For weddings, members of the wedding party as well as other girl and women guests dye their hands and feet with henna designs.

Mehndi are designs made by henna dyes that are put on hands and feet. Henna is a temporary reddish brown dye made from dried leaves or berries from the *Lawsonia inermis* plant. Henna is traditionally used by Indian, Pakistani and Persian women to create temporary hand and feet decorations. These “tattoos” generally last about a week.

**Materials Needed**

White paper  
Pencil  
Brown markers

**Activity Instructions**

1. Hand each student a blank sheet of paper
2. Have them trace their hands
3. Design prints in brown marker or crayon inside the traced lines.

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**Lesson Plans**

Classroom Kit: People: Dhiann Kaur  
Immigration Discovery Kit

**3 – Henna Tattoos**



**Storybook Summary - *Dhiann Kaur***  
***Boy with the Long Hair***

By Pushpinder Singh  
The Sikh Foundation, 1999

*Boy with the Long Hair* is a sensitive look at cultural difference as experienced by a young boy. The main character is new to school in the United States where he is having difficulty fitting in because he wears a *patka* (turban for boys). He reflects on his old school and misses his home. The students in his new school wonder about what he is wearing and he feels self-conscious. Eventually he decides to speak up for himself and tells them that he is just like them – as everyone “smiles in the same language.” He talks to them about his culture and religion and describes his *patka* and hair.

This coloring book is a wonderful way to show that everyone is the same, no matter where they come from, what language they speak, or what they wear.

*Discussion Topics*

- There are many types of cultural differences (clothing is one)
- What traditions do people bring with them to their new home, what traditions are changed or left behind
- Having the courage to talk about yourself and where you come from, having pride in your heritage
- The *Crossroads* child Dhiann Kaur also deals with cultural difference. How does she handle it?