

Sikh Studies Movie Night: Indian Horse

Topic: Truth and Reconciliation & Sikhi Connections

Introduction: Why Truth and Reconciliation?

On September 30, Canada observes the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. This day honors the children who never returned home and the Survivors of residential schools, as well as their families and communities. Residential schools were government- and church-run institutions that operated in Canada for more than 150 years. Indigenous children were taken from their homes and forced to abandon their languages, cultures, and traditions, often experiencing neglect, abuse, and trauma.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was created to listen to Survivors' stories, uncover the truth of what happened, and share 94 Calls to Action for Canadians to build a more just future. This day exists to remind all Canadians of the past, to honor those harmed, and to commit to reconciliation—walking together in truth, respect, and healing.

It is a national holiday because the impact of residential schools is not just Indigenous history, but Canadian history. It calls on everyone to learn, reflect, and take responsibility.

Connecting Sikhi and Indian Horse

- Truth (Sat): Sikhi teaches us to stand for truth, even when painful. The TRC and the movie both emphasize telling the truth about injustice.
- Human Dignity (Ik Onkaar): Sikhi teaches that all humans are equal, made in the same Divine light. Residential schools denied this principle, but reconciliation is about restoring dignity.

- Freedom of Faith and Culture: Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji gave his life to protect others' right to practice their own faith. In contrast, residential schools forced children to abandon theirs.
- Resilience & Chardi Kala: Despite trauma, Saul Indian Horse's story shows courage and resilience—just as Sikhs are called to live in high spirits even through suffering.
- Community Healing (Sangat): Sikhi emphasizes Sangat (community support) for healing. Reconciliation calls Canadians to stand together with Indigenous peoples to heal.

Sikh Pioneers in Canada and Truth & Reconciliation

The story of Truth and Reconciliation can also be connected with the history of Sikh pioneers in Canada, especially in British Columbia. Early Sikh immigrants faced racism, discrimination, and exclusion. They were not allowed to vote, faced barriers in employment, and were denied many basic rights. Like Indigenous peoples, Sikhs experienced being treated as outsiders in their own home.

One important fact is that Sikhs gained the right to vote in Canada in 1947, after many years of struggle. However, Indigenous peoples in Canada were not given the right to vote federally until 1960. This shows how Indigenous peoples faced even greater systemic discrimination and exclusion.

Both histories, of Indigenous peoples and Sikh pioneers, remind us of the importance of standing against racism, valuing human dignity, and working toward justice and equality for all.

Sikh History Connections

The story of residential schools and Indigenous peoples connects with Sikh history in many ways. Just like Indigenous children were taken away from their families, in Sikh history when invaders came to India, they kidnapped children and young girls, taking them away from their homes and even selling them in faraway markets such as Kabul. Another example is Maharaja Duleep Singh, who was taken away from his family, land, and culture, and forced to live as someone far from his Sikh roots. Both Indigenous and Sikh communities have experienced the pain of being separated from family and culture.

Sikhs also faced torture and attempts to erase their identity at the hands of rulers. Many were killed in cruel ways, but they stayed strong, keeping their faith, language, and dignity. These examples show us that when we stay connected to Sikhi—through our language, faith, and Sangat—we find the strength to endure even the hardest times.

The lesson for us is clear: resilience comes from holding on to who we are. When we stay true to our roots and support each other in Sangat & community, we can survive injustice and grow stronger together with the strength found in Seva, Simran, Sangat, Gurbani, Sikh history, and Maryada.

Reflection Questions

About the Movie (Critical Thinking & Sikhi Perspective)

1. Why do you think Saul's love for hockey was so important in his life? **Hockey gave Saul a sense of freedom and identity when everything else had been taken from him. It became his escape from pain and trauma and a way to express himself without words. It also gave him hope and belonging outside the residential school system.**

2. What emotions did you feel watching the scenes at the residential school? Why?

The scenes created feelings of sadness, anger, and helplessness because the children were treated cruelly and forced to forget their families, language, and culture. It was painful to see innocent children punished for being who they were.

3. How did Saul's relationship with his culture affect his healing? **When Saul reconnected with his Ojibway roots, family, and traditions, he began to heal. Remembering his identity helped him make peace with his past and find strength through cultural pride and community.**

4. How did the movie change your understanding of residential schools? **The movie made the reality of residential schools more personal and emotional. It showed that these schools caused deep, lifelong trauma, not only for individuals but also for entire communities. It helped me understand that reconciliation is about truth, justice, and healing.**

5. What lesson do you think young people today can learn from Saul's story? **Young people can learn to appreciate their families, culture, and identity, and to speak out against injustice. They can also see the importance of resilience and of finding positive ways, like religion/Dharm, sports, art, or community, to heal from pain.**

6. Sikhi teaches 'Ik Onkaar'—all humans are equal. How does this relate to the mistreatment of Indigenous children in residential schools? **The mistreatment of Indigenous children violated the core Sikh belief that all people are created equal. Sikhi teaches respect for every human being as a reflection of the same Divine Light. The schools denied this truth by treating Indigenous children as inferior.**

7. Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji sacrificed his life for the freedom of religion. How does this inspire us to respect Indigenous peoples' right to keep their culture and traditions?

Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji gave his life so that others could freely practice their faith. This inspires us to defend and respect the rights of Indigenous peoples to keep their languages, ceremonies, and traditions. True Sikhi means protecting freedom of all.

8. What does Sikhi teach us about resilience (Chardi Kala), and how do you see that in Saul's story? **Sikhi teaches us to stay in *Chardi Kala*—high spirits—even during suffering. Saul showed Chardi Kala by continuing to play hockey and trying to rebuild his life despite the pain he faced. Eventually though, the pain was too much and he had to connect with his roots to start healing. His courage reflects the Sikh spirit of staying strong and hopeful.**

9. How can Sikhs and other Canadians practice Seva (selfless service) to support truth and reconciliation today? **We can learn and share the truth about residential schools, listen to Indigenous voices, support Indigenous-led projects, and build relationships based on respect. Seva can include volunteering, attending cultural events, donating, or simply standing in solidarity.**