

The Province

VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

| SUNDAY, APRIL 16, 2006 |

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They open eyes

The amazing story of how two B.C. men give the gift of sight to thousands of poor people in India.

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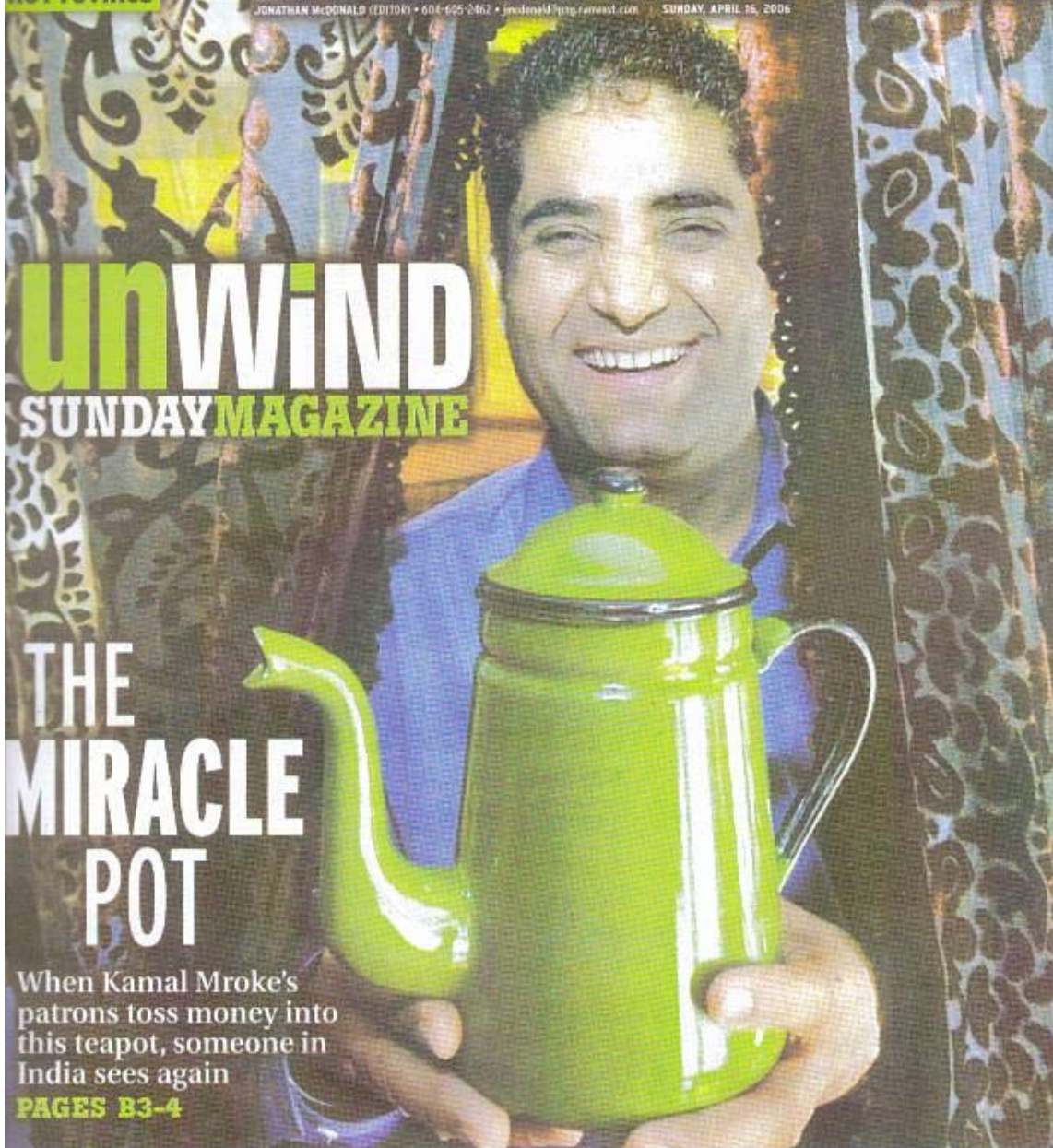
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GOOD READS • GOOD FUN • GOOD IDEAS

JONATHAN McDONALD (EDITOR) • 604-695-2462 • jon@mcald.com • www.mcdonald.com

SUNDAY, APRIL 16, 2006

PULLOUT SECTION B



unwind SUNDAY MAGAZINE

THE MIRACLE POT

When Kamal Mroke's patrons toss money into this teapot, someone in India sees again

PAGES B3-4

Kamal Mroke of Vancouver's India Bistro collects money donated by patrons and staff all year, then uses the cash to pay for eye operations in rural India. THE PROVINCE - JON MURPHY

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THE PEOPLE'S EYE CHARITY: The amazing story of two Lower Mainland men who have given the gift of sight to 40,000 poor people in India, and are still at it



A flashlight held by Kamal Mroke clearly shows a cataract in the eye of this man in Tapa, a village in the Punjab, confirming that he will need surgery. — MAXWELL BALMAN — KING COUNTY JOURNAL

In five minutes, they see again



Mike Roberts

"He who eats what he earns through his earnest labour and from his hand gives something in charity; he alone knows the true way of life." — Guru Nanak, founder of the Sikh religion

Tired, hungry and frightened, they trickle into the eye camps until they number in the hundreds. They have tramped over fallow fields and down dirt roads for the good part of a day, or spent their family savings on punishing bus rides from the furthest Bang villages of rural India.

Colored in the turmeric-colored



Surinder 'Shinda' Kainth of Burnaby, 34 (left), founder of Natar Sewa Manch (The People's Eye Charity), and partner Kamal Mroke of Vancouver, 41 (right), in the Punjab with their next 'special case,' a 22-year-old woman born with a tumour behind her eye. Her surgery is set for next February. — PHOTO COURTESY KAMAL MROKE

dust of the Punjab, some are elderly, while others have brought their children. Some do not know how old they are; others have long forgotten their last names. They are

the poorest of the world's poor and will leave nothing behind on this earth but footprints and bones.

Blind or nearly so, there is a journey of fading hope.

They have come to see two men from the Lower Mainland, two men of the Punjab who return to mother India each year with the gift of sight and the promise of a normal

life for the destitute and forsaken. To date, the selfless efforts of these champions of the poor have restored the vision of 40,000 Indian villagers.

Surinder Kainth and Kamal Mroke arrived in Canada from the Punjab as young men. Today, they are poster boys for the New World dream. Hard work and savvy business acumen have earned them success and riches as foreign in the impoverished villages of Punjab as dishwasher and plasma screens.

Surinder is a Burnaby mill worker and home renovator, a happily married man devoted to his family and community. Kamal is a successful restaurateur who owns the popular India Bistro on Davie Street, as well as interests in the upscale Copper Chimney on Hornby Street. He lives with his wife and their two children in Vancouver.

Both men could easily have turned their backs on India and her poor, lived affluent lives in Canada

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Last year, there were 7,400 eye operations

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and thought no more of the horrors of their homeland. Instead, each day, Surinder and Kamal tuck away cash in copper kettles. Generous customers and friends stuff tens and twenties, sometimes hundreds, into these kettles.

And every February, Surinder and Kamal gather that money and spend a month among the down-trodden of Punjab, en-ordinating and funding the restoration of their sight through teams of Indian doctors, nurses and volunteers.

It was Surinder who, eight years ago, founded Natar Sewa Manch (People's Eye Charity). Four years later, after befriending the missionary man he now calls "brother," Kamal agreed to join Surinder in his annual pilgrimage.

In the early years, there were only a handful of eye camps. Last year, 12 camps performed 7,400 operations on people from 300 villages, introducing thousands of subsistence farmers to the benefits of corrective lasers and prescription eyeglasses.

Next year, the "brothers" plan to sponsor 15 eye camps at a cost of \$37,500.

"Forty per cent of Indians have eye disease," says Surinder, whose grandmother was blind. "It's the pollution, the dust, and the fact they have no medical care."

"God gives us a good country and good health. Our small efforts, that is the least we can do."

For Kamal, whose aunt was blind while he was a child, it is a matter of blunt philosophy.

"You know what? I give you food, a million dollars or eyes on the table. What will you give?" he asks. "Eyes. You're hungry and you're blind, I can feed you, but you're hungry tomorrow. But if I give you eyes, you can go and earn a million dollars and feed your family."

Before Surinder and Kamal even arrive in India, village volunteers herald their arrival with rickshaws, mounted loudspeakers, avoiding the sightless poor for a free medical consultation. The eye camps, located within a short bus ride of state hospitals where the surgeries are performed, attract 700 to 100 people. The Indian government pays the wages of the doctors and nurses. Surinder and Kamal cover everything else: Needles, sutures, thread, anesthetics, antibiotics, medical instruments, artificial lens-



"They don't own anything. They can't afford anything. They can't even afford to fare. How are they going to go to a doctor?"

— Kamal Mroke

Villagers wait to see the specialist at the free eye camp in Tapa, India. Many who come disappear in some out of fear, some because they simply are unable to take the time away from their work.

PHOTOS BY MAXWELL BALMAIN — KING COUNTY JOURNAL



Kamal Mroke (left) watches the surgical team get patients ready for cataract surgery in the Tapa Hospital.

es, blankets, food, tents and buses to deliver patients to the rudimentary operating theatres.

The eye camps last three days. On Day 1, the fearful patients and their families arrive and line up for hours awaiting a consultation. A doctor shines a flashlight into their eyes. Patients needing immediate cataract surgery get a large letter "C" scribbled on their foreheads. Those who can get through another year are told to come back next time. The pen-marked poor spend the night on the floor under makeshift tents.

On Day 2, the operations are performed on tables three abreast. The eye is numbed with a local anesthetic and the eyelid is pulled back

and held with a single stitch of thread before the doctor moves in with two, small, spoon-like tools.

"It takes five minutes," says Kamal. "The doctor does a small cut and from the side — slowly, slowly — he will pop the cataract lens out. Then he puts the plastic lens in and puts only one stitch on it. Then the nurse comes, puts three case stitches in. Another guy comes, he puts on the bandages. It's like a factory. We do 100, 120 people a day."

Day 3 is set aside for recovery. At the end of the day, after a lecture on post-operative care and a fresh dressing, the patients return to their faraway lives of hardship.

Says Kamal: "They don't own any-

thing. They can't afford anything. They can't even afford bus fare. How are they going to go to a doctor?"

"The eyeglasses? Two dollars Canadian. They can't afford it."

In 2004, Jinder Sandhu, a registered nurse at Vancouver's St. Paul's Hospital, joined the brothers on their annual pilgrimage. Born in the Punjab but raised in Vancouver, Jinder says she was simply unprepared for the relentless cries of humans suffering at the Natar Sewa Manch camps.

But what struck her as most disturbing, she says, was the number of villagers who fled in the hours and moments before their surgery.

She says fear of the unknown was

a factor, but suspects poverty the true cause.

"You're asking them to give their living for a week," explains. "A lot of people will say, 'No, I can't afford to. . . . The leave, even though they'll go! They think only of today — feed my family today!'"

But there were also those whom the most basic medicine a minute.

"Gratitude and joy like wouldn't believe — it's very rational," says Jinder. "It's a grateful person who started."

Neither Surinder nor Kamal enjoys the attention.

"The people touch your face," explains Kamal. "They say, 'So good, you're like a god to us, we don't want that. We don't like you.' We say, 'We are only here to get your life back together because if your eyes are gone, life is gone.'"

Each trip, they take on a "big case" and pay for it out of their pockets. Next February, it is surgery for a 22-year-old man disfigured by a facial tumour.

"Friends, family, it all help can't do it alone," says Surinder "hobby chef" who also crochets and welds in and for eye camp donations.

Kamal says they have approached by non-profit organizations but refuse to see their money puffed away on administrative costs.

"When you do it with your money, you feel so good," he says. "You did something in your life, you feel so happy."

And you bring hope to the taken.

brobert@png.com