

## Nepal's Rich Sikh Heritage

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Nepal has a small but vibrant Sikh community that is best known for its role as transporters, who opened Nepal to the modern world. In the early 1950s. Not many, though, know that Nepal's Sikh heritage dates to Guru Nanak Dev Ji, who travelled through Nepal during his third udasi, and has a very rich legacy.

Hailing from the Jammu region, the role of the transporters is legendary. Many of them personally navigated the newly laid tracks of the Tribhuvan Highway and forded rivers to haul their trucks to Kathmandu. They also started the first public bus service in the country and have been active in the setting up of modern schools in the country.

In modern times, Sikhs have played pioneering roles in Nepal as transporters and engineers, doctors, police officers, teachers, educationists, pilots and even in fashion design. Indeed, the person credited with laying the first drinking water pipes in Kathmandu was a Sikh, Manohar Singh. And, of course, by setting up the first "tandoori" restaurants, they paved the way for popularizing Punjabi cuisine in Nepal.

There is also an interesting diplomatic coincidence; Sardar Surjit Singh Majithia was the first Ambassador of India to Nepal, who established the Embassy in 1947. His arrival and departure, by aero-plane, saw the first uses of the landing strip that is now the runway at Tribhuvan International Airport. Seventy years later, as we marked the 550th Birth Anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, I became the only other Sikh to have had the honour to represent India in Nepal.

In the 1980s, the Sikhs in Nepal totaled more than a few thousand and built a grand Gurudwara in Kupondole (Kathmandu) apart from smaller Gurudwaras in Birgunj, Nepalgunj and Krishnanagar. It was further enriched by Nepalese like Sardar Gurbaksh Singh embracing Sikhism. Migration, changing business practices have all seen evolution and today the huge contribution of this community to Nepal's development is a fading memory.

Marking Guru Nanak Dev Ji's sojourn in Kathmandu is Nanak Math, which has a peepul tree supposedly marking the exact spot where Guru Saheb had meditated. Nanak

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Math, like a few other shrines in Kathmandu, is linked to the Udasi tradition and has a Mahant presiding over it. The shrine is not well known and much neglected prompting author Desmond Doig in calling it the “forgotten shrine of the Sikhs”. Nepal also boasts several hand written copies of the Guru Granth Sahib, including a couple in the Pashupatinath Temple complex.

The third Udasi covered Mansarovar in Tibet, Sikkim and crossed the vast Indo-Gangetic plain with oral history strongly suggesting that Guru Nsanak DevJi visited Nepal during this Udasi, 500 years back, around 1515. Legend has it that Kathmandu’s King Jay JagatMalla visited Guru Nanak DevJi in Benaras and sought help for curing his son, Jay Prakash Malla. Guruji’s blessings cured Jay Prakash and Guruji was urged by Jagat Malla to come to Kathmandu.

The journey from Benaras took Guru Nanak DevJi in an eastward direction to Janakpur, the birthplace of Sita. With there being evidence of his having visited Ayodhya, a visit to Janakpur would appear a natural corollary. From Janakpur, he travelled to holy places in the Kosi delta. A local gazette notes Bhedia Math in the Kosi Region as a place of one of his sojourns. Thereafter, he is said to have walked through the Mahabharata range to Kathmandu. Earlier, he must have passed through western Nepal on his way back from Mansarovar.

In Kathmandu, his first place of stay is said to have been in the vicinity of the Singha Durbar where today the offices of the Nepal Government are located. Later, when the area was cleared for the Singha Durbar, the yogis staying there were relocated to Shobha Bhagwati, where the shrine has a huge bell with Sikh inscriptions.

Guru Nanak DevJi then moved to an area known as Balaju where Nanak Math, presided over by a Mahant, is located. This shrine has a peepal tree under which Guru Nanak DevJi is said to have meditated with two footprints carved on a stone slab to mark the exact spot.

Archival records appear to show large land ownership in at the Nanak Math in the name of Guru Nanak. It is believed that the initial grant of nearly 200 acres came from King Jay Prakash Malla. Thereafter, King Rana Bahadur Shah is also said to have gifted considerable land to the shrine after finding solace for his “unsound mind”. Today, however, only a small portion of this land remains with the Nanak Math, which boasts a hand written Guru Granth Sahib draped in Rumalas and daily Sikh rituals performed by the Mahant.

Hand written copies of the Guru Granth Sahib can be seen in Kathmandu at a couple of other shrines too, including in the Pashupatinath complex. Indeed, the Guru Granth

Sahib is the only other scripture in the complex of this holiest of Hindu Temples. And, there is the story of Guru Nanak Dev Ji having miraculously sprouted a spring, known as GyanDhara, at the Gyaneshwor Temple.

The Sikh connection with Nepal, however, really developed during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh when the armies of the Sikh and Gorkha courts fought inconclusively in the Kangra region in 1809. The valor of the Gorkhas saw the Lahore Court start recruiting them from 1815 onward and the constitution of the "Gurkha-paltan" in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Fauj-e-Khas. This unit took part in the Afghanistan campaign of the Sikhs where Gurkha officer Balbhadra Kunwar was killed. This earliest of recruitment of the Gurkhas into the armies in India has, even today, Nepalese serving in the Indian Army being colloquially referred to as 'Lahures' in Nepal!

The first half of the Nineteenth century saw several attempts to bring about a coming together of the Sikh and Gurkha courts, along with the Marathas, to thwart the ambitions of the East India Company. This, of course, didn't happen and the two communities became important allies of the British critically helping in the lifting of the seige of Delhi and Lucknow in 1857. Indeed, it can be averred that the bringing together of these two communities was game-changing for the governance of British India as the 'martial races' theory saw the two communities, by themselves, becoming the dominant contributors of fighting men to the British Indian Army!

The respect and recognition of each other, by the Gurkhas and Sikhs, was also visible when Maharani Jind Kaur escaping from the British came to Nepal in 1849 and lived here for eleven years under the protection of Jung Bahadur, who was the de-facto ruler of Nepal.

The Nepalese respect for the Sikhs was also on display when the Thappathali treaty signed by the victorious Nepalese with Tibet in 1855 had a specific clause allowing for the return of Sikh troops stranded in Tibet. These soldiers were part of the remnants of the army of General Zorawar Singh, who defeated the Tibetans in 1840 but ran afoul of the harsh weather.

The story continues. Maharani Jind Kaur had come to Nepal accompanied by a large body of Sikhs. When she left Nepal, many of them were allowed to settle in the area around Nepalgunj bordering Uttar Pradesh. Retaining their Sikh identity, including wearing unshorn hair and maintaining Gurudwaras in the villages of their concentration, they are a community largely missing in the annals of the Sikh Diaspora.

This year, as we celebrate the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, we are pleased to recognize Nepal as an auspicious land for the Sikhs. However, we also need to be mindful that while the legacy is rich, the Sikh connection with Nepal appears forgotten, lost or is otherwise fading. And, the implications of the Sikh-Gurkha connect, though obvious, when pointed out, were never really focussed upon, even by military historians.



**In this context, it is particularly gratifying that Nepal has been sterling in its recognition of its Sikh connection and the Nepal Rastra Bank has issued three commemorative coins – two in silver with denomination of Nepali Rupees 2500 and 1000 and a cupro-nickel coin with a face value of Nepali Rupees 100 – to mark the 550th Birth Annivesary of Guru Nanak Dev Ji. It is one of few countries issuing legal tender featuring a Sikh connection. The Indian Embassy in Kathmandu and the BP Koirala India Nepal Foundation have also brought out a pictorial publication documenting this legacy. This can be easily accessed on the website of the Embassy.**



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