

Our Brothers Across The Seas*

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** This was the first of a series of articles on Sikh communities overseas published in **The Sikh Review**. Subsequent articles dealt with the Sikhs of Burma, Thailand, Hong Kong, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. The series concluded with an account of the Sikhs on the African continent after the author visited Kenya, and the Union of South Africa.*

THE largest community of Sikhs outside India is in the Federated Malaya States and Singapore. Exact figures are not available as the census is no longer compiled in terms of religious denominations, and the last count in 1948 (which did enumerate the Sikhs separately) put the figure as 10,132 including Singapore, which was grossly inaccurate. Estimates made from records of *gurdwaras* and Sikh organizations put the figure for Malaya at, at least, 35,000 Sikhs, with another 10,000 for Singapore. Many people I consulted on the subject were of the opinion that both these figures could be doubled without danger of exaggeration.

Early Emigration

It is not unlikely that from the time Sir Stamford Raffles took Singapore in 1819 and British influence spread over Malaya, Sikhs from Malwa, which had already passed under British protection by the Treaty of Amritsar in 1809, started coming to this region to seek their fortunes. There is a legend that the towns Mersing and Jasin in Malaya are named after two Sikhs, Amar Singh and Jai Singh. The earliest documentary evidence of Sikh emigration is found in 1872 when captain T.C.S. Speedy of the Malayan Police brought 110 Sikh policemen from Calcutta to form the Resident's bodyguard in Larut. There is little doubt that there were already many Sikhs in the region who were engaged in the building of roads and railways, or as bullock cart drivers, in clearing forests for rubber plantations, or as dairymen and watchmen. Nevertheless the arrival of this band of policemen from Calcutta was the first big milestone in the history of Sikh emigration to Malaya. This perhaps explains the curious phenomenon that, to this day, the locals refer to the Sikhs as 'Bengalis'. Other Indians, particularly the Tamils, are called 'Klings'—presumably from a confusion with the name of the ancient kingdom of Kalinga.

The Larut district police force soon expanded and Sikh units were raised for service in other parts of the country. This was largely to combat the menace of the Chinese secret societies. In 1876, the Perak armed police, consisting almost entirely of Sikhs, was formed. In 1884, a larger body, the 1st Battalion of the Perak Sikhs consisting of infantry, artillery and cavalry units, was raised and charged with military, police and even civic functions such as fire-fighting, health and sanitation duties.

The Sikh policeman became a regular feature of the Malayan landscape. Various Muslim Sultans of the provinces also preferred having Sikhs as bodyguards to their own nationals or Chinese, or any foreigners. The reputation of the Sikh police force rose

even higher in the part it played in putting down violence in the Panang area and in the extremely dangerous work of liquidating secret societies. Consequently in 1896, yet another body, the Malay State Guides, consisting very largely of Sikhs, was formed for the safety of Singapore and the Peninsula. The headquarters of the Guides was at Taiping. The Guides saw action in Africa and China. The Sikh contingent also took part in Queen Victoria's Jubilee celebrations in London in 1895 as well as in the Coronation parade of King Edward VIII in 1902.

At the turn of the century, law and order in Malaya and Singapore was almost entirely the responsibility of a Sikh police force. But more than that, the development of the country — the clearing of the jungle for rubber plantations, the building of roads and railway lines to exploit tin ore and bring the product to the market, had also been done by Sikh workmen co-operating with Tamil indentured labourers. The Sikhs had the virtual monopoly of the transport system.

Where did they come from ?

The largest group of Sikh emigrants came from the region of Malwa, followed closely by groups from Majha and the districts of the Jullundur Doab. The overwhelming majority of these men were Jats, the largest single group belonging to the Gill sub-sect. The reasons that compelled them to leave their homes were economic. Although some of their kinsmen had somewhat eased the land problem by emigrating to the newly opened canal colonies in Western Punjab, it did not decrease their indebtedness. This was in its acutest form in Malwa and hence it was from this region that the largest emigration eastwards - to Calcutta, Burma and Malaya, first began. In Malaya, the chief settlements were along the western seaboard of the Peninsula and in Singapore.

Economic progress

Malaya paid handsome dividends. Bullock-cart drivers were able to earn enough money to liquidate their debts at home and get their brothers and cousins to join them. After the roads had been laid, they abandoned their carts for trucks and lorries, and continued their monopoly of the transport system. Policemen retired from service to take employment as watchmen with banks and big European and Chinese firms. They were given the paradoxical name of *jagas* since most of them spent their time dozing on their charpoys. They extended their operations to lending money at extortionate rates. But more important than their eagerness to make quick money was the far-sightedness of these illiterate peasants who sent their children to schools and colleges, and within one generation, not only raised their economic status from poor cart-drivers and night watchman to men of substance, but also reared sons who made their mark in academic circles and became the country's most sought-after teachers, professors, lawyers and doctors, and all this in fifty years.

In Malaya it is not uncommon to run into an octogenarian, like Suchet Siugh of Seramban, who never did anything all his life except ply a cart through tiger-infested jungles. Now (1961) he lives in a tastefully furnished bungalow with two acres of

garden. When I called on him, the son of this bullock-cart driver was out playing golf with a Deputy Minister of Government, and his two grandsons, who were studying in Australian universities, were home for the vacations.

Not all Malayan Sikhs have done as well as old Suchet Singh.. But there is little doubt that their standard of living is infinitely higher than that of their kinsmen in the Punjab, and the rate at which they have progressed from penury to prosperity, from abysmal ignorance to high academic distinction is truly phenomenal. Never in my years as a professor in the Punjab did I run across a group as intelligent and well-informed as the batch of young Sikhs at Singapore. They filled me with an enormous sense of pride.

The small non-Jat sub-section of Sikhs in Malaya has, as is to be expected, done even better in business than the others. The pioneer was one Gian Singh of Gujranwala who started modestly in 1900 hawking bales of textiles in the streets. When he died in 1931, he left a flourishing concern, Messrs. Gian Singh and Sons, with branches in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Today (1961), his son Ajit Singh who owns the Kuala Lumpur branch, is President of the Indian Chamber of Commerce, a Justice of the Peace, and member of many Government Committees. Other important Sikh firms are Hardayal Singh and Sons, Pritam Singh and Co., Thakral Brothers, Surjit Singh and Ranjit Singh, Gurbaksh Singh Sambhi (the largest dealer in food grains), and Bhagwan Singh, who has interests in tin and rubber.

The number of Sikhs in the police force has been considerably reduced. Sikh participation in the I.N.A. and, particularly, the conduct of Sikh guards towards European prisoners in Singapore's Chang Jail during World War II, made them unpopular with the British Government and the local Chinese. British authorities showed great generosity in dealing with the men who had 'collaborated' with the Japanese and did nothing more than dismiss them from service and deport them to India. Today there are not more than 300 Sikhs in the police force of the Straits and the Federation. Those who were cleared of the charge of collaboration rose to high positions, for example S. Pritam Singh who became a senior Superintendent, and young 'Singha' who, for his daring underground activities against the Japanese, is known as the 'Lion of Malaya' and is the personal bodyguard of the Prime Minister, Tunjku Abdul Rehman. There are other Sikhs in senior positions, for example Kirpal Singh of Radio Malaya, who also takes a lively interest in the affairs of the community and is a passionate reader of the *gurbani*. He has lectured on Sikhism in the United States.

Politicians

Sikhs take to politics quicker than to any other occupation. This is true of the Malay Sikhs. The name of the late Baba Budh Singh, the 'Malay Gandhi' is still a legend. Two Sikhs who are members of the Malayan Parliament are the tall and strapping Mahima Singh, who is a member of the ruling Alliance Party, and the youthful twenty-four year old barrister, Karam Singh, a fiery socialist of the opposition who won his seat from a purely Chinese constituency.

Religious and Social Organization

There are 132 gurdwaras in the Malay Federation and nine in Singapore (these figures have been compiled by an eminent Sikh journalist, Tara Singh). The community runs a large number of schools, of which the Guru Nanak Institution of Ipoh is the largest. There are Khalsa schools in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Seremban, Taiping, Alor Star, Johore Baru, and many other towns. The outstanding feature of the Malayan Sikhs' drive for higher education was the founding, in 1950, of the Malayan Sikh Educational Aid Fund by the late Dr. Tara Singh. This fund started with Rs. 36,000 and has so far helped twenty young Sikhs to be educated in foreign universities.

There are many Sikh associations to promote social, cultural and athletic activities amongst Sikhs. The community also has four newspapers. The oldest is the *Navjivan* edited by S. Diwan Singh. The *Pardesi Khalsa Sewak* and the *Malaya Samachar* are recent publications, as is the English *Samaj*. The last three named are ardent supporters of the Punjabi Suba — as indeed is the vast majority of the Malayan Sikh population.

The Debit Side

All is not rosy in the Malayan Sikh garden. Few Sikh communities are as split apart on regional and caste differences as they. The Khalsa Malaya Diwan is an organization of Majha; the Kalgidhar Malaya Diwan, of Maiwa. They even have separate *gurdwaras* -as in Singapore, where the Mazhabis have one of their own. The most distressing aspect of Malayan Sikh life is the prevalence of caste. At least four cases were mentioned to me of young Sikhs renouncing their faith because the parents of girls they wanted to marry objected to the match on the basis of caste. And I ran into one tragedy of a most attractive and educated girl forced into an unsuitable marriage with an illiterate man of her own caste. She is now separated and earning a lonely livelihood as a teacher. This un-Sikh tradition which can only be explained by the fact that whereas the boys were sent to schools and universities, the majority of the girls were forced to remain conservatively semi-literate under the thumbs of their rustic mothers. The younger generation has begun to revolt against this state of affairs.

The Future

The Malayan Sikhs are a step ahead of their co-religionists in other foreign countries. They know their future lies in giving complete loyalty to the land of their domicile, and a large majority have become Malayan nationals. They also know that in order to preserve their religious identity they must bring up their future generations with a knowledge of Punjabi and the Sikh religion. They are making great efforts to teach their children Gurmukhi and so become both good citizens of Malaya and good Sikhs.



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