

Kenya's Makindu Gurdwara: A Traveller's Paradise

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THE NAME MAKINDU IS BORROWED from the palms that grow along the crystal clear streams from the volcanic hills of the nearby Chyulu's and Kilimanjaro. But the fame of this tiny roadside town, on the Nairobi - Mombasa Highway, has spread amongst the Sikhs worldwide - and yet its story started so simply in the 1920s.

By the early 1900s, the Uganda Railway was complete and railway stations built along the line. The train running out of Mombasa had its first major stop at Voi, and then Makindu. Those were the days of the steam engines chugging along slowly across the *nyika* where the lions still reigned supreme just as the famous red elephants of Tsavo. "The steam engines required water and timber as firewood to fuel the engine," narrates Tejpal Singh, the white turbaned chairman of the Gurdwara committee, which has the task of maintaining the smooth operations of the Gurdwara.

In the event, "there was a railway engineering workshop at Makindu, and many Sikhs worked there," continues Tejpal Singh. By 1926, the Sikhs living in the 'landhies' (housing estates for the railway workers) built a simple structure, a prayer hall which housed the Guru Granth Sahib. The Guru Granth Sahib is the eternal Guru for the Sikhs - it contains the sacred teachings of not only the Gurus but also Muslim and Hindu sages of the time. Just before he died, the Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, instructed the Sikhs to revere the Granth as their Guru, which Sikhs do to this day.

Going back through the records of Gurdwaras of East Africa, the opening ceremony is described, "The opening ceremony of the Gurdwara Makindu took place on Sunday 27th April, 1930." About 150 Sikhs and others traveled to Makindu from the far-flung towns of East Africa. "The Temple, where Sikh religious services are held is a magnificent stone building with fine arches at the front and back. A beautiful garden is also attached to the building. The building has cost the few promoters Sh15,000, for which splendid effort, the community is to be congratulated. Within a few minutes of the opening ceremony done by Teja Singh, Guard of the Kenya and Uganda Railways, donations from the audience amounted to Sh3,250. A free grant of land was made by the Railway Administration, for which the community is grateful." The short article printed in 1963 to commemorate the opening ceremony of Siri Guru Singh Sabha, Nairobi, is complimented by a simple black and white photo of the Sikh congregation of Siri Guru Singh Sabha, Makindu.

The railway kept everyone busy - and since it was the major means of affordable fast transport in modern times, Makindu became a popular stopover for travellers to and from the coast. One of the fundamental principles of Sikhism is the free '*langar*,' or meal. The founder Guru of Sikhi is Guru Nanak Devji and Nine other Gurus followed. All of them were travellers, and there is an endearing story of Guru Nanak who, on one of his travels, preferred to share a meal in the abode of a poor man's hut, instead of the mighty king's lavish feast. The offended king ordered that the Guru be brought to his mansion by force. He then asked him why he chose the poor man, Lalo's meal and not his sumptuous table. At that the Guru asked for sweets

from the rich man's kitchen. He then squeezed the sweets and the dry crust of bread from Lalo's kitchen which he had brought along - he drew blood from the one, and from the other, drops of milk fell. The rich man's meal was the sweat and blood of the poor people. Bhago, the rich man became contrite, promising to spend the rest of his days serving the poor.

In the passage of time, the significance of sharing a meal is a cornerstone of Sikh hospitality.

Back to Makindu: By the 1950's things began to quieten down. The railway workshop was moved to Nairobi and gradually there was no Sikh community living in Makindu. The Gurdwara became quieter, with only a Kamba caretaker to maintain the little roadside facility.

But a few miracles happened around that time. One was that a fire gutted the structure and the only thing that was saved was the Granth Sahib. Then red ants attacked years later, nibbling their way through anything edible, except for the Granth Sahib. And then, finally, the simple caretaker saw a man in a "kilemba" appear in his dreams riding a horse - much like the last living Guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji. With this there was renewed interest in the Gurdwara and, again, donations started to pour in and it expanded to its present state - a stark white structure on the red African soils of Tsavo.

In the morning, we climb the winding narrow staircase of the outer facade. In the pure freshness of the morning, the Chyulus and Kilimanjaro are a distant haze. The minarets of the facade are pure craftsmanship of fine filigree carved in stone and the ceiling, a tapestry of mirror work. Neglected over the years, it is being renovated, but the skill of the craftsman cannot be doubted. "Hari Singh was a true artist. You couldn't tell him anything. He had worked on the mosques in Nairobi," remembers Tejpal Singh. It took Hari Singh five years to build the facade during which time the eccentric man quit three times."

The Gurdwara housed one of the original versions of the Granth Sahib, the only one in the country," recalls Tejpal Singh. The older Granth Sahib had 2,800 pages whereas the modern printed edition has 1,430 pages.

Its early evening. It's that ethereal sky - blue in the darkening sunset. I'm standing in the courtyard of the upper prayer hall. The full moon has risen from the eastern horizons just as the sun is setting. Except for the chant of the evening prayers, the night is quiet. In the light of the moon, the red soils of Tsavo, the giant baobab trees and the stark white washed temple with its magnificent minarets and the symbols of Sikhism tower into the sky full of stars.

In the parking lot, car loads of travellers are still streaming in. Because it's too late to travel on, the travellers look for an abode. The kitchen is busy, the rooms are full. But the traveller will sleep even on the floor if the rooms are not available, for, in this holy place, one is humbled.

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