

Population of the Sikhs

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PART II

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According to the research done by Dr. Harbhajan Singh of Punjabi~ University, Patiala, the Vanjaras have 20,000 tandas (Settlement) in India. Their population is 5 crores spread in 22 states of India mainly in Madhya Pardesh (47 lacs), Maharashtra (62 lacs), Andhra Pardesh (71 lacs), Karnataka (67 lacs), Uttar Pardesh (58 lacs), Orissa (33 lacs), Bihar (35 lacs), Rajasthan (32 lacs). They name their settlement suffixing 'Tanda' to the city, town or village where they settle. The leader of the Tanda is called Nayak. They trace their origin to Rathors, Chauhans, Pawars and Yadavs, and also call themselves Rajputs. Due to their large numbers in Maharashtra, V.P. Nayak and Sudhakar Rao Nayak became chief ministers of the state. Though they did not announce themselves as Sikhs, but they brought in certain improvements in Tandas. Vanjaras were the leading transporters during Mughal period. They moved from Kabul to Agra, Agra to Patna Hyderabad and Ahmedabad, supplying cart-loads of weapons and food to the troops. Size of their convoy consisted of large number of carts. Bhagwan Dass Nayak's caravan had 52,000 oxen. Peter Mundi (1632) had recorded in his travelogue, "Vanjaras were moving in a carvan of 14,000 Oxen."

Due to their trading activity (*Vanaj*) while roaming they were called Vanjaras. The English were also a trading class. Their rule affected them adversely. Leaving their wandering trade, they settled near cities and towns and started trading. However, new trading practices caused them great harm. This resulted in their change to agriculture. There too they failed. These days they are living in great penury. Christians tried to take advantage of their poverty but they did not abandon Sikhism. Long deep relationship with the Gurus has kept them tied to Sikhism. Their slogan still remains, "Jis ghar Nanak puja, us ghar hor na duja." (Where ever Guru Nanak is worshipped, no other religion can enter there.)

Vanjara Sikhs suffix 'Singh' to their names. Every Tanda has an *Ardasia*. If there is any quarrel within two groups, the *Ardasia* prays in the name of Guru Nanak and both groups leave the quarrel in between and go home. A boy cannot be married without tying a rupee in his turban in the name of Guru Nanak. This rupee is considered most precious and important in the marriage. The bride wears *choora* (bangle) in the name of Guru Nanak. At the time of marriage the groom is branded on the arm with a hot needle in the name of Guru Nanak.

75 percent of Vanjaras have land but lack resources to farm. From the times of Guru Gobind Singh, Vanjaras keep *nagaras* (drums) in their Tandas. They were among the first, on the day of Vaisakhi of 1699, to have Amrit and became Sikhs. The name of Guru Nanak is stamped indelibly in their minds. They tell with pride how Lakhi Shah Vanjara cremated the body of Guru Teg Bahadur. This way they lay claim on half of the Sikhi.

During our Maharashtra visit, we went to a village Pachaur, There, they were about to construct a Gurdwara. A surprising fact came to the fore. Bhai Maan Singh of Talegaon had been married to the daughter of Manu Singh of Pachaur. Maan Singh was a good

Sikh preacher. He began preparing the whole village to be baptized. To start with, a plan was made to construct a Gurdwara, for which the villagers promised to gift land initially, but declined later. Manu Singh had pledged to construct the Gurdwara. He declared, "If the villagers do not give the land for the Gurdwara he would demolish his own house to pave the way for it." He said, "If our ancestor Lakhi Shah Vanjara can burn his own house to cremate the Guru's body, why can't I demolish my own house?" The villagers thought it to be a gimmick, but Manu Singh after waiting for some days, really started, dismantling his house. When almost half of it was dismantled, the villagers saw reason, and gave the land for the Gurdwara. The kind of fervour that I saw there among the people assembled from nearby villages I did not find anywhere else. The joy was like that of a marriage and the devotion limitless. But, unfortunately, we haven't been able to send the promised money to them as assistance.

The arrival of Vanjaras in Andhra Pradesh is associated with the arrival of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army. Most of the 1200 Sikh soldiers were Vanjaras whose families spread far and wide thereafter. **90 percent Vanjaras are living below poverty line.** There is a need to preserve and associate them with *Gurughar*.

Sikligar

If we consider the dedication and commitment to Sikhism, this tribe is among the first. Lacking any help from any quarter, and living in penury, they still remain in high spirits. Their poverty, however, has kept them beyond the attention of so called Sikh Sardars. Neither any Gurdwara Committees has paid any attention to them nor any worthwhile Sikh organization has tried to help them.

Days are far behind when Guru Hargobind wore the swords of *Meeri* and *Peeri* to save the masses from the tyranny of Mughals, and when he felt the need of arms, he remembered these Marwari brothers. These were the same Marwari brothers whose chief Rana Partap was inspired by Baba Sri Chand the son of Guru Nanak, to sacrifice his everything for religion, He fought the Mughals valiantly, losing the battle of arms but not of mind. They accepted the vagaries of forests, but not the servitude of Mughals. They adopted the profession of manufacture of arms, and took upon themselves to supply these to fight the Mughals. On invitation from the Guru, they permanently got attached to the Guru Ghar. They not only manufactured arms for Gurughar but also fought battles, attaining martyrdom. When Guruji sent Bhai Jetha and Bhai Bidhi Chand to look for artisans, Bhai Kehar Singh Rajput was the first one to offer his services. Men brought by him made weapons that were used by the Sixth and Tenth Gurus in all the battles against Mughals. In between, during the period of non-violence their occupation was affected adversely. Some of them returned to Marwar. The residents of Chittaurgarh did not behave well with their forelorn brothers and they returned. Marital relationships were formed within the tribes and tradition of exchange also began due to the need of the times.

Some Sikligars associated with Guru Teg Bahadur also went with him to Assam and kept supplying weapons for royal armies.

Their fate took a turn towards the positive when the Tenth Guru took over. He called upon his followers to bring weapons. Sikligars also contributed their mite. First of all came Bhai Veeru and provided the details of his brethern. The Guru asked him to exhibit weapons. He ordered Bhai Nand Singh and Bhai Chaupa Singh to check exhibited weapons. Guru Sahib too paid a visit to the exhibition.

The weapons were extremely beautiful and shining brilliantly. These were so sharp that they would have severed the heads of elephants. The makers of these weapons themselves were such warriors that they could each fight alone with a lakh and quarter. Observing the shine of their weapons, the Guru himself named them 'Sikligar' and after observing their valour bestowed them with the title of his favourites. The swords, arrows and other weapons made by them were adopted enthusiastically by the Guru.

The weapon manufacturing activity was started in the fort of Lohgarh under the supervision of these Marwari artisans. According to Bhai Santokh Singh: 'Marwaris were very active in making weapons.' They prepared four types of weapons (1) *Amukat*, which can be used with hands like swords (2) *Mukat*, which can be released from the hand, and (3) *Muktamukat*, which can be used both ways. Bhai Ram Singh was responsible for the manufacture. He was the first to be baptised into Sikhism among the Sikligars, and became Ram Singh from Ram Chand after Amrit at the hands of Tenth Guru. He belonged to Bugiana. Though he could not become one of the *Panj Piaras*, but he was among the *Panj Muktas* the ones who were in line for sacrifice and baptised next to *panj piaras*. (**Guru Kian Sakhian**, P.116). He showed his fighting skills in the battle of Chamkaur intimidating the enemy valiantly.

He would clean the weapons with much dedication. Once he was cleaning a *Tegh* by putting it under his feet. A group of Sikhs chided him, "Why are you touching the sacred weapon with your feet?" They went away, saying this, but all Sikligars kept sitting with the weapons on their heads. When Guruji noticed this, he asked Ram Singh the reason for the strange act. As Ram Singh told of the comments passed against them, Guruji laughed and said "Just as a sculptor makes a sculpture pressing it under his feet and making people to worship it, likewise you also clean the weapons with much dedication and honour. So you are excused from the ill effects. (Giani Gian Singh *Twarikh Khalsa*, Part 3, P. 931). The account of bravery of Ram Singh in the battle of Chamkaur before he attained martyrdom is described in *Suraj Parkash*, (Part 8).

Bhai Badan Singh and Bhai Modan Singh gave company to the Tenth Guru till Nanded. After the Tenth Guru, this tribe got divided into small groups and started roaming in towns and villages, manufacturing and selling their ware. Some served the royal houses. Later some of them came in the service of Maharaja Ala Singh and contributed a lot in getting thousands of Hindu men and women released from Abdali. When Maharaja of Nahan asked for weapons and weapon makers from Maharaja Ala Singh, the Sikligars, Mohan Singh, Madan Singh, and Tehal Singh were sent. During the period of the Rani Aas Kaur, Misar Naudh revolted. Sikligars Kesar Singh, Mehtab Singh, Khem Singh, Gulab Singh, Margind Singh, Jawahar Singh showed their mettle and won the battle. This earned them honour in the court but they were put to death treacherously by the Misar.

During Maharaja Ranjit Singh's time they started making guns and rifles also. These rifles were famous with names like Toredar, Kotli, Pata, Churidar and Sada. These were manufactured on a large scale in the workshops of Lahore. The British period hit them very hard. Ban was ordered against their weapon manufacture and they were declared a criminal tribe. For sustenance, they started roaming on carts and started making small household implements, These did not earn them even their livelihood.

They are scattered in different parts of India now. In Punjab, they are in Ludhiana, Chamkaur Sahib and Baba Bakala (Basnie), Patiala, Sirhind, Gobindgarh, Ferozepur,

Moga, etc. (Ladnie), and some are still gypsies (Uthnie) around Ablowal, Kamal, Panipat, Bachitar Nagar, etc. Outside Punjab they are in large numbers in Maharashtra, Andhra, Karnatka, Madhya Pardesh and Gujarat.

This writer has gone and seen their condition in different areas and found that they are living in utter penury and their profession has lagged behind the machine age. Their pride does not let them do service. On top of that, they are illiterate. They don't own land or homes. They do not get proper food and clothes. They eat whatever they earn, sometimes once a day' and at the most twice. They don't have finances to construct Gurdwaras to keep them associated with *Gurughar*. These Sikligars who partook *amrit* from the Tenth Guru have remained associated with Sikhism, tying turbans and keeping hair. They also abstain from intoxicants. They follow, to an extent, the Sikh norms but deprivation is driving them away from Sikhism. Many have started shearing their hair. Some have joined other faiths. If these are not attended to in time the Sikhism would lose its big chunk.

The main sources about Sikligars are - '*Mahan Kosh*' by Bhai Kahn Singh, '*Sikligar Qabila*' by Sher Singh Sher, '*Sikligar Parsang*' published by Buddha Dal, Dr. Harjinder Singh Dilgeer's '*Guru De Sher*', Kirpal Singh Kazak's '*Sikligar Kabile Da Sabhyachar*', Giani Garja Singh's '*Shaheed Bilas*' and '*Guru Kian Sakhian*', the '*Sikligar Vanjara*' issue of Gurmat Parkash (December 2002), Dr. Dalvinder Singh's articles on Sikligars in, '*The Sikh Review*', '*Sachkhand Patra*' and '*Des Punjab*'.

Satnamis:

Very few people know that, numbering over one crore and spread in the areas of Jharkhand, Bengal and Chhatisgarh, Satnamis are those Sikhs who had taken on Emperor Aurangzeb at the behest of Guru Teg Bahadur against his decision to charge *jeziya* and destruction of temples and teaching centres of Hindus and Sikhs. Rebelling against Aurangzeb, for a considerable time, they had in their possession the whole areas of Southern Haryana and North Rajasthan. These Sikhs associated themselves with Sikhism during the visit of Guru Nanak. They recited *Satnam* and have kept themselves associated with *Satnam* till date.

In 1667, Aurangzeb declared that all Hindus would pay five percent *jeziya* tax. On April 9, 1669 he passed orders that all Hindu temples, and educational institutions be destroyed and their religious activities be banned. This decision was implemented ruthlessly (*Masir-e-Jahangiri* 1947, P.51-55, Sarkar, History of Aurangzeb Part 3, P. 265). On hearing these orders, Guru Teg Bahadur started from Assam towards Punjab in December 1671 and reached Delhi in January 1672 (*Punjab Past and Present*, April 1975, P.234) In Delhi he gave the call "*bhai kahu ko det nahi, na bhai manat aan*" (Neither I cause fear to anyone nor I accept fear). It were these Satnamis who implemented this call of the Guru.

When Guruji was in Delhi, the leader of Satnamis came to pay obeisance along with his associates and described the details of atrocities leashed on Hindus. Guruji understood that the time had come to face the tyranny, and that by sitting in fear, Mughals would only be more ruthless. This was the main reason he called upon every Sikh to be fearless. It included Jagjivan Das also.

On receiving the call, Satnamis congregated and decided that they being followers of Guru Nanak would not pay anything to anyone except the Guru. When government officials came to their houses to collect taxes they declined. The soldiers tried to force;

but were beaten back. The ruler of the area attacked them, they retaliated. The Mughal forces fled from the area of Narnaul. Rumour spread in the area that the Satnamis were blessed, hence they cannot be defeated by anyone.

On the other hand, a fear spread in the royal circles. The fact that Satnamis could not be defeated would result in rebellion in other parts as well. The situation would go out of control. Aurangzeb lost his sleep over this. He was already worried due to rebellions in Afghanistan and Peshawar. Afghanistan had already seceded after a rebellion. Rebellion at Narnaul being so near the capital could cause serious repercussions, possibly resulting in loss of power also.

The Satnamis were not sitting complacent either. They had fortified themselves under the leadership of Jagjiwan Dass Chandel and were prepared for any eventuality. The entire information was constantly relayed to Aurangzeb. He had the task in hand to break the fortifications of Satnamis and to break the myth of their being invincible.

Understanding the need of the hour, Aurangzeb decided to tackle this rebellion on a large scale. He prepared a contingent of forces under his general Salar Sayyad Ahmed Khan. He wrote with his own hands, the *ayats* of Quran on the army flags so that they may diminish the fear that Satnamis were blessed and cannot be defeated. He propagated widely the power in the *ayats* of Quran to thwart any magic. Addressing the forces he said, "The *ayats* on your flags will keep you safe and nobody will be able to defeat you because you are going to annihilate the *Kaafirs*" (*Mahan Kosh*, P. 147).

Armed with guns and weaponry, these forces reached Narnaul and encircled the few Satnamis. How could these unarmed Satnamis take on the heavily armed enemy for long? None of the Satnamis surrendered. They fought till dusk and left when night descended. They reached Madhya Pradesh eventually, closely followed by the Mughal forces. Along with their families they scattered themselves in the forests of what is now Chhatisgarh. Aurangzeb's army was recalled as they were required elsewhere.

Since then, the Satnamis remained in these forests. Worse happened when they were oppressed a lot by the rich and strong sections of the local population. Satnamis lived in their huts reciting Naam and remained aloof from the rituals of Pandits. Later Ghasi re-united them, thwarting the oppression of Pandits and spreading education among them. When the British came, they converted some of them to Christianity. Former Chief Minister Ajit Jogi's family is one of those Satnamis, who became Christians.

A few years ago, the house of a Satnami, near Dhamtari, caught fire. Everything in his house was destroyed except for a wooden box which contained a copy of the *Granth Sahib*.

The news spread far and wide. The Script of the Granth could not be understood by the educated local. Few Punjabis also lived in the area. One of them visited the site and found that this was an ancient '*birh*' of Guru Granth Sahib. The housekeeper informed that his ancestors used to read and worship the Granth (*Dainik Bhaskar*, Raipur Edition, November 8, 2003).

When people of Dhamatri came to know of this, they expressed a wish to build a Gurdwara there. The housekeeper gifted the land for the Gurdwara and realising that his ancestors were Sikhs, partook *amrit* himself. From then on, many of the Satnamis got baptised as Sikhs. Now this onus has been taken by the Satnam Foundation of Raipur, assisted by Scottish Sikh Council, alongwith other associations, which continues even now.

Conclusion:

A few organizations are contributing their mite for the welfare of these three tribes. Besides organization approved by the *Panth*, these include local organizations, as Gurmat Parchar Sanstha Nagpur, Satnam Foundation Raipur, Guru Angad Dev Educational and Welfare Society, Ludhiana, Trust for the Welfare of Vanjara and Other Weaker Sections of Society Chandigarh, etc. But the monetary part is taken care of mainly by foreign organizations, prominent amongst them being the Scottish Sikh Council, British Sikh Council, etc.

These efforts are however too meager to take care of crores of these people and to keep them attached with the *Gurughar*. For this the whole Sikh community needs to make efforts unitedly at a global level.

**End of Part II
(concluded)**

