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Sikhs recruited by Rajah Brooke to quell uprising

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SIKHS have had the dubious honour of being the most misunderstood community in Malaysia. After over a century in this country, they are still erroneously referred to as mungali kwai by some Chinese, wangali by the Southern Indians and benggali by the Malays.

As if this is not enough, several friends born in the 1960s and early 1970s have the misfortune of having their religion stated as benggali Sikh in their birth certificates.

For the record, Benggalis, with the majority being Hindus, originated from Eastern India with family names such as Biswas, Sen, Gupta, Roy, Choudry, Tagore, etc.

The doughty and gritty Sikhs, popularly known as Sardarji when they first arrived on Malayan shores, originated from Punjab, India.

There have been different interpretations as to when the Sikhs arrived in Malaya but most historians concur that they were brought in by the British in early 1870s.

Social anthropologist Sarjit Singh Gill says the first Sikhs were recruited by Sarawak Rajah Sir James Brooke from Singapore in 1857 to quell Chinese uprising in his territory. The Sikhs were then British political prisoners in Malacca and Singapore.

Some historians claim that the first two Sikhs brought to Singapore in late 1840s were Nihal Singh (a.k.a Bhai Maharaj Singh) and Kharak Singh. They had opposed British rule in India. Sarjit says Captain Tristram Speedy, who was Acting British Resident for Perak was responsible for bringing in the first batch of 110 Sikhs to Malaya in 1873.

There were also a few Pathans, Hindus and Punjabi Muslims in the group.

Brig Gen Rajban Singh in his work, *The Participation of Indian Nationals in Military Organisations Before 1919*, says Speedy was commissioned by Orang Kaya Menteri of Lumut, Ngah Ibrahim to enlist "a force of fighting men" to help him save his tin mines from the depredations of the Chinese insurgents.

Several historians conclude that the British recruited Sikhs because they did not support the Indian Mutiny of 1857 aimed at over-throwing the British Raj.

Due to this, the mutiny was contained to the upper Ganges valley.

Speedy's Sikhs were roped into the Perak Armed Police (1877) which was later known as the First Battalion Perak Sikhs (1884).

In 1919, the battalion was eventually known as the Malay State Guides (MSG), headquartered in Taiping. The MSG had a strength of eight companies (six infantry and two artillery).

Sarjit says when the MSG was formed, the Malay rulers of Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang signed the Federation Treaty in 1895, which among others said that when the Persekutuan Tanah Melayu is formed the following year, Indian soldiers will be brought in to maintain peace.

In 1874, the Sikhs comprised the majority in the Negeri Sembilan and Sungei Ujong Police. This was followed by the formation of the Selangor Police in 1874 and the Pahang Police 1888. Sikhs were chosen by the British because of their excellent record of service in the Sikh regiments in India.

Malkiat Singh Lopo in his book *Sikhs in Malaysia* says many Sikhs perished in the line of duty serving the British. Isser Singh was probably the first Sikh to die in such a manner, killed in 1875 during the

assassination of the Perak Resident J.W.W. Birch, Malkiat says.

Social scientist Dr Nadzan Haron in his work *Sikhs in Armed Establishments of British Malaya*, says the British admiration for the Sikhs was best described by Governor Sir Frederick Weld who after inspecting the Perak force in August 1880 wrote:

"I was especially pleased with the Sikh military police, their skirmishing was magnificent, and the wrestling after the parade gave me an opportunity to observe their fine physique and remarkable lighthness."

Excerpts from the Australian War Diary "Midnight Messiah-Johore" syndicated in the Melbourne Sunday Herald Sun says the early Sikhs were modest fellows who never drank or smoked.

"In the early morning they were like women before the dressingtable. They did up their hair and stuck a comb and a tiny dagger in it.

"But they were fierce fighting men and the smartest parade-ground troops I have ever seen," it says.

The immigration of Sikhs into Malaya increased after the First World War due to the unfavourable conditions in the Punjab due to political upheavals.

The portrayal of Malaya as the land of new opportunities was also a contributing factor.

Other reasons for coming to Malaya included pressure on land and job shortage back home.

It fitted nicely with the labour shortage and an economic boom elsewhere after the Second World War.

Upon coming to Malaya, some Sikhs became night watchmen. A charpoy (rope bed) placed in front of the main door was the trademark that a Sikh was in charge of security for the particular establishment.

The British, who only admitted Sikhs who strictly observed the basic tenets of Sikhism into their police force, allowed them to build gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) within police compounds.

These became meeting points for Sikhs from India. An example is the Brickiln Road Gurdwara in Penang which still has rooms specially prepared for the newcomers.

These institutions still exist at the Police Training Centre or Pulapol, Jalan Parlimen and Jalan Bandar (all in Kuala Lumpur), Penang and Ipoh.

Indian Settlements, Kg Beggali or Kg Singh were soon set up in many states, especially along the west coast.

By the 1930s and 40s, the first generation of Malayan Sikhs who were more educated and committed to Malaya as their home were beginning to grow up.

A number went into the professions, especially law and medicine.

Several organisations were formed to undertake activities like building new gurdwaras and Punjabi schools, as well as to start newspapers.

This began with the establishment of the Khalsa Diwan Malaya in Taiping in 1902, says Azharuddin Mohamed Dali in a paper *The Involvement of the Sikh Community in the Political Movement in Malaya During the First World War*.

Friction among the Sikhs, who came from three different areas of Malwa, Mahja and Doaba in the Punjab led to the founding of another association in March 1920 known as the Guru Kalgi Dhar Diwan Malaya.

Another society set up by the Sikhs then was the Sikh Missionary Tract Society Malaya (1940). The society which was aimed at spreading Sikhism and propagation of Gurbani (Sikh scriptures) also provided opportunities for Sikh children to learn Punjabi.

Sikhs also closely followed political developments in India culminating in the formation of Malaysian Sikh Union in 1947.

Punjabi newspapers like the *Malaya Samachar*, *Pardesi Khalsa Sewak* and

Nawan Sansar were enjoying good sales. Although the initial political affiliations were with parties and movements in India, they soon became localised.

Budh Singh, a Sikh community leader, was the cofounder and second president of the Malaysian Indian Congress.

Historian Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Khoo Kay Kim in his work *Sikhs in Malaysia: Then, Now and the Future* says the social changes among the Sikh community was a concern among the older generation as they were susceptible to changes brought about by the western as well as local cultures.

"This dilemma is faced by all present generations in Asia, Africa and South America," he says.

Sarjit says there is a need to set up minority studies departments in all local public universities. There is very little research being done on the history of these communities such as the Orang Asli, Baba-Nyonya, Chettiars, Penang Indian-Muslims, Portuguese as well as the Sikh Peranakan in Kelantan and Sabah, he says.

"Such centres must be set up to enable researchers document the historical aspects of these minority communities," he says.

In his work *The Importance of the Punjabi Language and its Challenges in Malaysia*, retired school principal Ajmer Singh says with social interaction and rapid development, Punjabi-speaking Sikhs are fast becoming a diminishing group.

"Those who speak the language often cannot read it and are thus deprived of Gurbani and Punjabi literature. Religious scriptures cannot be read without knowledge of Punjabi," he says.

Ajmer says although gurdwaras continue to teach Punjabi, the number of students have dwindled. Although there were a few Punjabi schools which received Government aid, most closed down due to poor response.

The last, he says, was the Tatt Khalsa Gurdware School in Jalan Raja Alang, Kuala Lumpur, which closed in 1998.

Ajmer says despite the decline in the use and teaching of Punjabi over the years, there are some positive signs for the future.

"Of late, there has been some renewed interest on the part of Punjabi parents in getting their children to know the Punjabi language," he says.

Sarjit says the biggest challenge faced by the community was to retain their identity. Among these, he says are mixed marriages and some school rules which make it difficult for Sikh children to observe their religious requirements.

Sikhs were also fine sportsmen. The MSG won the Warren Shield Shooting competition in 1896, 1889, 1903 and 1905.

In 1906, they went to England to compete in the Kolapore and Mackinnon Cups but were beaten. In 1908, they won the Robert Cup Competition in England.

This tradition was later continued by Santokh Singh and Serbegeth Singh who captained the Malaysian football team at one time or another as well as Sarjit Singh, who helmed the national hockey team and became one of the world's best players.

The loyalty of the Sikhs to the country is unquestionable.

During the height of the Indonesian confrontation all members of the Sikh community held an emergency meeting and passed a resolution pledging their full support to Tengku Abdul Rahman and his Government.

Then again in 1999, 18 Sikh bodies in the country pledged their support for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Government which was then faced by a myriad of problems including the regional economic crisis.

Dr Mahathir in his Vesakhi message perhaps summed it best.

"Despite being a minority in Malaysia, the achievements of the Sikhs in various professional fields is the pride of the country."

This has been corroborated by Khoo who says that proportionately, Sikhs have the largest number of professionals compared to any other group in Malaysia.