

SIKHS IN MALAYSIA

A Comprehensive History



Ranjit Singh Malhi



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PUSTAKA PERDANA



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Dedication

To My Late Beloved Parents



Sardar Sadhu Singh Malhi



Sardarni Mukhtiar Kaur

This book is entirely dedicated to my late beloved parents, Sardar Sadhu Singh Malhi (1925–2011) and Sardarni Mukhtiar Kaur (1924–2014). It was my father who originally suggested that I should record the glorious achievements of the Malaysian Sikh community. I am happy that I have been able to fulfil my father's wish through the writing of this book.

Sardar Sadhu Singh Malhi, who was proficient in Malay, Cantonese and Tamil apart from his native Punjabi, retired from the Royal Malaysian Police as a Detective Sergeant (No. 25360) on 1 June 1983 after serving with distinction for almost 31 years. He started his police career in Johor Bahru on 1 July 1952 and was subsequently posted to Bidor and

Tapah in Perak where he served for the longest period. In between, my father had short stints in Klang and Ipoh. For his exemplary service in the police force, my father was awarded the *Pingat Pangkuan Negara* (P.P.N.) by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong on 18 December 1982. Additionally, he was awarded 16 commendation letters by the Perak State Chief Police Officer and 48 monetary awards by the Malaysian government for being a diligent and incorruptible police officer.

My father led a frugal life. I remember him telling me vividly: “I could have bought a car for my own comfort but that was not my priority. My priority was to give all my children a good education and a head start in life.” He was truly a *Gursikh* who would arise early every morning, recite the morning prayers, and tie his beard smartly before proceeding to work. My father also delivered religious sermons in several gurdwaras. He had served the Gurdwara Sahib Tapah with integrity, both as the president and as an honorary internal auditor.

Sardarni Mukhtiar Kaur, my mother, was a rare gem. She was highly respected both by her neighbours and the Sikh community in Tapah for her generosity and humility. Besides being an excellent cook (most famous for her chicken rendang), she inspired her seven children to give their best in all endeavours. I will always treasure memories of how she would lovingly tie my *joora* (knot of hair) tightly enough for me to participate confidently and actively in sports.



Sardar Sadhu Singh Maihi being awarded the *Pingat Pangkuan Negara* (P.P.N.) by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, 18 December 1982

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I am greatly indebted to my long-serving and diligent associate, Santhana Mariam for meticulously proofreading, designing the layout of the book and enhancing the quality of the photographs. Special thanks are due to Gurdev Singh Malhi, my elder brother, and Ravinder Kaur Shadaan for their excellent proofreading of the book's manuscript. I am grateful to Rajdish Singh Malhi, my son, for using his creative skills to design the book's cover. Thanks also to Paguman Singh of New Zealand for providing valuable feedback on the concluding chapter of this book.

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I am most grateful to my late beloved parents, Sadhu Singh Malhi and Mukhtiar Kaur, who taught me self-discipline, integrity, and the importance of producing quality work at all times.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my wife, Professor Dr. Abtar Kaur and my four sons for their constant support and encouragement, particularly during challenging times.

Any inadequacies of this book, however, are undoubtedly my sole responsibility. No book is perfect; I welcome and appreciate any constructive feedback aimed at improving it.

Kuala Lumpur

Ranjit Singh Malhi

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Abbreviations

AS	Asia Samachar
BH	Berita Harian
BMA	British Military Administration
CO	Colonial Office
FMS	Federated Malay States
FMSGG	Federated Malay States Government Gazette
HCOF	High Commissioner's Office Files
IDM	Indian Daily Mail
JMBRAS	Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society
KMD	Khalsa Malaya Darpan
MBPI	Malayan Bulletin of Political Intelligence
MI	The Malaysian Insider
MM	Malay Mail
MPIB	Malayan Political Intelligence Bureau

MSP	Malayan Saturday Post
MT	Malaya Tribune
NAI	National Archives of India
NN	New Nation
NS	Nawan Sansar
NST	New Straits Times
PKS	Pardesi Khalsa Sewak
PP	Perak Pioneer
SAR	Selangor Annual Report
SE	The Straits Echo
SFP	The Singapore Free Press
SFPMA	The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser
SG	The Sarawak Gazette
SM	Singapore Monitor
SS	Singapore Standard
SSSF	Selangor State Secretariat Files
ST	The Straits Times

Glossary

- Akal Takht* – the throne of the Almighty; highest seat of authority for Sikh religious and political affairs
- Akali* – a follower of the “Timeless One” (God); title adopted by the Sikhs involved in the Gurdwara Reform movement (1920s)
- Akhand path* – a continuous reading of the *Guru Granth Sahib* by a team of readers, taking turns, usually over a period of 48 hours
- Amritdhari* – a Sikh initiated into the *Khalsa*
- Arora* – a mercantile caste of Punjab
- Bhangra* – Punjabi folk dance
- Diwan* – Sikh congregational gathering for worship
- Doab* – land between the rivers Satluj and Beas
- Dupatta* – a long piece of fine cloth worn around the head and neck by women
- Ghadar* – mutiny, rebellion
- Giani* – one possessing knowledge or wisdom; among the Sikhs, refers generally to a person well-versed in the scriptures
- Granthi* – literally “the keeper and the reader of the Sikh scripture”
- Gurbani* – the Guru’s utterances; sacred hymns of the Sikh scriptures
- Gurdwara* – Sikh place of worship
- Gurmukhi* – written form of Punjabi used in the Sikh scriptures

<i>Gursikh</i>	– a Sikh deeply devoted to the Guru
<i>Guru Granth Sahib</i>	– sacred scripture of the Sikhs
<i>Havildar</i>	– a Sergeant in the British Indian Army
<i>Hukamnama</i>	– commands of the Guru; edict binding on the Sikh <i>panth</i>
<i>Jat</i>	– an agrarian caste dominant in rural Punjab with a strong military tradition
<i>Jatha</i>	– band of devotees
<i>Jathedar</i>	– leader of a group; commander of a <i>jatha</i>
<i>Jemadar</i>	– most junior rank of an Indian officer in the British Indian Army; generally a platoon commander
<i>Keshdhari</i>	– a Sikh who keeps unshorn hair but chooses not to be baptized
<i>Khalsa</i>	– pure, elect, collectively used for baptized Sikhs
<i>Khande di pahul</i>	– baptism into the <i>Khalsa</i>
<i>Khatri</i>	– a mercantile caste to which all the Sikh Gurus belonged
<i>Langar</i>	– free community kitchen attached to a gurdwara
<i>Mahant</i>	– proprietor or hereditary head of a gurdwara
<i>Majha</i>	– literally “middle”; central part of Punjab which lies between the Beas and Ravi rivers
<i>Malwa</i>	– part of Punjab which lies south and southeast of the Satluj river
<i>Misl</i>	– confederacy or clan united around a leader
<i>Morcha</i>	– agitation on a particular issue

<i>Naik</i>	– a Corporal in the British Indian Army
<i>Panth</i>	– Sikh community as a whole
<i>Parcharak</i>	– a person appointed to propagate Sikh religion in gurdwaras
<i>Patit</i>	– a “fallen” Sikh; an apostate who has failed to observe the <i>Khalsa</i> code of conduct
<i>Pindh</i>	– Sikh settlement
<i>Pothoharis</i>	– mostly <i>Khatri</i> and <i>Arora</i> Sikhs who originated from Rawalpindi and Jhelum districts (present-day Pakistan)
<i>Ragi</i>	– professional singer of the hymns of <i>Guru Granth Sahib</i>
<i>Ragmala</i>	– single sheet at the end of the <i>Guru Granth Sahib</i> which gives the various tunes for chanting hymns
<i>Sabha</i>	– assembly; association
<i>Sant</i>	– a very pious person having saintly qualities
<i>Sarbrah</i>	– manager of a gurdwara
<i>Satsang</i>	– a spiritual discourse or religious gathering
<i>Sehajdhari</i>	– a Sikh who believes in the ten Sikh Gurus and the <i>Guru Granth Sahib</i> but does not keep unshorn hair
<i>Sepoy</i>	– the lowest enlisted rank in the British Indian Army; equivalent to a Private
<i>Sikhi</i>	– Sikhism
<i>Subedar</i>	– commissioned rank, immediately superior to a Jemadar in the British Indian Army; generally a company commander
<i>Subedar-Major</i>	– highest rank an Indian could achieve in the British Indian Army; adviser to the British Commanding Officer

Introduction

Despite the publication of several scholarly works pertaining to the history of Malaysian Sikhs, there is no one book which provides a comprehensive historical account of the community. For instance, Manjit Singh Sidhu's book, *Sikhs in Malaysia* (1991), focuses only on Sikh immigration to Peninsular Malaysia, the distributional and occupational structure of Sikhs in Peninsular Malaysia, social changes within the Sikh community, and gurdwaras and their functions. Similarly, the *Sikh Community in Malaysia* (2009), a book authored by Tan Sri Dato' Seri Darshan Singh Gill and his team of four other writers does not adequately cover the history of the political and economic activities of Malaysian Sikhs.

Undoubtedly, there are a few authoritative works focusing on certain aspects of the history of Malaysian Sikhs which deserve special mention. Kernial Singh Sandhu, in his seminal work, *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement (1786–1957)*, provides a scholarly and excellent account of Sikh immigration and settlement in Malaya. Likewise, Amarjit Kaur's MA thesis, "North Indians in Malaya: A Study of Their Economic, Social and Political Activities with Special Reference to Selangor, 1870s–1940s" (1973) provides a scholarly account of the economic activities of the Sikhs, their significant role in the policing of British Malaya, the Malay States Guides, as well as ethnicism, religion and social organization among Malayan Sikhs during the period under consideration.

Other useful works on the history of the Malaysian Sikh community that greatly assisted the author in his research for this book are Amarjit Kaur's MA thesis (2003), "The Role of Sikhs in the Politics of British Malaya and the Straits Settlements (1874–1957)"; and *Gurdwaras in Malaysia and Singapore: An*

Illustrated History 1873–2003 authored by Saran Singh Sidhu which also provides brief but valuable information on the economic activities of the Sikh community in Malaysia and Singapore; Kesar Singh Giani's book (1947) entitled *Indian Independence Movement in East Asia*; Sarjit Singh Gill's article, "Sejarah Penglibatan Orang Sikh dalam Pasukan [K]onstabulari Bersenjata Borneo Utara, 1882–1949 dan Kesan Terhadap Identiti" (*JEBAT* 34, 2007); and three books by Malkiat Singh Lopo–Dhaliwal and Mukhtiar Kaur Rattian–Sandhu, namely *Sikhs in Malaysia Series, Volume One: Some Historical Notes*; *Volume Two: Highlights of a Century 1873–1973*; and *Volume Three: Some Sikh Cultural Customs and Traditions in Malaysia*.

Hence, this book is primarily written to fill the gaps in the historiography of the Malaysian Sikh community.

This book makes three major contributions to the historiography of the Sikh community in Malaysia. First, it provides a comprehensive and fairly detailed historical account of the Sikhs in Malaysia encompassing their immigration and settlement, role in policing and defending the nation, anti-British political activities during the period 1914–45, economic activities, Punjabi newspapers, socio-religious organizations, sterling achievements of Sikh sportsmen and sportswomen, political activities after 1945, Punjabi literary and educational organizations, and gurdwaras and community building.

Second, drawing upon painstaking research and authoritative sources, the book seeks to rectify more than fifty factual errors found in existing historical works on the Malaysian Sikh community. This particular initiative is certainly not meant as a denial of the incredibly important works of past scholars, for they have indeed contributed immensely to enrich the subject's corpus. Instead, it represents an attempt to build on their valuable contributions, clarify and update historical information in the light of current research, and continue to present the latest, historically accurate version of the Sikh community in Malaysia.

Third, it contributes significantly to new knowledge by providing a detailed and authoritative account of the involvement of the Malayan Sikhs in the Ghadar movement, Akali movement and the Indian independence movement in Malaya. To date, there are no detailed studies on the involvement of Malayan Sikhs in these movements.

The book adopts a thematic approach and utilizes both primary and secondary sources. Archival and library research took the author to first, the National Archives of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur and thereafter to New Delhi (National Archives of India, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan Library and Jawaharlal Nehru University), Jalandhar in Punjab (Desh Bhagat Yadgar Library) and Singapore (National Library and the University of Singapore Library). Primary sources that were accessed include Colonial Office Records; Government of India, Home Department Records; Report of the Komagata Maru Committee of Enquiry, 1915; Punjab Ghadr Directory, 1916; Sedition Committee Report, 1918; Ghadr Directory, 1934; First Burma Conspiracy Case Proceedings, 1916; Indian National Army Files; Selangor State Secretariat Files; contemporary Malaysian newspapers; and personal and telephone interviews with more than one hundred Sikhs by the author. Secondary sources that were researched comprise numerous and up-to-date theses, published books and journal articles.

Earlier, in the process of completing his BA graduation exercise entitled “The Punjabi Newspapers and Sikh Organisations of Kuala Lumpur” (University of Malaya, 1976/77), the author had gathered valuable details about the political activities of the Sikhs before World War II through interviews with participants directly involved in various anti-British activities and others who were knowledgeable about them. The oral historical information gathered was particularly useful in ascertaining the background of Gurdit Singh, the main activists involved in the Akali and Indian independence movements in Malaya, and the nature of anti-British activities of Malayan Sikhs. The verification of oral historical information gathered was

further verified by crosschecking with other interviewees and generally with the related documentary evidence.

The author greatly benefited from conducting archival and library research in India which provided valuable information on the Ghadar, Akali and the Indian independence movements in Malaya. Of greatest value were the Punjab Ghadr Directory, 1916 and the Ghadr Directory, 1934 which revealed important information regarding the Malayan Ghadar activists and their activities in Malaya—historical information not mentioned by previous scholars.

Certain challenges were faced in conducting research for this book. To begin with, no copies of the early Punjabi newspapers, namely the *Pardesi Khalsa*, *Khalsa Parkash* and *Khalsa Sewak*, were available. The author had to depend on the limited archival resources to confirm their existence, and on interviews with certain older generation of Sikhs to provide an account of these early newspapers. Another major constraint was the paucity of written materials on the early Sikh organizations in Malaya.

The book is organized into eleven chapters. Chapter 1 traces the early emigration of Sikhs from Punjab, India to British Malaya (excluding Singapore, now referred to as Peninsular Malaysia), North Borneo (Sabah) and Sarawak; causes and nature of Sikh immigration to Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak); phases of Sikh immigration to Peninsular Malaysia; Sikh immigration to Sabah and Sarawak; and the occupational structure, growth, and distribution of the Sikh population. Chapter 2 examines in detail the significant role of the Sikhs in policing and defending British Malaya, North Borneo and Sarawak. It affirms the crucial role the Sikhs played in maintaining law and order which was a prerequisite for the economic development of present-day Malaysia.

Chapter 3 discusses the little known anti-British political activities of the Malayan Sikhs during the period 1914–45 which were geared towards either gaining independence for India or safeguarding the religio-political interests of the Sikh *panth* in India, particularly in Punjab. It focuses on the involvement of Malayan Sikhs in the

Ghadar movement (1913–18), the *Komagata Maru* incident of 1914, the 1915 Singapore Mutiny, the Akali movement (1920s), and the Indian independence movement in Malaya (1942–45).

Chapter 4 delves into the various economic activities of Malaysian Sikhs. It is not widely known that the Sikhs played an instrumental role in the early economic development of British Malaya until the late 1920s through their virtual monopoly of bullock carts which were then the main mode of road transport. Further, with the advent of motorized vehicles in the 1930s, the Sikhs were among the first entrepreneurs to venture into the lorry transport business and public transport bus service. In addition, Sikh moneylenders provided vital financial support and boosted the development of retail trade in Malaysia by extending loans to shopkeepers.

Chapter 5 provides an analytical account of the origin and development of Punjabi journalism in Malaya which lends credence to the fact that the Malayan Sikhs were very closely attached to their homeland before the 1950s. The early newspapers were largely Punjab-oriented in news content with prominence given to the Punjabi Suba, Shiromani Akali Dal, and religious affairs. The chapter also highlights the crucial roles played by the Punjabi newspapers, particularly in keeping the Punjabi language alive, propagating *Sikhi*, championing social reforms within the Sikh community, and being the voices of the Sikh community.

Chapter 6 discusses the historical development and roles of various Sikh socio-religious organizations in Malaysia which largely mirrored their regional affiliations (*Majha-Malwa* rivalry) and religious differences. Further, the origin, nature and development of the early Sikh socio-religious organizations in Malaya were very much influenced by events in their homeland, Punjab. Whilst, Chapter 7 provides an account of the Punjabi literary and educational organizations which played a critical role in perpetuating and promoting the Punjabi language, literature, drama and poetry.

Chapter 8 focuses on the establishment of gurdwaras, initially by Sikh policemen and subsequently by the non-police Sikh

community, which was often based upon occupational stratification, regional affiliations and religious orientations. The gurdwaras functioned not only as places of congregational worship but also as community centres catering to the socio-cultural and educational needs of the Sikhs. Chapter 9 deals with Sikh sports and political organizations. The Sikhs established several organizations since the 1920s to promote sporting activities within the community, the earliest being the Selangor Sikh Union established in Kuala Lumpur in 1921 and still vibrant today. Politically, the Malayan Sikh Union played a crucial role in safeguarding the interests of the Sikh community until the 1960s. The chapter also alludes to individual Sikhs who have stamped their mark in Malaysian politics, both at the state and national levels.

Chapter 10 highlights seven outstanding Sikhs who have contributed positively to society and excelled at both the national and international levels in various fields. It complements the accounts and anecdotes relating to numerous other Sikh personalities that have been discussed in other chapters. These are intended to enliven the historical narrative of the book. Finally, the concluding chapter, Chapter 11, evaluates the contributions of the Sikh community towards nation building in various fields besides summing up its aspirations, triumphs, challenges and the way forward in challenging times.

Overall, Malaysian Sikhs can take great satisfaction in having achieved astonishing progress educationally and economically, so much so that today they shine in almost all professions.

Finally, I hope and pray that Malaysian school history textbooks will incorporate and acknowledge the significant contributions of the Sikh community towards nation building. Portraying an inclusive history which captures our nation's diverse past and contributions of its multiethnic society is crucial to ensure our young are provided with a balanced, unbiased and truthful account of Malaysian history.

Immigration and Settlement

Beginning from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Sikhs from Punjab, India started immigrating in considerable numbers to Malaya (excluding Singapore, now Peninsular Malaysia), North Borneo (Sabah) and Sarawak, mainly to serve in the police and paramilitary forces. The Malaysian Sikh community, which currently totals about 80,000, constitutes less than 0.25% of the nation's population. Nevertheless, the Sikhs have made significant contributions to the growth and development of the nation that far outweigh their tiny representation. They are also one of Malaysia's most dynamic communities: within one generation, the Sikh community has been transformed from predominantly being one of policemen, bullock carters, watchmen, dairymen and mining labourers into professionals such as doctors, lawyers and engineers as well as academics and high-ranking civil servants.

Who Are the Sikhs?

The Sikhs are the followers of Sikhism, the world's fifth largest religion. The word "Sikh", which originates from Sanskrit (*shishya*), means a disciple or learner.¹ The Sikhs are the disciples of their Ten Gurus beginning with Guru Nanak (1469–1539) and ending with Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708). The holy scripture of the Sikhs is the *Guru Granth Sahib* which is regarded as the eternal Guru. The *Guru Granth Sahib*, numbering 1,430 pages, consists of 5,894 hymns composed by the first five Gurus; ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur; Hindu and Muslim saints (notably Farid and Kabir); and several bards attached to the courts of the Gurus.² The Sikhs



Drawing upon a decade's painstaking and extensive research, *Sikhs in Malaysia: A Comprehensive History* provides a meticulously detailed and analytical historical account of the Sikhs in Malaysia. The book is the first comprehensive and authoritative account of the Sikh community in Malaysia which narrates its remarkable transformation from predominantly being one of policemen, soldiers, watchmen, bullock carters, dairymen and mining labourers into professionals, academics, high-ranking civil servants and top businessmen.

Spanning from the second half of the nineteenth century to the present, the book examines the significant role of the Sikhs in policing and defending British Malaya, North Borneo (Sabah) and Sarawak and thereby contributing to the preservation of law and order which was a prerequisite for economic development. It recounts the important contributions made by the Sikhs to the nation's economic development, including the pivotal role of Sikh bullock carters in providing crucial transport services which facilitated the early development of the tin mining and rubber industries. The book also delineates the origin and growth of Punjabi newspapers; historical development and roles of Sikh socio-religious, literary, educational, sports and political organizations; and the central role played by gurdwaras in the Sikh community. While keeping a scrupulous eye on historical facts, the narrative is interspersed with personal anecdotes on individual Sikhs who both shaped, and were impacted, by the events of history.

The book breaks new ground by providing for the first time a systematic and authoritative account of the involvement of Malayan Sikhs in various anti-British political activities during the period 1914–45. These activities were geared towards either gaining independence for India or safeguarding the religio-political interests of the Sikh community in India, particularly in Punjab. Further, the book rectifies more than 50 factual errors in existing historical accounts on the Malaysian Sikh community.

Ranjit Singh Malhi, one of Malaysia's leading historians, attained his PhD from Asia e University through his thesis entitled "From Loyal British Subjects to Ardent Revolutionaries: Anti-British Political Activities of the Sikhs in Malaya 1914–45". Among his publications is his book, *The Komagata Maru Affair: Contesting Imperial Politics of Indian Exclusion from Canada*, which the nation's pre-eminent historian, the late Emeritus Professor Tan Sri Dr. Khoo Kay Kim has commended as being "a study of the Sikhs which has no equal."



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