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SIKHS

in Southeast Asia

NEGOTIATING AN IDENTITY

Edited by
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INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES
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PREFACE

This volume is an outcome of a conference, “Sikhs in Multiracial Southeast Asia: Negotiating an Identity”, held at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in May 2008. Senior scholars in the field of Sikh studies were identified to present an overview of the topic while some scholars were encouraged to go into the field in parts of Southeast Asia to learn about Sikh communities settled there and to present their findings at the seminar. During the two-day seminar, guests of honour, Member of Parliament of Singapore, Inderjit Singh, former Ambassador (Malaysia), Ajit Singh, and former Ambassador (India), Paramjit Sahai, were also invited to present their perspectives on the issues discussed at the seminar. The seminar was a joint initiative co-funded by ISEAS and the Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

FOREWORD

Sikhism in Southeast Asia — Southeast Asia in Sikhism

This fine collection of essays makes a substantial contribution to both Southeast Asian and Sikh studies. The contributors to the volume document the historical development of Sikh communities in Southeast Asia and cultural configurations that shape contemporary Sikh life in the region. They trace the ways in which colonialism, migration, political struggles, and religious life have shaped the experience of Sikhs in Southeast Asia over the past 150 years.

This region is a very important site to think through Sikh history and to test new approaches in the field of Sikh studies. Historians, geographers, and anthropologists have long seen Southeast Asia as a crossroads, where an array of local cultures have intersected with several substantial diasporic communities and numerous long-distance trading networks. The work of these overlapping and interlocking structures produced societies characterized by considerable social complexity where cross-cultural negotiations of various kinds have been a basic fact of life, both in the colonial and post-colonial periods.

Recent work by historians such as Thomas Metcalf and Sugata Bose has underlined the centrality of connections to India in the shaping of modern Southeast Asia and have emphasized the ways in which these connections were produced by those two powerful engines of modernity: empire and migration. The essays gathered here reconstruct the changing shape of these inter-regional networks and trace the consequences of these connections in vivid detail. They also show how Sikhs in Southeast Asia, as sojourners or permanent settlers, have imagined their Punjabi roots

and the place of that Punjabi cultural heritage in shaping the particular forms of diasporic cultural practice.

It is striking, however, that despite the work of scholars such as Kernal Singh Sandhu and Verne Dusenbery, Southeast Asia has not been a site for sustained investigation or theoretical reflection for scholars of Sikhism. Various explanations might be forwarded for this oversight, but the outcome of this lacuna is that models of the Sikh diasporic experience tend to be grounded in British, North American, or even East African case studies. This volume is a much needed and extremely significant corrective to this imbalance within Sikh studies. Southeast Asia is, of course, an extremely rich site for thinking about the transformation of the Sikh Panth (community) and the history of Punjabi/Sikh communities outside India. In particular, the development of Sikhism in Southeast Asia foregrounds two crucial issues: negotiations between Sikh leaders and the machinery of modern states, and the place of cross-cultural engagements of various kinds in shaping understandings of what it is to be Sikh. These are two broad issues that, to my mind at least, have received insufficient attention by scholars of Sikhism, who have prioritized narrowly “religious” issues and who tend to privilege religious/textual sources over other types of material in their analytical practice.

One of the great strengths of this volume is that the essays clearly communicate what I have elsewhere called the “texture of Sikh history”. By this I mean that these contributions demonstrate the ways in which the specificities of space, time, social structures, and political systems shape the development of the particular Sikh communities. The authors who have contributed here remind us of the full range of lived Sikh experience and underscore the ability of Sikh individuals, families, and *sangats* (congregation) to adapt to the particular circumstances that have framed their fortunes, while maintaining their commitment to the teachings of the gurus. The authors of these essays use a wide range of sources and demonstrate how new archives — such as cartoons — might be productively used to illuminate important aspects of Sikh history. They also document the histories of a broad cross-section of Sikhs, ranging from working-class urban workers to powerful businessmen to female activists. The essays also cast new light on certain issues that have been acknowledged as significant in the shaping of the Panth, but which have only received limited treatment to date, such as the place of war in framing Sikh identity, or the place of memory in the definition of community boundaries.

So the essays collected here remind us that location matters and that even in an age of intensified transnational flows, state policy continues to have a substantial ability to define the economic and cultural parameters of an

individual's or community's experience. State practices and national imaginaries have been central in defining what possibilities have existed for Sikhs to define themselves in the public sphere, and have also shaped the ways in which particular Sikh communities in Southeast Asia have been able to engage with the global movement of representations, ideas, and discourses. Time and time again, the contributors remind us that the nature of the *quam* (race/community), as well as the global economic and cultural landscape, looks quite different from different locations. Although all Sikhs are connected by their veneration of the ten gurus and Sri Guru Granth Sahib, to be a Sikh in Manila was quite different from being a Sikh in Yangon or Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur or Singapore. The groundedness of these case studies and the more synthetic or theoretical overviews offered by Arunajeet Kaur, Shinder S. Thandi, and Verne Dusenbery, provide us with a rich and challenging set of readings of the Sikh experience. These stories capture the complexity of lived experience and offer some compelling insights in contemporary Sikh life in Southeast Asia. Taken as a whole they stand as the most important guide we have to the Sikh experience in Southeast Asia and they open up a host of new analytical possibilities for those of us working in Sikh studies.

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WAR MEMORIES AND THE REPRESENTATION OF SIKHS

Arunajeet Kaur

In his 1995 publication, *Singapore: The Pregnable Fortress*, British historian Peter Elphick recounts the defeat of the Allied powers during World War II in having to surrender Singapore to the Japanese. His primary concern was to attribute blame for the Allied failure to the desertion of Australian and Indian troops and the successful Japanese manoeuvre to subvert British Indian troops with propaganda. The popular appeal of the book has led many to quote and debate its content and it is a source of reference for scholars and war studies enthusiasts. When Elphick discusses the efforts of the Indian Independence League (IIL) in Southeast Asia, he mentions that "The Sikh community was strongly organised within itself but became susceptible to anti-British propaganda emanating from the Punjab and from Sikh exiles in America." He continues by quoting a British officer, Dickinson, who was interned as a POW during the Japanese Occupation, as saying that the Sikh community was one "which contributed nothing to the welfare of Malaya, and which could only be regarded as parasitic, stupid and likely to be openly anti-British in the event of a disaster overtaking British Arms" (Elphick 1995, p. 74). Elphick's statements are revelatory of the power relations that existed between the British as colonial masters and their subjects. Sikhs, as part of the British Indian Army were expected to be loyal, obedient, and subservient to the British imperial agenda. And this expectation and its betrayal have been documented in accounts of the Japanese Occupation in the Asia-Pacific that

ent itself to the fabrication of an empire-centred script of resistance, loyalty and liberation (of the natives) fashioned by the returning British imperialist forces" (Lim & Wong 2000, p. 5).

The Sikhs were in a unique and complex situation when World War II broke out. Their homeland, Punjab, was a hotbed of anti-colonial activity coloured by the sacrifices of freedom fighters such as Bhagat Singh, memories of the Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre in 1918, and the Ghadar conspiracy of 1915. Yet Punjab was a major source of recruitment into the British Indian Army, with Sikhs identified as a "martial race" forming a substantial percentage. Sikhs were deployed in the Asia-Pacific theatre of war when twenty-three out of forty-seven Infantry battalions in the Malayan Command were Indian (Jack & Blackburn 2004, p. 39). When the Allied forces surrendered to the Japanese, many Sikh and Indian prisoners of war (POWs) were subverted to the Indian National Army (INA), which was seen to be in partnership with the Japanese, to participate in the struggle for Indian Independence and to achieve Japanese plans for a "Greater Eastern Co Prosperity Sphere". Since the late nineteenth century, Sikhs had formed the nucleus of the British police and paramilitary forces in Malaya and the Straits Settlements. When the Japanese took control over Malaya and Singapore in 1941, the same Sikh policemen were re-employed under Japanese command. They were made to stand on guard at sentry posts and were in charge of POW camps where Europeans had been interned during the occupation. In the eyes of the British and the other local communities in Malaya, especially the Chinese, who were to bear a heavier burden of suffering during the occupation, the Sikhs were remembered as collaborators of the Japanese during the occupation from 1942–45, at a time when, to quote Wang Gungwu, "Possibly the greatest fear was that of being contaminated by association with the Japanese, the fear of being a collaborator" (Wang 2000).

The narrative documenting World War II and the Japanese Occupation has been classified by Wong as either "empire centred", whereby World War II is depicted, "as an episode of Japanese invasion and Allied counter invasion in which harsh, exploitative Japanese occupiers are ousted by American forces working in concert with British and other Allied military" (Wong 2000, p. 223) or "nation centred", "one of colonial or anti-colonial struggle". In both instances, Sikhs within the Malayan context have been portrayed in a negative light. Within the "empire centred" narratives, such as war accounts, battlefield accounts of Indian or Sikhs soldiers have been silent in documenting heroic feats or bravery, and war diaries especially of POWs interned at the famous Changi prison have been particularly scathing in describing Sikh prisoners as turncoats and traitors. Furthermore with the establishment of the

INA and the large number of Sikhs within its ranks, Sikhs were represented as traitors. Within the "nation centred" narratives, particularly in the case of Singapore, the Japanese Occupation and the war in general were not publicly commemorated or documented in history textbooks prior to 1984 (Goh and Saravanan 2005, p. 218). The reason for this was that during the occupation there was no sense of a Malaysian, Malayan, or even a Singaporean identity (Wang 2000, p. 13). In fact episodes of resistance in the case of the Chinese reflected a greater interest in the affairs of China during the Sino-Japanese war of 1937, and episodes of collaboration on the part of the Malays and the Indians were also to demonstrate that their communal relationships were stronger with their homeland elsewhere. However post-1984, when the war and occupation did come to be remembered, it was through the lenses of the politics of survival (Wong 2000, p. 223), whereby the agencies of the articulation of war memories, such as the National Museum and history textbooks, highlighted the trauma and suffering during the occupation, naturally giving precedence to the plight of the Chinese community that was the victim of the barbarous "Sook Ching" movement that entailed their massacre by the Japanese by the hundreds of thousands. The Malays and the Indians did not feature as protagonists in this tale of suffering due to their relative comfortable life during the occupation.

This chapter, therefore, attempts to trace the representation of Sikhs during the Japanese Occupation in World War II as soldiers, policemen, and civilians. It will also try to understand why there has been no documentation of the Sikh's psyche as he manoeuvred between the dilemma of survival and loyalty. Was his voice that of the subaltern colonized subject, too insignificant to be documented in the larger tradition of imperial/Western literature? Then again, was he just a trivial minority whose voice was drowned out in the louder tales of suffering and agony endured by others during the Japanese Occupation?

THE "MARTIAL" SIKH SOLDIER/POLICEMAN

Post-colonial discourse has examined the role of knowledge creation, epistemological models, and the establishment of representative symbols on the part of European colonialists in order to enforce power relations between the colonizer and the colonized. The creation of particularly positive and negative stereotypes was important, as Mangan notes, "to exalt the colonizer and humble the colonized" (Mangan 1993, p. 6). But stereotyping also enabled the colonizer to assign tasks and job placement according to the "suitability", as determined by Western ideological thinking, of the native to

execute the official running and administration of the colonial government. For instance, the Sikhs were transported from their homeland in Punjab to form the nucleus of the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States Police Force because they were found to be successful against the triads in Hong Kong, and the stereotype assigned to them by the British as a martial class made them suitable as policemen vis à vis the locals in Malaya,

We have klings, Malays and Boyans, composing 377 out of 386 of our police.... The Kling is often clever, acquires languages easily and has a certain amount of quickness but on the slightest moment will pervert the truth.... The Malay is of a different character, superior in some aspects, but very stupid. It is very difficult to get two ideas into his head; it acquires a surgical operation to do it. The Boyan is still worse. He has none of the good qualities of the Malay and all his bad qualities and in addition to that he is very clannish.¹

The above quote reveals the racial biases of the colonial administrators, but more importantly, the stereotyping discussed in this statement, reveals a lack of any attempt at "flexible thinking", imposing instead a sense of social order in the interest of upholding colonial structures of power (Pickering 2001, p. 3). It "commodifies" the native into a stereotype and uses him as a resource. The native's individuality is perceived as a generic phenomenon that can be exchanged for any other native (Mangan 1993, p. 9). Likewise the Sikh was favourably stereotyped as a "martial race", making him a resource for the colonial government to utilize as a reliable soldier or policeman for the empire. The Sikhs consistently earned admiration for their warlike qualities; they were found to have a steadiness and zeal and were, in the rare instances, believed to share masculine character, and phenotypical and physical features with the British. The "martial races" doctrine was actually a practical construct of governance that was born out of the Peel Commission after the 1857 Mutiny which found it impractical for the British to have an all-European army, or to import peoples from other colonies to manage the Indian subcontinent. The British decided to organize their army using the strategy of "divide and rule" whereby the dominance of high-caste Brahmins and Rajputs in the army was offset by the generous recruitment of Sikhs, Punjabi Muslims, and Pathans. Also, partly because of the loyalty the Sikhs showed to the British in the 1857 Mutiny, they were deemed a reliable native community. The "martial races" doctrine, however, came to be couched in theories of social Darwinism and Aryan supremacy. As a result of the European doctrine of biological determinism, whereby martiality was considered a characteristic inherited by blood, Punjabi Jat Sikhs were considered "Aryan in their features,

figure, language..." (Metcalf 1997, p. 84). This ideology of biological determinism was played out when Sikhs were only recruited into the Malayan police forces if they were at least 5 feet 10 inches in height, with a 34³/₄ inch chest.² This distinguished them from other local policemen, such as the Malays, and made them more fearsome and suitable as law enforcers, at least in the eyes of the British colonial masters.

However, what has stood out consistently about Sikhs, especially as soldiers or policemen within the military institution of the empire, has been their unquestioning loyalty to their British masters. The British prided themselves in being able to manage a martial people who became excellent marksmen, and parade and ceremonial guards. They were not just useful in the battlefield, but also as emblems of the British Raj. In the excerpt below which has been taken from a declaration of loyalty of the Sikh community in Perak to the British Resident Reginald George Watson on 25 June 1916, it is aptly demonstrated that the Sikhs pledged their steadfast loyalty to the British,

We the Sikhs here assembled, do desire to tender expression of our feelings of loyalty to the British Crown.... Sir, may we request of you to convey these our sentiments to the king-emperor, giving him full assurance that, be the Sikhs in their homeland of India, or abroad, they will always be prompt and eager to do his bidding, and fulfil his command.

This loyalty was also parodied by the British who at times revealed that they found Sikhs obedient to the point of being daft. In the *Malay Mail*, 21 October 1907, the following article appeared exemplifying British humour over Sikh devotion to the Englishman;

The Sikhs Obedience

In his book, *Bush Whacking and Other Sketches*, Mr Hugh Clifford gives this humorous illustration of the obedience of the Sikh soldier. A company are rushing to stockade: The Bugle blares, and the men tear their way through the underwood and the scrub, fixing their bayonets as they run. A shrill voice cries persistently in the ear of the political officer. "Tuan! Tuan! Tuan!" it pipes repeatedly.

At last the white man turns wrathfully upon the speaker. "What do you want?" he shouts. "Tuan, behold I am wounded. Have I thy leave to retire?"

It is a Sikh, and as he speaks he points to a spot in his putties where a bullet has passed through the leg above the ankle, without breaking the bone.

"Go!" says the white man, and the Sikh limps back down the hill for a few steps and then subsides upon the ground in a sitting posture. He has expended all his strength in following the white man to ask for leave to retreat.

That is the beauty of the Sikh as a fighting machine. On the Day of Judgement he will ask an Englishman's permission before obeying the trump of doom!

The British had become accustomed to functioning within the stereotypes generated by Western ideology when managing power relations within the empire. The Sikh was the stereotypically obedient, loyal foot soldier who understood the British as his master. Therefore it was difficult for the British to comprehend Sikh behaviour other than that of betrayal when they became Indian sentries and joined the INA.

THE SIKH SOLDIER IN THE MALAYAN COMMAND

On 15 February 1942, the commander of the British forces in Singapore, Lieutenant General A.E. Percival was to surrender to the Japanese. Several reasons have been given for the easy victory of the Japanese. But the most revealing of the colonial mindset and white supremacy came from Sir Henry Robert Moore/Brooke-Popham, writing from the safety of Australia in 1942, that "a prime cause of the failure in Malaya was due to the eastern races being less able to withstand the strain of modern war.... On the other hand he thought that special mention is due to the white population for devotion to duty" (Horne 2004, p. 211). But INA war trial accounts in Delhi were to reveal European officers abandoning their posts, a fact that has seldom, if ever, found its way into imperial accounts of the Malayan Campaign.

Shah Nawaz Khan, who belonged to the 1/14 Punjab Regiment, in his statement before the first INA court martial said, "In the battle of Singapore on February 13, 14, 15 1942, when the British officers, on my right and left flanks had disappeared with their units, I held on to my position."... Fateh Khan, a VCO of the 5/14 Punjab Regiment, in his statement before his own court martial said that when his battalion was pierced through by the Japanese tanks on 7 January 1942 his company commander, a British Lieutenant, "ran away first". He added: "The rest of the British officers also ran away and there was nobody to control. I took the command of the company there and went on fighting for two days continuously and did not surrender..." (Ghosh 1969, pp. 66-67)

However, in describing the fall of Malaya, accounts have highlighted situations where Indian troops were subverted by Japanese propaganda and exhibited instances of treason,

On the evening of the first day of the Japanese attack on Malaya, 8th December 1941, sepoys of another Indian States Forces battalion, the 1st Hyderabad (not to be confused with the 4/19th Hyderabad of the Indian Army) shot and killed their commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel C.A. Hendricks, rather than stand and face the Japanese at Kota Bahru airfield. The proximate cause of this refusal to stand may have been their earlier sight of the groundstaff of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) fleeing the aerodrome in disorder but there can be little doubt that the underlying reason was that the Hyderabads did not feel like fighting a war which had nothing to do with them, an argument often used by IIL agents. (Elphick 1995, p. 105)

The Sikhs were to bear the mantle of treason more heavily during the Malayan Campaign in 1942 for several reasons; firstly, since they were classified as a "martial race", the expectation of loyalty from among their ranks was higher. Secondly, the involvement of Thai-Sikhs in the establishment of the IIL, and their collaboration with the Japanese especially in the activities of the Fujiwara Kikan,³ was especially notable. It was Pritam Singh, a Sikh priest, and Amar Singh who worked with Major Fujiwara to infiltrate and distribute leaflets among Indian soldiers in the border states of Malaya. Pritam Singh was to accompany Major Fujiwara as the Japanese advanced south into Malaya so as to establish fresh branches of the IIL. And he contacted Indian communities to cooperate with the Japanese. In fact, it was through such an encounter with local Indian rubber plantation owners that the legendary Captain Mohan Singh was to defect to the Japanese.

Captain Mohan Singh got his commission from the Indian Military Academy at Dehra Dun, but he had already developed anti-British sentiments at the onset of World War II as explained in his own writings below,

There is a difference between the soldiers of a free nation and soldiers of a subject nation. The soldiers of a free nation fight because it is their duty to fight national wars "right and wrong", we fight because we are ordered to by our alien rulers. There was not the slightest doubt that we were being exploited by the British for their own ends. The war was not our war. Not a single Indian was consulted before plunging the entire nation into the most destructive struggle. (Singh 1974)

aptain Mohan Singh was one of the first Indian officers of the 1/14th Punjab Regiment to be captured in the Malayan Campaign and played a substantial role in subverting Indian troops through collaboration with the Japanese though he remained suspicious of the Japanese due to their actions in Korea, Manchuria, and China (Lebra 1971, p. 21). According to Lebra, Mohan Singh also established propaganda teams from Indian volunteers to continue subverting Indian troops as described below:

Mohan Singh personally chose volunteers for his propaganda unit. He lectured them on the ideology of independence, infiltrating behind enemy lines and bringing men out of the British Army. The men wore regular uniforms and carried *F Kikan* passes and "F" insignia to get through Japanese lines. They were joined by *F Kikan* members who escorted them behind enemy lines and collected Indian soldiers at the rear of each propaganda group. The first sortie threaded through the rubber trees beyond the roads and observed the enemy position and topography. INA and IIL teams went back and forth through enemy fire bringing in Indians, returning again to the front for more. (Lebra 1971, p. 21)

On 17 February 1942 Mohan Singh ceremoniously accepted the surrender of Indian POWs in Farrer Park in Singapore. Between 40,000 and 50,000 Indian troops surrendered at the race course — Sikhs formed a significant number of those present that day.

It must be realized that there were significant circumstances that led to the recognized collaboration and defection of Sikhs to the Japanese. It is seldom emphasized that there were several crucial slip-ups on the part of the British recruitment and training strategies that had depleted the morale of Indian troops in the Malayan Campaign, and defecting to the Japanese was not just a pragmatic decision rather than a morality issue.

With the war being fought on several fronts, the British had to fortify the Commonwealth forces by recruiting soldiers from Punjab, and given the shortage of men, they began to recruit willing, younger men, some barely seventeen years of age. The demands of war meant that there was very little time for these recruits to spend in training or adjusting to regimental culture and tradition. Hence there is the recognition that these Indian troops were "raw" without mention that it was the callous recruitment policies of the British that set up these Indians in military unpreparedness to meet adept enemy militia and battle strategy. The seventeen-year-old Sikh soldier who left home to add to his family income was not psychologically ready to fight in combat with an alien people in an alien environment. It was akin to riding

into sure death. Eyewitness accounts of these Sikh soldiers showed the weak morale and shock of these Sikh soldiers;

I was only thirteen when the Japanese began to attack Malaya. What I remember most clearly is that the Japanese began to bomb some distance from our village in Perak but the sound was so loud that I fainted the first time I heard it. I was also worried that my father was hurt or dead as he was not at home. The next day we saw Sikhs in uniforms in military trucks on the road. They were passing us by and some trucks stopped. They were worried and some were singing sad songs that expressed "either we go home with no glory or we meet death here in an unknown land".⁴

When the Japanese were attacking Singapore, I was staying at Henderson Road. I saw actual dead bodies. I realized that this is war. I saw some Indian army boys, some hardly 18 or 19 years of age. They had been conscripted from India by the British and had no training. The Sikh boys did not even have sufficient facial hair yet. That was how young they were. They were singing a song *Dukhiya dhaa koyeen saharaa nahi* — Nobody helps us, the miserable.⁵

The Malayan jungle terrain was difficult for the Indian soldier to acclimatize to. The weather was humid and there were different diseases to deal with such as malaria. Ian Morrison gives an account of the adversities encountered by Indian troops in the Malayan jungles,

It was a type of fighting that was new and distasteful to them. "These Indians are fighting blind," Major-General Barstow, officer commanding the 9th Division told me. "They feel they have a hood over their eyes." It was utterly different from the fighting in Africa, where the spaces were wide and open and you could see your enemy. In this jungle fighting, the first you knew of your enemy was when he fired at you from out of a thick clump of bushes fifty yards away. You did not know where he was. He might be by the side of you, behind you, up a tree actually above you. The impression which the Indian troops gave was one of bewilderment... (Morrison 1942, p. 96).

Apart from the confusion experienced while fighting in the jungle terrain, Indian troops were also disenchanted by several other factors: poor supplies such as food, medical aid, ammunition, and the inability of their English officers to execute competent decisions at the battlefield, causing severe casualty rates among the Indian soldiers. Thompson highlights this in numerous instances as he describes actual battlefield encounters:

The young Indian soldiers continued warily on foot, but after only a mile the advance guard came under fire from the Japanese 42nd Regiment, which had beaten them to the Ledge. The Japanese commander then threw his two companies of light tanks into action — a terrifying experience for Krohcol's young Indian members who had never seen a tank before... Appeals on behalf of the empire were wasted on the Indian troops of Krohcol who were fighting for their lives and suffering heavy casualties. Two Punjabi companies were cut off from the battalion, and although one company rejoined later that morning, most of the men in the second were never seen again. Fearing he would lose his whole battalion, Moorhead requested permission...to withdraw his battalion... Permission was granted ... and Moorhead planned to withdraw the following morning... He set 9 a.m on 12 December as the pull out hour, but during the night the Japanese enveloped the Punjabis' flanks, surrounded C Company and killed all but 10 men... Moorhead was lucky to escape in one of the carrier's platoon's four remaining vehicles. When he reached the 5/14th Punjabis, he admitted that he might have "hung on for too long". (Thompson 2005, p. 156)

...a British officer with the 5/11th Sikhs says, "Men dropped where they were in a huddled heap and propped themselves up in a sitting position, one against the other, their senses too numb even to feel the leeches and ants on their skin." There was no hope of supplies, and Painter had no alternative but to push forward in the morning. Many units became separated and hopelessly lost, the vast majority falling into Japanese hands. (Thompson 2005, p. 249)

The Sikhs, though heavily recruited into the Indian Army were also an extremely politicized people by World War II, caught up as they were in the India fever for independence. It must be noted that while Pritam Singh of IIL and Captain Mohan Singh were seen to be working with the Japanese, they had also exacted several agreements from the Japanese such as the one signed on 4 December 1941 (Ghosh 1969, p. 21) before the outbreak of war in Malaya. The Japanese promised "to give all possible help to the Indian nationalists in their struggle for the independence and assured the latter that they had no political, economic, cultural or religious ambitions in India; besides they promised that the Japanese army would honour the lives, property and freedom of Indians in the region" (Sareen 2004, pp. 22–23). This reveals that Indian communities in Malaya, including Sikhs, had not yet developed Malayan identity; at best they saw themselves as subjects of the empire and their priorities lay in the independence of India rather than the defence of British Malaya.

THE SIKH SENTRY DURING THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

Japanese administration of Malaya and Singapore did not entail a complete overhaul of the British system. One of the strategies of law enforcement that was retained was to continue using Sikhs as policemen and sentries. Besides, Sikhs, due to the favourable relations between the INA and the Japanese, were considered to be a “safe” option as guards and sentries. Sikhs were deployed at checkpoints to conduct inspection of belongings and passes, and also as guards of POW camps that had mainly Europeans interned. It was the deployment of Sikhs in these duties that was to have a tarnishing effect on the reputation of Sikhs as loyal, committed, and steadfast subjects of the British Empire, and as security providers. As employees of the Japanese, these Sikh sentries had to abide by the policing and punishment standards of the Japanese, which involved face slapping and all other sorts of physical brutality. The Japanese frequently instructed the Sikh sentries to assault, in particular, local Chinese via face slapping, kicking, or hitting the victim with the butt of a rifle. In instances where Sikhs refused to execute such orders, they were themselves punished by the Japanese instead. As a result of these occurrences, the local Chinese and Malay population developed a communal animosity against the Sikhs during the occupation. Cheah Boon Kheng writes that, “the Sikhs, who served in the regular police force, earned considerable animosity from both the Malays and the Chinese. Sikh policemen were regarded as efficiently ruthless and loyal to the Japanese authorities” (McCoy 1980, pp. 114–15). Sikh policemen, who were formerly seen as emblems of the British Empire, became symbols of Japanese brutality and cruelty during the war years.

Australian and European POWs interned at Changi have also denigrated Japanese appointed Sikh sentries extensively. Sikhs guards and sentries at these camps were particularly noted for their brutality in meting out punishment to POWs. The following POW war diary entries give testimony to the fact that the Sikhs were hated for carrying out the orders of the Japanese:

A Sikh sentry hits one of the fatigue party, so all refuse to go out. Apparently, the situation arose because we have never been numbered off, but, this morning, they were. One group did, but the second group stuck at an Irishman. The Sikh ordered him to number but he didn't. The Sikh referred him to the Japanese n.c.o. who apparently said, “Make him”. The Sikh said, “Number” and when the Irishman did not, he was struck. Whereupon, the fatigue parties all came back in. There was an inquiry with no officer present, as far as I can gather. The Sikh was

alleged to have been called a black bastard. His word was taken and the Irishman, Fitzpatrick, was beaten with a strap... (Goh 2002, p. 173)

Keith White, whom I met at Kulim, was on a fatigue sweeping the courtyard. A Sikh sentry orders him to sweep the guardroom. He points out politely that his fatigue is not that and refers the Sikh to the Fatigues Officer. *Tendang* (Kick) and when the Nipponese in charge is referred to, more *tendang*. He receives many bruises. This is intolerable. Are we to take any order from any Sikh? If so how can we organize field work? (Goh 2002, p. 186)

September 30 1942 ...The Sikh sentries today beat up an internee for refusing to clean out their guard room... (Lewis 1984, p. 139)

Despite their contempt for the Sikh sentries, the British and Australian DPs were aware that the Sikhs too were at the mercy of the Japanese and were caught in a unique dilemma. Although they were under the payroll of the Japanese, many Sikh policemen were still unable to dispense with the loyalty and obedience they had for their former British colonial masters:

22 August 1942: "A Sikh guard contingent begins to take over the Japanese. Are they ex-police?... A Sikh sentry on duty for the first time sees a police officer who was his superior formerly and says, "Tabek Tuan." (Greetings, sir) He is overheard and gets his face slapped. (Goh 2002, p. 168)⁶

Similarly, the British ex-officers who had become POWs experienced a nostalgia for the might of the British Empire during internment when they witnessed Sikhs being used in service of the Japanese:

3 September 1942: In the main yard I watch the Sikh change guard. Alas for our once smart Sikh police. They are so confused with the changed drill and the barked instructions of the Japanese that they don't know right from left. And the bowing... (Goh 2002, p. 174)

21 January 1943: ...I shall never get used to the sight of a big burly Sikh, with a rifle and fixed bayonet, marching up to the bunch of Nipponese — who apparently sit all day long on the verandah of an attap house, all in a row, all wearing topees. He then presents arms, stands stiffly to attention — and performs the regulation bow from the waist! It all looks so comic opera that I always laugh...⁷ (Goh 2002, p. 233)

Diary entries of European POWs also reveal Japanese brutality and ridicule towards the Sikh sentries. In many instances it is reported that Sikhs were also punished just as severely for not obeying the Japanese or disrespecting them:

June 13 1943... Today, a Jap sentry chased one of our Sikh sentries into the jail, beat him up with his fists and belt, had his hands tied up, beat him up again and had him taken away. Tominara appeared but seemed to have no authority to interfere although the incident took place within his own sphere of authority. It is conjectured that the Sikh had cheeked the Jap on the road outside the jail. (Lewis 1984, p. 180)

But beyond the understanding that Sikhs were as much victims of war in having to serve the Japanese, Sikhs soldiers and sentries are portrayed as dull mercenaries who lack virtues of loyalty and steadfastness in war situations. Australian POW war accounts of the Sikh in particular are significant in describing them as turncoats and objects of ridicule. This could be because Australians had not had any level of engagement with the Sikhs as the British had and understood them even less:

The Sikhs, who had changed sides, he liked even less than we did. They were now regularly patrolling the road on which we were working. As [they were] representatives of the Imperial Japanese Army we were probably now allowed to insult them. This we never did directly, but we would sit on the side of the road and as they marched by we would whistle the Laurel and Hardy theme, "You're cuckoo and I'm cuckoo". They quickly got the message and became angry and threatening. This delighted Easto (Japanese Army sergeant) and as soon as they broke ranks to remonstrate with us he would stand them all to attention and belt them across the back with a pick handle. After this treatment the Sikhs ignored us. This displeased Easto so he would hide in the bushes and the Sikhs, seeing no Japanese in sight, would again break ranks and come threateningly towards us when we whistled, whereupon Easto would emerge from behind the bushes with his pick handle and belabour them as enthusiastically as before. They soon learnt that just because Easto wasn't in sight he wasn't necessarily absent.... There was no way that the unfortunate Indian warriors could win. We began to feel a little sorry for them and mildly remonstrated with Easto. He said he had absolutely no time for them; yesterday when the British were number one they were licking Englishmen boots, today they were licking Japanese boots, and if the British came back or if anyone else came back to Singapore they would be licking their boots.... (Wilson 1989)

as indicated in the testimony above, the Japanese were also biased against the Sikh soldiers as law enforcers and understood their position as mercenaries. They frequently not only compelled the Sikhs to execute their duties, but also maintained a sense of cold empathy if the Sikhs were disregarded, disobeyed, or even violated by the POWs:

It took some very straight talking by their officers to make that rebellious minority see where their best interests lay, helped along by a few bashings from the hated Sikh guards for failing to salute them. These guards were from the two Sikh regiments that had deserted and gone over to the enemy very early in the campaign. They were universally despised not only by our chaps but by the Japs as well. This was effectively demonstrated one day when one of our troops went to the edge of our perimeter where a Sikh had mounted a machine-gun. He beckoned to the Sikh, used to obeying orders, left the machine-gun and walked over to the Aussie who swung a billet of wood he was holding behind his back, and struck the Sikh a blow on the head which flattened him unconscious on the ground. A Jap soldier had another machine-gun mounted nearby and we expected him to fire. Instead he burst into laughter and danced about in glee. Our first lesson in how unpredictable their reactions were. (Wyett 1996, p. 110)

The Sikh sentries on the other hand were aware of their unique position and in difficult times capitalized on it to earn a livelihood. The Sikh sentries maintained friendships with the POWs when Japanese backs were turned and were reported to confide in the POWs that their allowances and food rations were just as meagre, making it difficult for them to feed an entire family (Goh 2002, p. 202). They often turned a blind eye when POWs made attempts to procure more rations from illegal hawkers on the outskirts of the camps and frequently acted as middlemen between hawkers and other peddlers on the black market to secure more rations for the internees, naturally accepting a bribe. When news began spreading that the end of the Japanese Occupation was inevitable, the Sikh sentries absconded from the camps and stopped showing up for morning parade (Lewis 1984, p. 225), giving an indication to the European POWs that the Allied forces had regained territories. In fact when returning Allied forces arrived in Singapore, Sikhs were used to guard Japanese POWs instead! Nonetheless, war time memories had left a bitter sting in the hearts and minds of many in the local population and it is suspected that the Sikh Police Contingent at Pearl's Hill was disbanded immediately after the war as it had lost the confidence especially of the local Chinese population.

THE ABSENT SIKH VOICE

In most of the narratives examined so far Sikhs have been represented as loyal and obedient, then as traitors and turncoats or not even intelligent enough to make their own decisions. It is significant, however, to realize that the Sikhs themselves, with some exceptions such as Captain Mohan Singh who wrote his memoirs, have never recorded in the form of diaries or oral accounts the Sikh soldier's or policemen's psyche during the Malayan Campaign or the Japanese Occupation. The absent Sikh soldier's voice, therefore, stands out as another case study for subaltern studies scholars, who focus on the domain where the principal actors are not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities. They constitute the mass of the labouring population and intermediate strata consisting of ordinary people (Guha 1997, p. xv). The majority of the Sikhs who were recruited into the Indian Army and the police forces of the empire were illiterate and financially insecure.

The Sikhs were of a martial heritage because of their religious history and culture. However, many were attracted to service in the military not due to some lofty ideals of heritage, but instead driven by economic concerns. Sikhs had very pragmatic reasons for enlisting in the British Indian Army. Enlistment meant a cash income through army salaries and pensions. This would bolster the average villager's income, otherwise derived from agricultural produce. For larger families, with more male heirs especially, this meant a smaller inheritance of the initial landholding. By joining the army, the Sikh villager enjoyed the opportunity to increase his honour (*izzat*) in the village by being able to afford brick (*pukka*) houses (Mazumdar 2003, p. 31) with their pensions, and managing to afford extensive dowries for sisters and daughters, a higher quality of food, and finer clothing, moving up from *khaddar* to cotton and silk manufactured in mills. The Sikh soldier joined the British Indian Army to ameliorate his socio-economic standing in his immediate environment in Punjab. Hence when he was thrown into a battle environment he was unfamiliar with, at the age of seventeen, and had to execute orders from his European masters who had an inadequate battle strategy, it was survival that mattered most.

Members of the civilian Sikh community in Singapore also joined the Indian National Army. For instance, local Sikhs were involved in the propaganda, administration, accounting, and day to day execution of duties of the Indian National Army headquartered in Singapore. Again as testimonies of the war years reveal, decisions to join the Indian National Army were primarily to ensure means of survival:

Just because of the INA, the word had gotten around that we were pro-Japanese. We were not. Sikhs were not, Indians were not. Many leaders

in the Indian community were suspicious of the Japanese and advised on the quiet to just mark time although openly demonstrating collaboration with the Japanese.⁸

We were given meat rations ... chicken and mutton. Also flour, rice and some vegetables. Cloth rations and travel passes as a result of being part of the INA. Although the rations were not enough for the whole family and we had to supplement our food supplies by growing our own food.... Indians were generally left alone and the Japanese were not easy people.⁹

CONCLUSION

reflecting on the Sikh soldier's or policeman's role during the Malayan campaign and the Japanese Occupation, imperial and national narratives of the war often overlook the fact that the Sikhs were firstly subjects of the British Empire, who were indebted to the British for employment in the armed forces, but not altogether aloof from the politics of the independence struggle of the Raj. And secondly, that in the 1940s, they were still first-wave migrants into Malaya and Singapore just like the Chinese. Their sentiments were still naturally with the homeland and focused on issues of practical survival. Therefore, while they were considered traitors by dominant agencies of knowledge creation and production, they were heroes when they believed in India's independence, or dutiful householders, when they continued to provide for their families during the desperate times of the Japanese Occupation.

Notes

Legislative Council meeting minutes, 13 June 1872.

Annual Report by British Resident of Perak 1887.

Fujiwara Kikan was an operation run by Major Fujiwara Iwaichi whose orders were to work with local Indians to subvert Indian troops and also with other locals to facilitate the Japanese invasion of Malaya.

Interview with Mohinder Kaur (translated from Punjabi).

Mohinder Singh, Reel No. 5, National Archives of Singapore.

Goh Eck Kheng, *Life and Death in Changi: The War and Internment Diary of Thomas Kitching* (1942–1944), p. 168.

Ibid., p. 233.

Mehervan Singh, Reel 18, National Archives of Singapore.

Mohinder Singh, Reel 19, National Archives of Singapore.

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