

## **ROAD TO MANDALAY – SIKHS IN BURMA**

### **A TALE OF EXEMPLARY LOYALTY TO FAITH**

(Based on Travels of Swarn Singh Kahlon, December, 2011)

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(Article appeared in The Sikh Review, Kolkata, February, 2014 issue).

#### **THE ROMANCE OF BURMA**

There are two romantic poems about Burma;

ONE by Rudyard Kipling (1889-90),

where he tries to relive on return to London his travels in Burma:

"By the old Moulmein Pagoda, lookin' lazy at the sea,  
There's a Burma girl a-settin', and I know she thinks o' me;  
For the wind is in the palm-trees, and the Temple-bells they say:  
"Come you back, you British soldier; come you back to Mandalay!"

#### **AND THE SECOND**

By the exiled Mughal King, Bahadur Shah Zafar who immortalised his death in Burma (1862) through the epitaph he wrote on the wall with a burnt stick:

*"Kitna hai badnaseeb Zafar, dafan ke liye  
do gaz zamin na mili ku e yaar mein"*

This was also the period when Sikhs started to migrate to Burma; a country now renamed 'Myanmar'. The Sikh migration to Burma was an important component of global Sikh migration and remained a popular destination for about six decades. Many Sikhs have their relatives and friends who still talk about the Burma days even if they have returned permanently since long back. A visit was very tempting especially as my wife's mother was born and grew up in that country. Whenever my mother-in-law and her sisters had some confidences to share they would shift to speaking Burmese even after their return three decades ago.

#### **INTRODUCTION – EXEMPLARY FOLLOWING OF SIKHISM**

We were pleasantly surprised with Sikhism being practiced in Myanmar erstwhile Burma. Arising from three major exoduses of Indians, the Sikh presence has dwindled. A large number of Gurdwaras and almost all other Sikh institutions have been closed down or taken over by the Government. The highlight of Sikhs settled in Burma is that they are professing the religion as it should be in a devout manner with self and family involvement in running the Gurdwaras. Most of the Sikhs are 'keshadharis' – what a contrast to the dismal situation in Punjab. Three Gurdwaras have women 'Granthis', a unique example of equality of sexes. The Sikhs are well settled and accepted but they feel somewhat cut off from India due travel restriction under the Army rule. With political and economic opening up of the country, it is hoped that they will have more opportunities to meet their co-religionists from India in future.

#### **A SHORT HISTORY OF THE SIKH MIGRATION:**

Sikh migration to Burma started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with British Indian Army. There were three Anglo-Burmese Wars: First: 1824-26; second: 1852-53 and third: 1885-

86. Sikh soldiers took part in small numbers in the Second War and in large numbers in the Third War. Following the Third War Burma became a province of British India and thereafter became a separate colony in 1937. Prior to the World War II, there was an overwhelming presence of Indians including Sikhs in various spheres of activity. It is estimated that almost half of Rangoon's population at the time of Japanese invasion comprised of Indians.

As mentioned earlier, there were three major exoduses: the first in early 1940s when the Japanese occupied Burma during WW II. The second exodus was post-Independence of Burma in 1948 – anti Indian feelings had started simmering even prior to independence. Soon after the military coup of 1962, the Government decided to follow what came to be known as 'Burmese way to Socialism' whereby most businesses including retail trade were nationalised. This was a big blow for the Indians which resulted in the third exodus. When one morning the people went to open their shops, they were greeted by Army persons asking them to hand over the keys. They were told that all the goods now belonged to the Government from that moment onwards. They were free to work as Managers of the shops on paltry salary.

The 1931 Census listed a total of 10,761 Sikhs in Burma with many more coming in subsequently until the War. Migrating to Burma in earlier times felt just as if settling in another province of India. According to Sikh Diwan of Burma's Annual Report of January 1952 - December, 1953, there were a total of 136 Gurdwaras, 13 Khalsa Schools and Sikh Institutions such as Ashrams, Libraries, Langar Halls and Dispensaries spread all over the country. Where ever there was a Gurdwara in a Military establishment, there would invariably be another Gurdwara in the nearby town suggesting that many Sikh businesses were connected with servicing the Army requirements. Besides Gurdwaras in Military establishments and in various towns, there were Gurdwaras in Mining areas (Namtu and Mawchi Mine -Tin, Lead and Wolfram, and Mogok - Rubies), Dockyard (Dalla), Oilfields and Refineries (Chauk, Yen-an Chaung, Magwe, and Minbu) indicating involvement of Sikhs in various professions and their presence all across the country.

The British supported and encouraged Sikhs to build Gurdwaras for which land was generously allotted. The main Sikh Gurdwara in Yangon has a marble plaque detailing allotment of premises for Gurdwara, the foundation being laid by Capt.-Parkins - details are given in Appendix.

The Namdhari Guru, Baba Ram Singh, because of his spearheading a resistance movement against cow slaughter, was exiled to Burma first to Rangoon and then to Mandalay. Since his followers started to visit him from India, the British got a bit concerned and moved him to a more isolated sea resort of Mergui on the South East coast, where he eventually died. It has to be noted that the non- violence movement originated with the 'Naamdharis' (sometimes also referred to as 'Kukas') much before the concept was popularised by Mahatma Gandhi.

#### **THE PRESENT SIKH SCENE:**

We had the opportunity to visit the Sikh Sangat and Gurdwaras in Yangon, Myitykyina, Mandalay, and Taunggyi. At present only about 48 Gurdwaras exist, one third of which are non-operative and some are having just one or two families living and managing the place. In one or two instances two Gurdwaras located near to

each other are being looked after by one granthi. All Gurdwaras in Military establishments and the various Sikh institutions such as Khalsa Schools have been taken over by the Government. In some locales where Gurdwaras are unattended and kept locked, the 'Sangat' from nearby areas makes an effort to visit at least once a year when they re-clothe the 'Nishan Sahib' thereby establishing the continuing Sikh ownership. It is helpful that many Gurdwaras have some property attached to it thus providing rental income which comes in handy for the upkeep of premises. There is a free dispensary still being run in the rooms attached with Yangon Gurdwara.

Post 1962 coup, the Indians and Sikhs became almost economic refugees and had to rebuild their lives afresh. Those who could leave returned to India or moved to neighbouring countries. Others who stayed back did so because for them the option of going back was not attractive enough. Post take-over by the Army junta, foreigners were not allowed to study in professional institutions such as Medicine or Engineering unless citizenship was acquired which was not easy. Some immigrants are still stateless but many have acquired citizenship or have obtained residential permits.

All Sikhs are fluent in Burmese and Punjabi languages, speaking the former outside the house and the later at home and with other compatriots. Proficiency in English language is rather limited. Gurdwaras promote Punjabi learning and 'Gurmat parchar'. Marrying local women is not uncommon - the wife invariably becomes a Sikh bringing up the children in Sikh tradition. It is interesting to note that facial features of many a Sikhs has somewhat oriental look. Most of the Sikh men wear 'longyi' (similar to Indian lungi), which is the popular attire of the Burmese. The Sikh women also wear the traditional 'longyi' Burmese dress - Punjabi salwar-kameez being worn only on special occasions or sometimes on visit to Gurdwara. The overall feeling one gets is of the community having comfortably adapted the local language, dress, food etc. and yet maintaining the Sikh identity in full measure. Marriages are still celebrated in true Punjabi lavish style. We came across an invite to one where the 'baraat' had travelled to another town by special coach attached to a train and subsequent celebrations lasting a couple of days at the bride's town.

An incident worth narrating relates to the large scale protests in 2007 (also termed as 'The Saffron Revolution') initially by students and women followed by the monks who are highly revered in Burma. One of the Monks' processions in Yangon was led by a turbaned Sikh business man activist, Surinder Karkar Singh - U.Pancha (his Burmese name - most immigrants have both Sikh and local names). He had subsequently to leave the country because of safety concerns. This is another example of how well the Sikh community is integrated in Burma.

Most of the people met were into trading and retailing especially in motor parts business. Some Sikhs are involved in agro related activities such as dairying and 'ghee' making. The younger generation in some cases are able to pursue higher studies and professional courses. Because of financial limitations their exposure abroad is limited and many of them do not have proficiency in English and computers. How local adaptation to different professions has taken place can be seen from a chance encounter with a Sikh who was involved in "gold panning" in the river Myit-son north from Myitykyina.

Of late, as the economy is opening up, some new immigrant Sikh professionals and entrepreneurs from neighbouring countries are beginning to set up new businesses. The future is certainly attractive as the latest developments auger well. The present Sikh population could be estimated at 2-3000 numbers. The community needs support from the Sikhs in India through supply of religious books, 'gutkas', 'karas', 'kirpans', Sikh book and magazines (in Punjabi) and even turbans. Some support from India would go a long way.

## **APPENDIX 1**

(Entire inscription, though somewhat detailed, makes an interesting reading).

### **HISTORY OF THE SIKH GURDWARA AT RANGOON Inscription on the Foundation Stone at the Gurdwara**

"That in the year 1893 The Sikhs in the Indian Army and in the Military Police in Burma, who were the only residents then in Burma felt want of a Sikh Gurudwara in Rangoon. The then senior Sikh Sardars of the Military Police and the Indian Army sent a Memorial in the said year 1893 through the Chief Commissioner of Burma and Colonel Peel, the Inspector General of Police to the Governor General and Viceroy of India praying for the grant a piece of land in Rangoon free of rent and taxes to enable them to erect a temple (Gurudwara) and Rest House for the Sikhs in return and as a reward for the meritorious services rendered by the Sikh Military officers and men in the army and in the military police in Burma since annexation of Burma. In the meantime and pending the receipt of orders on the said memorial a strong committee was formed by the Sikhs in the army and the military police to collect funds for the building and erection of a Gurdwara and a meeting place or Dharamsala.

Orders on the said memorial were passed in the year 1897 and by an instrument of gift dated 31<sup>st</sup> day of May 1897 the Secretary of State for India in Council granted unto (1) Jhanda Singh Rai Bahadur Subedar Major 7<sup>th</sup> Burma Battalion then stationed at Mikmeiktila (2) to Kishen Singh Subedar Major of Rangoon Military Police battalion then stationed at Rangoon (3) Surmukh Singh, Jemadar Rangon Military Police Battalion for the time being of the Committee of the Sikh Temple in Rangoon and their successors the Presidents and Members stationed at Rangoon, three pieces of land fronting on Judah Esezekiel Street in block H3, Rangoon, measuring 171-6 feet by 58 feet, or containing area of 9956 two three square feet. TO HOLD the said lands on to the said Grantees free from all revenue or rent UPON TRUST to devote the said land to the purposes of building and maintaining thereon religious buildings for the performance of worship according to Sikh rites and of building to be used as a meeting place and Dharamsala for Sikhs and for other Hindus belonging to or connected with Indian Army or the Burma Military police living in or passing through Rangoon but for no other purposes. In the said instrument of gift it was specifically agreed and stipulated (1) That the Secretary of State for India in Council may at any time resume possession of said land and (2) That if the said land and any buildings thereon shall at any time be devoted to any purposes other than those mentioned in the said instrument and if they at any time be not devoted to such purposes then and in any such case the Granter may revoke this gift and thereupon the said land and buildings thereof shall revert to the Crown without any compensation to the Grantees.

After the receipt of the said gift from the Government the construction of the buildings thereon was started in June 1897 and the foundation stone was laid on the 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1897 by Captain H.H. Parkins the then Deputy Inspector General of Military Police. The buildings were completed and the opening ceremony thereof was performed in 1899 by the Lieutenant Governor of Burma and a big gathering of distinguished army and military British Officers and Civilians and Sikh Officers representing the Military Police and Indian Army Battalions. The address was read at the meeting by Sardar Bahadur Gopal Singh Naib, Commandant of the Bhamo Battalion and The Lieutenant Governor and party were taken round the buildings by Subedar Major Kishen Singh and Subedar Mehar Singh.

A general committee was formed by the Sikh Officers and men in the Indian Army and Military Police in Burma and a managing committee consisting of the following Sardars was also formed who were stationed at Rangoon (1) Subedar Major Kishen Singh (2) Subedar Mehar Singh (3) Jamedar Sarmukh Singh (4) Jamedar Kesar Singh (5) Sardar Bhagwan Singh senior veterenary assistant Military Police (6) Subedar Natha Singh (7) Subedar Dewan Singh (8) Jemadar Kehar Singh.

In the year 1900 another application was made by (1) Kishen Singh, Subedar Major of Rangoon Military Police Battalion stationed at Rangoon (2) Sarmukh Singh Jamedar of the said Rangoon Military Police battalion and (3) Kesar Singh Jamedar of the said Rangoon Military Police Battalion as representatives of Sikhs serving as soldiers in the Burma Battalions as Military Policemen in the Burma Military Police Battalions for the grant of an additional piece of land for the erection of the said Sikh temple and Dharamsala as the accommodation was not sufficient and in the pursuance of the said request by an instrument of gift dated the 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1900 the Secretary of State for India in Council granted unto the said Kishen Singh, Sarmukh Singh, Kesar Singh and their successors, the President and members for the time being of the committee of the Sikh Temple Rangoon a further piece of land measuring 10 feet by 58 feet adjoining the said piece of land in Judah Ezekiel Street comprised in the said instrument of gift dated the 31<sup>st</sup> May 1897. TO HOLD the said piece of land unto the Grantees forever free from all land revenue or rent UPON the same Trusts as are set out in the second instrument of gift dated the 31<sup>st</sup> May 1897 and subject to the same conditions and" (incomplete).

**Foundation Stone of Sikh Temple  
Rangoon  
Captain H Parkin  
Deputy Inspector General  
Military Police  
Burma  
On 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1897**  
  
**(Ik Onkar)  
Buniyadi Pathar  
Sikh Gurdwara Rangoon**

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **BIBI BALBIR KAUR: GRANTHI, YANGON GURDWARA (A Case Study)**

Summarised version: Balbir Kaur took over as Granthi of the Yangon Central Gurdwara in 2003 from Amarjit Singh who moved to Taunggyi. Her father Sardul Singh, presently 100 years old (born 1913) came to Burma as an INA volunteer during the War. He went back to Punjab for the first time only when he was over 70 years of age to his village Roywal, Jagraon, District. Ludhiana. He has been Granthi in several Gurdwaras such as Maynyo, Kyawtawt, Pawbe and Lasho. Balbir's mother Kishen Kaur was half Burmese - daughter of Banta Singh who was married to a Burmese lady at young age of 17 yrs in 1950. Balbir was part of a large family comprising of six sisters (one has since died) and one brother, who has migrated to Australia where he is working as a teacher. Balbir's mother became a Granthi of Maymyo Gurdwara in 1973 at age forty. One of Balbir's sisters is also a Granthi at the Lasho Gurdwara. Other sisters are married to Granthis of various Gurdwaras.

Balbir got married in 1977 to Harbans Singh, who was a farmer in Pwintpyu, a town 200 miles north of Yangon. They had a small farm across the river where they cultivated rice, sunflower, linseed and gram. The farmlands were canal irrigated. Pwintpyu had a Gurdwara with about 100 Sikh families but their village, 'Kalagon' across the river had only 5 Sikh families. After her husband died, she managed the farm for about five years when she decided to move to Yangon in 2003. Balbir has nine children, five sons and four daughters – only one child is married.