

Sikhs in Myanmar (Burma)

Hardev Singh Virk

It was a pleasant surprise when I received a letter from Educational Consultants of India Ltd. (EDCIL), Noida that my name had been recommended by Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India for a four week visit to University of Yangon. India and Myanmar have signed an MOU for exchange of scientific and technical manpower to help Myanmar in scientific research. Under this agreement, India will get crude oil.

Mr. Subash Bakshi of EDCIL gave me only two weeks time for making preparations for this visit, and promised to provide a visa, air tickets and other necessary information. I was going to Yangon University as a Visiting Professor to guide research students and deliver seminar lectures in my field of specialization. I always considered Myanmar as a part of British India that has cultural affinity with the Indian people. But to my surprise, Burmese people have no common heritage with India. Rather they have strong links with the Indo-Chinese races.

On February 23, 2005, I reached Yangon International Airport on a Myanmar Airways flight from New Delhi. It took us only five minutes to cross all the barriers of customs and immigration. My hosts Professor Ko Ko Kyay So and his research group took charge of my bags and drove me to the International Guest House on the Yangon University Campus. The facilities provided for visiting faculty are good with air conditioned apartments fully equipped with modern gadgets. On February 24, Professor Sein Htoon, Head of Physics Department received me in his office and introduced me to all group leaders.

Yangon (Rangoon) University was among the top ten Indian Universities before the British divided India and declared Burma as an independent country. It has a sprawling campus in the heart of the city. Inya lake adds glamour to the beautiful campus of Yangon University. Myanmar is currently under military dictatorship and I was a little curious to know the fate of the young lady, Aung Sung Ky, fighting for the liberation of Burmese people. Military rule has disciplined the country and Burmese people have acquired traits of honesty, national character, and deep commitment to their country. They are also the most religious and hospitable people on earth.

Professor Htoon had his education in a Christian Missionary school set up by the British government. He told me about the Sikh Gurudwara, he used to visit as a child, in front of this school building on the Thin Pyan road. Naturally, I became interested to know more about the Gurudwara and trace the history of Sikh people living in Myanmar. On Sunday, February 27, my visit to the Sikh Gurudwara was arranged. The marble slab on the front wall narrates the history of this Gurudwara.

A group of Sikh soldiers in the British Army took up cudgels to start construct this building. They approached the British Governor of Burma in 1893 and got his sanction on May 31, 1897. Captain

H.H Parking laid the foundation stone of the Gurudwara on October 23, 1897 in the presence of Rai Bahadur Jhanda Singh, Sarmukh Singh and Kishan Singh of 7th Burma Battalion. It was maintained by Sikh Officers of the British Military Police for many years. The British developed Rangoon city as a port and a business center in the early twentieth century and many Sikh families moved to Burma in search of greener pastures. The British offered jobs to the Sikh youths in both army and police. Rather, the Sikhs dominated the police forces in whole of Indo – China, from Burma to Shanghai and Hong Kong. After many Sikh soldiers settled in Burma the control of the Gurudwara passed to the Sikh Religious Council of Burma.

On every Sunday I regular visited the Gurudwara to trace the remnants of Sikh faith in Burma. I learnt that Sikhs had a hey day in Burma during the British rule. They owned business, banks and farms and commanded lot of respect. Military dictatorship nationalized the banks and trade owned by foreigners and most of the Sikh families moved out to India and other countries. The exodus still continues to Thailand and Australia.

There are four Sikh Gurudwaras in Rangoon but due to depleted strength of Sikh population, only the Central Sikh Gurudwara holds regular services on Sundays. I was happy to observe that a Sikh lady, Ms. Balvir Kaur is the Granthi here. Due to absence of *raagis*, Kirtan is conducted by the local *sangat*. The tradition of free kitchen (*langar*) continues here.



**Sikh Temple
(Gurdwara),
Yangon**



Another milestone in Rangoon was Khalsa AV School whose foundation was laid by Dr. Randhir Singh, a Sikh philanthropist, on February 24, 1934. Military dictatorship nationalized this school but its stone slab is still intact.

Most of the Sikh families belong to Punjab. They are engaged in import/export of textiles and other consumable products. I met Mr. Hundal whose family worked as ship building contractors and owned some shares in Burma Oil Company. Its headquarter are in the town of Thanlyin which is 20 miles outside Rangoon. The Sikh Gurudwara in Thanlyin, which was founded in 1920, presents a deserted look.

Sikh women usually wear Burmese dress even at social gatherings, and Sikh-Burmese marriages are no longer a taboo among the youth. Like Japanese women, Burmese ladies are very hard working and make good wives.



Rangoon is now known as Yangon and Burma as Myanmar. Yangon is a very clean city and there are no slums. Traffic rules are strictly followed and there is no honking of horns on the roads. Government offices start functioning at 7 AM and continue till 7 PM. Literacy rate is much higher than India. Female population is higher than the male population, and Burmese women dominate in almost all spheres of life. In education the women occupy 80 percent of positions and they constitute the same percentage in higher education and research. Almost 50 percent educated women do not find a suitable match and prefer to remain unmarried. Dress code is strictly followed in Myanmar and the influence of western culture is negligible.

Yangon boasts of an International Buddhist Missionary University that provides free education, free boarding and lodging to 200 students' from 18 countries. Buddhism is the state religion, but there is complete freedom for other religious minorities in Myanmar. Religious fanaticism has been rooted out by the military regime. All official functions, however, start with prayer recitals based on Buddhist scriptures.

My search to locate some historical monuments related to Sikh religion and culture did not bear fruits. I was not allowed to visit Mandalay, a town connected with Indian National Army set up by Subash Chandra Bose with the help of Sikh army deserters. Special permission is required to travel outside Yangon city, which was granted near the final days of my visit. However, I could visit the tomb of last Mugal ruler of India, Bahadur Shah Zafar, who was exiled to Rangoon by the British in 1858 and died there in 1862. Reading some stanzas of his poetry etched on the tombstone lamenting his misfortune can easily bring tears to your eyes:

Zafar tum kitne ho badnasib, ke dafan ke lye do gaj zamin na mili kuyen yaar mein

Surprisingly, Bahadur Shah Zafar was declared a Chishti Saint after his death in Rangoon.

I was keen to trace some monument connected with Baba Ram Singh Kuka. This Namdhari Guru was also deported to Burma by the British after the Malerkotla episode in which 70 Kukas were blown to pieces by cannons. Baba Ram Singh was imprisoned in Mandalay jail, then shifted to Rangoon and finally to an unknown destination, as his followers from India frequented his prison cell despite strict surveillance by the British. I was told by some old Sikhs that even Namdharis and Giani Zail Singh failed to locate monument connected to Baba Ram Singh. I could not verify the truth of their statement and my search will continue during my next visit which is quite probable. I also learned about a British cemetery outside Yangon, where a large number of Sikh soldiers were cremated during the Second World War. The lady granthi of the Gurudwara told me about Sikh farming families settled in Shan State bordering China.

I was happy to find some remnants of Sikh culture in Myanmar and wish SGPC or DGPC will establish links with the local Sikh *sangat* there.

Copyright©2005 Hardev Singh Virk. About the author

[Print this Article](#)

[Email this Article](#)

[Comment on this Article](#)

[About](#)

[Links](#)

[Subscribe](#)

[Disclaimer](#)

Copyright © 2002 SikhSpectrum.com. All rights reserved. Please contact webmaster@sikhspectrum.com with any questions about this site. SikhSpectrum.com is a non-profit, non-commercial e-zine run and maintained by volunteers.