

SIKHI AND SINDHI HINDUS – THE HISTORY AND OVERLAP –

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INTRODUCTION

Sindhi Hindus and their reverence to Guru Nanak, founder of Sikh religion and Guru Granth Sahib, the religious book of the Sikhs which is treated as ‘Living Guru’ is fascinating. Few Sindhis and fewer Sikhs are aware of the history behind it. A considerable number of Sindhi Hindus still live in Sindh, Pakistan. It is home to 93% of Hindus in Pakistan. The 2017 census recorded that there were 3.94 million Hindus in Pakistan and they constitute 1.85% (including 0.25% of Schedule Caste) of the total population of Pakistan. The Pakistan Hindu Council, however, gives a much bigger estimate of 8 million. This could not be verified from other sources. This article traces the history of Sikhs visiting Sindh over the past five centuries which left an impact on Sindhi Hindus which led to the Sikh amalgamation in their belief system.

SINDH IN 1851 – BURTON’S OBSERVATION

To understand Sindhi Hindus in Pakistan, one has to keep aside our standards and preconceived ideas about what constitutes a Hindu, Sikh and even Muslim religion. The Sindhi Hindus are heterodox in their belief and rituals. Their religion is a mixture of Hindu, Sikh and Sufi brand of Islam. British annexed Sindh in 1843 and found Sindh unique and different from other Indian provinces.

Richard F Burton (1851) wrote *Sindh & the races that inhabit the Valley of the Indus* describe a curious mix of Hindu and Sikh practices among Sindhi Hindus. He calls them ‘heterodox Sikhs’ and observes that “*they show a general tendency towards the faith of Nanak Shah, and that*

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many castes have so intermingled the religion of the Sikh with their original Hinduism, that we can scarcely discern the line of demarcation.”

Burton states that *Lohano* Sikh is called Nanakshahi and Munnee Sikh (a Shaver). Sometimes he wears a *kara* but never the *Chakkar*. Lohana is a caste from the trading community. The writer mentions Udasi priests and their initiation of people into Nanakshahi faith. These people recited Jap Ji Sahib, Rehras Sahib and Sukhmani Sahib. Now let us trace the Sindhi’s unique relationship with Sikhi.

GURU NANAK'S (1469-1539) VISIT

According to *Janamsakhi Tradition* by Dr Kirpal Singh, all the Janamsakhis mention that Guru Ji came to Shikarpur in North Sindh while on his way to Central Asia. *Bhai Bala wali Janamsakhi*, gives details regarding his meeting and discourse at Shikarpur. The details regarding Guru Sahib’s visit to Shikarpur are contained under *Sakhi of DaudJnlaba* (Sakhi of Daud the Weaver) and has been translated by the writer of this article. Several episodes in this Janamsakhi version endorse Guru Nanak’s visit to Sindh.

The local *Sangat* (congregation) also believes that Guru Nanak came to Sukkur as well. The Janamsakhis specifically do not mention Sukkur but state that after Shikarpur he went further in Sindh. Giani Gian Singh (circa 1880) has also mentioned the visit to Sukkur by Guru Ji in his work. One can safely say that Gurbani was introduced to Sindhis during this period and later on hymns from Guru Granth Sahib.

BABA SRI CHAND VISIT & UDASI PANTH PRIESTS

The Sindhi tradition records the visit of Baba Sri Chand, son of Guru Nanak and founder of UdasiPanth. Darbar Baba Sri Chand Sahib in village Fakeer Jo Goth in district Thatta commemorates the visit of Baba Sri Chand, the founder of Udasi *Panth*. He was not given the guruship by his father. Most of the Udasi priests were ascetic, remained celibate and did not keep *Kesh* (uncut hair and beard). Their doctrine was influenced by the Hindu religion while reciting Guru Granth Sahib.

History tells us that many Udasi *Panth* priests also came and settled in Sindh. This explains the number of Udasi Darbars in North Sindh.

KR Malkani (1984) in *The Sindh Story* specifically mentions Bawa Gurpat Saheb, the twelfth-generation descendant of Guru Nanak who came to Sindh. These syncretic Udasis started and built many places of worship like the famous Darbar, *Sadh Bela* in Sukkur in 1820s and *Samadha Asbaram* in Shikapur in 1850s. The latter has become a hereditary seat and there is little remanence of Udasi *Panth* now. Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha (1930) in *Mahan Kosh* writes, the famous Udasi priest of Shikarpur, Gurdas had recorded meanings of difficult words which appear in Guru Granth Sahib. The *Dharamsaal* of Bhai Gurdas Ram in Shikarpur which commemorated the piousness of the Saint was abandoned following partition and is now a part of a School.

Piara Singh Padam (1978) in *Mabatma Sant Rein* mentions that the famous poet and Udasi priest *Sant Rein* established three *deras* in Halani (Sindh). Enquires made recently state that there were 4 *deras* at one time but only one exists now. This town in Naushahro Feroze district of Sindh has a famous Darbar dedicated to Udasi Saroop Das, built in late 18th century. Following partition in 1947, a Halani Darbar was established in Ajmer (Rajasthan).

EMERGENCE OF SIKHI & SINDH

Prior to the British occupation of Sindh, the Hindus were not allowed to purchase land and property. They could not ring bells and worship idols in the temples. The province of Sindh and Punjab are neighbours and Sikhi had a positive influence on the morale of Hindus. Malkani writes:

“A significant factor in Hindu survival in Sindh during the Muslim period, in reasonably good shape, was the rise of Sikhism in the Punjab. Sanatan Dharma having gone moribund under prolonged Muslim rule, Sikhism came as a fresh breeze in the stale Sindhi atmosphere.”

MIGRATION OF MULTANIS TO UPPER SINDH

Bherumal Mahirchand Advani (1919) wrote that *Amils* (Administrators) left Multan and neighbouring areas in Punjab after 1666 during the reign of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. The *Shikapuris* (people of Shikarpur) who were renowned for their banking and business acumen are descendants of these people. Some of them also

share the same surname with Punjabi *Aroras* and *Khatris* (trading castes).

Some of them were Sikhs and others were influenced by the Sikh religion. As this migration happened before the establishment of Khalsa *Panth* in 1699, this may explain the ‘non Khalsa’ but Sikh tenants of Sindhis.

MANJI & MASAND

Dr Hari Ram Gupta has written that Guru Amar Das established 22 preaching centres called Manjis or cots on which a preacher sat to sing hymns to be followed in chorus by the *Sangat* (congregation). Bhai Lalu was the preacher for some parts of Sindh. Local Sindhis mention the presence of Masand Deras in Bhavnagar (Gujarat). The place is run by *Sehajdharis* but have great reverence for Guru Granth Sahib which is recited with much devotion.

There are several Darbars (& even Mandirs) known as *Khat Wari* Darbars. located in Khairpur (Sindh), Mumbai, Nashik among other places. Khat means cot and the preacher would sit on the cot. Their origin lies the Manji/Masand or *Sevapanthis*.

BHAI DAYAL SINGH

KR Malkani mentions a Khalsa Sikh, Bhai Dayal Singh who was sent to Sindh to inculcate martial spirit among the people. Unfortunately, no further details could be procured about Bhai Dayal Singh. Malkani writes “When Bhai Dayal Singh grew old in the service of the Guru’s army, he was given a sword, a *kirpan*, a *chakra*, and a spear to go and infuse some courage in the Sindhis.”

BHAI KANHAIYA

There is a strong tradition in Sindh that Bhai Kanhaiya, ‘precursor to Red Cross’ came to Sindh. It is said Bhai Kanhiya was sent to Sindh by Guru Gobind Singh. He came to be known as *KhatWaro Bao* (literal meaning in Punjabi is Manji wala Baba) because he gave his sermon while sitting on a cot. Surjit Singh Gandhi (1978) has written briefly on Bhai Kanhiya’s journey to Sindh and his order Sevapanthis who propagated Gurbani in Sindh. Bhai Seva Ram, a follower of Bhai Kanhaiya established centres across Sindh to propagate Sikhi. The Khat Wari Darbar in Shikarpur is said to commemorate the visit of Bhai

Kanhaiya.

GURDWARAS BUILT DURING KHALSA RAJ

KR Malkani writes “*Maharaja Ranjit Singh sent one Manik Singh with a copy of Guru Granth Sahib on elephant-back to be installed in Hyderabad. The Mirs gave land for the purpose and the well-known Akal Bhoonga was built there.*” The writer further states “The rise of Sikh power in the Punjab did come as a moral boost to the Sindhi Hindus, who had promptly put up a few gurdwaras.”

After partition almost all Gurdwaras in Sindh have been abandoned as all Sikhs and most Sindhi Hindus left for India. The abandoned Gurdwara on the Akal Bhunga Road in Hyderabad still exists but has a new owner and no longer serves as a place of worship. The present *Sangat* in Hyderabad has started the work to build a big Gurdwara in the city.

The Sindhis (both Hindus & Sikhs) who came to India after 1947 built Gurdwaras in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. Most of the present Gurdwaras in Sindh (Pakistan) have been built in the last twenty years.

BANDAI SIKHS IN SINDH

During the search on Sindhi (Khalsa) Sikhs, the writer came across Bandai Sindhi Sikhs. I spoke to Sardar Ratan Singh from Indore whose father came from Sindh to India after partition. When asked about the status of Banda Singh Bahadur among his community and if he was considered as the 11th Guru, Rattan Singh clarified that Banda Singh Bahadur was a Sikh of Guru Gobind Singh and military leader of the Sikhs. He said Sikhs have only 10 Gurus and 11th Guru is Guru Granth Sahib.

Rattan Singh was asked if they (Bandai Sikhs) married only among themselves. He replied that this was true but since past 20-30 years they marry among Sikhs. He volunteered and told me that unlike Punjabi Sikhs they are totally vegetarians. (& writer would like to add *Kesbdhari* as well).

Dr Ganda Singh has mentioned that Baba Fateh Singh (of Dera Baba Banda Singh Bahadur) who was contemporary of Maharaja Ranjit

Singh was given jagir by the former. Baba Fateh Singh took two extensive tours as far as Sindh (Larkana, Hyderabad etc.) to enlarge the Gurdwara Sahib in Reasi. Dr Ganda Singh further adds “*There are signs to show that many Sikhs had gone towards Sindh and the south-western deserts and jungles of Punjab during the perilous days that followed the death of Banda Singh.*”

SANT THAHIRIYA SINGH

Chief Khalsa Diwan sent preachers to a few places including to Sindh during early 20th century for the propagation of Sikh principles based on Gurbani. One local person who made much difference and is still revered by the Sindhi community in India and Sindh is Sant Thahiriya Singh (d 1927) of village Kandhra, district Sakhra in Sind. His legacy continues and number of Gurdwaras are named as such ‘Guru Nanak Darbar – Dera Sant Baba Thahiriya Singh Ji. They should not be confused with any ‘Deras’ but it simply honours the name of Sant who brought Sindhis close to Sikhi. They have Gurdwaras in Pimpri (Pune), Gwalior, Indore (both in Madhya Pradesh), Bhavnagar/Dhasa, Navsari, Palitana, Sihor, Dhola (all in Gujarat), Kota (in Rajasthan) and Malerkotla in Punjab.

Sant Thahiriya Singh was a close associate of Sant Sham Singh (1803-1926) who performed *keertan* seva at Harmandir Sahib for many decades and motivated numerous Sikhs during his lifetime including Sant Gurmukh Singh of Patiala (1849-1947) to take up Karseva of Gurdwaras. The combined efforts of these Gursikhs raised the number of Sikhs in Sindh from a mere 1000 in 1901 to 31,011 in 1941.

PRESENT SITUATION IN SINDH

The Hindus in Sindh (& Pakistan) continue to live in a Muslim majority place and have mostly not been party to Arya Samaj/Hindu – Sikh tensions so they continue to hold Guru Nanak and Guru Granth Sahib in reverence. The heterodox belief and practices continue till today and for this reason some people refer to them to as *Sehajdhari* Sikhs. But it would not be correct to call all Sindhi Hindus as *Nanakpanthis*. In Upper Sindh, a minority of Sindhi Hindus who call themselves *Gursikhs* (Sikhs of the Guru) are *Sehajdharis*. They believe in Sikh Gurus and Guru Granth Sahib only. They do not undertake

idol worship. Except for *Kesh* (or 5 Ks) they are Sikhs/Khalsa in every aspect. From these *Gursikhs* some have become *Keshdhari* and *Amritdhari* Sikhs, who now number about 10,000 in Sindh. Since 2005, these Sikhs have opened number of Gurdwaras (not to be confused with Udasi Darbars or Tikanas) in every town and city of Upper Sindh.

The power of internet means that they can get access to *keertan* from Harmandar Sahib and *Katha Vachaks* from East Punjab. A small minority who calls themselves *Gursikhs* and *Nanakpanthis* by other Hindus are *Sehajdhari* Sikhs in real sense. Instead of *Namaste*, their salutation on meeting is *Wabe Guru* and the response is *Dhan Wabe Guru* or *Wabe Guru Ji*. Some of them have taken the next step in their spiritual journey and have become Khalsa. The majority of Sindhis in Pakistan reside in Tharparkar and Umerkot region. These people were historically and culturally part of Rajasthan but have been part of Sindh since 1750s. These people have no tradition of reverence for Guru Nanak (or Guru Granth Sahib in their culture). Relatively they are poor people and include tribes like Bheel and Koli, many are landless labourers. Sadly, they are the neglected people of Sindh.

As a sample of their diverse belief system, five short case studies of Sindhis across both sides of the border are produced below

GHOTKI (SINDH)

Ghotki is a city in northern Sindh and has a Gurdwara Guru Ram Das since 2005. The writer asked the Management Committee the number of *Gursikhs* in the town? They informed that there are 250 people who are part of regular *Sangat* (congregation). The Gurdwara Sahib held 40 days evening *Samagam* (programme) to commemorate the martyrdom of Guru Arjan. The *Samagam* was concluded with *Akhand Paath* which was conducted during last 3 days. The *Sangats* about 500 people but during last three days, the *Sangat* jumped to 5000 per day. When enquired about how many people (Hindus) in Ghotki have *sharda* (respect & reverence) for Guru Nanak? They said, everyone. A similar answer was given at Shikarpur.

VIKASH SINGH

There are only five Khalsa Sikhs in the town but the local Sangat

have great devotion towards Guru Nanak and Guru Granth Sahib. They learn Gurmukhi script specifically to read and recite Gurbani. Bhai Vikash Singh who is Main Sewdar, Granthi and *Keertaniya* at Gurdwara Sahib in Shikarpur was a Nanakpanthi and took *Khande di Pabul* in 2010 and became Khalsa Sikh. Like other Gurdwaras in North Sindh, the one in Shikarpur came into existence only few years ago.

Pardeep

Pardeep is a young man living in Thatta district. He showed lot of enthusiasm while talking to the writer on Sikhi. Unlike North Sindh where there are number of people who could read Gurmukhi script, there are very few in interior and South Sindh. When asked if he was a *Gursikh* (*Sehajdhari* Sikh)? Pardeep said no but he is a *Nitnemi* (one who does *Nitnem*). He daily recites Jap Ji Sahib, Chaupai Sahib in the morning and Rehras Sahib & Ardas in the evening from a *Gutka* which is in Sindhi Persian/Arabic script.

MRS KHATRI

Mrs Khatri, a wife of expatriate in West Midlands told me that she has taken *naam* in Sanghar (interior Sindh). Following an *Akhand Paathb*, the *bukamnama* is given to person to recite and remember it as *naam*. When she was in Sindh, she would go to Darbar and do *seva* for *Sehaj Paathb* of Guru Granth Sahib (in Sindhi script) near the *Gurpurab* of Guru Nanak. The *bhog* of *Sehaj Paathb* is conducted on the *Gurpurab* (birthday of Guru Nanak). The ritual of *naam* was confirmed this from other sources as well.

BHAVNAGAR (INDIA)

The city has about 300 Sikhs (half are Punjabis who are government employees on transferrable jobs and other half is Sindhi Sikhs). The city has 15 Gurdwaras only one was started by a Punjabi Sikh community, rest are run by Sindhis (who are about 35,000 and 70% of them go to Gurdwaras). Majority of the Sindhi wedding are conducted in Gurdwaras in Bhavnagar. Almost every year 2-3 Sindhi youth take *Khande di Pabul* and become Khalsa. This is without any missionary influence, but it is not surprising as many families are close to Sikhi. In Bhavnagar, one can easily distinguish a Punjabi Sikh to

that of Sindhi Sikh. The former is a trimmer and goes to Punjab regularly. The latter is *Kesbdhari* and in many cases *Amritdhari*. Sadly, the Punjabis are generally poor adherent of the Sikh faith. Sindhi Hindus in Bhavnagar are unique indeed.

PRESENT SITUATION IN INDIA

The Sindhi Hindus in India have their own set of challenges. Unlike Punjab and Bengal, after partition of the country, Sindhis came to India but there was no Indian part of Sindh. They settled in neighbouring provinces of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra and other places. As they are not a majority in any place, there can't be a Sindh province in India where they could implement Sindhi language. Hence the Sindhi language is less popular among new generation except where Sindhis are in appreciable numbers like Bhavnagar, Gwalior, Indore, Pune etc. Sindhi intellectuals have not been able to decide the script of their language. Some feel it should be *devnagri* (used for Hindi, Gujarati and Marathi) while other prefer Persian-Arabic script (as used in Sindh, Pakistan). Very few Sindhis in India can read Gurmukhi script. However, they continue to celebrate the *Gurpurab* of Guru Nanak with great fervour. Guru Granth Sahib continues to hold special place for them. But there are exceptions, Bhai Chela Ram's Ashrams gives almost similar exalted status to Guru Granth Sahib like in Gurdwaras. There are no idols of Hindu Gods and Goddesses in their Ashrams. Steven Ramey (2008) mentioned this in his famous work.

CONCLUSION

This article briefly traces the history of Sikh relationship with Sindh. The five short case studies give a flavour of diverse and heterodox beliefs of Sindhi Hindus. They are in some ways like Punjabi Hindus prior to 1947 that would read and recite Gurbani but would also participate in idol worship of Hindu God and Goddesses. The example of Bhavnagar in Gujarat is a unique and very interesting one. Readers can form their own conclusions from these case studies. The motive is to make both Sikhs and Sindhi Hindus aware of their historic relationship. They share a unique bond which should be preserved.

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