

# **Sikhs' Social Role and their Impact in Kenya's Sustainable Development, 1895-1990**

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## **Abstract**

*The Sikh communities are people with a history. In India, Sikhs have attracted various studies particularly because of their diverse role. The same has been done on the diaspora Sikh in Europe, America, Australia, and Africa. This study was motivated by the fact that, the Sikh left India, went abroad, remained a distinct religious community, established themselves, affected the host societies in varying degrees and most importantly, attracted multi racial scholarly attention from a cross section of disciplines including history, sociology and religious studies, that is largely reflecting their diverse effects in a series of fields. However, scholarly coverage of the Sikhs in Kenya, more specifically the interrogation of their social impact 1895-1990, since their coming to the then Imperial British East Africa (IBEA) is scanty. Sikhs influx to Kenya followed British control and expansion from the East Coast of Africa to the interior of what became Kenya, it was necessitated by increased demand for Indian labour force which was designated by William Mackinnon of IBEA company to work on the Kenya-Uganda railway. The paper investigates the Sikh's social institutions, temples, Sikhs' role in education, health and sports in Kenya. The study was informed by Humanistic model. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Non-probability, purposive sampling procedures specifically snowball were engaged. Informants involved were specific people who were in a position of being conversant with research problem yet were scattered in major urban centres in Kenya. Observation and Interview guide instruments were used. Data was analyzed qualitatively as was envisaged in descriptive research design applied in this study. The findings of the study are an addition to Sikh historiography and a contribution to knowledge. The paper brings to the fore unique, distinct social institutions of the Sikh community as people with a role to play to the larger Kenyan society.*

**Key Words:** Social Institutions, Social Role, Sustainable Development, Colonialism, Sikhism

## **Introduction**

Sikhs contact with the East Africa coast did not start with the coming of the first Indians who came in the second century AD. Actually, Indian ships came to East African coast before the birth of Sikhism and its founder Guru (teacher) Nanak in 1369. It is important to note however that though the Asians started coming to the East coast of Africa centuries before the founding of Sikhism, it was not until the expansion of the British control over East Coast of Africa that the Indians, (more particularly Sikhs) began to appear in large numbers. The process began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The peak of the Sikhs influx to East Africa was during the importation of Indian labour designated for the construction of the Kenya-Uganda railway.

During the railway construction exercise, the supply of material, labour and personnel was contracted to a Karachi based Indian entrepreneur A.M Jeevanjee. Acting on the advice of the railway engineer, the labour force from Punjab were thought to be more reliable in military, police and construction work.

In 1895, A.M Jeevanjee recruited and dispatched the first batch of 350 Indians via Karachi. In 1896, more Indians were disembarked at Mombasa. By 1899, a total of 18,000 Indians were working on the railway project. By 1902 out of 32,000 Indians who had come 2,493 had died while 6,724 stayed on and others went back to India Gregory (1971). The migration of Sikhs into Kenya did not stop even after the completion of the railway because other Sikhs came not as total strangers but as relatives of already settled families in East Africa.

Sikhs are a distinct people with a history, as it can be established from various studies carried out elsewhere; this is sufficient reason for historians to study them. In India, many historical studies have been undertaken on this community for example, Khushwant, (1963), Pyne, (1915), Gokul, (1946). Written records indicate that the Sikhs came to Kenya with the advent of colonialism. They have lived and prospered in Kenya, yet their social role in Kenya's development has remained off focus and hence the need to analyze their social institutions, temples, schools, health institutions and their role in sports.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The study centres on a community that migrated from their homeland in Punjab Gregory (1971) to the new environment in East Africa. The Sikhs had to change to urban life, commerce, trade and professionalism in their new place of adaptation. They had to seek economic, political and social survival, and at the same time maintain their identity by conforming to their religion and culture. Sikhs had to maintain their religious rites, dressing pattern and institutions and pass on the experience of the adults, to the young, and defends itself from external and internal forces of disintegration, in essence to comprehensively study the Sikh community demands an all round approach as postulated by humanistic theory Mcleod (2015). Humanism and humanistic studies whole person, and the uniqueness of each individual. It looks at human behavior from both the eye of the observer and that of the observed, Mcleod (2015). As was envisioned in this study, humanistic theory underscores qualitative research methods for example collecting data from both primary and secondary sources using instruments such as open ended questionnaire,

unstructured interviews and observation. Humanistic theorists view human beings as rational and thus fundamentally different from other animals incapable of thought and speech, hence a befitting the lens through which this study was visualized Mcleod, (2015).

## **Methodology**

The information was collected from both oral and written sources and Descriptive research design was applied. The main site of the field research was Nairobi, Meru, Makindu, Nakuru, Kisumu and Eldoret because Sikhs have largely settled in these towns. In order to reach information rich cases the researcher adopted non-probability methods. Specifically the researcher applied purposive particularly snowballing because of the special nature of study which demanded specific informants, that is only those who were in a position of being conversant with the problem of research yet most of them were scattered in Kenya's major urban centres. Oral information got from both Sikhs and non-Sikhs interviewed helped the researcher corroborate evidence. Interviewing religious leaders, association or institution leaders, the chairmen of Sikh Gurudwara, businessmen, Sikh social workers, Kenyan Sikh government officials of either colonial and/or post-colonial period, teachers and descendants of early Sikh settlers in Meru provided immense first hand information. The other sources of data included archived private papers, proceedings of Municipal and legislative council from Kenya National Archive. The researcher visited University of Nairobi library and accessed bound records of East Africa Standard volumes of the colonial periods, local newspapers, books, journals, pamphlets, dissertations and Theses.

The researcher used interview questionnaire guide alongside observation during interview sessions. The entire research involved the main researcher and four research assistants. Data was qualitatively analyzed by quick impression summary of key findings, thematic and by content analysis.

## **Sikh Social Institutions (1890-1990)**

### **Temples and Schools**

Sikhs' settlement in Kenya was associated with systematic establishment of temples (Gurudwara) starting from their first embarkation at Mombasa to the interior. A Gurudwara for the Sikhs was a central institution for socio- cultural and political needs. Sikhs who assembled at the Gurudwara were in the presence of the Guru and binding decisions were made at such collectivity. Sanctity was attached to such assemblage Grewal (O.I:1997). At the Gurudwara the Sikhs came face to face with holy book, the Guru Granthi Sahib, which gave them power over the profane Grewal (O.I:1997). Besides worshiping, the Gurudwara was also used for learning for example the Sikh children learnt their mother tongue Punjabi as well as the tenets of their religion, Gokul (1972)..

By dint of hard work, Sikhs earned wealth which they used to build the Gurudwara. Since many Sikhs were artisans, carpenters and masons and timber was readily available it enabled

them to construct temples in various localities of the urban centers in Kenya. Similarly Sikh community had professionals in construction industry and architects who took part in design and construction of Gurudwaras as part of 'Kar seva' voluntary service Jongider (O.I:1996). The family of Mediratta of Elementaita made a generous contribution of restoring Sikh Gurudwara at Nakuru after it was ravaged by fire. In recent times, architect Nandhra T.S offered voluntary service to his community as both architectural consultancy and contractor, Nandhra (O.I:1996). In Kenya the Sikhs have built temples in Mombasa, Nakuru, Meru, Makindu, Nanyuki, Nyeri, Thika, Magadi, Kitale, Kisumu and Eldoret. In some towns there are two temples, one for the Ramgarhia Sikh temple and the other for Sri Guru Singh Sabha. At Nairobi there were eight Gurudwaras.

The members of Sri Guru Singh Sabha built the first Gurudwara at Kilindini in 1893. The need for space made the management purchase two acres of land in 1918 where a guest house comprising of eleven rooms and a kitchen was added in 1927. The foundation of the temple for a spacious Gurudwara was laid on 13th April 1937 by Hem Singh. Besides, a Sikh girls' school was added in 1933, and in 1939, a second school came up to meet the growing demand for schools. By 1963 the school had about 200 students Narain (1963). The first Sikh Gurudwara at Nairobi was a tent, set up in 1899, through the aid of Sardar Kishen Singh, in conjunction with other Sikhs employed in the police and the railway. In 1911 the tent was replaced with a dome shaped concrete temple, Narain (1963). At Kisumu, the Gurudwara was inaugurated in 1909. At first they had constructed a simple corrugated iron sheet temple, on the land which was assigned to them by the railway authority. Through the efforts of Babu Didar Singh Sandhu, Sardar Kehar Singh, Sardar Jaget Singh, Kala Singh, Babu Nathu Ram, the temple was built at Kisumu. It was completed and opened in 1914. The attached guest house to the temple was useful for the Sikhs and other Asians who travelled to and from Uganda, Tanzania and made a stop-over. In addition, Sardar Katar Singh Grewal, Dr, Katar Singh and Sardar Dhanwant Singh helped in putting up a school, initially called Government of India school Kisumu. The school was rented to the government between 1926 till 1939. Thereafter it was leased to the Produce Control Board until 1952, when it was given back to the Singh Sabha and then renamed Sikh Girls School. This was significant since at that time, education for Girls was still neglected. The Girls school was a pointer to Sikhs' commitment to equality between sexes.

Nanyuki Gurudwara, like the Nyeri Gurudwara was a bungalow shaped attached with the rest house, kitchen and dining hall. The Nyeri Sikh Centre was started by Kartar Singh, Waryam Singh, Mistry Karam Singh and Dr. Lal Singh in 1920. The newest Gurudwara was established in 1933.

Sikhs, similarly constructed a magnificent temple at Makindu after the first Gurudwara was destroyed by fire. The initial Gurudwara had been built and completed in 1930 by the Sikh railway workers, businessmen and other Sikhs from Public Works Department. Fire burnt down both the Gurudwara and Sikhs' holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib. Makindu Gurudwara is stone built, travelers from and to Mombasa particularly Indians, make a stop-over and get accommodation.

At Nakuru, the Sikhs constructed a school alongside the Gurudwara. The Sikh school was among the first schools in the area. At Eldoret, the first Sikh centre construction started in the second decade of the 20th century. The later Sri Guru Singh Sabha temple in Eldoret was completed in 1962. Adjacent to Mt. Elgon in north rift the Sikhs built a small temple at Kitale in 1930.

The large number and spread of the Sikh temples in Kenya shows the importance the Sikhs attach to their religion and how it permeates their social life. Apart from spiritual significance, Sikh temples are land marks and they display Sikhs' organizational skills. They also show Sikh settlement, spread and influence in Kenya. Despite the fact that Sikhs built temples in Kenya, its social significance to the Kenyan public remained minimal. Except for limited unskilled employment opportunities sweeping, cooking and security guard, Sikh centres to the Africans were without religious attachment.

Though Sikhism has been in Kenya more than a century, its influence as a religion on African Kenyans is minimal. The beturbaned Africans at either of the Sikh temple, particularly at Makindu, do so as part of their work uniform without religious attachment Lou (O.I:1996). Unlike Christian churches, where Africans were members, and had free entry and exit without detailed formalities, (unless security was involved) the Sikh centres remain restricted places. All visitors particularly people of African descent have to go through a procedure to secure admission. The mistrust between the Sikhs and Africans, since the colonial period, has failed to melt down Bharat (1972). The two communities, Africans and Sikhs are aware of the existing inter-racial social strain. The extent of suspicion between the two was not a local affair but a national issue, Daily Nation ( June 1988) evidenced in speeches by political leaders cautioning the African domestic servants working for the Indians against peddling lies about their employers Nation ( June 1988). Similarly, politicians cautioned their colleagues against making inflammatory statement that may jeopardize the already volatile social situation between the Africans and Asians, Sunday Standard, (May 1983).

Meanwhile, schools constructed alongside the Gurudwara were significant social contribution of the Sikhs in Kenya. Despite the colonial racial policies which skewed learning institutions to racism, schools stuck to the noble role of increasing literacy horizon. After attaining independence in 1963, schools became non-racial. Sikh schools in Kenya include, Khalsa Boys and Girls at Nairobi Racecourse road, Khalsa South 'C' primary school, Guru Nanak primary schools. Others are in major towns including Mombasa and Kisumu. Individual Sikhs and families built high cost institutions, for example the Gulab Lochab Academy Eldoret for the Lochab brothers.

Khalsa School at Nairobi was initiated by the then president of the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurudwara Ragi Labh Singh working in conjunction with other educationalists S. S Vohra and Mohan in 1930. Khalsa School later grew to include both secondary and primary sections Kaur (O.I:1997). The subsequent expansion of the school was done through 'Kar Sava' and individual donations Kaur (O.I:1997). On the walls of the school, names of the donors and the amounts donated by each individual Sikh are written. On average most classrooms were constructed at the

cost of Ksh 2,000 each Kaur (O.I:1997). Sikhs' aim of constructing schools alongside the temples was partly influenced by the colonial racial discrimination in schools. Sikh schools countered the challenges which their youths were exposed to in racist colonial schools.

Closely accompanying independence in Kenya was an increased number of African students joining schools previously reserved for white and Asian races. Partly forced by the African influx, Sikh parents transferred most of their children to high cost schools previously reserved for the white race, while other sent their children to study abroad, as a few remained. Reasons that forced the Sikhs to transfer their children ranged from the legacy of casteism to inter-racial suspicion between Africans and Asians. The colonial regulations had relegated the Africans to last place, while the Sikhs were in second place according to the racial hierarchy in colonial Kenya.

Meanwhile, schools as centers of enhancing racial integration among the youth did not achieve much. Similarly, the few Sikh children who went to school together with Africans were still haunted by colonial racial legacies and the animosity which prevailed between Indians and Africans. This distorted possibilities of racial integration.

Professor of Philosophy of the University of Nairobi, Nyasani, opposed the argument that given time the young Asian youths sharing schools with Africans at public schools would at one time break racial barriers and integrate Sunday Times (Sept, 1985). He observed that the Asian's racial attitude were formed and instilled within families very early. Sikh children were advised against racial integration which the learners carried to school for confirmation. According to Nyasani when the children got home and recounted their inter-racial encounters, they were further instructed against inter-racial liaisons Sunday Times (Sept, 1985). Accordingly this process went on and on, until it formed a vicious circle, where an Asian Child is born, grows up under racist training, becomes old, to the extent that they could no longer integrate, instead they start propagating the same racial prejudice Sunday Times (Sept, 1985). At inter-racial schools, the Sikh children aware of their social, religious and economic differences, formed their own social groupings, and only interacted with selected African students, particularly with families of higher economic status. Most of these relationships were temporal and situational without firm foundations Sunday Times (Sept, 1985) which- diminished immediately they parted institutions. This kind of relationship was not limited among students but also characterized Sikh employer and the African employee. It was predominantly, master servant. Promotion to positions of leadership in Sikh firms was racially based than merit.

## **Health and Sports**

The other profession that the Sikhs influenced was health. After their arrival in Kenya, some worked as sub-assistant medical officer, assistant surgeons and nurses. The second generation of the Sikhs joined universities and excelled in several professions including medical. By 1959 there were Sikh medical doctors like Kartar Singh, Sarmuk Singh and Kishen Singh Narain (1963). In private sector, Sikhs served on British Red Cross, Asian blood bank, Indian maternity hospital, Social Service league and school children health. The Sikhs, as a community

and individuals, constructed clinics and hospitals, like Ramgarhia dispensary Nairobi, Guru Nanak clinic Mombasa, Ramgarhia Sikh dispensary and Nanak Sikh dispensaries in Kisumu. The major Sikh medical institution in Kenya is Guru Nanak Ramgarhia Sikh hospital situated at Pangani Nairobi. Unfortunately, the name tends to exclude Jat and the Namdharis Sikhs from the hospital. Before the elevation Guru Nanak Ramgarhia Sikh hospital, it operated as a clinic until 1985, when it acquired hospital status. The hospital serves mostly the upper middle class people Nandhra (O.I:1996).

## **Sports**

The Sikhs' role has also been noticeable in sports. They started active sporting in the 1920's. Initially, because of their small number the Sikhs were affiliated to the general Indian sports association the Railway Indian Institute Narain (1963) where they remained until they established their sports club in 1920. Sikhs first sports club was called 'Khalsa Union. It was formed under the initiative of Messrs Balwant Singh, Kishen Singh, and Sadhu Singh. The first club consisted of fifteen members, whose, aims were to improve physical and mental conditions of her members. Khalsa union became a forum where Sikhs met as equals, discussed matters affecting them as individuals and as a community. Khalsa union, however faced an early exit Narain (1963).

Almost immediately, the Sikhs formed another sports organization Khalsa club. It was, started by Mahan Singh and Bakhtawar Singh. Hockey and cricket were the main games of the club. Volleyball was the third best. Due to internal dissension, the Khalsa club made an early exit.

After having learnt from their weaknesses, the Sikhs eventually came up with a new and more formidable organization under the new name 'Sikh Union of Kenya, formed in 1930. Except for the change of name, from, "Sikh Union" to "Simba Union" which followed the government's directive that outlawed all ethnic or communal or tribal names from organizations, for all practical purposes Simba Union was Sikh Union Mohinder (O.I:1996). Sikhs reclaimed the virgin, rugged, high gradient terrain into a sports field disapproving apprehensions of the white municipal engineer, Narain (1963).

Membership to Simba Union was open to Sikhs who could afford payment of membership fee. Non-Sikh Asians and whites were admitted as honorary members. Though it was pointed out that the Africans failed to become members because of the exotic nature of the games (i.e, hockey, cricket and volleyball) then played at the club Narain (1963), the colonial racial segregation policies would not permit social union of Africans and Sikhs. Equally important, was the suspicion and mistrust that existed between Africans and Sikhs which disfavored such interaction. This in part explains why up to date, Simba Union is predominantly a Sikh body with negligible number of Africans. This does not however, negate the Sikhs contribution in sports, particularly hockey. Between 1920 and 1959 the Sikh Union held nearly all the trophies then contested for in hockey except the M.R D'Souza Gold Cup Narain (1963). Some trophies contested for were won thrice and others forever. In the first Olympic team sent

out of Kenya in 1956, the Sikhs were dominant numbering eight, excluding the coach Mahan Singh. Before becoming a coach Mahan Singh had been a player East Africa standard (Jan 27, 1958).

The outstanding Sikh hockey players who went to represent Kenya in Melbourne Australia as early as 1956 included, the captain Surjeet Singh, others were Sardara Singh, (nick named Chhura knife), Bhakhtawar Singh, Joginder Singh Kata, Chattar Singh, Ajit Singh, Sher Singh and Bachita Singh. The achievements of the Sikhs in sports did not only enhance sentimental or emotional satisfactions but also went long way to remove the webs of racial prejudice that one group held against the other.

### **Sikhs Motor Racing**

Sikhs through rally driver Joginder Singh, displayed their sportsmanship in motor racing. The two brothers, Joginder Singh and his co-driver Jeswant Singh set a record that not many Kenyans surpassed. Joginder Singh was a Kenyan by birth, born in 1932, a few miles from Kericho town. His father Bala Singh was a Sikh born in Punjab. He migrated to Kenya after 1920.

Unlike many European rally drivers, who began racing at an early age, Joginder Singh began at the age of 26 years. The following chart furnishes Joginder Singh's racing career as summarized by Amin et al (1975).

**Table 1: Sikhs Motor Racing from 1956-1974**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Car No</b>	<b>Co-Driver</b>	<b>Make of Car</b>	<b>Position</b>
1959	57	R.M. Patel	Volkswagen	9
1960	66	Jaswant Singh (Sikh)	Volkswagen	9
1961	16	Jaswant Singh (Sikh)	Volkswagen	16
1962	44	Jaswant Singh (Sikh)	Volkswagen	5
1963	75	Jaswant Singh (Sikh)	Fiat 300	4
1964	80	Jaswant Singh (Sikh)	Comet	21
1965	1	Jaswant Singh (Sikh)	Volvo PV 544	1
1966	52	Bharat Bardwaj	Volvo P 132	2
1967	15	H.S Semhi	Volvo 1225	4
1968	3	Ber Smith	Datsun 2000	5
1969	22	Bharat Bardwaj	Volvo 1425	2
1970	17	Ken Remyard	Datsun 1600	2
1971	30	Jaswant Singh (Sikh)	Ford Escort	16
1972	9	H.S Semhi	Ford Escort R. 600	RTD
1973	18	T.M Samuel	Colt Galant	RTD
1974	46	David Doing	Lancer	1

In 1965 and 1974, Jorginder Singh put Kenya on world map and became the first non-European to win an international motor race in Kenya Amin et al (1975). Out of the sixteen years of Jorginder Singh's motor racing career for seven years, he was co-driven by his brother, Jaswant Singh. The success of the duo racing in a Volvo in 1965 earned them an invitation to Sweden (the manufacturers of Volvo) for celebration. In 1966 Joginder Singh took part in Swedish rally. Though he performed poorly, but completed the race Amin et al (1975). Like other sports, Joginder Singh's role in motor rallying promoted inter-racial relationship between the Sikhs and Africans. Publicity that Joginder received from the print and, electronic media influenced public opinion to accept the Indian Kenyans as people with a role to play in Kenya's glory.

In conclusion, though the Sikhs attached a lot of importance to their religion as was exemplified in the construction of temples in various cities whenever they set foot but temples did not only serve Sikhs' religious land marks but also became a beacon that showed when the Sikhs entered, settled in particular place and spread in Kenya. Schools and hospitals constructed by the Sikhs subsequently became significant social institution in the development of education and health. Finally Sikhs' participation in sports and rally racing contributed significantly to bridging racial webs between the Sikhs and African.

The study recommends for: First A comparative study of the Sikhs' political and economic role in Kenya and India and second the government to initiate decolonizing the spirit between the Sikhs and Africans.

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