

SIKHS

in Southeast Asia

NEGOTIATING AN IDENTITY

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SIKHS **in Southeast Asia**

NEGOTIATING AN IDENTITY

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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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Ravindra K. Jain is a senior anthropologist, retired from the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. He is a leading international authority on the Indian diaspora. Educated at Lucknow and Canberra, Professor Jain held the Chair of Social Anthropology and was Dean, School of Social Sciences (1992–94) at JNU. He has taught sociology and social anthropology in all parts of the world, including a prestigious appointment as University Lecturer in Social Anthropology of South Asia, and as Fellow of Wolfson College at Oxford University (1966–74). He was elected to the THB Symons Fellowship in Commonwealth Studies and in that capacity held a visiting professorship at the Australian National University, Canberra (1995–96).

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Amarjit's recent publications include *Mobility, Labour Migration and Border Controls in Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006; co-edited with Ian Metcalfe); *Wage Labour in Southeast Asia since 1840* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); *Women Workers in Industrialising Asia: Costed, not valued* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and *Historical Dictionary of Malaysia*, 2nd ed. (Scarecrow Press, 2001). She has also guest-edited special journal issues on Labour Migration. Professor Kaur's work on Indian migration and the Indian diaspora appears in a number of books and articles and is widely cited. Amarjit is currently President of the Malaysia and Singapore Society of Australia.

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