

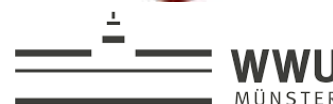


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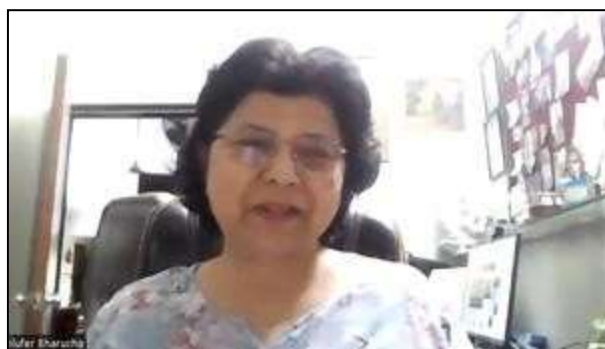
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Report on The Red Turbans of Shanghai: From Colonial Instruments to Anti Colonialists, 1885 - 1945

by Dr. Manpreet J. Singh on 23rd January 2023

The Mumbai Münster Institute of Advanced Studies (MMIAS), University of Mumbai, had organised a session on *The Red Turbans of Shanghai: From Colonial Instruments to Anti Colonialists, 1885 - 1945* under the MMIAS International Interdisciplinary Lecture Series. Professor Dr. Nilufer E. Bharucha, Co-Director, MMIAS, welcomed all the participants and introduced the speaker Dr. Manpreet J. Singh and the topic of the lecture which focussed on the Sikh diaspora in Shanghai between 1885 and 1945.



Professor Dr. Nilufer E. Bharucha, Co-Director, MMIAS

Professor Bharucha then requested Dr. Manpreet Singh to begin her lecture. Dr. Singh's lecture explored the history of Sikhs who worked as policemen in Shanghai for the British forces in the late nineteenth century. She drew insights for her study from the research conducted by Yin Cao, a Chinese scholar from the Tsinghua University, on the Sikh presence in Shanghai.



Dr. Manpreet J. Singh, Author and Independent Researcher

The lecture began with Dr. Singh focussing on the influence of the Sikh community in Shanghai and how the community has been documented in local history. The role of Sikh policemen between 1885 and 1945 was so integral that even today they are featured as caricatures in movies and comics. The Sikh policemen were referred to as 'Hong Tou' with a continuation of 'A San' which equates to 'red heads' and 'yes sir' literally. However, the 'A San' can also be interpreted as number '3' in the Shanghai dialect which, as Dr. Singh states, might be a reference to how the policemen were considered the lowest in the hierarchy among the British, Chinese, and the Sikhs.

Dr. Singh then spoke about the history of the arrival of the Sikhs in Shanghai and how they came to be the British compradors in the first place. The British accomplished the task of militarising Sikh soldiers under the pretence of providing them with an outlet to connect with their Khalsa identity again, which ironically served as a tool of resistance under the Sikh Raj against the colonial rule.

Dr. Manpreet Singh then outlined the history of the Sikh individuals who were deployed in Shanghai in the 19th century after the British won the first opium war against the Chinese monarchy. In 1884, the Sikh Riot Police was recruited from the Ludhiana regiment to assist with the turmoil caused by the Chinese-Taipai Rebellion against the existing monarchy, and it stayed in the system for the next 60 years.

The Sikh-British Association, according to Dr. Singh, was founded on compromises in order to derive mutual benefits. In the case of the British, it was the possibility of stopping a mutiny, whereas for the Sikhs it was the promise of financial perks and an improved life.



Dr. Singh's lecture also reflected upon how the alliance with the British eventually ruptured the self-image of the Sikhs. Due to the newly formed British militarised identity, it caused irreversible damage to the Khalsa identity of the Sikhs.

The speaker mentioned how according to Yin Cao, in his book *From Policemen to Revolutionaries: A Sikh Diaspora in Global Shanghai, 1885-1945*, the Sikhs in Punjab preferred to join the police forces in South-East Asia due to the considerable difference in the salary and perks provided in comparison to military enlistment.

Dr. Singh then quoted Tony Ballantyne, who has stated that the Sikh diasporic network is a web which not only connects Punjab with overseas settlements but also links these multiple settlements with each other. This gave the Sikh policemen in Shanghai leeway to ask for benefits from their British supervisors, which they knew were being provided to their counterparts in other regions. At the turning point of the century, when it was discovered that the West offered even higher monetary benefits than the South East, many Sikh policemen instead joined the police force in Siberia and North America. Dr. Singh observes how this migration to the West would later be the onset of extreme racial

discrimination against their Sikh identity which till then had remained uncontested in colonised India.

Amidst the rampant insubordination within Shanghai, the British tried to reign in the Sikhs by constructing a Gurudwara owing to the rootedness of the Sikhs in religion. The British had already tried this method successfully in the army.



Ironically, the Gurudwara, which initially served as an assembly and meeting point for the Sikh policemen and their families, later went on to serve as a centre for subversive activities against the British rule.

The beginning of this subversion began with the realisation that the preferential treatment given to the Sikhs was only until they could be used by their colonial masters. This realisation, combined with the persistent discrimination against the Sikhs in the West, came to head with the Komagata Maru incident which occurred in 1914, where only 24 out of the total 376 passengers on a ship were admitted into Canada while the remaining were turned away and had to return to the Budge Budge port in Calcutta where 22 of the Sikhs were shot dead by the imperial British forces. The Ghadar movement, founded in 1913 by the Punjabi residents in the United States and Canada to fight against the British rule in India, gained popularity.

Many incidents served as catalysts to the already disrupted dynamic between the Sikh policemen in Shanghai and their British officials including the call for Sikh and Chinese policemen to open-fire on a group of Chinese people trying to enter the police premises in 1925. This particular incident evoked for the Sikh individuals the memories of Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919. By 1930, a large number of Sikh policemen had resigned from the Shanghai police force. After the attack on Pearl Harbour by the Japanese imperial army in 1941, Shanghai police came under the jurisdiction of the Japanese and by 1945 the Indian police unit in Shanghai was officially disbanded.

Dr. Manpreet Singh further stated how the story of the Sikh diaspora in Shanghai has either been subsumed into the larger national narrative or glossed over in the British history to avoid acknowledging the subversion toward the empire, and hence has never found its due place. She proposed that exploring the ruptures that underline the seemingly strong connection between the British and the Sikhs will make for an interesting focus area for future research. Apart from this question, Dr. Singh further suggested looking into the different facets of this diaspora such as whether the masculine self-image of the trained Sikh soldiers trapped them into serving for the British forces, and how did this choice reflect on their place in the family structures and their relationships with the non-militarised components of the Sikh community. Dr. Singh then quoted Aakriti Kohli who has studied the militarisation of Sikh masculinity and talks about how the British casted

the martial races in comparison with the image of the West masculinity but never allowed the Sikh masculine image to reach the pedestal of the British. Hence, their position of power and its simultaneous contentious relationship with their alternate Khalsa identity is also an integral aspect to look into.

Dr. Singh concluded the lecture by presenting various slides that visually documented the lives of the Red Turbans in Shanghai through old and recent images.



Professor Nilufer Bharucha then thanked Dr. Manpreet Singh for presenting a detailed and pioneering research in an unexplored facet of the Sikh Diaspora and opened the session for questions and queries.

The conference concluded with a vote of thanks by Ms. Kirti Risbud, Research Associate, MMIAS. Participants from India and around the world joined the lecture online.

Click the link below for the complete video of the lecture.

Link: <https://youtu.be/GQ2YNUXReZE>

Place: Mumbai

Date: 23rd January 2023
