

## Book Reviews

### Southeast Asia

#### *Sikhs in Southeast Asia: Negotiating an identity*

Edited by SHAMSUL A.B. and ARUNAJEET KAUR

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Photographs, Maps, Bibliography, Index.

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This volume on the Sikh community in Southeast Asia is based on localised and collective experiences of the community in the diaspora who have strived to maintain religious and cultural connections with the homeland. Among other things, it brings forth the cross-cultural dilemmas confronting this community in Southeast Asia. Here, it resonates with the concerns, ambiguities and aspirations of the global Sikh diaspora. The two main themes of the volume — as is the case with a lot of literature on immigrant communities — are ‘migration’ and ‘identity’, which are dealt with in different dimensions by the many contributors. While more publications are available on the diasporic experiences of the Sikhs in the West, similar literature on Southeast Asia is negligible. In this respect, this book makes a commendable effort to address this gap and throw light on the little known experience and history of this sub-ethnic community. In doing so, it also contributes significantly to the sparse literature available on the Indian immigrant communities in the region.

Migration flows between South and Southeast Asia, especially in the past two centuries, had been orchestrated and facilitated by the agency of the colonial enterprise. While on the one hand, the Sikh communities contributed as auxiliaries to the British in their colonial expansion and took up jobs abroad to ameliorate economic grievances, they were also being increasingly drawn into the parallel growth of anti-colonial activities across the globe. Few studies have been made on the dilemmas and contradictions of Sikh armed recruits with their rising national consciousness and awareness of racial discrimination in spite of their image as loyal and obedient colonials. This dichotomy among the Sikh soldiers in China was raised by Madhavi Thampi in her book, *Indians in China: 1800–1949* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005). Arunajeet’s chapter resonates with Thampi’s idea in relation to the Sikhs as victims of agencies that created their misinterpreted

identities beyond homeland borders, though she does not refer to Thampi's work at all. Also, Arunajeet's chapter, although it raises an important question, is more descriptive and documentary rather than providing any substantial analysis in the larger framework of similar psychological predicaments. The Sikh community's dilemmas with identity and their struggle for survival continued unabated in the post-Partition narrative and post-colonial 'nation-building' strategies. There has also been a distinct difference of imagined homelands and cross-cultural identity formations for subsequent generations, as brought up in many articles in this volume.

The question of Sikh identity in Southeast Asia is complex and overlaps with similar issues for the South Asian minority as a whole in the region. Thus, while the Sikhs had to deal with the misnomer of a 'Bengalese' identity (as A. Mani points out in his essay on Indonesia) in many places in Southeast Asia, their place of religious congregation, the gurdwara, has been used by both the Sikhs and the Sindhis. Mani also points out that the Sikhs in Indonesia are not seen as a distinct ethnic category, but are grouped as Hindus (p. 142). Interestingly, the Bollywood rhetoric relating to the imagined homeland for the Sikh diaspora is essentially a shared space with 'Punjabi' cultural influence.

Jain's article on ethnographic perspectives and methodological debates, with extensive references to work done in this field, is one of the brightest chapters in the volume. Mani's work on Brunei and Indonesia is also informative and interesting and contributes almost as primary sources of information, especially on the Sikhs in the lesser known towns and suburbs across Indonesia.

One important lacuna in this volume is that the discourse of the 'local' fails to connect with the 'global', which is necessary to comprehend the growth of complex and changing transnational identities in the region. With the exception of the commendable contribution by Dusenbury, in which he addresses the process of 'glocalization' (p. 61) in the Southeast Asian Sikh community, most of the articles leave us with an impression of different groups in the Sikh community with a similar religious allegiance to homeland institutions, striving to maintain a unique physical and cultural identity in separate geopolitical peripheries with little or no connections with their fraternity in Southeast Asia, or across the globe. Given the regular attempts at endogamous arranged marriages within the community, and efforts made to preserve religious, cultural and linguistic identities, one wonders if such efforts were not helpful in facilitating networks and bridging gaps across geographies, especially in the current technological revolution and social media sphere. Can the role of women and their participation and/or lack of participation in leadership roles in

Malaysia discussed in the last chapter by Kaur and Kaur Ludher then be addressed along with the issue of the increasingly single status of educated women in Myanmar (Myat Mon's article, p. 137) within the patriarchal traditions of the Sikh community? The question of whether there is awareness within the community of similar gender concerns and other problems in the region needs to be raised in any such scholarship. While there is a reference to bringing *gianas* from Malaysia to Indonesia, as narrated by Mani (p. 156), one wonders whether such activities remain confined within the precincts of religious institutions only.

The question of networks and interactions within the Sikh diaspora in the region also becomes important in positioning the sub-ethnic minority community within the framework of Southeast Asia's multiethnic societies. One also finds the inward approaches of the community problematic, especially in the interviews by Theingi and Theingi: 'most Thais responded that they had never interacted with Sikhs; ... They perceive Sikhs to be in their own close-knit community, with little connection to Thai society' (p. 232). This is in spite of the fact that the Sikhs are increasingly adopting Thai names and speaking Thai, sometimes much more fluently than Punjabi. This brings us to comparisons and reflections on similar South Asian diasporic communities like the Sindhis who had followed identical politico-economic and socio-cultural transformations since the colonial times. Theingi and Theingi's article on Sikh participation in textile trading with the Japanese and the tailoring business (pp. 227–9) resonates with the economic trajectories of the Sindhis in different parts of Southeast Asia, suggesting that research on deeper connections within Indian business networks could have been interesting and useful.

In a similar context, the argument for kinship-oriented social networks that did not extend beyond family ties, as expressed by Yahya, while interesting, may be compared to traditional kinship-based networks among other Indian business communities like the Chettiars, Sindhis and Gujaratis. These indigenous networks not only acted as a means of financial and manpower support, and sources of information, but also helped sustain the business communities under colonialism without any major conflict of interests with the Imperialists. The idea of the '*bhappa*' Punjabis would have had a similar basis, though their transition in the contemporary setting would have been different, as suggested by the author. It was common for those recruited by the Indian business communities from the homeland network to eventually establish a separate business. Given such precedents, future generations became wary of dependence on their community networks. Historical interpretation is indeed important for Yahya's argument, which is based on cursory research.

The first few chapters in the volume have overlapping historical narratives of the Sikhs in the region, and the editors should have tackled the repetition. A thematic organisation of the chapters could have also made the publication more connected and interesting. However, in spite of its limitations, this volume makes an important contribution to the discourse of sub-ethnic transnational identities in Southeast Asia.

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*The spirit of things: Materiality and religious diversity in Southeast Asia*

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Once upon a time the modern academic study of Asian religions meant primarily the collection and close textual examination of the major scriptures in order to uncover the underlying tenets of the religion. Religion was held to be principally about the next world, rather than the material world. This view gained influence during the colonial period when scholars of religion under the influence of Weber saw Asian religions, unlike their Protestant counterparts in Christian Europe, as incompatible with modernity as exemplified by the 'secular' colonial powers. Following decolonisation and independence, attention shifted to religious practice — in particular, how religion was an obstacle to economic modernisation and rational governance. The expectation was that religion would steadily become confined to the private realm, if it did not die out altogether. More recently, however, scholars are discovering the importance of religion to economic prosperity. Why has this happened? Put simply, the capitalist transformation of Asia over the last three to four decades, and the improved material well-being of many Asian citizens, has led to the stubborn persistence, if not flourishing, of religion in this region. As a result the material aspects of modern religious life in Asia are increasingly drawing the attention of scholars. It is this phenomenon that is the subject of this timely publication, *The spirit of things: Materiality and religious diversity in Southeast Asia*.

*The spirit of things* is an ambitious attempt to study the religiosity of a range of material objects associated with the various religious traditions throughout contemporary Southeast Asia. The volume tries to do justice