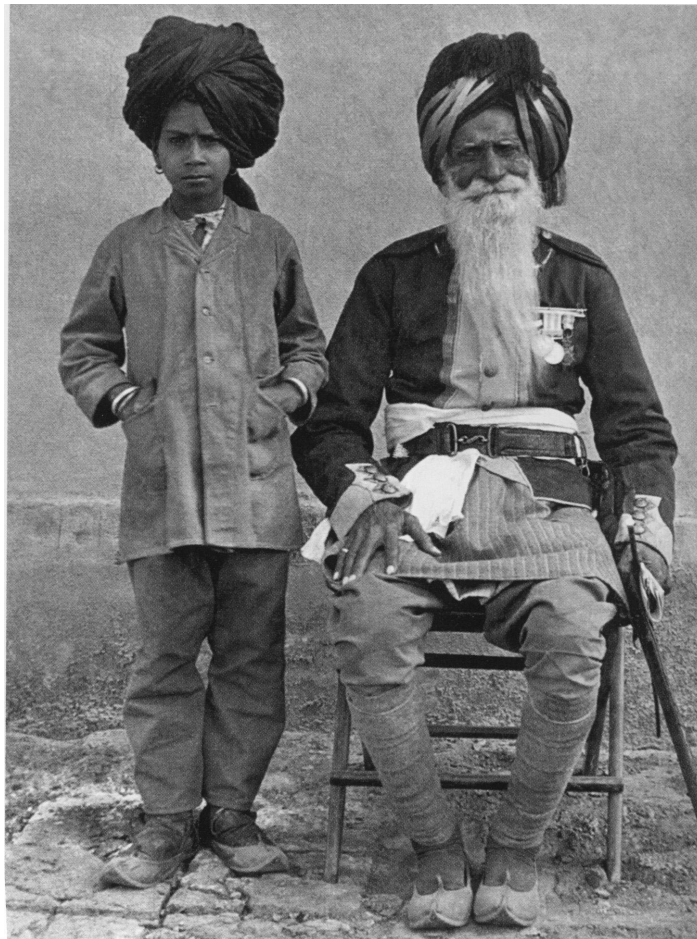


Role of Sikhs in the Kenya Police

(Harjinder Kanwal)

The Kenya Police was founded approximately in the beginning of the 20th century. Around 1890 AD the Uganda Railway line started its mammoth journey from the coastal town of Mombasa, Kenya, towards the hinterland to reach Port Florence [Kisumu] (then in Uganda - reason why the railway line was called Uganda Railways). Towards the end of the century about 32000 Indians worked on the Uganda Railway at one time or another. Most of them were recruited under contract from the North West Province (Punjab) of India by Mr. A.M.Jeevanjee, who had previous experience in successfully recruiting men for the Imperial British East Africa Company, including a 300-strong police force.

During the strenuous laying of the railway line, ample difficulties were encountered by the contractors and the labour force. Wild animals, especially lions, the man-eaters of Tsavo were a terror to the humans plus the marauding African tribes who were a considerable hindrance to the work being carried out.



A Sikh soldier with son employed by the Uganda Railways around 1890 AD for policing the railway line.

The British hired professional hunters to deal with the lions and other wild animals. During this traumatic period a police force was formed to safeguard the property and the lives of the labourers by keeping regular watch during the construction work. The armed guards who were called the 'askaris' were on regular beats.

The wild plains of Kenya were turned into some sort of law abiding by this small group of police force who patrolled day and night to create an atmosphere of safety and tranquillity.



During this period around 1895 AD a Sikh was appointed the first police Inspector in Kenya. His name was Kapur Singh. This venerable and purposeful gentleman was the first Asian Police Officer to serve in the country. It is an instance of the methods of those days that he acquired a great name for himself in his profession even though he did not know one word of English. He was a practical believer in inter-communal harmony and the earliest good relations between Asians of all classes are due to the example set by him. He laid the foundation stone of the Singh Sabha Gurdwara and also laid foundation stones of mosques in Nakuru, Kisumu and Mombasa. His sons, S. Lachhman Singh and Chief Inspector Satbachan Singh also distinguished themselves in the Kenya Police.

An excerpt from 'Cuckoo in Kenya' by W.R.Foran depicts the exploits of Police around 1904. He was sent to Nairobi Police Station to relieve Inspector Besant Singh and to make him serve under him. In the book he writes:-

"...The Sikh Inspector accepted being deposed with a friendly smile, which I thought did him immense credit and seemed anxious to prove helpful to the stranger within their midst....All the records were kept in Urdu by the Indian police-writers; and Besant Singh seemed the only man of the staff with more than a superficial knowledge of English. The handicap confronting me made my heart sink into the pit of my stomach. I felt like a lamb among wolves. ... Still more agitated now than when I entered the police station, I transferred my interest to a hefty stack of police files and criminal investigation reports. Besant Singh had quietly placed them on the table, speaking in rapid and fluent Hindustani far too fluent for me to understand all he said...I glanced up sheepishly at the smiling, watchful Sikh Inspector, seeking inspiration from his non-committal face. There glowed no ray of hope for me behind those bright brown eyes and the carefully trimmed black beard. My heart slumped down into my boots....I much question if he realised how great was the chasm of my ignorance. If he did grasp this, he was a gentleman and sportsman enough to conceal the fact. I owe Besant Singh much for steering me safely through those trying days of noviciate. ...The splendid Sikh had served with the Railway Police from the very beginning of construction work on the railway, and for the past two years had been in full charge of Nairobi Police Station. He was a great 'Shikari'(hunter), a brave man and worthy of the highest traditions of the gallant Sikh Units in the Indian Army in which he served with honour before transferring to the Indian Police and then coming to British East Africa. Besant Singh had killed twenty-four lions during the advance of the railway to Nairobi, making a habit of hunting them with a .303-rifle, for which he possessed only .256 calibre ammunition. To make these cartridges fit his rifle, he wrapped them around with paper. This intrepid Sikh sportsman was a first-class shot, but there are not many who would have dared tackle lions with ammunition that did not fit the rifle. Certainly I would not."

A small town, Machakos, 43 miles from Nairobi was supposed to be the capitol of Kenya but later on Nairobi took preference over it and the building of one of the charismatic cities of the world began. Pioneers like Lord Delamere and General Grogan were the backbone of the Kenya governing body and they had a big hand in the development of Nairobi and the rest of the country.

The British are known as great organisers and in view of that a proper police force was established with the help of Indians from India, especially the Punjabi Sikhs, who were well known for their valour and loyalty, which the British had envisaged during the Punjab battles and during the First World War, which was second to none at the time.

The British were aware of the potential of the Sikhs. These sturdy men who were skilled and semi skilled craftsmen were a great help in building the country. The British were aware of the faithfulness and the bravery of the Sikhs, thereby giving them the jobs which were suitable to their character.

The skilled and semi skilled labour force was one aspect and the administration side the other where the more educated ones were employed to do the clerical work of the East African railways.

The Police force grew from strength to strength with plenty of Asians serving diligently and reaching top posts.

With the steady growth of Nairobi as the capitol city of Kenya, the Kenya Police also grew into a force worth reckoning. The Asians were an integral part of it with the Africans on lower ranks. At that time the inhabitants of Kenya were divided into three communities, Europeans, Asians and Africans. The 'Asians' (collectively Hindu, Sikh and Muslims) being the inhabitants of India.

Initially the police chiefs were the British white men, who eventually gave way to Asians, especially Sikhs, who were considered loyal and proficient lawmen.

After the first Sikh Inspector Kapur Singh, the police force was infested with Punjabis who did an excellent job in keeping the law intact in the country.



Sikh Police men around 1945 AD

Standing (LtoR): J.S.Choda, Boota Ram Bali, Sampuran Singh Bassan

Sitting (LtoR): Dhana Singh (Hav. Major); Kartar Singh, (Sub Insp.); Sant Singh (Jamadar); Satbachan Singh (Chief Sub Insp.); Bachan Singh (1st grade clerk)

Some of the names of the Police force of Kenya which come to mind are given below but there were many more whose names are not known or forgotten:-

Banta Singh thanedaar (Inspector); Bharaj Mohinder Singh (ASP); Bharaj Parminder Singh (Inspector); Bhambra Jaswant Singh (Asst. Supt.); Chana Tara Singh (Inspector); Chaggar Kulwant Singh (Inspector) ; Chaggar Manjit Singh (Chief Insp.); Dogra Mohanjit Singh (Chief Insp.); Giddy Inderjit Singh (Chief Insp.); Jassy Harkrishan Singh (Insp.); Kalsi Maldeep Singh (Chief Insp.); Khehar Inderjit Singh (Chief Insp.); Khehar Rajinder Singh (ASP); Kular Hardev Singh (Chief Insp.); Nasib Singh (Chief Insp.); Panesar Karam Singh (Supt.); Sokhi Joginder Singh (Asst Comm. Of Police); Sembi Dharam Singh (Insp.); Thethi Tajinder Singh (Insp.)

Assistant Commissioner Joginder Singh Sokhi was a very prominent Police Officer responsible for the safety of the Presidential cavalcades.

The above information has been derived from various sources and the exact authenticity of the individual officers and their ranks cannot be confirmed.



Some Asian and African Police Officers with European Chiefs around 1960 AD



Late Chief Insp. Dharam Singh.