



Sikh-ing Home in Northeast Thailand: Constructing the Sikh identity and heritage in Khon Kaen

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Abstract

Since the early 1930s, Sikhs have been settling in Khon Kaen bringing their businesses along with them. While they speak the Thai language fluently, they still struggle to explain to the local Thai people their identity and are often looked at as foreigners although they have been born and raised in Thailand. Despite looking different from the rest, they have managed to gain respect and recognition in the Thai community with their long-established businesses so much so that Sikhism has been recognized as one of the five religions under the royal patronage. Beginning this research with the hypothesis that the Sikhs face discrimination very much like most minorities do in other countries, fieldwork has showed that the discrimination they face has not weighed down on the community to the extent imagined, but it cannot be ignored that there are still gaps in the complete assimilation of the Sikhs into the Thai society. This paper will apply the concept of Heritage from Below, arguing how heritage can help create identity, to show how the Sikhs have managed to retain their heritage using a ground-up approach and while facing little resistance from society. This paper will highlight how conducting qualitative research on the community has helped find two ways in which their identity has been constructed a) code-switching between Punjabi and Thai in daily conversations and b) the monetary power they have even though they are a minority group. Another observation is that the Sikhs have different perceptions of the non-Sikh South Asians even though the interlocutors were from the same community. The paper will conclude by analyzing how the Sikhs in Khon Kaen have maintained their heritage from below by constructing their identity in a way that might be unique to their community.

Keywords: Heritage from Below, Identity, Khon Kaen, Sikhs



Introduction

Walking along the streets of Pahurat in Bangkok before coming over to Khon Kaen, gave me the opportunity to see first-hand the extent to which the Sikh migration has spread to Thailand. This then got me to do some background research into their migration story. As someone who has questions about my own identity as a Singaporean Indian, I too was curious about how the community, and the Thais around them, received their identity as a Sikh in Thailand. Since my exchange program is based in Khon Kaen, this article focuses on the small community of about ten Sikh families in this city. The Sikh community now has 17 Gurudwaras – a Sikh temple – around Thailand, including one in Khon Kaen. In Bangkok, where the biggest Sikh population in Thailand resides, is also the ground for a Sikh Association of Thailand, which the Sikhs in Khon Kaen are a member of. Although some Sikhs in Bangkok are doing jobs, all of them in Khon Kaen have their own businesses that have been passed down from their parents or even grandparents. Since they have a long history of migration into Thailand, this paper understands how the Sikh community has negotiated, and hence, constructed their identity which has led to them being able to retain their Sikh heritage using a bottom-up approach.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this paper is to show 1) how the Sikhs in Khon Kaen are part of the Thai society but have completely fit in with the community 2) how the Sikhs have managed to retain their heritage and identity while being in Thailand and 3) the heterogeneity within the community.

Literature Review

In her paper, Warren (2019) focuses on Thai-Sikh students at Mahidol University, Bangkok, and the challenges they face interacting with Thai students. Difficulties in interacting arise due to the differences in culture, family background and religion. She also explains how some Thai students would intentionally exclude Thai-Sikh students from group or extracurricular activities due to their non-Thai appearance. This then results in some of them being pressured into changing their appearance to look more “Thai”. However, this comes at the expense of important religious clothing, such as the turban that Sikhs are to don at all times, when it is removed by the younger generation because of their desire to fit in. A similar case study can be seen in British multiculturalism and Sikhs by Singh (2005). In this scenario, the Sikhs had to fight for their right to don the turban on several occasions and were told to refrain from carrying *kirpans* or keep beards at their workplace. Although the nature of the pressure is more direct in Singh’s book, both papers shed light on the factors that might threaten the religion and heritage belonging to the Sikh community in Khon Kaen. In his book, Johnson (2012) talks about how the Thai minority living in Kelantan negotiate their ethnic and cultural identity as they grapple with the idea of being neither Thai citizens nor Muslim Malaysians. The report can draw on this internal conflict within a Sikh individual by understanding how minority groups seek to retain their identity while facing political pressure from majoritarian states. An example of the political pressure faced by Sikhs is, as



Narksuwan et al. (2013) found that government agencies or private companies force their employees to cut their hair and wear a hat when working. A similar threat to the heritage of minority groups can be seen in the publications of Pillai (2015), Wolff (2000), Tolia-Kelly (2010), Biehl, Comer, Prescott & Soderland (2014) and Promitzer, Hermanik & Staudinger (2009). Similar political and social pressures present in Khon Kaen might still pose a threat to the Sikh heritage.

Also revolving around the concept of identity, Narksuwan, Siltragool, & Jantapol (2013) touch on the identity of Sikhs in Thailand focussing on the use of the Punjabi language - the language associated to Sikh people. Narksuwan, Siltragool, & Jantapol (2013) claim that Punjabi is still used to pray but the use of it for other functions has decreased. Thus, according to this literature, their usage of the language to pray and perform ceremonies is one way the Sikhs have managed to retain their identity while living in Thailand. The discussion on the role of Punjabi language can thus be relevant to this research as it is one of many bottom-up approaches that is used by the Sikh community to maintain their heritage. Dillon (2017) also shows in his book how the Chinese Muslims in Malaysia have managed to retain their Chinese heritage while being the minority group in the country seen by how they “reinforce their cultural Chinese identification”. James C. Scott (1985) introduces the peasantry method of resistance giving the title of it being “often the most significant and most effective” way of resistance over the long run compared to the explosion of one-time resistance methods such as strikes and riots. He describes the peasantry method of resistance ones that “require little or no coordination or planning; they make use of implicit understandings and informal networks; they often represent a form of individual self-help; they typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority.” These types of resistance harshly but not directly go against the authority. The peasant class uses these types of resistance in a subtle manner that does not ignite violence but slowly pushes the people in power to give them the rights they are looking for. This idea allows us to look at the Sikhs as the “peasant class” in Khon Kaen to see how they have managed to put up “everyday forms of resistance” into establishing their identity in order to retain their heritage.

Aside from external pressures, Verkuyten, Calseijde & Leur (1999) discuss the internal threat to the “Moluccan culture and continuity of traditions” should there be mixed-race marriage between a Moluccan and a non-Moluccan. Judice (2008) and Fu & Heaton (1997) also share the view that mixed-race marriages might cause children to choose to maintain one heritage over the other or be forced into doing so. This then poses the threat of heritage of one of the parents’ to be lost with the future generations. Such a concern could be a challenge from within for the Sikhs as their children might choose to marry a Thai since they interact with them on a daily basis and hence face the risk of diluting their heritage in Khon Kaen.

Conceptual Framework

Heritage from Below (HFB) discussed by Muzaini & Minca (2018) in their book *After Heritage*, is a term coined by Robertson (2012) to understand the bottom-up approach of preserving heritage. HFB explains the ways in which non-state actors navigate through the discriminatory and suppressive tendencies of top-down heritage as a means to ensure their culture and heritage is maintained ‘from below’ but without putting up too much of a fight against those in power. The



concept of HFB as discussed in the book emphasises on the discretion of the individual to form heritage in the way they wish to remember it and that the formation of heritage from below “is frequently influenced by... our own positionalities”. But at the same time, it also notes that “there are times when it is inappropriate or even unsafe to make personal or community heritages public especially when these pertain to sensitive histories”. HFB is, thus able, to provide a strong conceptual framework to work with when exploring the ways in which the Sikhs in Khon Kaen have managed to retain their heritage and identity while being a minority group while still being sensitive to the issues, from within as well as without the group, that may be faced in the process of doing so.

Another useful theory to work with will be the constructivism theory which explains how “people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences” (Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2004). Conversing with the Sikh community in Khon Kaen will allow me to understand the experiences they have had and how they have used these experiences to negotiate their Thai-Sikh identity. It will also highlight the importance of constructing an identity of their own in order to maintain their heritage in the coming future.

Methodology

This research was done using a qualitative method. There have been 5 key informants so far, but as the research is still ongoing, it is expected that there will be more interlocutors as the research continues. The research was conducted using interviews and observation, after which the interviews were analyzed to find the central theme for this research. The primary research took place in Khon Kaen City. The shops of the Sikhs are mostly situated in the city area but there is no specific cluster as to where their businesses are located. Due to the small number of their community, it is not common to find Sikh people around the city easily, but I have noticed that they tend to frequent Central Plaza in the city. There are also two Sikh students, that I know of, who are currently studying in Khon Kaen University doing their undergraduate program. Since all Sikhs in Khon Kaen run their own businesses, requesting for their time to conduct the interviews was not a challenge. The first one to two interviews began with the overarching question of finding out the challenges that Sikhs faced when wanting to maintain their heritage while being the minority group in Khon Kaen. However, after having conversations with more people, it came to my realization that the challenge to their heritage was not their primary concern. The interview questions then had to be adjusted but still remained under the umbrella topic of how the Sikhs had constructed their own identity in Khon Kaen which has now helped them in maintaining their heritage.

Interview questions for the Sikhs include, but are not limited to:

- How do you maintain your traditions while living in a foreign country?
- What sort of experiences have you had with the native Thais in Khon Kaen?
- What external as well as internal challenges do you face in passing down your traditions and cultures to your children?



There were also uses of secondary research to look for the Sikh community in Khon Kaen as well as to learn about the different ways Sikhs have been maintaining their religions, culture and their identity characteristics. The names of the interlocutors have been modified to keep their identities confidential.

Research Findings

Name	Background Information
Sun	Has a long history of migration from Punjab to Thailand. Born in Khon Kaen. Studied in Thailand for the first few years then went to India to continue studying for 9 years. Owns a cloth shop and lives with his mother. His wife and children are doing jobs in Bangkok. Plans to close his shop and move to Bangkok soon.
Nom	In her early 20s. Born in Khon Kaen but went to Mussoorie to study at a young age. Lily's daughter. Is currently completing her undergraduate studies overseas.
Lily	Owns a shop in the city of Khon Kaen. Born, raised and studied in Bangkok. Came to Khon Kaen City (KKC) after getting married to her husband who is born in KKC. Has 2 daughters. Lives with her mother-in-law.
Ron	Housekeeper of the Gurdwara (Sikh temple). Came from Amritsar, India, to Khon Kaen many years back. Lives alone as his wife stays in Bangkok and children are overseas doing jobs.
Can	Owns a shop in the front part of the city. Born in Nong Khai and came to do business in Khon Kaen. His wife is from Bangkok. Invests in a lot of property around the city. His father lives alone in KKC and children live in Bangkok.

Through my fieldwork, it came to my attention that the Sikh community has severely dwindled over the last couple of years as many families and the teenage generation Sikhs are either moving to Bangkok permanently or going overseas to complete their education. All ten remaining families have their own businesses and for most of them, their homes are attached to their shops for more convenient access.

There is a Sikh temple, also known as the Gurdwara, along Ruamchit Road (ซอย ร่วมจิตร์), a small road in the city district. Surprisingly though, many local Thais are not aware of the existence of this temple. The space outside the temple was once used as a ground for celebration of the different Sikh events that took place across the year. Every Sunday morning, there will be a prayer session at the temple and some of the Sikhs even visit the temple everyday if they are able to take



the time out from their businesses. Before the temple was built in 1972, the Sikh community did their daily prayers in their own houses and go to one another's place for prayers on the days where there were more important events.

Accepted but not Assimilated

“Here we are Indians, but in India we are Thais...” (Lily)

Sikhism coming under the royal patronage conferred the Sikh community much respect from the royal family as well as the Thai community. In addition to this, the Sikhs are known to do service to the Thai community whenever they get the opportunity and time to help out. For example, the Sikhs in Bangkok organize a food distribution session for the locals as part of their merit-making. Such kind acts by their community has allowed them to gain admiration from the Thais and this image has spread to the Sikhs in the other provinces of Thailand. This has helped Sikhs become accepted into Thai society with more ease as compared to other minority groups in Thailand.

Despite this acceptance, Sun felt like there are still some gaps in the complete assimilation between them and the Thai society. According to him, even with the respect from the royal family for their religion, it is still tough for them to get a job in the government or public sector. As Sun said, and I quote “the Thais still can't completely accept Sikhs working together with them”. But while acknowledging all the gaps in the assimilation of the Sikhs into the Thai society, he still has hope that a complete assimilation will be possible in the future.

Sikh, Seeking, Sought

Communication is Key: Unlocking linguistic features in the Thai-Sikh identity

I decided to visit the Gurdwara on the 1st of September – an important day in Sikhism as they celebrate the bestowing of their holy book. The prayers were conducted in the Punjabi language. Although the Sikhs in Khon Kaen speak to each other in Thai most of the time, they have managed to keep the Punjabi language alive in their religious ceremonies.

I learnt from my interviews that most of the Sikhs are sent to India to study in the early years of their education so that they can learn how to speak English, Hindi and Punjabi. Many of them are already native speakers of Thai since they were born and spent their early childhood in Thailand. By enforcing this multi-lingual education, it allows the Sikhs in Khon Kaen to learn their native language as well as the cultures and traditions that come with it and at the same time, be able to speak to the locals in Thailand fluently. Although the use of the Punjabi language in daily conversations is rare, the knowledge and use of it at least in religious ceremonies is one way the Sikhs in Khon Kaen have managed to retain their heritage from below.

Bicycles, Textiles, Mobile Phones, and Curtains: Sikh Businesses as Heritage Sites

Over the years, the Sikh community has managed to gain recognition and respect through their businesses. They are known by the Thai society as “the one they should go to if they need to



buy cloth” or the equivalent for the various business they have for bicycles, curtains and mobile phones. With their long-standing businesses, many Thais have established their identity with the shops that they run. One of the benefits they have gained by establishing this dominance is that the Sikhs have been able to fight back discrimination faced in school. Nom recounted how she used her family’s shop name to stop others from calling her names or bullying her in school. Because her family was well known in the city for the business they ran, her Thai classmates stopped mistreating her.

The businesses run by the Sikhs can be seen as a way the community has used the gap in their assimilation into the Thai society, as mentioned before, to their advantage by constructing an identity through their shops as the strong association between their family and their business can be seen in the anecdote above. The small space where their businesses are run can then be seen as a heritage site that they have created by themselves as their shops do not just help them make a living but also comes with a history and many stories tied to it which can be passed on to those who want to know more about the Sikh community in Khon Kaen or even for the coming generations of their community to hear.

Sikhs vs. Sikhs: Different views, dynamic identities

Even within the Sikh community, differences in their views on various matters were evident – the most obvious one being marriage. While some have a more orthodox way of thinking, others have a more liberal view on the topic. One of my key informants, Lily, emphasized how she would only allow her children to get married into another Sikh family – no other ethnicities are acceptable – even convincing me to get married within the South Asian community and explaining why it is important. On the other hand, Sun had a more liberal view on this issue. “They have to learn!” he said, as he talked about Sikhs accepting Thai-Sikh interracial marriages. Personally, he was very open to the idea of interracial marriages especially with the Thais so as to have better a better opportunity for the Sikhs to assimilate into the Thai society. Definitely, as seen in the literature review, interracial marriages do run the risk of the gradual erosion of Sikh heritage in the future, but I agree that it will also be beneficial for the Sikhs should they wish to have a more inclusive experience in the local society.

Discussion and Conclusion

As this research is still ongoing, there is still much more that might be discovered after more interviews are conducted with the community. While the Sikhs in Khon Kaen have not faced any political or social pressure as in the literature highlighted above, it still cannot be denied that there still exist some gaps in the complete assimilation into the Thai society. Only time will be able to tell whether this will take a turn for the better or worse. But so far, it can be seen that the Sikhs have managed to retain their heritage in terms of the language they speak and the businesses that were passed down to them. This heritage from below has aided them in constructing a Sikh identity of their own. While their language and business are not what many would usually define as “heritage”, both of these are elements that they wear with a badge of honour and has hence become the identity of this ethnic group especially since it is unique to them. The gradual placement of their religion and religious sites around the country is a method the Sikhs have applied that does not go too harshly against the authorities and yet is a slow form of resistance on their side to be



able to retain this heritage. With the formation of their Sikh identity, it makes it easier for the current generation of Sikhs to pass down their heritage, especially considering their dwindling numbers in the city. The construction of identity is also a good way for them to carry around should they travel and settle in other countries as a way to then reconstruct their heritage from below in the new destination. The acceptance and resistance to interracial marriages comes in the form of a double-edged sword – while more interracial marriages are beneficial for the assimilation, it also poses a possible dilution to their heritage. However, the different views from within show that there is heterogeneity within the community.

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