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Micro-history and the study of minorities: working-class Sikhs in Singapore and Malaya*

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A Sikh moneylender who worked as a watchman for the British firm of Paterson Simons and Company was reported missing. Tall, muscular, bearded and approximately twenty-six years of age, he was described by a widely read newspaper as wearing a yellow turban on the night that he was last seen alive. The mystery of his disappearance was solved on the following day when a corpse was discovered by a Malay gardener at the Botanic Gardens in Singapore. Unclothed and badly bruised, the body lay some twenty feet away from the decapitated head, which was covered by a gunny bag. Both of the watchman's arms had also been severed, with the right arm found lying on the left side of the body, while the left arm was missing. On the same evening, the watchman's fifteen-year-old widow, Nehal Kaur, and her father, Sunder Singh, as well as three other Sikhs, were detained at the Central Police Station. A reward of $1000 was offered to anyone who could provide crucial information leading to the watchman’s death.1 Thus began a sensational murder investigation and trial that evoked emotions, feelings and myths in Singapore, as it did abroad.

It is not the intention of this article to provide a fictional account of this gruesome incident or a narrative that would probably share some affinities with crime and mystery novels. Nor does it lend credence to the assertion made by a noted scholar that Sikhs are, in the main, ‘emotional’, ‘foolhardy’ and prone to violence.2 Rather, by unravelling the circumstances surrounding the murder and the testimonies of persons implicated in the case, I seek to offer new angles of vision to the study of Sikhs in Singapore and Malaya. To date, historians writing on the history of Sikhs in south-east Asia have generally confined their investigations to several over-arching themes, namely: the development of institutions, identity formation, religious

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1Malaya Tribune, 20 September 1929.
rituals, political activism, immigration patterns, occupational choices and biographies of prominent personalities. An indirect consequence of these trends in scholarship is the generation and representation of ‘Sikhs as a collectivity which shared the same values and movements’. There has been no detailed study of the daily tribulations of ordinary Sikhs as they endeavoured to co-exist alongside other communities in colonial south-east Asia. The voices of the marginal and ‘deviants’ have been summarily negated.

This article seeks to remedy this striking dearth in the literature by uncovering the social worlds and daily lives of Sikhs in Singapore and Malaya through the employment of the methodology of micro-history – an approach which could well be applied to the study of other ethnic minorities and creoles, such as Armenians, Babas, Hadramis, Jews and Tamils in the same social context. Pioneered by prominent historians such as Carlo Ginzburg, Le Roy Ladurie and Natalie Zemon Davis who drew upon the works of social anthropologists, micro-history is the study of minor events and insignificant peoples with the object of validating and/or refuting commonly held historical assumptions. In the words of Giovanni Levi, a leading micro-historian:

The unifying principle of all micro-historical research is the belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved. . . . Phenomena previously considered to be sufficiently described and understood assume completely new meanings by altering the scale of observation. It is then possible to use these results to draw far wider generalizations although the initial observations were made within relatively narrow dimensions rather than examples.

It will be shown that the murder of the Sikh watchman, the Coroner’s inquest and the court trials that ensued were examples of what micro-historians have termed ‘social drama’. That is to say, when scrutinized with meticulous care and framed against the background of larger historical processes, such a series of events could provide us with inroads into uncharted terrains of Sikh pasts, particularly of those Sikhs who can be broadly categorized as members of ‘the working class’. Among the much glossed-over themes that will be enumerated in the following pages are the extent of personal animosities, everyday rivalry and occasional acts of violence, the state and position of women, the relational structures within the family, occupational pursuits, the domestic environment and modes of communication, as well as the


4Harjot Oberoi, The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition (Delhi, 1994), 34.


7The category of ‘working-class Sikhs’ is defined here as a group of individuals that was excluded from the control of the means of production, and whose primary source of income was non-skilled and semi-skilled labour. They may or may not have owned small properties, were poorly paid and had limited employment security.
networks of social acquaintanceships that existed among ordinary Sikhs in Singapore and Malaya in the 1920s and 1930s.

But this is not all. In addition to offering a new approach to the study of Sikhs in Singapore and Malaya, this article argues for the need to make effective use of a genre of sources that have been largely ignored by scholars of Sikh studies and, by implication, minority studies in south-east Asia: coroners’ reports and legal records. While these sources serve as antecedents for law enforcement officials, criminologists and legal experts in the formulation of legal rules and principles, they can also provide historians with fascinating stories of crimes, petitions and suits pertaining to debts and probates of wills. Indeed, a close contextualized reading of coroners’ reports and legal records forces us to consider new questions in regard to Sikh and other minority histories. What was the total number of murder cases involving Sikhs in Singapore and Malaya in the 1920s and 1930s? Do these separate incidents have any common features? What were the gender compositions of the people involved, and what were the specific circumstances that led to these homicidal incidents? How did the colonial justice system deal with homicide among the Sikhs? How did other ethnic groups respond to these violent crimes? To address these and many other related questions, I have juxtaposed the coroners’ reports and legal records with other government records and official publications, as well as local newspapers. Only then can Gayatri Spivak’s oft-cited query ‘Can the Subaltern speak?’ be answered in a less abstruse way. The Subaltern can speak, and this is a fragment of their story.

A SIKH OF MULTIPLE TRADES AND OVERLAPPING SOCIAL WORLDS

His name was Jewa Singh, but he was more commonly referred to as ‘Jewa’ among his friends and relatives. Little is known about his early life, although the surviving evidence shows that he was born in a remote village in the Punjab in 1903. The son of a landowner and a member of the Jat caste, Jewa’s mother, Partab Kaur, and a half-brother, Santa Singh, remained in India throughout his long sojourn overseas. He was uneducated and illiterate yet able to sign his name, which was tattooed on his left arm. It is obvious, then, that Jewa shared similar backgrounds with many members of the cohort of Sikhs who migrated to Malaya in the early 1920s in search of employment. Endowed with limited intellectual capital and yet acutely aware of the opportunities that were laid before him, Jewa was among many who had served in the Malayan police force for some years before obtaining employment in other sectors of the economy.

After four years of dedicated service with Paterson, Simons and Company, Jewa was promoted to become the senior watchman in charge of several other Sikhs. This was a ‘social...
world’ in which he shared ‘commitments to certain activities’ and the ‘sharing [of] resources of many kinds’ to achieve his goals.12 Like many of his peers, Jewa fits nicely into the typology proposed by Kernial Sandhu of the ‘North Indian watchman-cum-moneylender, generally a Sikh who has provided the necessary loans to labourers, clerks and small shopkeepers, usually at usurious, though not unrealistic (given the context), interest rates’.13 An essential element that is missing from such typology, however, is the fact that fellow watchmen, taxi drivers, household maids and even close relatives were integral components of Jewa’s clientele. It is thus unsurprising that, by early 1929, Jewa had risen to become ‘one of the wealthiest moneylenders in Singapore’.14 Maintaining the habit of carrying large amounts of cash even during his working hours, he was reputed to have loaned out between $15,000 and $16,000 to Chinese and Tamil clerks according to their ability to pay back the borrowed sum. The amount that was given to these clerks during each transaction ranged from $50 to $500, while the interest rates varied from 30 per cent to 50 per cent of the amount loaned. It was different in the case of loans that were given to Sikhs, both in Singapore as well as elsewhere in Malaya. Bela Singh and Nand Singh, for example, had signed promissory notes that amounted to $4000 with almost zero interest. There were many others, such as Hernam Singh, Shian Singh and Besant Singh, who had borrowed no less than $500 each, an amount equal to several months’ wages among working-class people at that time.15

The moneylending business, like all businesses, was fraught with tribulations. Squabbles, discord and dissensions arising from late payments and outright refusals to furnish the loans were common occurrences. In most instances, a peaceful settlement was reached between parties, which meant that life would return to normal. Sunder Singh, as a case in point, had settled some of his debts by marrying his stepdaughter to Jewa. On other occasions, Sikh moneylenders resorted to sending warning letters to the borrowers through the intercession of legal representatives. Jewa was a regular client of one of Singapore’s largest legal firms, Drew and Napier, and was described by the firm’s clerk as a moneylender who always paid the lawyers in cash. ‘[H]e took the money out of a leather wallet which he carried.’16 In the event that all parties could not reach a compromise, violence became the arbiter – which, in Jewa’s case, led to the premature end of his life at the hands of the closest of kin.

MURDER AND HOMICIDE AMONG THE SIKHS IN SINGAPORE AND MALAYA

More than just a criminal case, the murder of Jewa caused a great sensation among Sikhs in Singapore and Malaya. Rumours that spread within the minority community and beyond claimed that vengeance rather than robbery was the main motive behind the crime. Jewa had engaged in moneylending on a fairly large scale, and the brutal murder may have been an upshot of the civil actions which he had filed against his debtors.17 An editorial published in The Straits Times during that period provides an illuminating analysis of the incident. Murders among Sikhs in Singapore and Malaya were said to be ‘infrequent and comparatively few when

13 Sandhu, Indians in Malaya, op. cit., 292.
14 Singapore Free Press, 21 September 1929.
15 Frederick George Bourne, ‘Proceedings of Singapore Coroner in the case of the Death of a Sikh named Singh’ (1929), Mss. Ind. Ocn. s. 239, 19.
16 The Straits Times, 15 November 1929.
17 Singapore Free Press, 21 September 1929 and Malaya Tribune, 21 September 1929.
compared with such crimes among other Asiatic communities, but whenever a case occurs it is accompanied by the most ferocious brutality’. The editorial went on to describe a recent incident at Robinson Road in which a Sikh watchman was attacked by his Sikh companions. ‘His head was smashed and portions of his brain were scattered on the five foot way.’\(^{18}\) This was a somewhat partial, if not sensationalized, appreciation of the state of affairs, but it contained a grain of truth just the same.

A survey of coroners’ and legal reports from the years 1929–39 revealed that there were only five cases of Sikh murders tried at the Assizes, including both Singapore and the rest of Malaya. The number of cases heard in other district courts would have been more, though sources on these trials are scarcely available. Still, the sum total of Sikh murders would not have constituted more than 2–5 per cent of the total homicide incidents in the British colony, which destabilizes the homogenizing image of the Sikhs as being a ‘violent’ and ‘martial race’.\(^ {19}\) Indeed, to the extent that the rhetoric of martyrdom and self-sacrifice (\textit{sahid}) was ubiquitous among Sikhs in Singapore and Malaya due to the growing appeal of the \textit{gurdwara} (Sikh temple) reform movement and Akali propaganda that emanated from the Punjab in the late 1920s, the killing of a member of one’s own religious community for unjust ends was unanimously regarded as a heinous offence.\(^ {20}\) However, on the rare occasions when murders \textit{did} occur, extreme forms of violence were evident.

Two years after the death of Jewa Singh, a man named Sunder Singh was found dead, with multiple stab wounds, at the Rangoon Road School in Singapore. The murderer was a fellow Sikh named Tara Singh who, upon being apprehended by two other Sikhs, exclaimed: ‘I have killed Sunder Singh myself. I have to kill two more. Let me go!’\(^ {21}\) In Perak the following year, Boota Singh was found guilty of the murder of Harnam Kaur. Boota, his victim Harnam, her husband Hernam and another Sikh named Kapur had all lived in the same house for more than a year, which, as we shall see later, was a common practice among Sikhs in Singapore. Nine months before her demise, Harnam had lodged a police report at Pusing Police Station, claiming that Boota had ‘tried to misbehave with her’. Outright refusal of Boota’s overtures and other related factors might have led to the fatal stabbing of Harnam Kaur.\(^ {22}\) In July 1933, Santokh Singh was charged with the murder of his brother, Jaimal, at the Ek Ho rubber factory in Paya Lebar Road, Singapore. The factors that led to the murder are shrouded in mystery due to the paucity of sources. What is certain is that Santokh confessed in court that he was solely responsible for stabbing his brother in cold blood. Jaimal died some few weeks before his brother was sentenced to death.\(^ {23}\) In the same year, the bones of Gurdit Singh were found in a remote part of Singapore. The Detective Branch obtained information on four Sikh suspects, two of whom were arrested, while the rest remained at large in India. The Coroner’s office

\(^{18}\) \textit{The Straits Times}, 21 September 1929.

\(^{19}\) Tony Ballantyne, \textit{Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World} (Durham, 2006), 84. For statistics on homicide cases in the Straits Settlements during this period, see the sections dealing with policing and crimes in the \textit{Annual Reports of the Straits Settlements} 1929–1939 (London, 1998) for the years 1929 through 1939.


depicted the case as ‘exceedingly interesting’ and ‘quite as intriguing as a Sherlock Holmes murder’.24

The fifth case to be considered here at some length took place in Penang. At three o’clock on the morning of 11 September 1938, Najar Singh, a watchman working at the Penang Hill railway station, was attacked by two men, one of whom was Lechman Singh, who thrust a long spear into Najar’s stomach. At the same time, another Sikh attacked Najar from the side, stabbing him in the head and shoulder with a knife. When Najar tried to extract the spear from his wounded belly, a fourth Sikh who was standing nearby called upon the two attackers to flee. Najar Singh died in hospital a few days later, after giving his statement before the magistrate. The judge and jury panel of the Penang court concluded that Lechman Singh was guilty of murder and sentenced him to death. A new trial was ordered for the second assailant, Hazara Singh. Isher Singh, the accomplice who urged the two attackers to run, was acquitted of all charges.25

A few common threads run through each of these homicide cases. All of the perpetrators were male working-class Sikhs who, like the majority of Indians in Malaya, were at the lower end of the socio-economic ladder.26 To this must also be added the close relationships between the murderers and their victims. They were siblings, distant relatives and friends who shared a common working environment. The third commonality is to be found in the types of weapons used. All of the murders involved the use of sharp instruments, including the kirpan (the Sikh ceremonial sword) that was carried by Sikhs in Singapore and Malaya at that period, even after restrictions had been imposed by the colonial regime.27 Above all, death sentences were meted out to all who were found guilty, irrespective of whether the murder was planned or deliberate. It is useful to posit here that the imposition of such harsh punishments served as a deterrent and disciplining measure for the Sikhs, given the political context which demanded their loyal adherence to the colonial justice system. Perhaps more importantly, the common threads running through all of these diverse homicides were to find their resonance in Jewa Singh’s murder.

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION, CORONERS’ INQUESTS AND THE MURDER TRIALS

If the murder of Jewa Singh is to be regarded as a watershed in the history of crimes committed by Sikhs in Singapore and Malaya – particularly in terms of its brutality and grotesqueness – the publicity, interest and talk which the case engendered within the wider Sikh community was even more spectacular. In no previous instance in Singapore’s history had the Coroner’s court and the Singapore Assizes seen the presence of hundreds of working-class Sikhs from both sides of the Singapore causeway, listening attentively to the cross-examination of several

24Frederick George Bourne, ‘Coroner’s Annual Report, Singapore’ (1933), Mss. Ind. Ocn. s. 203, 6.
witnesses and suspects surrounding the murder.\textsuperscript{28} Notwithstanding the fact that Jewa Singh was relatively well known, in view of his moneylending activities, the attendance of an extraordinarily large number of Sikhs in the courtroom and the nearby vicinity in the course of more than two months of court proceedings suggests that multiple means of social communication existed among the Sikhs in Singapore and Malaya. Foremost among these was the word-of-mouth network arising from the close-knit nature of the community. The census that was conducted in 1931, for that matter, reported that there were only 2,988 Sikhs in Singapore, while the numbers were six times as numerous in various Malay states. The estimated ratio of Sikh men to women in both Singapore and Malaya was three to one.\textsuperscript{29} Given the relatively diminutive size of the migrant community whose members came, for the most part, from villages located at Doaba, Malwa and Majha in the Punjab, and considering that a large segment had previous acquaintanceships through policing work as well as other related occupations, it is thus unsurprising that when something as shocking as a murder took place, it would immediately become a topic of passionate discussion and a subject of widespread gossip.

The second medium of social communication was through the print media of newspapers and popular publications. Although literacy within the Sikh population in Singapore and Malaya was low and confined to the upper classes, C. A. Bayly has aptly noted that North Indians had been a ‘literacy aware society’ since the early eighteenth century – a society in which news reports and sections of books which were believed to contain useful knowledge were often read aloud to gatherings in homes, bazaars and other settings.\textsuperscript{30} It seems likely, then, that the same was the case with Sikhs in Singapore and Malaya, which could partly explain their acute awareness of the murder trials. Additionally, there was the crucial role played by gurudwaras (Sikh temples) within the Sikh social context. More than a mere place of worship, gurudwaras in Singapore and Malaya in the 1920s and 1930s functioned as conduits for community-building and as arenas where pertinent issues and news of the times were disseminated and discussed.\textsuperscript{31} Two weeks before the commencement of the murder trials, a mass meeting was held at a gurudwara in Singapore. Attended by more than 500 Sikhs, mainly from the moneylending and watchman class, the attendees registered their antipathy towards Jewa’s assailants, and resolved that all those present would work closely with the police to conduct extensive investigations. The meeting was later publicized in the press.\textsuperscript{32}

One of the first persons called upon to provide evidence related to the murder was Inspector Hugh Gray from the Orchard Road Police Station, and it is through his testimony that selected insights into Jewa’s personal life and daily routine were made known. On the day that Nehal Kaur and her stepfather were arrested, Gray conducted a thorough search of a room at the Paterson, Simons and Company godown in which Jewa and Nehal had stayed together

\textsuperscript{28}The Straits Times, 5–10 October 1929. To avoid unnecessary repetition I have conflated the statements of each of the persons who were called upon to testify on two different occasions, that is, at the Coroner’s inquest and at the Singapore Assizes, from early October to early December 1929.


\textsuperscript{30}Christopher A. Bayly, Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870 (New York, 1996), 39.

\textsuperscript{31}Verne A. Dusenbery, Sikhs at Large: Religion, Culture and Politics in Global Perspective (Delhi, 2008), 195.

\textsuperscript{32}The Straits Times, 23 September 1929.
with Bakhtawar, Jewa’s close friend and colleague. Two boxes that belonged to Nehal and the deceased were brought back to the Police Station. Only women’s clothes were found in Nehal’s box, and she had produced the keys to the deceased’s box. Several items of men’s clothing that were nicely folded were kept in it, along with some papers and a cash box. Upon seeing the cash box, Nehal claimed that it belonged to her. Further inspection revealed that the cash box contained women’s jewellery and that there were bundles of ten-dollar notes hidden deep within the deceased’s box. Gray then left both boxes with Nehal and Sunder Singh in the detention room. While conducting a second inspection of both boxes on the following day, Gray was astonished to find that there were only a few notes in the deceased’s box. The money had been transferred to Nehal’s box and this, according to the Police Inspector, was evidence of a premeditated murder.33

Gray’s testimony was succeeded by a report given by William Archibald Balhetchet, an Assistant Surgeon at the Singapore General Hospital, who surmised that Jewa’s body was dumped at the Botanic Gardens some few hours after his death. The postmortem examination revealed bruises on the left leg, as well as on the front and back of the head. There were also signs of retraction of tissues and muscles at the neck and the elbows, which meant that Jewa had struggled against multiple assailants. Several wounds on the back of the neck suggested that repeated attempts were made to sever the head from the body. Both hands had been severed, leaving two clean cuts below the elbows. The cause of death was haemorrhage from decapitation. ‘I think’, Balhetchet explained,

the deceased was stunned first by two heavy blows from behind and then done to death whilst in a dazed or unconscious condition. I think the bruises were caused by heavy blunt weapons, nothing to show the actual shape or size of the weapon. Decapitation was done from the back. I counted 6 to 7 wounds from different angles. These wounds must have been caused by a heavy and sharp instrument such as an axe or heavy parang. Head just hacked off. The two arms were cut off with the same weapon or weapons of the same type. It would require a great deal of force to cut off the head. A very great deal of blood had been lost.34

By this time, it had become clear that Jewa must have known his murderers and been in very close contact with them. This was underpinned by a third witness, Bakhtawar Singh, who was a junior watchman and a childhood friend of the deceased.35 Twenty-five years of age, literate and unmarried, Bakhtawar’s relationship with Jewa was a vivid manifestation of two important concepts that dominate Sikh culture: vafadari (loyalty) and hikmat (hospitality). These interrelated concepts imply a strong sense of brotherhood and mutual co-operation that were manifest through the exchange of turbans, the pledging of lifelong loyalty and the offering of all forms of assistance, without expecting anything in return.36 Hailing from the

33Bourne, ‘Proceedings of Singapore Coroner in the case of the Death of a Sikh named Singh’ (1929), Mss. Ind. Ocn. s. 239, 8–9.
34Ibid.
35It is also important to note here that none of the Sikhs who were implicated in Jewa’s murder had any knowledge of spoken English, and they testified in Punjabi during the inquest and at the court proceedings. The court interpreter was also a Sikh named Sunder Singh Sawhny. See the Straits Settlements Blue Books, 1929 (Singapore, 1930), 58.
36Barbara-Sue White, Turbans and Traders: Hong Kong’s Indian Communities (Hong Kong, 1994), 98–9.
same village and having befriended Jewa for more than fifteen years, Bakhtawar gained employment at Paterson, Simons and Company through his friend’s personal recommendation. Both of them had lived at the godown since Bakhtawar’s arrival and, in return for the help that had been rendered to him, Bakhtawar wrote most of the promissory notes that were given out by Jewa to his clients. So close was their relationship that Jewa had, on many occasions, entrusted the keys of his boxes to him. According to Bakhtawar, Jewa married Nehal Kaur six months before his murder. All three of them were staying in the same room, which was not divided by any partitions. In response to the charge by the public prosecutor, Joseph Pedlow, that he might have planned the murder in order to inherit Jewa’s wealth via marriage with the deceased’s widow, Bakhtawar insisted that he was never attracted to her. ‘She was just Jewa Singh’s wife and Jewa Singh was my friend.’ Moreover, inter-marriages between Sikhs of the same sub-caste were forbidden. Unlike Jewa, Bakhtawar explained that he and Nehal originated from the same sub-caste and were therefore ‘brother and sister’.37

More importantly, Bakhtawar highlighted the multiple tensions that afflicted Jewa’s marriage. There was such a lack of trust between the couple that Jewa did not let his wife have the keys to his box. Jewa commanded Bakhtawar to make sure that Nehal did not leave the godown in his absence, whether with her parents or anyone else. Quarrels between the couples were frequent, and things finally came to a head when Jewa served a lawyer’s notice on his father-in-law for outstanding debts. At 9 o’clock on the night of 19 September 1929, Sunder Singh arrived at Paterson, Simons and Company, looking distressed and hurried. Speaking for a few minutes with Jewa, both of them left the godown, hailed a cab and drove away. This was the last time Bakhtawar saw his friend. Sunder Singh visited the office the next morning as if nothing had happened, insisting that his daughter return to his house with him. Bakhtawar reacted furiously to this, and a quarrel ensued. Other Sikh watchmen in the area came to mediate between the contending parties and it was decided that a police report was to be lodged at the Central Police Station. The report on the missing man was filed by Bakhtawar rather than by Nehal or Sunder Singh. This fact alone was enough to convince Justice Stevens, the judge at the Singapore Assizes, that Nehal and Sunder were linked to the murder.

Subsequently, five other male Sikhs, Chindu (a taxi driver) and four watchmen, Harnam, Besant, Darsan and Bishan, were each called to the witness stand on 9 October 1929. All five had known Jewa and Sunder Singh, and each concurred that there was nothing unusual on the day of the murder. Bishan’s testimony is especially instructive because it further underscores the common practice among working-class Sikhs of living together in the same domicile. While Jewa, Nehal and Bakhtawar represented one extreme of the spectrum in terms of lack of privacy, having lived together in the same room with no real sense of personal space, Bishan and his wife stayed in different rooms with Sunder Singh’s family, in a small hut near Kim Yam Road. Employed at the Kim Yam rubber works with Sunder and Sukhdarasan Singh, Bishan was a watchman and part-time moneylender whose relationship with other watchmen was riddled with rivalry and animosities. However, the reverse was true with regard to his relationship with Sunder, since they were fairly close and were dependent upon each other in managing the moneylending business. Bishan described his role in arranging the marriage between Jewa and Nehal. The bride’s parents requested a dowry consisting of a set of jewellery

worth $1000. Although Bishan Singh saw this as ‘rather a heavy price’, Jewa nevertheless acquiesced to their request, and even went so far as to build a room for Sunder’s family. The relationship between Sunder and Jewa was said to have been friendly, with the exception of an argument over a lawyer’s notice. Bishan claimed that he knew nothing about the murder because he was in Johore to visit a friend at a police barracks and to collect money from a Tamil and a Sikh bullock cart driver. On the day of his arrest on suspicion of being an accomplice to the murder, Bishan asked Sunder whether he knew the real culprits behind the odious crime. Sunder’s response was swift: ‘One was Besant Singh and one Bhagat Singh and Khasan also known as Khasan Singh.’ Sunder then told him the details of the crime.38

WOMEN AND THE ACCUSED

Before proceeding to a discussion of the defence put up by Sunder against the charges levelled at him, it is pertinent here to restate Doris R. Jakobsh’s call for the recovery of the voices of women in Sikh history. While Sikh apologetics repeatedly insist that women and men are inherently equal in the Sikh world view, in reality, historical writings contain virtually nothing about women, apart from minimal asides referring to occasional exceptional women who have been deemed worthy enough to have the pages of history.39 While such observations are somewhat hyperbolic, a critical survey of the extant literature on Sikhs and other Indian communities in Singapore and Malaya underscores Jakobsh’s fundamental point: women have featured less prominently in historical writings than men. Recent works by notable historians such as James Warren40 and Barbara Andaya41 have attempted to remedy this gap in scholarship by locating women in south-east Asia at the centre of historical analysis. Building upon these studies and extending the scope of observations, I will provide a brief account of the largely forgotten struggles of Sikh women and their agency in a world dominated by men. Among the few Sikh women who gained public attention as a result of the murder case was Nehal Kaur. Brought to Malaya three years before the murder, Nehal was fifteen years of age and, therefore, was categorized as ‘a minor’ under British law.42 Her real father died when she was merely two years old, and abiding by the customs and traditions of Sikhs in the Punjab, her paternal uncle, Sunder Singh, had married her mother. Deprived of any formal schooling yet taught the necessary skills for homemaking by her mother, Nehal was illiterate and knew only the basic rudiments of her community’s religious beliefs. Indeed, when asked by the Coroner whether she could count, Nehal replied that she could count up to no more than a hundred. To this the Coroner replied in a most condescending and paternalistic way: ‘That would not be much use to a moneylender, his interest is nearly always more than 100 per cent.’43 Admittedly, such derogatory views about Sikh moneylending and usurious practices were not uncommon. A significant case in point was a cartoon that was published locally around the same time, depicting a Sikh watchman and moneylender as an octopus-like monster called ‘The Sikh of Iniquity’, with multiple, writhing tentacles, each labelled with the word ‘usury’.44

38ibid., 239, 86.
39Doris R. Jakobsh, Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity (Delhi, 2003), 7.
40Warren, Ah ku and Karayuki-san, op. cit.
41Barbara Andaya, The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia (Honolulu, 2006).
42In the Estate of Jewa Singh’, Straits Settlements Legal Reports (S.S.L.R), 1931, 13.
43Singapore Free Press, 11 October 1929.
Entangled within the Sikh’s grasping tentacles are a Chinese clerk (or krani) and an Indian servant (or tambi), shown struggling in vain to free themselves from their crushing debts owed to the iniquitous and usurious Sikh (see Figure 1).

Nehal’s marriage to Jewa came about through the arrangement of her parents, rather than through her own choice. Arguing against Bakhtawar Singh’s testimony, she repeatedly stressed that no tensions had developed between her and her husband, or between Jewa and her parents. Rather, she claimed that she was happy to be married to a man who had entrusted her with the keys to his box, which contained money and valuable jewellery. She and Jewa had visited her parents at least twice a month. Her parents also used to come to visit her place ‘sometimes to see my husband, sometimes friendly visits and sometimes business. Not for business only just to visit us. My father came looking for work. My husband was on friendly terms with my father. Never quarrelled.’ Despite her claims of a happy marriage, Nehal confessed in court that she had no idea whether Jewa had left a will. However, she certainly knew her rights as a widow, insisting ‘I should have a share of his money as I am his wife.’ Nehal described Bakhtawar as a friendly person and claimed that they often ate their daily

Figure 1. Anon., Dream Awhile: Cartoons from Straits Produce showing in pictorial form the main events in local history (Singapore, 1932), n.p.

meals together; but she also alleged that he had made improper advances towards her on many occasions when Jewa was away. Nehal claimed that his verbal sexual harassment did not provide her with a sufficiently strong reason to seek help from her husband or her parents, and that she had endured the mental torment in silence.\textsuperscript{45}

Nehal’s testimony cast doubts on the police and the judge’s suspicions that Sunder Singh was the architect behind the murder. The statements given by Raj Kaur, the wife of Bishan Singh, did not provide evidence that a murder had taken place near her house. Arguing that she had been living harmoniously with Sunder Singh, his wife and two children for several months and that she saw them as her kindred, Raj claimed that the neighbourhood where she lived was free of violent crime. She narrated her daily routine of taking short naps on a charpoy outside her rented hut and denied any knowledge of a murder.\textsuperscript{46}

The third and perhaps most compelling testimony in defence of Sunder Singh was presented by his wife, Partab Kaur. The court proceedings made no mention of her age, caste background or physical appearance. The \textit{Malaya Tribune} poignantly noted that Partab was accompanied by a little child who ‘played about around the witness box, pathetically innocent of the serious crime on which her father stood arraigned’.\textsuperscript{47} Corroborating her daughter’s statements, Partab mentioned that she had borne three children by Sunder Singh. They were two girls, aged four and one-and-a-half years, as well as a baby boy born on the night of 20 September 1929. During her previous marriage to Sunder Singh’s late brother she had two children, Nehal and a son, who was in India. Relations between her husband and Jewa, according to Partab, were never strained. Sunder had left the house at five o’clock on the day of the murder and returned home at eight on the same night, in time to strike the gong at his workplace, which was near their hut. Her husband then came home to have his dinner and he had spent the rest of the night with her.\textsuperscript{48}

The attempts to absolve Sunder from any direct involvement in the murder were, however, obliterated by the testimony of a twenty-eight-year-old Tamil woman named Govindamal, who was working as a masseuse and an assistant to a midwife. She had known Sunder ever since the start of Partab’s pregnancy and had rendered her services for more than seven months before the murder. It is interesting to note that, in her testimony, Govindamal stated that she knew Bishan Singh who previously lent her some money. There were no written agreements and the interest rate of the loan was 20 per cent per month for every $10 that was lent out. Govindamal massaged Partab on the night of Jewa’s murder, and completed her task at half past eight. She recounted vividly the events that transpired on that same night:

> When I had gone about half way down the small path, at the junction of the small path and the larger one, I heard a noise of someone groaning. I flashed my torch in that direction and saw a man lying down – a Sikh – and three other Sikhs on top of him. Sunder Singh was one of them. He was kneeling on the man’s chest and holding his throat. The other two were each holding a leg of the man. When I flashed on the light they both ran away. One was taller than the other but they were strangers to me. Both Sikhs. They ran towards the main road and then I heard the noise of a car. No lights

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Singapore Free Press}, 11 October 1929.  
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Bourne, ‘Proceedings. . .’, op. cit.}, 239, 41.  
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Malaya Tribune}, 18 October 1929.  
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{ibid.}, 18 October 1929.
there. I could not see the car from where I was but the car was on the main road. It sounded like a taxi.

After the two men ran away, Sunder Singh got up quickly and came towards me. I did not particularly notice his clothing. He had a turban on when he met me in Arab Street. No turban on when I saw him on this path. I saw his hair. I did not see his turban there, but there was a piece of cloth near the neck of the man on the ground. I did not see his turban there at all. He came close up to me. I spoke to him, and asked him ‘What is this?’ He said his relative was drunk and had fallen down. I asked ‘There were three of you, why did you not carry him?’ He said he would do so later. He said he was all dirty [soiled]. The man was wearing a dark coat, white shirt. I saw spots of blood on his shirt front. It looked wet. I noticed that [Sunder’s] mouth smelt of liquor – strong smell and there was a smell of nightsoil [excreta] about his body. He said ‘go home’ and I did so. He did not speak to anyone on the way. The murder happened at the bushes near Sunder Singh’s house at Kim Yam Road. Two days later, I heard about this murder. People read it from newspapers.49

Due to the lack of evidence and the accused’s refusal to divulge the identities of the two Sikhs who had assisted him in slaying his newly wed son-in-law, the judge at the Singapore Assizes decided upon placing the murder charge solely upon Sunder Singh. From mid-October 1929, the ‘Gardens Murder’, as it was called, had generated extensive media coverage and public interest in both Singapore and Malaya. The court was so crowded that spectators who arrived late had to sit in the aisles along both sides of the room. Men and women also sat on the steps in the staircases, and among the large crowd of Sikhs there were ‘Europeans, craning their heads and cupping their ears so as not to miss a word of defending and prosecuting counsels’ addresses’.50

Three sessions of gruelling cross-examination revealed that Sunder had worked at Tampin in Negri Sembilan before arriving in Singapore on 20 March 1929. Saddled with debts due to a failed business venture, he was prompted to go to Singapore upon Jewa’s agreement to buy his lorry and to help him gain employment. In the interim, a sum of $500 was lent to him by the deceased and the money was used by Sunder to establish his own moneylending business. A sum of $200 was loaned out to two Tamils at an interest rate of $1 per day. Such evidence drew sharp criticism from the public prosecutor, who pointed out that it was illegal to charge interest by the day instead of by the month.51 Sunder denied that he had married his stepdaughter to Jewa for monetary reasons; he insisted that the dowry was not $1000, as Bishan Singh had alleged, and that Jewa had given money to the Sikh temple to bless the wedding. Jewa had also decided to waive $250 out of the $500 that he had loaned. The defence counsel, Mr E. R. Koek, marshalled two witnesses who could testify that Sunder could not have been at the scene of the crime. Yet the statements that were given by one of the witnesses, a Eurasian lawyer’s clerk, revealed that Sunder had returned to Kim Yam Road at the same time that Govindamal saw the strangling of Jewa Singh.

50 The Straits Times, 28 November 1929.
51 Ibid., 22 November 1929.
On 2 December 1929, Judge Stevens passed the death sentence on Sunder Singh. The application for an appeal by the defence counsel on behalf of Sunder Singh was rejected, and the judge stressed that ‘In the event of Mr Koek taking the matter to the Attorney-General, he desired that his decision this morning would not influence the mind of the Attorney-General.’ Three days later, a mass meeting was organized at a local gurdwara, attended by several hundred Sikhs. The organizers thanked all parties who had helped ensure that justice was meted out to Jewa Singh’s assailant. The organizers went on to express their solemn gratitude towards the judges, the members of the jury and the police. It is plausible that this gathering was convened for its explicit purpose, that is, to show that the Sikhs were pleased with the outcome of the investigation and the verdict in the trial. Yet a more likely implicit yet intentional message conveyed by the gathering was an assertion that the Sikh community as a whole was made up of decent, law-abiding folks who were on the side of the colonial system of justice.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued for the need to unearth the forgotten histories of working-class Sikhs in Singapore and Malaya through the employment of the methodology of micro-history. To that end, I have explored previously untapped sources, such as coroners’ records and legal reports, to reconstruct various aspects of the social worlds and daily lives of Jewa, Sunder, Bishan, Raj, Partab, Nehal and many others who have been omitted from the pages of south-east Asian history. This narrative analysis of a gruesome murder and the ensuing police investigation and prosecution clearly reveals that the Sikh community harboured everyday rivalries and personal animosities that could sometimes lead to acts of violence. Further, the framing of what might seem at first to have been an insignificant social drama against the background of larger historical processes has brought to the fore new perspectives on the colonial state and the position of women, relational structures within the family, occupational pursuits, the domestic environment, modes of communication and networks of social acquaintances among the overseas Sikhs of Malaya. While this article has focused on a murder as a prism through which various facets of the history of working-class Sikhs could be unravelled and more fully understood, there is still much to be done in exploring other neglected episodes and themes. Suicide, marriage, childbirth and other events – and even the mundane trivialities of everyday life – are areas that can be examined with the aid of unconventional sources. Let us commence by bringing to life ‘numerous alternative memories of the past from the testimonies of the “under-classes, the under-privileged, and the defeated” – the history of the “little people”’.

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52 ibid., 2 December 1929.