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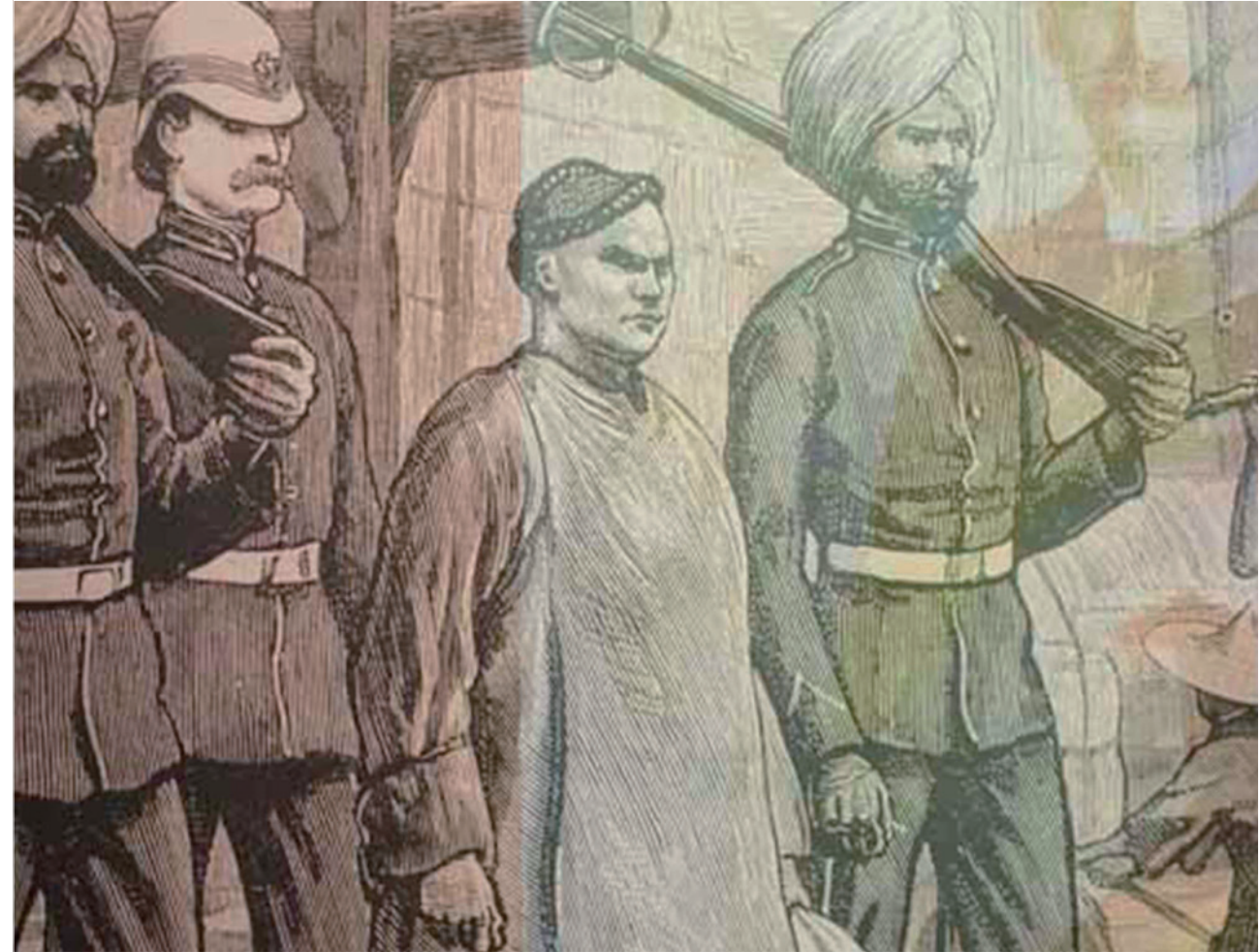
*Indians –
Here Since the
Foundation of
Hong Kong*



Indians – Here Since the Foundation of Hong Kong

Indians have been part of Hong Kong since it was founded in 1841. Over the years they have been an important part of the fabric of life in the city, working as international traders, diamond merchants, soldiers, policemen and tailors. They have likewise made their mark in law, medicine and finance and taken important roles in the government. In the 1990s, Indians made up less than half a percent of the population but their businesses accounted for as much as nine per cent of the city's global trade. The community today numbers about 45,000 - almost doubling in size since the handover to China in 1997. For the most part the new arrivals have been professionals – engineers and professors as well as workers in finance and IT, alongside the more traditional fields of diamonds and jewellery, shipping and trade.

Indians brought with them their languages and customs as well as



→ The Capture of a Notorious Chinese Pirate, Chang Yeh, at Hong Kong, *London Illustrated Newspaper*, 1887.

religion, music and dance. By and large they have retained their cultural links, maintaining close ties with Indian communities around the world and forming an intricate network that has helped make Hong Kong Asia's world city. These Indian communities have traditionally been close-knit – with most young people marrying within their own group.

→ History

Indians were an essential part of Britain's imperial army. When the British flag was raised over Hong Kong in January 1841, at least 2,700



→ (Top) The main Central Police Station, consisting of a Barrack Block and a parade ground, was built in 1864. The building provides accommodation for the growing number of police constables, including many Sikh policemen.

→ (Bottom) Management of prison guards was transferred from the police department to the Superintendent of the Gaol, 1879.



Indian soldiers – and four Indian merchants – were there to witness the historic event. Even before the colony was founded, Indian firms were trading with China, many of them dealing in the lucrative – though debilitating – commodity of the time – opium. The British wanted Hong Kong for its excellent deep-water harbour, the best on the south China coast, and that led to its emergence as a shipping and trading centre.

Indians played a key role in making the colony into a trading and shipping powerhouse. Of the 13 founding committee members of the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation in 1864, two were Indian Parsees and one an Indian Jew. In 1888, an Indian Parsee founded the Star Ferry, which still shuttles across the harbour carrying commuters and sightseers alike. Ebrahim Noordin, a Muslim from Surat on the west coast of India, founded Abdoolally Ebrahim in 1842; it is the oldest Indian firm in Hong Kong and is still in business today. By June 1845, there were 362 Indians and 595 Europeans living in Hong Kong, out of a total population of 23,817.

Indians were also a vital part of Hong Kong's security forces. Prior to World War Two, one-third of the police force was Indian, mostly Sikhs from Punjab. Many other Indians served in the British military and prison services. In December 1941, Indian soldiers served



→ From 1861, Hong Kong police recruited members from India, first from Mumbai and later Sikhs from the Punjab region. Sikh police officers were allowed to retain their customs and religion – they wore turbans, instead of police caps, and were assigned a room where they could shower before prayers.

gallantly in resisting invading Japanese forces. During the Japanese occupation, large numbers of Indians were interned in prison camps around the British colony. By February 1942, there were 10,947 prisoners of war in Hong Kong and 3,329 of them were Indian. In Happy Valley, there is a Commonwealth War Graves Commission memorial to one Sikh and eight Hindu soldiers who died in the defence of Hong Kong; the Muslim Cemetery there contains the graves of 24 Muslims from the Indian sub-continent who lost their lives in World War One and Two.

→ Star Ferry

One of the most visible Indian contributions to the former British colony is the Star Ferry, which has operated a passenger service between Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon peninsula for 130 years. Almost every visitor takes the iconic ferry at least once during a visit to Hong Kong – no matter how short. Despite the alternative of the underground train, which shuttles briskly beneath the harbour, the ferry is still widely used, offering spectacular views, a refreshing sea breeze and a few minutes of tranquility amid the city's frenetic workday pace. The ferries carry over 52,851 passengers a day or 19.3 million a year. In 2009, a poll by the Society of American Travel Writers rated the Star Ferry first among the "Top 10 Most Exciting Ferry Rides" in the world.

In 1888, businessman Dorabjee Naorojee Mithaiwalas founded the "Kowloon Ferry Company" and acquired three boats to carry passengers across the harbour. The service was so successful that a fourth vessel was purchased. Each had the word "Star" in its name, and the following year the firm was renamed the "Star Ferry". That familiar name is still in use today. Each boat could carry 100 passengers, with an average of 147 crossings a day at that time. On his retirement in 1898, Naorojee sold the company to the Hong Kong and Kowloon Wharf and Godown Company, owned at that time by Jardine, Matheson & Co and Sir Catchick Paul Chater, a prominent British-Indian businessman of Armenian descent. Until the opening of the first cross-harbour tunnel in 1972, the Star Ferry



→ The first pier of the Star Ferry, 1902.

was the main form of public transportation linking Hong Kong island and Kowloon.

Naorojee arrived in Hong Kong in 1852; he stowed away on a ship bound for China from Bombay (now Mumbai), finding work on board as a cook. He set out on his own in the business world, initially selling opium to China. Eventually, his main interest – besides operating ferries – would be managing hotels. Ultimately, he ran four of them. After he retired to India in 1898, he passed management of the hotels to his son.

→ Bank, University & Hospital

Naorojee was a Parsee (meaning Persia). Parsees are followers of



→ The priest of the Parsees in Hong Kong performs his daily ritual.

Zoroastrianism, one of the world's oldest living religions, originally from what is now Iran. Zoroastrianism entered recorded history in the fifth century B.C. It was the state religion of pre-Islamic Parsee for more than 1,000 years, losing that role after the Muslim conquest in the mid-seventh century A.D. After the conversion of the population to Islam, many Zoroastrians fled to escape persecution and settled in western India. The community made great contributions to the modernisation of their new homeland. In more recent years they built factories, mills, steel plants, hospitals, hotels, and educational and research institutes. They were also prominent in philanthropy. The Tatas, one of the biggest industrial and commercial families of India, are Parsees; their community helped make Mumbai the industrial and commercial capital of India.

Protecting Hong Kong from Illegal Immigrants

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Captain Nam Sing Thapa Magar



→ Captain Nam Sing Thapa Magar, was stationed at the Gallipoli Barracks, San Wai Camp, in Hong Kong in 1962.

“There was more than a brigade of Chinese soldiers on the other side of the border in mainland China. Some trained their rifles at me, ready to fire at any moment. If they had pulled the trigger, I would not be talking to you today. We had guns but no ammunition. I was afraid.”

Nam Sing Thapa, 72, was describing some of the events in his 24 years as a Gurkha soldier patrolling Hong Kong’s border with the mainland. His career with the Gurkhas stretched from 1962 until his retirement in 1986. Now he lives with his family in a cramped apartment on a tumbledown street in Lai Chi Kok. “Our 48 Brigade record was catching more than 16,000 illegals in one month. We gave them over to the Hong Kong police, to be handed over to the Chinese authorities. The Gurkhas patrolled the border 24 hours a day, seven days a week, manning the observation and listening posts – watching and listening. We were not allowed to shoot. I never shot or wounded anyone.”

He was one of thousands of Gurkha soldiers who patrolled the border, assisting the Hong Kong police. “Today I receive a pension from the Gurkhas, one-third of that given to British members of the regiment. It is not enough to live on. I have

to do other work. I plan to return to Nepal in one or two years. I have a small plot of land there. But we have a Communist government now there. What is it going to do?”

Nam was born in February 1946 in the Syanja district in central Nepal. His father was a warrant officer in the Gurkhas who served from 1942 to 1966. At the age of four, he was helping his grandfather look after cows, goats and buffaloes on the mountain sides. “I used to cry because of the difficulties of controlling the animals who damaged crops,” he says. In 1953, he went with his father to the Gurkha camp in what was then Malaya (now Malaysia). “There was no transportation and no roads. So we had to walk from the village to the Paklihawa British recruiting camp; it took six days. Then we got in a truck to Gorakhpur in India. From there we took a train to Calcutta, where we boarded a ship to Malaya. His father was sent to a Gurkha camp in Ipoh. “Facilities in the camp were poor. Six to eight families shared a toilet and washrooms. We had bunk beds. At that time, dry and fresh rations were controlled – we had three ounces of meat a week, fruit once a week and rice was scarce. We had no refrigerator, so we used supplies of thick cubes of ice once a week.” The young Nam



→ Captain Nam Sing Thapa Magar explains how to use a kukri knife at the Lotus Temple in Hong Kong. The Lotus Temple was built by the British for the Gurkhas and is dedicated to the God, Shiva.

attended classes at a school in the camp. In 1959, aged 13, he enlisted in the Boys' Company, the Brigade of Gurkhas, in Sungei Patani, Kedah, Malaya.

"My father insisted, saying the family needed the money. I started training in 1960. It was very tough – up at 4am, running and exercising in temperatures up to 40 degrees Celsius. We did a lot of sports, including football, volleyball, basketball, swimming, adventure training and boxing. We also did specialised training, such as First Aid, carpentry and vehicle mechanics."

In 1962, he officially joined his regiment, the second battalion 6th Queen Elizabeth's Own Gurkha Rifles; it was stationed in Gallipoli barracks, San Wai Camp beside Fanling in the New Territories. "The city was a shock – there were no trees, so we planted them. Several times bushfires broke out. We Gurkhas had to wake up at midnight and work until 4 am, walking in extended lines to put out the fire by using bamboo sticks, water buckets and so on. There was no drinking water and no baths available in 1963, so we carried stream water from the San Wai range. We Gurkhas supplied drinking water in the tanker vehicles to the village people. Hong

Kong had many tall buildings and many fishing boats. Especially during heavy rain, flooding, landslides and typhoons, we Gurkhas had to rescue the village people and fishing boat people from disasters. In emergencies, we went to rescue people and took them to safe areas; then we erected tents for immediate shelter and supplied food and drinking water. The Gurkhas built roads, bridges and houses for the village people, as needed.

"Our prime duty was to secure the border area and assist the Hong Kong police in riot control, curfews, cordons and search. It was a tough and exhausting assignment. At that time, there was no border fence, so the Gurkhas had to rely on observation posts, binoculars, eyes and quick feet. We worked in groups of four, (patrolling) five metres apart. We had kukris and a rifle, but no ammunition. Only our commander in charge had 10 rounds in his magazine which he carried. We had to use the minimum force possible. We had to concentrate our heart and mind. The illegals were inventive – they made boats out of air pillows or came over in mud boats. You could not see them until they jumped onto the land.

"We each had one bottle of water. Temperatures

went up to 40 degrees Celsius. The illegals never had a weapon. If you caught one, he or she would surrender. Many tried a second or third time. In the winter, many were very cold. I remember a woman of 18-19 years; she was shivering. I gave her tea and my sleeping bag for the night, before we handed her over the police." The brigade record was 16,000 captured in a single month.

Boxing at the Tokyo Olympics

Nam was a talented sportsman and excelled at boxing. A flyweight, he started boxing in 1960 at the camp in Malaya and continued at the barracks in Hong Kong two years later. He boxed for Battalion, Land Forces then the Far East Land Forces Individual Championships in Singapore; he won the Far East Land Forces (All India Silver belt), as well as exhibition matches. His commanders recommended him to the Nepali government for inclusion in their team for the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. He received a letter of encouragement from the then ruler of Nepal, King Mahendra. "We were the first Nepalis to represent our country at the Olympics. There were four of us boxers and two marathon runners. I was unlucky. My first fight was against a black American who had won the bronze



→ (Top) Captain Nam Sing Thapa Magar shows his kukri knife in front of the Lotus Temple in Hong Kong.



→ (Bottom) Captain Nam Sing Thapa Magar stands inside the Lotus Temple.

medal at the 1960 Rome Olympics. I hit him with all I had but he had the ring craft. He was 33 and I was 18. The referee stopped the fight in the first round, in his favour. I was too young.”

Helping Gurkha Veterans

In 1986, after 24 years of rigorous service, Nam retired from the Gurkhas at the age of 40. His officers recommended him for the post of Area Welfare Officer. These are former soldiers who live in different parts of Nepal and assist former Gurkhas who are destitute, sick or have suffered from natural disasters like fires or landslides. He accepted the post and went to live in Butwal in central Nepal, close to the border with India. “I was in charge of six districts, a very remote area, with no transportation. It took me 11 days of trekking to cover all districts. People spoke different languages, some incomprehensible.” After three-and-a-half years, he resigned his post. He remained in Butwal and ran a small farm, with poultry, using knowledge he had acquired on courses in Hong Kong.

Return to Hong Kong

In 1992, he met his former regimental

officer who offered him a job in Hong Kong in the security industry. The salary and conditions were too good to resist. He signed a two-year contract and returned in February 1993. He went to work for Jardine Securicor Gurkha Services Limited. Their mission was to protect the residences and properties of their clients, guard deliveries of cash and provide other security services. “Since we were in the civil service, we could not carry arms, even a kukri. All we had was a baton. We faced triads and criminal gangs.” In 1996, Nam acquired a permanent residence Hong Kong identity card. He retired in 2010, at 65.

“As a former Gurkha, I am eligible for a full UK passport. My friends there have asked me to go but I said ‘No, thank you’. I prefer to return to Nepal. The climate and food in the UK is not good. The weather in Nepal is nice. The money is better in Hong Kong. I have to support one sister who is unmarried and living in a village in Nepal. Our son lives in the U.S., but, with Mr. Trump, he may have to come back. Two daughters have married, one in Nepal, and one lives with us in Hong Kong. Over the next year or two, we plan to return to Nepal. We have a small plot of land there. As they say, join the British Army and go around the world – what I have done.”

South Indian Dishes

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↑ Iddli

What chappatis are to North India, idlis are to the South – albeit with much more preparation. The chappatis can be made in a couple of minutes, whereas the idlis take a bit longer. A batter made of dehusked fermented black lentils is steamed and then served hot with condiments such as sambar or chutney for this South Indian breakfast staple.



↑ Medu Vada

Another South Indian breakfast favourite is the medu vada, an Indian fritter made from mungo bean. It's formed into a doughnut shape with a crispy outside and soft inside. It's a popular South Indian daily snack that is also a key component of the menu on festival days. It can be served as a main course, side dish or snack. They are served with sambar and coconut chutney.



↑ Uthamppam

This is a pancake made with idli batter and vegetables. You can put whatever you like in them, a mix of vegetables or other ingredients. The vegetables are cut into the batter and then cooked.



↑ Rasam

Rasam is another South Indian staple. A good comfort food filled with garlic and spices. There's any number of rasam varieties, including tomato. It's seen as a comfort food but also as a way to get rid of a cold due to the garlic, turmeric and other ingredients. Rasam originated in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.



← Dosa

The dosa is a type of pancake that looks like a crepe. It's made with fermented batter made out of rice and black lentils. The fillings vary, but a yummy way to start the day is a breakfast of dosa stuffed with potato, fried onion and spices.