

# PUNJABIS IN EAST AFRICA

*Don't go don't go  
Stay back my friend.*

*Crazy people are packing up,  
Flowers are withering and friendships are breaking.  
Stay back my friend.*

*Allah gives bread and work  
You wouldn't find soothing shades anywhere else.  
Don't go my friend don't go.*

- Punjabi folk song of the early 20th century

Amarjit Chandan

In 1849 the East India Company's army occupied the sovereign state of Punjab – the land of five rivers – in north-west India. The British Crown took control in 1858.

The first Punjabis to ever travel abroad were Sikh troops serving in the British Army. From the 1880s onwards, they were posted in Southeast Asia and the Far East. Many worked as security guards and in the police force. In the early 1900s they migrated to British Columbia and worked on the Canadian Pacific Railway and settled as farmers, farm labourers and lumberjacks. From there they moved south into Washington, Oregon and California. Ghadar (literally, 'Revolt'), the militant movement against British imperialism during 1910-15, emerged from this experience abroad.

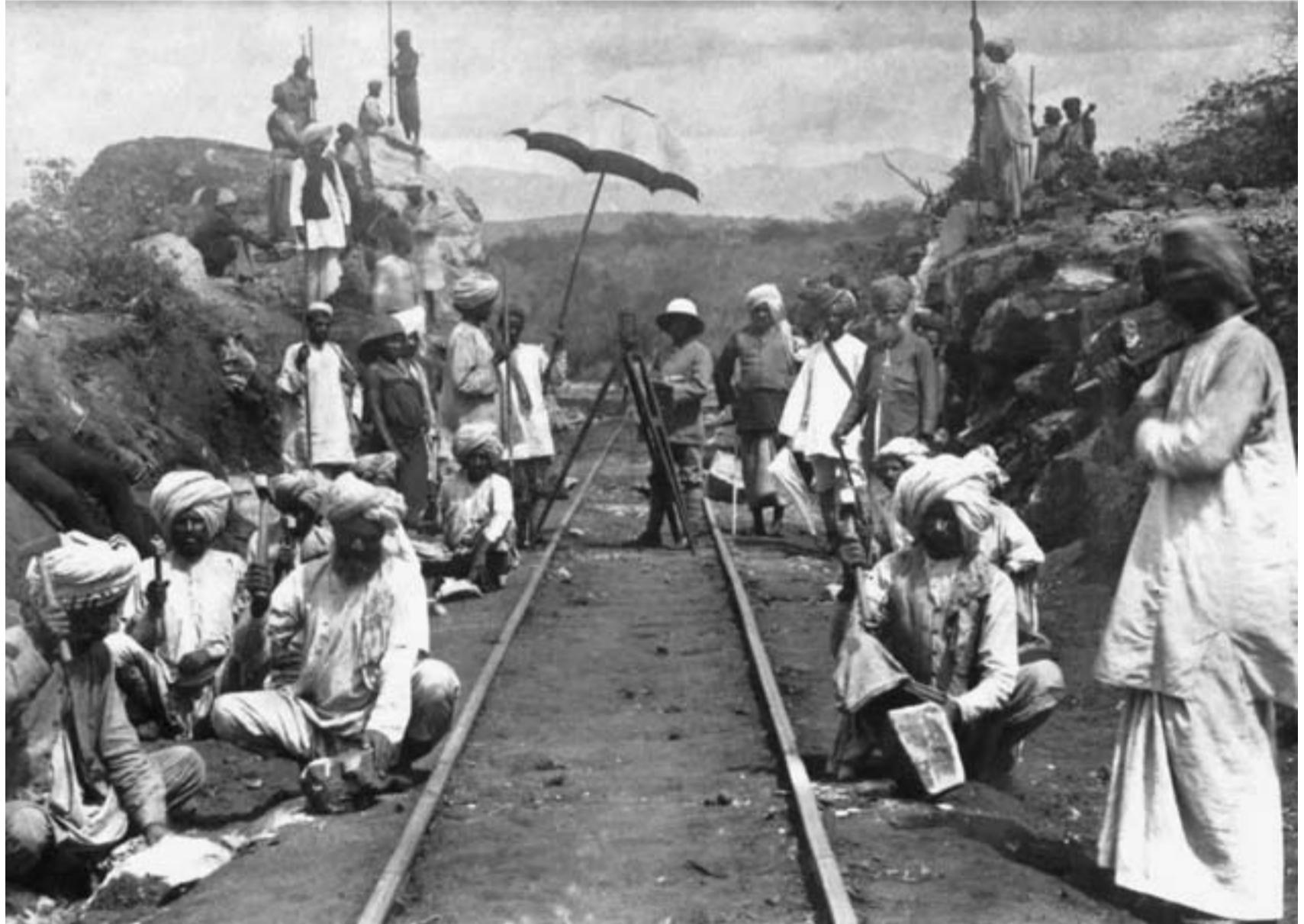
During the first world war, the British recruited 120,000 Muslims and Sikhs from the Rawalpindi division in western

Punjab. Thousands gave their lives in Basra, Gallipoli and at the French front, losses that inspired a corpus of Punjabi folk songs. Forty-seven thousand Punjabi soldiers were posted in East Africa.

The British East African Company was established in 1888. In 1895, protectorate administrative and commercial rule was enforced from Bombay. That same year, A. M. Jeevanjee of Karachi was awarded the contract to build the Kenya-Uganda railway and recruited his workforce from the Punjab. The first batch of 350 men sailed to Mombasa; over the next six years their number increased to 31,895. Most of them – Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims – worked as skilled labourers, artisans, bricklayers, carpenters, plumbers, tailors, motor mechanics and electrical fitters, mainly in Kenya and Uganda. After the railway's completion in 1905, fewer than 7,000 chose to stay in East Africa. By 1911, 12,000 Punjabis, Gujaratis and Parsee moneylenders, as compared to 3,000 Europeans, were living mainly in Kenya. In 1920 Kenya was declared a British colony.



Nihal Singh Mankoo (d.1925) from Lahore. One of the first batch of Punjabis to go to Kenya in 1895. His sons ran Nipper's Garage in Stuart Street, Nairobi.



Cutting near Voi  
Station. 1890. Courtesy:  
Railway Archives, Nairobi



By Gopal Singh Chandan, Nairobi. © 1932.



Makhan Singh addressing a rally. 9 Sept 1962.

Photographer unknown



Gopal Singh

Chandan.

Photo by UN Patel.

Nairobi. 1929



During the first half of the 20th century, communities developed around *gurdwaras* and *mandirs* (Sikh and Hindu temples, respectively) and mosques. Indians became conscious of workers' rights, and in 1922 Sudh Singh united Asian and African workers in the Railways Artisan Union. Sudh Singh's son Makhan Singh (1913-1973) emerged as an architect of Kenyan trade unionism and created the Labour Trade Union of Kenya (LTUK) in April 1935. In 1937, the LTUK was renamed the Labour Trade Union of East Africa (LTUEA). As a political aspirant in 1950, Singh was jailed along with Fred Kubai, the LTUEA president, by the British colonial authorities on the charge of 'operating an unregistered trade union and failure to dissolve it'. He was finally released in 1961, but was shunned by the Kenyatta government of newly independent Kenya and died of heart failure as a political recluse in 1973, aged 60.

Punjabis served widely in Kenyan public life, as members of the legislative council and all municipalities, and made a dis-

tinctive mark in sport, especially hockey, cricket, motor racing and golf. Sikhs, meanwhile, have dominated the Olympic hockey team since long before independence.

In 1962 the total population of Asians in Kenya was 177,000. Currently, it is less than 60,000. <

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photos: Amarjit Chandan Collection

By Gopal Singh Chandan.  
c 1932. Nairobi



Eastleigh Airport, Nairobi. 1957.

Photographer unknown



By Mohammad Amin. Nairobi. 1965.



Joginder Singh on his last journey on retirement.

Nairobi. 1963.

Courtesy: Railway Archives, Nairobi

