

Sikh and Indian Australians

STEPPING INTO THE DAILY LIFE OF THE INDIAN HAWKER IN THE COLONIES

HTAWA



YEAR 5 HISTORY: SIKH AND INDIAN AUSTRALIANS

Learning sequence 3: Stepping into the daily life of the Indian hawker in the colonies



Western Australian Sikh Hawker, Nahel Singh who regularly travelled through the South West, from Albany to Bunbury and across to Manjimup with his brother Herman Singh.

Did you know that many of the “Afghan” hawkers were Sikhs from the Punjab region in India? This Learning sequence will provide opportunities for students to understand the way of life in the colonies of this small but significant group of men, travelling Sikh hawkers, who sold their goods predominantly in rural areas across Australia. The Sikh hawkers were a distinctive group in the colonies with a tall bearing, a beard, turban and a kind and helpful manner. They also shared wonderful stories. This Learning sequence will develop the following Year 5 HASS skills:

- use of subject specific terminology and concepts
- analysis of primary sources
- identification of different perspectives
- development of questions to support inquiry learning.

Activity 1 Review of the features of Sikhism

See [Learning Sequence 2. Teacher Resource 4: Muslim, Hindu and Sikh beliefs](#)

Students could create Venn diagrams to show similarities and differences between Christian and Sikh beliefs or (Muslim and Sikh beliefs). Or, in pairs, draw a Sikh belief chart (or create an online collage of the key beliefs of Sikhs). These can be displayed around the classroom.

You could also organise an excursion to either of the two Sikh Gurdwaras in Perth, at 10 Cheltenham St, Bennett Springs WA 6063 and 280 Shreeve Road Canning Vale, WA 6155 by contacting Singh Tarunpreet at: tarun_preet2000@yahoo.com

The excursion to the Canning Vale Gurdwara could also incorporate a visit to Adenia Park in Riverton which is dedicated to Sikh history in Western Australia.

see: <http://www.communitynews.com.au/canning-times/news/heritage-park-to-tell-story-of-sikh-contribution-to-australia/>

As we explore the daily lives of Sikh hawkers in colonial Western Australia, and the eastern colonies, try to encourage students to identify how their beliefs were incorporated into their daily lives. (Honest living, meditation and focus on God and caring for others).

Front cover photo: Meer Singh’s wagon, Len Kenna & Crystal Jordan australianindianhistory.com

Activity 2: The daily lives of Hawkers

Young Indian men from the Punjab were among the migrants to Australia in the wave of free migration from the 1870s to 1901. Many were from Sikh farming families whose land, divided between many sons, could not sustain the next generation. The arrivals paid their own way so were able to choose how to make a living in the colonies, rather than being tied to contracts. Some worked on the land or with horses, others began selling goods from door to door to build their finances. Many of the men had the second name of Singh - meaning lion (bravery), while their sisters or wives took the title Kaur, which means princess or lioness. These people belonged to the Sikh religion where equality was vital. Profits earned from selling goods in the new colony were sent home to villages to support the family, or saved to buy land or buy a shop in Australia.

During the 1890s Indians were required to pay two shillings and sixpence for a hawker's licence. In some colonies such a licence was only provided to British subjects, meaning that Sikh and Hindu Indians came to monopolise the trade, until restrictions were enacted in the 1890s. If hawking door to door was profitable, the merchant bought a wagon and made contact with warehouses in cities to buy goods or access imported goods from India. With further success a hawker could buy a shop or invest in land. Two very successful Sikh hawkers in South Australia were Baba Ram Singh and Otim (Uttam) Singh, who arrived in Australia in 1890 and by 1907 established "The People Stores" in South Australia. In Western Australia Charr Singh owned a 2200 acre property in Quairading from 1904 to 1910 and Sunder Singh was a shop and home owner in Cranbrook until the late 1930s.

Hawkers travelled across the large colony of Western Australia. Evidence of their contribution to communities and outlying farms has been found from: Nannup, Manjimup, Albany, Bunbury, Collie, Cranbrook, Dongara, Geraldton, Wandering, Yarloop, Quairading, Mt Magnet, Wyndham, Coolgardie and Perth. Use the map of Western Australia provided in Teacher Resource 1 to locate and clearly identify the towns and regions frequented by Sikh hawkers during the late 1800s. [Teacher Resource 1: Map of Western Australia](#)

2.1. Meer Singh's wagon

Len Kenna & Crystal Jordan, australianindianhistory.com



See the video about the process of the restoration of Meer Singh's wagon by entering the following information into your search engine: "Australian Indian History, Good news 19th century Indian hawker's wagon".

A hawker's wagon contained the following features:

A canvas cover; sides that opened to display goods; shelves and small drawers to hold a range of goods to sell; a secret compartment to store money; horse equipment carried in a hammock under the wagon; two horses (and sometimes one spare); two seats for driver/s; attachments for horses.

Sketch a hawker's wagon like Meer Singh's wagon shown above. Label each part of the wagon. Where would the hawker sleep? Using a map of the south west of Western Australia sketch a route that the hawker might use to visit towns people and farmers over a 3 month period. Do you think they would visit the same places once, twice or three times a year?

2.2. The Daily Life of a Sikh Hawker

Discuss questions such as: How did the hawkers live while they travelled? What did they sell? How did they get along with farmers and shopkeepers that they met? Where did they worship?

Brainstorm answers and request that students ask further questions about the lives and contribution of Sikh hawkers.

Source Analysis

Show the students the short video from Splash (a secondary source) and then ask them to read the two descriptions of farm visits by hawkers (Both are memories about the Sikh traders and are therefore primary sources). Then instruct the students (individually or in pairs) to write their responses to the questions which follow:

Source 1 View the video from Outback House on ABC Splash.

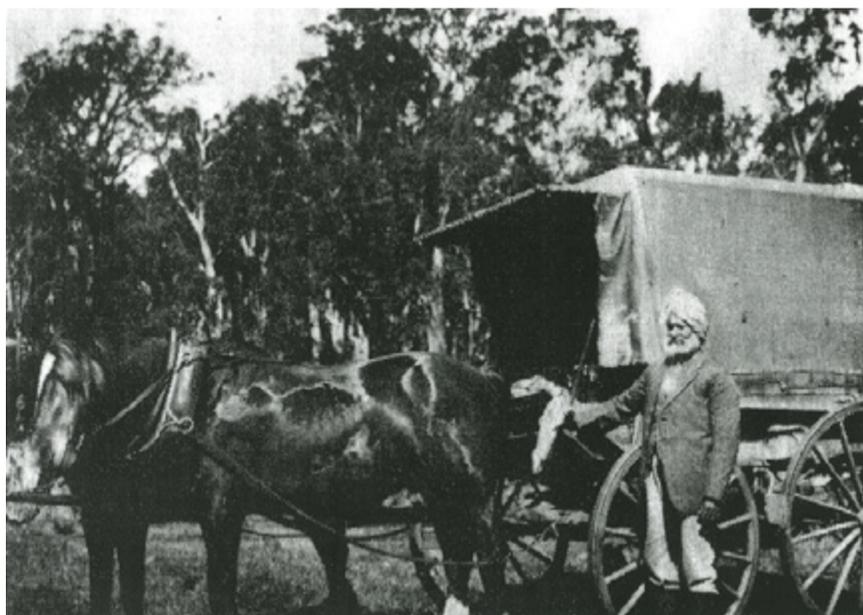
To access the short video type the following into your search engine:

“Splash, abc, media 154728 outback house arrival of the hawker”.

Source 2 Sikh hawkers in the South West of WA before 1901

Long before there were shops in Manjimup, two Indian hawkers travelled throughout the lower south west area in a horse drawn wagon, providing a very welcome service for the settlers. The wagon was well stocked with blankets, dress lengths, cottons, ribbons, shoelaces, wool, needles, socks, trousers, tea, matches, soaps, pocket knives, working boots, slippers and many more items. Herman and Nehal Singh were always warmly welcomed on the farms because of the wares they sold, the skins they bought and because of their kindly nature. Their supplies came from a shop in Cranbrook owned by their brother Sundah Singh. Many adults today delight in telling of how, as children, they ran to welcome the hawker's wagon filled with treasures, and how the Sikh shared with them their.. johnny cakes (a pancake made from cornflour, salt and water) and sometimes their lentil curry. For the most part, Herman and Nehal liked to cook their own meals as they ate no meat or animal fats. They cooked over an open fire chanting as they cooked.

<http://www.australiansikhheritage.com/nehah-herman-and-sunder-singh/> (Information from the Muir family)



Ottam Singh visiting Nannup. Courtesy of Australian Sikh Heritage

Source 3 Memories of a visit from a hawker in Victoria

The van was just an ordinary covered wagon with the sides, I think they were mostly canvas with perhaps outside wood, and he'd let them down just to show us his wares that were inside, all nicely packed, and it was all very comfortable. It was pulled by one horse and there was no sleeping accommodation, I think he pitched his tent somewhere at night.

I think he probably pulled into a sale somewhere, or the markets, or somewhere near Bendigo and loaded up and then went through the country towns, and went right out to the farms and went back to replenish his store again.

Of course, everybody was clamouring around, the children were excited to see what was there - it was quite a red-letter (special) day when the hawker arrived. And strangely enough these men were well-liked with the farmers, they got on well together. And children liked them too. Well, we'd get a few things that we needed, and sometimes they would get some chaff from the farmer to feed the horse at night.

<http://greataustralianstory.com.au/story/sikh-hawkers> - Mary Staley

The hawkers also sold exotic products such as tea, cumin, cloves and other spices which were imported into Australia by the 1880s. Hawkers often brought letters to rural families and also provided the opportunity for families to order goods from city stores through commercial catalogues. These goods would be delivered when the hawker visited the location again. Often camping on farms the travellers helped around the farm, played cricket and other games, and provided donations to local community events. The WA census of 1881 listed 14 “Hawkers and general dealers” working in the colony.

Possible questions for students:

- i. Use evidence from Sources 1 to 3 to list the items that the hawkers provided for the family members on the farm: the farmer, his wife and their children.
- ii. Do the sources give any idea of what the relationship between the farmers and the hawkers were like? Give evidence from the sources to support your answer.
- iii. How reliable do you think the sources 2 and 3 are considering they were written from the author’s childhood memories?
- iv. Use evidence from the sources and your imagination to complete the following activity. Imagine if you lived on a farm in the SW of Western Australia in 1880. Brainstorm ideas or use a Y chart (which includes what an experience looks, feels and sounds like) about the visit by a Sikh hawker. With a partner (or in a group) create a short play, a story, a series of sketches or a painting entitled “The day the hawker visited”. What did you buy? What did you see? How did you feel?. Empathise with how the farmers felt about the visit. Include ideas of why there was excitement when the hawker visited. What questions would you like to ask the hawkers about their activities and contributions to colonial Australia?

Activity:

2.3 The Sikh hawkers also told exciting stories during their visits to farms. A military tradition in the Punjab meant that many Sikhs were veterans of wars, fighting to defend their Sikh Kingdom or as part of the British Army.

- Sikh contingents supported General Frederick Roberts in the Second Anglo - Afghan War, where in the 1880 Battle of Kandahar, they defeated the Afghan forces..
- The heroic sacrifice of Sikh soldiers in the 1897 Battle of Saragarhi in North West India became legendary, as 21 Sikh soldiers defended to death a British fort against 10,000 Afghan soldiers.



Sikh troops with Afghan prisoners in 1878 during the Second Anglo-Afghan War [public domain, [wikimedia commons](#)]

For further information on these stories see:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/armed-forces-commemorate-the-battle-of-saragarhi>

<http://www.australiansikhheritage.com/saragarhi/>

<http://www.britishbattles.com/second-afghan-war/kandahar.htm>

Hawkers would also have shared stories about life in their villages, and the centre of the Sikh religion in Amritsar: the magnificent Golden Temple. Read about the Golden Temple which has a dome covered in 100 kilograms of gold leaf at:

<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/india/golden-temple-of-amritsar>

2.4 Wrestlers and entertainers

Sikh hawkers also told stories of the tradition of wrestling in their homeland. There were many Sikhs across Australia who took up wrestling and the use of heavy clubs for fitness. The following information comes from the Melbourne Sportsman, Wednesday 11 July 1888, p 7

“Last Sunday week the British India mail steamer Bancoora arrived in Melbourne. Among her passengers were Sochate Sing (Singh) and Vodabus Sing (Singh), two Sikhs who have come out[to Australia] partly on business and partly to visit some relatives. The first named (Sochate) has served in the Sikh artillery in Hong Kong, and bears on the arm of his tunic the crossed rifles, the badge of the crack marksman of his brigade. In addition, both are catch- a catch -can wrestlers. Sochate Sing, indeed being a pupil of Kirkut, the champion wrestler in India.

To Mr Gilbert Smith, the well known interpreter, we are indebted for a short interview.... Sochate Sing tells that wrestling is very common in India, particularly among the Sikhs. They are trained in athletic exercise from the time they are five years of age. The Sikhs are essentially a war like race, depending mainly for their living on soldiering, though a large number are farmers. But even the [farmers] go through an athletic training.

Sochate Sing had his first wrestling match when he was nine years old in the Punjab. They met in friendly rivalry with no stake and no gate money. He was afterwards engaged in numerous tournaments..... Sochate Sing and Vodabus Sing gave a quick, clever exhibition. The first named is 6 foot one inches high, and straight as a dart. Both are, of course, out of condition, having suffered terribly from sea sickness on the passage [to Australia]. Enough was shown, however, to prove that with a month's rest and careful training they would prove formidable [wrestlers].... What Sochate Sing [thinks of wrestling in Australia] is contained in the following statement to the Editor of the Sportsman.

“I, Sochate Sing, an Indian wrestler, desire to fight a match with an Australian wrestler. For this purpose I am prepared to [bet a sum of money]. Do me the great favour therefore to arrange matters within a month. (Signed) Sochate Sing.”

Buttan Singh was another famous Sikh wrestler who arrived in Western Australia in 1900. He won a series of wrestling matches in the early 1900s in Kalgoorlie and Melbourne to become the Australian Wrestling Champion in 1903. He went on to win titles in the USA and Great Britain. Called a “delightfully unassuming man” by the Western Australian press, he was also one of the world's best at swinging clubs, which usually weighed 6.3 kilograms each.

For more detail type the following into your search engine: “Australian Indian History Indian Wrestlers Australia”.

Teacher Resource 2: Vocabulary review. These terms could be added to terms from previous learning sequences to develop a “Word wall” in the classroom. Ask students to add any new terms to their vocabulary list. A map of India showing the location of the Punjab region and major Indian cities could also be displayed.

Activity 3. Perspectives on Hawkers in the colonies.

By the 1880s the colonial press and an active trade union movement were became fearful of “Asian” workers in Western Australia. A strong work ethic and acceptance of lower wages meant that many unionists believed Chinese and Indian workers were a threat to the standard of living in the colonies. In Western Australia a series of laws were passed, at times copied from laws in the eastern colonies, to deal with the perceived threat.

- 1886 an Act to Regulate and Restrict Chinese Immigration
- 1886 Goldfields Act to ban Chinese from taking out mining leases
- 1896 the Asiatic and African Aliens Act stopped the sale of mining rights and hawker licences to people born in Asia or Africa.
- The 1897 Immigration Restriction Act required Non-Europeans wishing to come into WA to write out a 50 word passage in a European language.

Attitudes held by gold miners, the Coolgardie press and various trade unions pressured the colonial government, led by Premier John Forrest, into developing these restrictive laws. They caused difficulties for Sikhs and Indians who were British subjects and had worked for decades in the colony. The source analysis in **Teacher Resource 3** is based on the historical concept of perspective.

See Teacher Resource 3: Perspectives on “Asiatic and African Aliens”

By 1900 each colony had regulations to restrict Chinese and other Asian people entering Australia. One of the unifying factors leading to the federation of the colonies was the growing fear of the “coloured races” and a very early Act of the Federal Parliament was the Immigration Restriction Act. In what was to become part of the so called White Australia policy, to live in Australia people from Asia and Africa were required to:

- pass a dictation test
- leave their family in their homeland
- apply for a re-entry certificate if they left the country
- apply for The Certificate of Exemption for the Dictation Test if they had lived in Australia before 1901.

Hawkers and other migrants who lived quietly in the Australian colonies contributed in many ways to the development of the country. They connected the cities to the country, provided essential resources for public works, they were servants, horse breeders, farmers, agricultural labourers, mailmen, companions, shared rich stories and introduced new foods. And yet, they were often invisible from Australian history and their presence ignored in “white” Australia. How can we showcase the stories of non-European migrants - Japanese divers, Muslim and Sikh cameleers, the Chinese? Why did they come to Australia and in what ways did they contribute to the development of the colonies? This is Australia’s story too.