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All about Sikhism in Afghanistan

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: *With the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the history of the minuscule but important Sikh community in the country could be on the verge of its end. The World Punjabi Organisation along with the Delhi Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DSGMC) have been coordinating with the government of India for the evacuation of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs.*

A history of Sikhism in Afghanistan

- Contrary to the common assumption that Sikhs in Afghanistan are recent immigrants of Indian origin, the Sikh community is in fact indigenous to the country and has a long and deep-rooted history in the region.
- History enthusiast Inderjeet Singh in his book, 'Afghan Hindus and Sikhs: History of a thousand years' (2019) suggested that the history of Sikhism in Khurasan (medieval Afghanistan) begins with the founder of the Sikh religion, Guru Nanak, who is known to have visited the region sometime in the 15th century.
- Anthropologist Roger Ballard in his 2011 research paper explained that the Sikh population in the region consisted of "those members of the indigenous population who resisted the process of conversion from Buddhism to Islam which took place in this area between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, and who subsequently aligned themselves with the teachings of Guru Nanak – himself a Khatri and the founder of the Sikh tradition – during the course of the fifteenth century."
- In 1504, the Mughal emperor Babur captured Kabul and by 1526 he was the master of Northern India. Kabul became one of the provinces of Hindustan and was referred to as 'Hindustan's own market' by Babur.
- It remained part of Hindustan till 1738 when it was conquered by the Persian ruler Nadir Shah.
- During this period the Sikh chroniclers record a number of names and instances when Sikh followers in Kabul came to the region now known as East Punjab, to pay respect to the Sikh Gurus.
- There were also several instances when Sikhs from East Punjab went over to Afghanistan to spread the teachings of the Sikh Gurus.
- For instance, the 18th-century text, Mahima Prakash, written by Sarup Das Bhalla, descendant of the third Sikh Guru, Guru Amar Das, mentions the name of 'Kabuli wali Mai' (lady from Kabul) who did seva (voluntary service) while digging a stepwell at Gondiaawal in East Punjab.
- The same text also mentions Bhai Gonda who was sent to Kabul to propagate the teachings of the seventh Sikh Guru and that he also established a Gurudwara there.
- The period between mid 18th to the mid 19th century is an important one in the history of Afghan Sikh relations. For about 101 years the Afghans and Sikh empire were neighbours and mostly antagonists.
- By the early decades of the 19th century, the Sikh empire under Maharaja Ranjit Singh had annexed large parts of the Durrani empire under the Afghans. During the Second Anglo-Sikh war of 1848-49, however, the Sikhs were supported by the Afghans, even though they lost out to the British.
- In the late 19th and early 20th century, in reaction to the Christian proselytising activities following the annexation of the Sikh empire by the British, the Singh Sabha movement, a Sikh reform movement was established.
- The impact of the movement was felt across Afghanistan as well. Akali Kaur Singh, for instance, spent a year in Afghanistan, going from house to house to spread the Sikh doctrine. His mission led to the creation of several gurdwaras in the region.

The Sikh exodus from Afghanistan



- The first major exodus of the Afghan Sikhs and Hindus happened during the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan in the late 19th century.
- Khan's rule in Afghanistan was termed by the British as the 'reign of terror'. He is known to have judicially executed close to 100,000 people.
- Several Hindus and Sikhs had emigrated during this period and the Afghan Sikh community of Patiala in Punjab is known to have been established then.
- But it was in 1992 when the Mujahideen took over Afghanistan that the most extensive exodus of the Sikhs and Hindus started.
- Before the Mujahideen took over, the Sikhs were affected by two instances of terrorist activities. In 1988, on the first day of Baisakhi, a man with an AK-47 stormed into a gurdwara and gunned down 13 Sikhs.
- The following year, Gurdwara Guru Teg Bahadur Singh in Jalalabad was attacked by rockets fired by the Mujahideen, leading to the death of 17 Sikhs. Singh in his work wrote that between March to October 1989 the Mujahideen attacked Jalalabad with the intention to capture the city.
- More than a hundred Afghan Sikhs died during the six month period when the Mujahideen targeted mainly the Sikh residential area of the city.
- After the Mujahideen took over Kabul in 1992, a large number of Sikhs started leaving the country as they were subjected to several instances of kidnapping, extortion, and persecution. The troubles multiplied further when the Taliban swept to power in 1994.
- While in the early 1990s over 60,000 Sikhs and Hindus lived in Afghanistan, by 2019 it had reduced to about a thousand, mainly restricted to Kabul, Jalalabad and Ghazni. Outside these cities, their gurudwaras and mandirs are now illegally occupied by locals of the majority community.
- Even within these cities, their houses were forcefully occupied during the turmoil of the civil war and most of them live in gurudwaras and mandirs.
- The tolerance of diversity which had hitherto been such a characteristic of Afghan Islam rapidly began to evaporate in the face of the hard-line jihadi and fundamentalist attitudes promoted by the Taliban.
- More recently, in 2018, a suicide bomb attack in Jalalabad killed at least 19 Sikhs and in March 2020 an attack on Gurdwara Guru Har Rai Sahib resulted in the death of 25 persons. Ever since, there has been a massive increase in the emigration of the Afghan Sikhs.
- They are also hopeful that with the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act by the Indian government, it would be easier for them to get entry and citizenship in India.
- Close to 200 Sikhs and Hindus continue to be stranded in Afghanistan after the evacuation on Monday.

All about Calcutta

(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: A 2003 judgment by the Calcutta High Court should have settled any dispute that may have existed concerning the date of the birth of the city of Calcutta, but some two decades later, August 24 invariably generates discussion of the city's age, its date of founding and Job Charnock, whom many credit for having "found" the city of Calcutta.

Details:

- After months of deliberation, in what was considered to be a historic judgment, the Calcutta High Court had said that Charnock was not the founder of the city of Calcutta and directed the West Bengal government to stop associating Charnock's name in this context, including removing textual references



to it and to not celebrate August 24 as the city's birthday. Very simply, the High Court had said, "Calcutta does not have a birthday".

- To claim that any city was "founded" on a specific day would mean dismissing early years of settlement. In the case of Calcutta, Charnock did not chance upon barren land because settlements predated his arrival.
- Historians don't see a particular date (of founding) as very crucial because a city can't grow in a day. It is true that Job Charnock came on a day and there are records of that and he decided that there would be a settlement here. But that was not the city.
- The crucial question for me as an urban historian is, when does it take the contours of a city? A city means a lot of people staying together; there are institutions, government, there is economic activity, cultural activity. It is markedly not rural; there are urban attributes.
- Hence, from an urban history perspective, Calcutta's story as one of the greatest cities of its time, doesn't start from 1690, the year of Charnock's landing.
- Datta believes that one of the most significant developments that gave the city a semblance of urban formation occurred in 1756 when the Nawab of Bengal Siraj ud-Daulah lay siege to Calcutta in retaliation for the British East India Company engaging in unauthorised development of the structure that is now known as Fort William.
- The East India Company was defeated in a decisive battle, making them realise the vulnerability of the fort.
- Post 1757 when the fort was remade and fortified with enhanced protection, the construction was exceptionally well done. It was really this attack on Fort William, a bastion of the British and other Europeans living there, that changed the map of Calcutta.
- The Europeans who used to primarily lived inside the fort—the European merchants, the administrators etc—started moving out. They knew that if there was an attack, there was infrastructure to save them.
- That is when places like Chowringhee, Esplanade were set up. That was European Calcutta, what we call 'White Town'.
- Simultaneously, while the fort was being rebuilt and fortified, there was another important development happening on the sidelines. The British East India Company had started an ambitious initiative for which they required a large number of labourers.
- We have evidence that they recruited labourers, and quite deliberately went to surrounding districts, and even further to Bihar, Orissa, to recruit poor people seeking jobs. We have evidence that people migrated to build this fort.
- To accommodate this planned migration of labourers, the British East India Company turned to a Muslim burial ground near Fort William, and set up what was known as 'Coolie Bazaar', where these labourers were given a place to stay while they worked on the construction of this fort, writes historian P. Thankappan Nair in his book 'The Growth and Development of Old Calcutta, in Calcutta, the Living City'.
- This started a process of migration from what we call in urban history, the hinterland. So the poor who moved into the city also gave it its character.
- The establishment of the Government House in 1767 and the Lottery Commission in 1817 were the other important developments in the city's history that gave its urban landscape more defined contours.
- This commission was entirely responsible for the setting up of the city's roads, streets and lanes. Some markers of urban settlements include planned roads, water supply and transport, and the establishment of these in the early 19th century was responsible for making Calcutta the great city that it eventually became.
- Following the establishment of the Lottery committee, one of the most important urban development projects undertaken by the British East India Company included the laying down of the long stretch of road that is now called Bidhan Sarani in north Calcutta.
- This is an attribute of a city, where you have a very important thoroughfare being laid down. Once this road was laid down, institutions began coming up on this road, like schools and colleges. It shows that



urban social and cultural activity was happening. The city started getting character. It was no longer just a settlement.

- Along this axis, in the early 1800s, some of the city's most important institutions were set up, like the Hindu College, that became Presidency College, Medical College and Hospital, and further up north, the Bhramo Samaj.
- This whole debate of Calcutta being founded on a particular day according to me is not fruitful. It took a long time and some broad political, social, economic activities that happened in phases gave character to the city. That was how the city was founded—in phases.
- The markers that make an urban settlement a city only happened in the 19th century for Calcutta. When it eventually did, records show that it developed as one with a sizable population, to become one of the great metropolises of the 19th century, comparable to other European cities.
- The 2003 Calcutta High Court judgment was the result of a petition filed by the Sabarna Roychowdhury family, who had claimed ownership of a significant portion of the land that now forms Calcutta, challenging the official date of birth of the city, claiming that Charnock had arrived in Calcutta in 1676.
- The connection of the Roy chowdhury family to the discourse surrounding the ownership and history of Calcutta can be found in archives and deeds where rights over the land were handed over to the British East India Company.
- The three villages, Gobindapur, Sutanuti, Kalikata, that were combined to form Calcutta, were a part of the Khash land owned directly by the Mughal emperor, under whom the Sabarna Roychowdhury family were zamindars, Neogi says.
- In the Mughal system of government, a zamindar was the emperor's representative who oversaw the emperor's land and collected taxes on his behalf. So a zamindar in a Mughal administrative set-up was indirectly an employee of the emperor.
- They didn't own the land. As a payment for being the emperor's representative and tax collector, they could keep a fraction of the revenue they collected for themselves," says Neogi.
- In 1697, the transaction that happened between the Sabarna Roychowdhury family and the East India Company was not of the ownership rights, but rather the zamindari rights of these three villages, after which, the British became the next tax collectors for Mughal emperor Aurangzeb.
- This the Company misunderstood. Based on their knowledge of how landholding worked in England they thought that the zamindars, like English landlords, owned their lands, sometimes for generations and paid tax to the monarch.
- Because zamindari was translated as landlordship, the Company had assumed that the transaction on November 10, 1697 was a transfer of proprietary rights over these three villages. This misinterpretation would create problems later.
- It is this misinterpretation from where much of the debate surrounding the early urban history of Calcutta starts. The date, 1690, is a convenient marker. We shouldn't discount that.
- This date is also important because it marks the start of British rule, especially since Calcutta was the diamond in the empire.
- No city is built in a day; it is a long process. The question for any urban historian is what are the markers of any great city and how did they come about.

All about Delhi's new smog tower

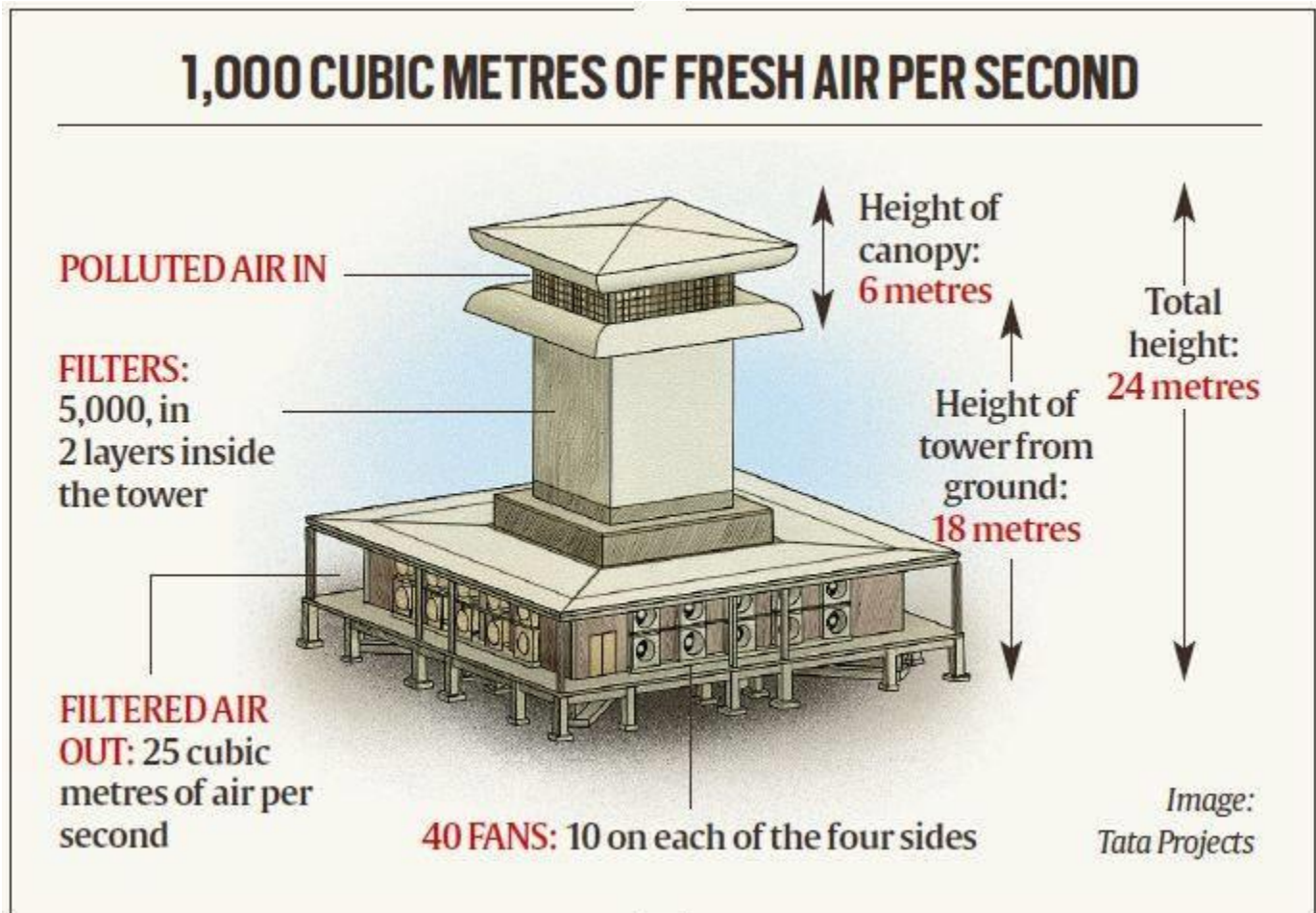
(Source: [Indian Express](#))

Context: Ahead of its infamous smog season, Delhi got a 'smog tower', a technological aid to help combat air pollution.



Components of smog tower

- The structure is 24 m high, about as much as an 8-storey building — an 18-metre concrete tower, topped by a 6-metre-high canopy. At its base are 40 fans, 10 on each side.
- Each fan can discharge 25 cubic metres per second of air, adding up to 1,000 cubic metres per second for the tower as a whole.
- Inside the tower in two layers are 5,000 filters. The filters and fans have been imported from the United States.



Smog tower: How it works

- The tower uses a 'downdraft air cleaning system' developed by the University of Minnesota, said Anwar Ali Khan, senior environmental engineer, Delhi Pollution Control Committee, who was in charge of the project.
- IIT-Bombay has collaborated with the American university to replicate the technology, which has been implemented by the commercial arm of Tata Projects Limited.
- Polluted air is sucked in at a height of 24 m, and filtered air is released at the bottom of the tower, at a height of about 10 m from the ground.
- When the fans at the bottom of the tower operate, the negative pressure created sucks in air from the top. The 'macro' layer in the filter traps particles of 10 microns and larger, while the 'micro' layer filters smaller particles of around 0.3 microns.
- The downdraft method is different from the system used in China, where a 60-metre smog tower in Xian city uses an 'updraft' system — air is sucked in from near the ground, and is propelled upwards by heating and convection. Filtered air is released at the top of the tower.



Likely impact

- Computational fluid dynamics modelling by IIT-Bombay suggests the tower could have an impact on the air quality up to 1 km from the tower.
- The actual impact will be assessed by IIT-Bombay and IIT-Delhi in a two-year pilot study that will also determine how the tower functions under different weather conditions, and how levels of PM2.5 vary with the flow of air.
- An automated Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) system in the tower will monitor air quality. Levels of PM2.5 and PM10, besides temperature and humidity, will be measured constantly, and will be displayed on a board atop the tower.
- Monitors will soon be installed at various distances from the tower to determine its impact at these distances. The project aims to provide purified air in a “localised” area, officials said.

Supreme Court order

- In 2019, the Supreme Court directed the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) and the Delhi government to come up with a plan to install smog towers to combat air pollution.
- The court was hearing a matter related to air pollution in the national capital due to stubble-burning in Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. IIT-Bombay then submitted a proposal for the towers to the CPCB. In January 2020, the Supreme Court directed that two towers should be installed by April as a pilot project.
- The smog tower at Connaught Place is the first of these towers. The second tower, being constructed at Anand Vihar in east Delhi with CPCB as the nodal agency, is nearing completion.
- Since 2009, an increase of 258% to 335% had been observed in the concentration of PM10 in Delhi, a 2016 report by the CPCB noted. But the most prominent pollutant in Delhi and neighbouring areas is PM2.5, the report said.

No evidence so far

- This is the first experiment with a large-scale outdoor air-purification system in India. Small smog towers have been raised in Netherlands and South Korea; larger ones have been set up in China.
- Experts said there isn't enough evidence that smog towers work.
- Delhi has three smaller air purifiers (about 12 feet tall) installed by the Gautam Gambhir Foundation in Krishna Nagar, Gandhi Nagar, and Lajpat Nagar — essentially big versions of indoor air purifiers.