

Stop Processions

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As usual, Sikhs of Delhi took out a procession on Shahidi Gurupurab of Guru Arjun Dev. It was undoubtedly as great a spectacle as those in the years past: a mile-long file of men and women walking ten to twenty abreast. Punj Piyaras (the first five beloved converts to the Khalsa Panth) with kirpan drawn, brass bands, *gatka* groups, displaying their skills with lathis, swords and whirlers; the decorated palki carrying the Granth Sahib, followed by women singing hymns. Traffic came to a halt, shops en route pulled down their shutters. It took the procession several hours to cover the distance from one historic gurdwara to another. Life in the city came to standstill for several hours.

Every such procession costs the community several lakhs of rupees which could have been better spent building more schools, hospitals, etc. What takes place in Delhi takes place in all big cities where there is a sizeable population of Sikhs. It is repeated at least thrice every year (Guru Nanak's birthday, Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom anniversary and Guru Gobind Singh's birthday). These processions have nothing whatsoever to do with Sikhism; they are not even part of *maryada* - a religious tradition.

I had often toyed with the idea of writing against our national habit of taking out processions which deprive thousands of their daily earnings and no doubt make people miss their appointments, trains, flights and some, in immediate need of urgent medical relief, deprived of their lives. I did not do so earlier lest I should be accused of being anti-religious and deserving punishment by people who look upon themselves as guardians of the faith. They would ask for my head on a platter.

I brought up the subject very discretely when a few Sikhs happened to be in my home. They included Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa, former cabinet minister and Akali member of Lok Sabha, Tarlochan Singh, Chairman, Minorities Commission and MP Rajya Sabha, Nanak Singh Kohli, NRI philanthropist and Tavleen Singh, journalist. Tralochan Singh spoke out: "All the goodwill we Sikhs earn by *sewa* and the *langar* where we feed thousands free of charge everyday is destroyed by these processions. They should be banned." All the others agreed. It would be foolish for any government to try and ban religious processions. It has to be done by leaders of the community. In the case of Sikhs the SGPC, jathedars of the Akal Takht and governing bodies of different gurdwaras. I am sure Hindus and Muslims will be shamed into doing the same. Then the government can come down heavily on political processions as well.

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