

“ISSUE OF TURBAN IN FRANCE” Sikh struggle for human dignity

By M.S. Rahi

A Review by G.S. Cheema, IAS*

In France - and it applies equally to the rest of Continental Europe – the Sikhs are virtually unknown. Not that there are too few of them; in that vast under- class of shadowy ‘illegals’ or refugees (whether real or of convenience) there are any number of them, but most (like some at home) have cut their hair and given up their turbans. The few that have remained loyal to this symbol of their faith are, ironically enough, assumed to be Muslims - often by other Muslims as well. During a short one-year stay in France I was often greeted by ‘*Maghrebi*’ or Sahelian Muslims from North Africa with a hearty ‘*Al-Salaam Aleikum!*’ While I had no inhibitions about reciprocating appropriately -after all ‘Peace be on you!’ sounds much better than the banal ‘*bon jour*’ - people would be often confused when I failed to respond to further attempts at conversation in Arabic, and tried to explain that I was neither Muslim nor Arab, but a Sikh and a ‘Hindi’, for India is still known as *Hind* in the Arab world.

That was in the good old days when inebriate Europeans would sometimes also see a maharaja in a turbaned Sikh, but post September 11th, cold stares were more usual, and occasionally schoolchildren would try to bait me with cries of ‘Ossama! Ossama!’ Muslims from Black or White Africa, usually speaking some variety of Arabic are as commonplace in France, as South Asians are in the UK, but **while there has no doubt always been an undercurrent of hostility on the part of the native (white) French, it was quite different from the colour discrimination with which Indians, and even mixed-blood Anglo-Indians had to contend with in the UK or in old British India.** In France if a man speaks French and subscribes to the motto of the Revolution, he is accepted as French, with minor reservations, and the French somehow managed to teach their colonial subjects French remarkably well, and even a visit to Pondicherry today will bear this out. **The French, like other Latins have always aimed at cultural assimilation, and in their attempt to ban the turban, head-scarves or ostentatiously large crucifixes, they are aiming at exactly that.** After all such distinctively foreign items of headgear or dress make a person stand out, and when they are coupled with a darker shade of skin-colour, the man or woman stands out as distinctively foreign. To be an ‘outsider’ is always uncomfortable, the French, by their lights, are only being kind.

But the Tenth Guru, in his wisdom, blessed us with the five ‘*kakkas*’ which - if faithfully kept - make assimilation impossible. In India it makes no difference; with our innumerable castes, sects, and religions, besides infinite gradations of colour, variety is taken for granted, and assimilation in the French would be seen as a threat to the identity, *Vive la différence!* Would be our slogan. But in Europe where it was only after the bloody struggles of the Reformation and the Counter Reformation that the state reluctantly accepted that there could be other religious sects apart from Roman Catholicism or whatever variety of Protestantism which the ruler chose to recognize as ‘established’, such bewildering variety would seem positively subversive. In fact atheism may seem preferable, and ever since the age of Voltaire and Rousseau, there has been a strong streak of anticlericalism in France, which appeared to have triumphed with the great revolution, when *ersatz* quasi-religions like those of ‘Reason’ or the ‘Supreme Being’ threatened to eclipse Christianity.

There is probably more than a bit of the same streak of anti-clericalism in the new legislation, only this time it is directed more against Islamic orthodoxy, and Sikhism is the inadvertent victim. Possibly this may be just wishful thinking; for all we know it may

be a straightforward assault on Islam and Sikhism (with the crucifixes thrown in as a red herring). A continuation of the Crusades, which were after all mainly a French (or Frankish) enterprise.

Mr. Rahi has in his short booklet made an appeal to the French sense of fair-play (of course Anglo-Saxons would scoff at the idea - the 'frogs' and 'fairplay?'), and traditional tolerance of individualist idiosyncrasy. Voltaire, Rousseau and Napoleon have been duly quoted - and I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the great savant Andre Malraux was aware of our existence, and we have in fact been noticed in his *Anti-Memoirs*! Perhaps more to the point are the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other conventions of the United Nations or the European Union, some of which have been included among the appendices. The strange case of Sardar Darshan Singh, formerly Michel Rudel, is particularly illustrative of a certain mentality. I believe there are similar restrictions on the choice of possible first names in several other European countries. **A pleasant contrast is the enlightened reasonableness of the debate on the turban in the House of Lords in the United Kingdom which took place in 1976** - the subject being whether Sikhs should be exempt from the legislation making the use of a helmet compulsory while riding motor-cycles.

I would have thought that notwithstanding the stories of English eccentricity, on the whole the French were more broadminded and tolerant of individualist non-conformism. All the great movements of modern art, for instance - so different from the sterile classicism of the conservative academies which represented the popular art of the times - had their origins in France. It is a pity that today, however, France should be identified with such a retrograde and reactionary piece of legislation. I personally feel that the same arguments would apply equally in defence of headscarves and *hijab* as well, but it may be unwise to make a frontal attack on so wide a front. Our limited concern is for the turban, and here Mr. Rahi has done signal service. If our cause is ultimately successful, this little book might well claim some credit. For as the poet said:

*Little drops of water, and little grains of sand,
Go to make the ocean, and the mighty land.*

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The Personal Library of Sr. Jatinder Singh (USA)

An amazing private collection

We have received from Sirdar Jatinder Singh [P.O. Box 1167, Roseville, CA 95678-8167, USA] a voluminous catalogue of books, manuscripts and journals – in English as well as Punjabi, appertaining to every aspect of Sikh religion, history and culture. Over the past four decades and more, the scholarly Sirdar has assembled - and systematically maintained - a truly incredible treasure of reference books – all at his own expense.

Considering that there are - not one but two - professorships on Sikh Studies in California – at U.C. Santa Barbara and UC Riverside – we earnestly hope that good use can be made of this private collection by the existing and potential scholars and by readers. Our compliments to Sirdar Jatinder Singhji for his Herculean efforts and dedication to this comprehensive Bibliography of Sikhism.

- S.S.

