The British Sikh Consultative Forum

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Accountability: When it comes to non-hierarchical organisation concepts we may be 're-inventing' the wheel handed down to us by the Khalsa tradition. That certainly is the recent experience of British Sikhs.

The Khalsa in the 18th century replaced hierarchical organisation in favour of flat structured "hub and spokes" system and before that, the Guru himself replaced single person leadership by a collective decision-making process. Sikh *misls* met as a "consultative forum" in the form of periodical *Sarbut Khalsa*, received reports, consulted, agreed on general direction, and dispersed, as the diverse *misls,* to shape and pursue own objectives and strategies accordingly.

In the West, traditional hierarchical organisations began to be abandoned towards the end of the 20th century, partly due to the introduction of computer systems and networks on a massive scale. Also, in automated offices, man-machine interface required quick decisions on the spot at the "coal face". Flat structures appeared on the business scene with the disappearance of middle grades. So, both the organisational and decision- making concepts underwent a revolution. In a way, the Guru and the Guru Khalsa had anticipated these developments three hundred years ago! But have we, the Sikhs, re-discovered our own heritage regarding these concepts as yet?

This short article is about the British Sikh Consultative Forum (BSCF) experiment in the UK. Some steeped in Sikh tradition feel that there is nothing new about the BSCF concept as it continues to evolve at its own pace with some healthy (and some not so healthy!) opposition.

Question of Sikh identity and two parallel developments in the UK:

The mistaken-identity assaults on the Sikhs following September 11 terrorist attacks on America, did take the Sikhs in the West by surprise. In the UK, despite the Anglo-Sikh relations stretching over 200 years, and the Sikhs living as a significant minority for over half a century, they were generally ignored by the Government and maligned by the media. Despite their numbers, they felt helpless and insecure. The overnight banning of the *kirpan* at Heathrow airport without any consultation whatsoever, pictures of a youngish Gursikh being arrested in America splashed across large circulation regional papers in the UK, the first shooting of a Sikh in America, and assaults on Sikhs, etc. concentrated Sikh minds as never before. This was also the time when the cosy and compromising relationship of some Sikh "advisors" to the Government departments in the UK, began to be questioned and exposed.

The concept of a common prioritised agenda of Sikh issues to be taken up with the Government and its agencies, which was being developed by the UK's Sikh Secretariat gained immediate popularity amongst the Sikhs, especially after 11th September 2001 events. It was the right idea at the right time. So was the cause of Sikh identity and separate monitoring of British Sikhs taken up by the British Sikh Federation (BSF). However, the massive Sikh mandate received by the BSF petition

to the Government, signed by the whole spectrum of Sikh Gurdwaras and organisations, troubled two organisations also aspiring to represent UK Sikhs. This became apparent from their subsequent behaviour.

An Umbrella Organisation:

The above initiatives and developments may be bracketed together. The second main development arose from the UK-wide rush to form some sort of umbrella organisation, even a supreme council or parliament of British Sikhs. There were many meetings in different parts of the country but there was no tangible progress for many months. The writer attended some meetings, which were typical of meetings of Sikh *jathedars* looking for *kursis* in councils and executive committees. No more.

Two competing Sikh "advisors" to the Government, with some good work to their credit in the past, also saw much enhanced roles for themselves: in the first case by setting up "own" umbrella organisation, and, in the second, by just maintaining status quo, as an existing "network". To firm up the credibility of the Sikh Human Rights Group (SHRG) vis-à-vis the government departments, the idea conceived by the Group's director, was to set up a "closed shop" type of British Sikh Consultative Forum, under own care and to be run from SHRG office. The additional and perhaps healthier objective (prompted by one or two organisations) was to give fair competition to the Network of Sikh Organisations also led by a single director; an "advisor" popular with Government departments but increasingly less so with Sikh grassroots.

A special meeting of organisations of own choice was called by SHRG director. Much to his chagrin, however, the meeting became more open than intended due to wide interest encouraged by some key organisations. A stormy meeting of about 30 Sikh organisations at the Central Gurdwara at Shepherds Bush, London, on 6th July 2002, was saved by a final resolution to evolve over a period of time, an open and accountable Forum. A minute-taking and co-ordinating Secretary was appointed and it was agreed to hold future meetings at regional Gurdwaras, each meeting to be chaired by a nominee of the host Gurdwara. That was the founding "working group" of the British Sikh Consultative Forum.

BSCF Mission Statement and role: The number of participating Gurdwara representatives and other organisations grew steadily in the next few meetings. As was to be expected, the Forum concept addressed the immediate issues affecting British Sikhs, i.e. issues, which needed to be taken up with the UK Government. Most of these issues and concerns had already been group and prioritised by the Sikh Agenda prepared by the Sikh Secretariat in consultation with many UK organisations.

All organisations participating in the British Sikh Consultative Forum have been invited to share information about own aims and objectives with the Forum participants. That process continues through regular presentations by the participants and is bringing similar interest groups together as informal working groups. An administrative team is also evolving through pooling of complementary skills. (One recent example of this administrative team-working was in the drafting and collation of the Forum petition to the President of India on behalf of

Prof.Devindar Pal Singh Bhullar.) The Forum was formally set up at the 4th meeting of the Sikh organisations on 28th September, 2002.

This is arguably a model for Sikhs in other countries.

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