

Are We making Life Difficult for Sikhs in India?

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Quite a while ago, I received a note from a friend who was a senior government officer in India. He is a devout, well meaning Sikh who feels the pain and problems of the Sikhs. After spending some time visiting the Sikh community in the United States, he raised several issues, and I think he was both right and wrong. Let us examine some of his concerns.

He recognizes that Sikh abroad need "proper identity and respect". He laments the facts that we Sikhs abroad are busy building Gurdwaras, but do not realize the importance of good public relations. He is dead right that we have been slow in perceiving the power of the media and how they operate. But there is a growing awareness, even though it is belated and inadequate. Things are changing - largely by dint of a whole new generation of younger Sikhs, primarily the products of western society. Our travails, though frustrating, are nothing new; every new immigrant community has faced similar challenges. It is like a trial by fire. The Jewish people are an example.

Then he broached another issue. Let me quote him:

"I do not understand why the Sikhs in America (especially in Canada) speak against India. We may dislike certain governments, but why the country? The present government is very friendly to us and have done so much that we all appreciate them. To raise, for example, the slogans for Khalistan in Sikh congregations, and to denounce India will not pay us. The so-called leaders in America who instigate such mindset should be put wiser. The Sikhs in America should look to the Sikhs' future in that Continent, and need not worry about us."

It is the foregoing excerpt that spurred this editorial. It deserves a fuller exploration and an intelligent discussion. Let us put things in their perspective. Let me start by saying that having lived away from India and in America now for close to half-century - I came here when Sikhs in New York could be counted on fingers of two hands - my identification now is with the political entity of America. Yet I am basically a product of the culture and ethos of India. That cannot be denied nor do I wish to.

But I separate the country and the 'nation', that is, India from the governments that come and go every few years. A government is not the country. 'Indira was not India' even though she was passionately promoted as such. We must separate the nation from its leader, no matter how wise, farsighted, warmhearted and sagacious he or she might appear to partisan supporters! Politicians need not be mythologized. Friendship between nations, and in the political arena, is not the same as personal friendship. To criticize a government, a politician or a policy does not automatically translate into criticism of a country.

To cast a critical eye on a government - to be a watchdog - is not only a citizen's right but also duty in a democracy. I know - in USA - half the country routinely criticizes the policy initiatives of the U.S. President at any moment of any day without being afraid of any repercussions. I believe such rights and duties are sacred in any democracy.

But I see that in fact the writer is questioning why those Sikhs who live outside India are invariably critical or the Indian establishment. My friend asserted that the present government is "friendly to us". That may be so, but is it wrong to raise questions because of such perceived friendship? If, sitting in America, I can ask uncomfortable questions about apartheid in South Africa, or the Arab-Israeli conflict, or war in Iraq, why must I remain silent about human rights in India? As friendly as the present Indian government might be to Sikhs, as the writer claims, Sikhs around the world cannot remain untouched by the seeming complicity of the allies of the same government in destruction of Babri Masjid or the Gujarat violence six years ago. If the Indian government, or the Hindus around the world can raise their voices about the treatment of Hindus in Afghanistan why can Sikhs not speak of what they perceive as governmental high-handedness in Punjab?

His last sentence: "The Sikhs in America should look to their future in that country and need not worry about us here" saddens me. By this logic, the world was wrong to raise its voice against the slaughter of Jews by the Nazis, no Jew or Arab in America should concern himself with the Middle East, no country or organization may speak for - or against - any policies of any other government. And Guru Tegh Bahadur

need not have espoused the cause of Kashmiri Pandits in 1675.

By no means do I imply that, when Sikhs raise slogans here, they are always righteous, precise or justified in their context. But they have the right to speak and, I think, also the obligation. It is discussion and debate in the public arena that focus the harsh light of scrutiny and accountability; it is only then that truth emerges or painfully dribbles out. That, to me, is the essence of the American way. Living democracies have to reconcile themselves to the fact that the people are watching and public discussion will always be contentious.

Sikhism is now doubtless a global faith. Our 'local' imperatives define what we do and how we react to situations. We have to give each other the freedom to act according to our conscience, even unwisely - at times. We need to ensure that the ties that bind the far-flung Sikh communities to our Faith remain strong without becomingly suffocating and patronizing of each other.

