

## **The Hot Indian Summer Sikhs under Siege**

DEMOCRACY IN INDIA HAS BEEN characterized as “the best government money can buy”. The completion of five years of the BJP-led coalition government give the Sikhs little cause to celebrate. A year ago the Punjab witnessed the dishonourable exit of the Akali-BJP coalition government. That alliance in the only Sikh-majority state yielded mostly negative dividends. Indeed the socio political environment in Punjab continues to be inimical to the aspirations of the Sikhs. Rural indebtedness, liquor and drug addiction and a stagnant economy has taken a heavy toll of people’s morale.

The emergence of an aggressive majoritarian fundamentalism in Gujarat, Rajasthan and indeed across the country posed a serious threat to survival of the minorities. The political process continues to be unresponsive to the public interest as well as minority aspirations. This is aggravated by pressures generated by globalisation of key economic inputs. In blatant disregard of the secular character of the Indian constitution, an array of favourite Hindutva agenda is being promoted - with the active cooperation of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, conjuring up shades of the Big Brother in Orwellian “1984”.

The Sikhs in India are perhaps destined to remain a minority. In sheer numbers they are already losing out to Christians. Their index of social development shows a steady decline, as Sarabjit Singh, Gupta & Jindal’s study on Menace of Drugs in SR November, 2002, appears to indicate. Yet the populist perception and propaganda depict them as an adrift, dirty-rich, liquor-guzzling, fun-loving community who when aroused politically - pose a threat to India’s integrity.

Sadly, the truth about the aspirational deprivation of Sikhs remains buried under the trivia and trash trotted out by the press, cinema and majority-controlled media. For five decades and more the community has encountered a slew of unjust political dispensations.

First, the partition in 1947 that handed them a disastrous raw deal, robbing them of the best agricultural lands they had developed during the rule of the legendary Maharaja Ranjit Singh and later (on deceitful annexation of the Punjab, by the British) during the first half of the 20th Century. Partition also spelt calamity of another kind: the holiest Sikh shrines; Nanakana Sahib, Panja Sahib, Dehra Sahib, and scores of other gurdwaras, with large endowments, were summarily snatched because of an arbitrary border determined by Lord Mountbatten in a tearing hurry, under advice of an obscure barrister, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, and in connivance with an impatient Nehru.

Then, in 1966, a much shrunken Punjab was deprived of its own brand new capital, Chandigarh, through an unprecedented deception, notwithstanding Darshan Singh Pheruman’s martyrdom in a hungerstrike to death. Now, the Punjab government is a sub-tenant of a Union Territory controlled by New Delhi. The same applies to Centre’s control over Gobind Sagar (Bhakra-Nangal) hydel power and river waters - a dispensation that mocks at the federal principle of state governance.

Ruled - and remote-controlled - by the majoritarian VHP/RSS caucuses, the Centre simply does not trust the Sikhs. No wonder, with all our glorious martial

tradition, no Sikh general has ever been the Army Chief. The Sikhs' representation in defence forces has plummeted from 30% in 1950's to about 5% in 2002. Sikh regiments - with legendary record of heroism - have been reshuffled and dispersed like a pack of cards - to the detriment of traditional values which has been hallmark of India's warrior heroes and inspired the discipline underlying Sikhs' exceptional courage. For many years now there has been no Sikh judge on the Supreme Court bench, while Punjab is the only state that *shares* its high court with neighbouring Haryana.

In consequence, partly, of the repressive measures in 1980's, but also because of the majoritarian manipulation, most Sikhs have become apathetic, even fatalist ("*Que sera sera*") some are alienated because of the shenanigans - or inaction - of Akali leaders. The Nov. 2002 imbroglio over election of the SGPC President is an example, when the Punjab Police swarmed the holy precincts of Darbar Sahib. No wonder the youth is disillusioned, many desperate to emigrate, and many more have shrugged off their (male) identity as turbaned Sikhs.

At the social level, the so-called *mazhabi* Sikhs continue to suffer discrimination and bias. The "devout" are caught in the trap of legalist definitions, bent on excluding the *sahajdharis* from the gurdwara electoral rolls. Their rigid exclusivist stand flies in the face of Sikh tradition of honouring *Sahajdharis* as our "reservoir" of demographic replenishment from generation to generation. Evidently, fear of 'loss of power' in gurdwaras lurks in their mind. Similarly, "*patits*" need to be reclaimed - not stigmatized. They forget that precepts of Sikhism are all embracing and rooted in the conviction that all humanity shall eventually qualify to enter Sikhism. On the other hand, we must guard against assimilation into the "quicksands of Hinduism" - a warning sounded by Sardar Khushwant Singh long ago: Despite the diversity, the Sikh society - now global in its outreach - needs to be harmonized on the basis of moral postulates.

In this encircling gloom, we admire the ceaseless efforts at internal reform by the Sikh Core Group, based in Chandigarh and Delhi, constituted under the sage guidance of Octogenarian Justice Ranjit Singh Narula.

In an earlier editorial we pointed to the legal anomaly that compelled Sikh taxpayers to declare themselves as "Hindu Undivided Family". We wonder why it cannot be rectified through intervention of the dozen or so Sikh MPs who have seldom used their clout for Panthic causes. Sikhism may have economic and cultural ties with Hindus, but its position as an independent religion must not be compromised. We also remember how the Congress government under Mrs. G and her son, had demonized the Sikhs and used official propaganda machinery to convince the 'cowbelt' that Sikhs were anti-national. That mindset - later subverted the judicial system under TADA to destroy a whole young generation of Sikhs in Punjab.

Our argument may seem oversimplistic, but the crux is that Sikhs have had a raw deal ever since the dawn of independence. The axiom 'government of the people for the people by the people' has been turned on its head, and spirit of true secularism undermined. Perversion of the electoral principles has seeped into Gurdwara elections, causing widespread disillusionment among the masses, and estranging our youth. It is time corrective measures are considered by the Sikhs collectively.

