

A British School for Sikh values

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EVEN THOUGH THE BRITISH RULED us for 200 years yet when one views them dispassionately, one cannot help but extend respect to them on many an aspect. For instance, it was the British who laid the foundation of Democracy. Although, many nations have tried dictatorship, capitalism and socialism, there is no denying the fact that democracy alone enables people to live a life of dignity and grace.

And now, the British have once again proved their unflinching faith in the democratic way of life by allowing unbridled growth of multiculturalism in their country. The British government decided to fund the first-ever Sikh school in 1999. Home Secretary Jack Straw visited Guru Nanak Sikh Secondary V.A. School in Hayes Middlesex, West London, to announce the funding. Despite Straw's statement that the British government respects minorities' religions and their educational institutions, the funding had raised a lot of noise and criticism. Terming it a political move, critics had argued that such a funding would make it difficult for the new generation to be absorbed into the mainstream. Minorities, on the other hand, had argued that if the British government could fund Christian schools then why not schools run by other religious groups.

Besides following the British national curriculum, the funded Sikh school teaches Sikhism. Students have to learn Punjabi and understand the teachings of Sikh Gurus both in Punjabi and English.

Each day begins with kirtan in the gurdwara within the school complex. Students are imparted classical training in Indian instruments and vocal singing.

The school was the brain child of Sikh religious teacher Baba Amar Singh, who was keen to give the best of the East and the West to the students. Since there were no funds available, Baba Amar Singh asked the Sikhs settled in the UK to donate. Finally, three acres were purchased in 1993. That very year the school building came up and the school began to function. For the next five years the school ran on donations from the Sikh community and eight more acres were added to the premises.

Gurpartap Singh Bhullar, who has been closely associated with the school since its inception, took me around the school. He said, "The British grant that came in 1999 has not only ensured a better growth of the school but also brought about more facilities for the students. In 1998, Oxford University selected one of our students. After that there has been no looking back. Our results have been between 92 per cent and 95 per cent. The addiction to drugs and alcohol that is so rampant among the youth in the West is not a problem for us. Besides being brought up in culturally rich atmosphere, the students are given intensive training in sports. The preaching of the Guru is not expected to just be mugged up but is explained. Our students know exactly what the written *bani* means. In fact, any one of them can give you a lecture on it. It is this that makes them better human beings."

The school is co-educational and more than 1,500 students are enrolled in it. Each student has access to computers, and is imparted some vocational training too. While the boys wear turbans, the girls don salwar-kameez with dupatta. Interestingly the school management under the guidance of Baba Amar Singh and

think-tanks like Bhullar, Dr. Sadhu Singh and Dr. Pargat Singh has enriched the library with books on all Gurus, saints like Baba Bulleh Shah, Baba Farid and Kabir and works of other great writers. The pictorial books are extremely attractive and easily available to students.

Bhullar added that the school is not only for the Sikhs. "Students from any community are welcome here. We already have hundreds of students from other minority communities in England. Even our teachers are British, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs," he elaborated.

Bhullar is a man driven by passion for Sikhism. He has been leading many a campaign to let the world know about well-known Sikhs. It was because of his efforts that Maharaja Ranjit Singh's statue was installed at the school. "In Punjab, our children do not know anything about the rich culture and the role of Sikhs. Students might know the name of Maharaja Ranjit Singh but they are not likely to know what a great leader he was. I strongly feel that students need role models and there can't be one better than the Maharaja. So, we are imparting full knowledge of the Maharaja's role in history," he added.

A lot is wanting in school education in the West. In the name of freedom of expression, students get away with bad behaviour. It is common to find students walk in and out of class as they please, put their feet on chairs or table, chew gums, eat food in class, etc. As a result, there's little respect for teachers. In such a backdrop, the Sikh school stands out, where the student-teacher ties remain as strong as ever.

[Courtesy: *The Tribune*]

