

Pope on right to practise religion

Chandigarh, Jan. 31. – In a letter to Mr. Tarlochan Singh, chairman, National Commission for Minorities, the Pope has said the State can't arbitrate in religious matters.

Rather it should respect the dignity of an individual and his inalienable rights – among which is the right to practise and spread religion of his choice. The observations were with reference to the law France plans to promulgate to enforce “secularism.”

Protest in France: Sikhs in France observed protest last month against the proposed ban on religious apparel in schools. The ban is also on Muslims girls wearing scarves, Jews wearing skullcaps and Christians carrying oversized crucifixes. – AP

[Courtesy: *The Statesman*]

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3000 Sikhs march in Paris against turban ban

January 31: A Paris boulevard became a sea of coloured turbans as Sikhs from across Europe marched to defend their traditional headgear against a looming French ban on religious symbols in state schools.

Waving French flags and chanting “live and let live”, about 3,000 Sikhs turned out to call for turbans to be exempted from the ban due to outlaw symbols such as Muslims headscarves, Jewish skullcaps and large Christian crosses in the strictly secular public schools.

The National Assembly begins debating the ban on Tuesday but the draft text of the law, which outlaws “conspicuous signs” of faith, could be read to include turbans.

Sikhs, of whom about 5,000 live in the Paris region, say turbans and the light scarves that women wear are not religious but practical items. “My great grandfather fought to save France in the First World War,” said Simran Singh, 14, who wore his ancestor’s campaign medals around his neck and carried a poster showing Sikhs with the British army in France in both world wars. Waving a French flag, Tirath Singh, seven, said he had no problem wearing his neat blue turban in school but added: “I live in Germany, it’s different there.” Sikhs came from Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, the US and Canada to take part in the march.

[Courtesy: *The Telegraph*]

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Christians, Sikhs unite against France ban

Bobigny (France), Jan. 24: Christians from Iraq and Sikhs from India expressed outrage yesterday at French government plans to ban the wearing of religious symbols in school - a move which could force them to hide their crucifixes and swap their turbans for shower caps.

“Everything was fine until they decided to have this law,” said Joseph Adlun, the head of the association of French Assyro-Chaldeans, a Christian community which originates from ancient Mesopotamia.

“Now they’re trying to create confrontations between us and other communities. We’re Catholics, we acknowledge the Pope and when dealing with the state we are secular. Why are they picking on us?”

Slipping into Aramaic, the language of Christ, he summoned one of his young colleagues, Ayten Karatay, who produced a small silver cross from inside her jumper. “Can they really want to ban this?” said M Adlun. “It’s ridiculous.

“In Britain if you talk about being part of a community, it’s a good thing. In France, if you talk about your religious or ethnic community it is bad, it means you’re trying to ghettoize and fracture society.”

The Sikh community is similarly agitated since France’s education Minister, Luc Ferry, proposed that Sikh boys be banned from wearing turbans to school. He suggested they wear a transparent hat, like a shower cap.

“If they make me take off my turban, I will not go to school,” said Bikramjit Singh, 17, who was born in France. “In England, Sikh policemen can wear their turbans. In Germany, Sikhs can ride scooters without their helmets. Every other Western country respects our turban as part of our faith. I will have to finish my schooling elsewhere.”

His uncle, Gurdial Singh, 50, a magnificently bearded and turbanned builder, agrees. “When I arrived in France in 1980 from India, people were very warm and friendly. They were curious about my religion. Recently, I went to the Eiffel Tower and people called me *bin Laden*. Now we’re confused with the Muslims. We’re caught in the middle of all these problems. If they try to make us remove our turbans, it will be shameful for us and for France.”

Dravinder Singh, the head of the Bobigny Sikh Association, said: “I would no more take off my turban in public than you would walk naked down the street. I’d prefer to leave this country than remove my turban.”

[Courtesy: *The Daily Telegraph*]

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British Sikhs join French “revolution” against anti-turban law

London: Hundreds of British Sikhs took to the streets of the British capital on Saturday, Jan., 17th alongside Muslims and Jews, in Europe’s first inter-faith public campaign against a controversial French law.

The law, which will be put to the French parliament next month and take effect later this year, makes it illegal to wear Sikh turbans, Muslim hijabs or Jewish yarmulkes to school. Outsize crucifixes are a no-no as well.

The Sikhs, just 7,000 and counting in France, are the smallest minority affected by the proposed ban, but their Europe-wide campaign has been the loudest.

Many say it points to a growing assertiveness within a largely peaceful, prosperous and increasingly politically conscious community, which inaugurated Europe's very own 'Golden Temple' in the heart of the west London just last year.

Till recently, rally organiser Mejjinderpal Kaur told TNN, France did not seem even to know it had Sikhs living there. Hectic political lobbying across Europe is being spearheaded by the Sikh Federation (UK), Britain's first Sikh political party, which openly espouses Khalistani sentiments Saturday's rally is to be addressed by the party's Dabinderjit Singh.

Kaur, a barrister whose United Sikhs Organization is meeting the French ambassadors in London and Washington on Monday, says the inter-faith campaign has a deeply moving background.

Turbanned Sikh soldiers fought for French freedom during WWI, serving in 13 cavalry and eight infantry regiments. But just 90 years later French Sikhs are fighting for the freedom to wear the turban.

The British street protest was held just two weeks before French Sikhs are to hold a parallel rally in Paris. In the 1st week of Jan. nearly 30 British MPs put their names to a parliamentary motion supporting Sikh outrage at being asked to take the turban off "just like a hat", in order to fit in with French secularist principles.

Stark black-and-white posters and trendy T-shirts have been printed to commemorate the Sikh legacy to the saddest military roll-call in 20th century European history: Ypres, La Bassee, Neuve, Chapelle, Festubert, Loos, Givenchy and Somme, all WWI battles in which Sikhs fought and fell.

Many believe the Sikh reminder of Europe's still-open war wounds may strike a chord in French hearts and across the continent.

Many British MPs, whose constituents include sizeable Sikh communities, say the British and Canadian approach to the turban may be best.

[Courtesy: *Times of India*]

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Sri Guru Granth Sahib on Website

A website on Sri Guru Granth Sahib, www.geocities.com/ggsj03, was launched by Manjit Singh Calcutta, Hony. Chief Secretary, Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, on the eve of 31st annual *samagam* of Guru Gobind Singh Study Circle in Ludhiana last November.

The website has been created with the help of Dr. Pushpinder Singh of Social and Health Services Directorate and dedicated to the 400 years of installation of Guru Granth Sahib. The website has detailed information on compilation of Guru Granth Sahib its editing and collection of religious scripts and life sketches of the contributors. It gives in detail, the inner composition of Guru Granth Sahib, 31 *raaga* in which religious script is written and audio of *shabads*.

The website gives a glimpse of finalisation of Guru Granth Sahib at Damdama Sahib after the inclusion of Bani of Guru Teg Bahadur by Guru Gobind Singh and conferment of the Guruship on Guru Granth Sahib at Nanded in Maharashtra.

The altruist way of life as preached by the Ten Gurus, the philosophy and *banis* with special headings, like Anand and Anjulan, with their meanings and *baramah*, which depict months of years as enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib has also been extensively explored.

[Courtesy: *Indian Express News Service*]

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Guru Nanak Dev's Birthday as National Holiday

Karnataka has declared Guru Nanak Birthday as a holiday in State of Karnataka. This was announced by the Chief Minister Shri S. M. Krishna in Bangalore, last October, following intervention by National Commission for Minorities. This demand was being pursued by Sr Tarlochan Singh, Chairman, of the Commission for several years. Some States in India do not observe Guru Nanak Birthday as a State Holiday, whereas it is a National holiday as declared by the Government of India. At the request of National Commission for Minorities, Shri Navin Patnaik, Chief Minister, Orissa also assured that the Gurburab will be a State holiday in the State of Orissa. Similar plea has been made to the State in regard to the Buddha Purnima.

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SGPC Members exempted from special police investigation for issue of Passports

The Members and Employees of SGPC, who have been subjected to special police investigation for the issue of passports, have been exempted from seeking explicit clearance for going abroad. They will now be issued passports the basis of normal local police verification. During the last two decades applications for passport of SGPC Members were required to be forwarded to Ministry of Home Affairs for "clearance".

Chairman NCM, S. Tarlochan Singh, took up this matter with the Ministry of Home Affairs, and emphasized that SGPC is a statutory body elected under law. It employs hundreds of *sewadars* for Head office and distant Shrines. They should not be discriminated against and there should be a uniform procedure for granting passports to any of the members or *Sevadars*, such as *Raagis*, *Pracharaks*, etc. He requested the Deputy Prime Minister for his intervention, who agreed to the suggestion. The Ministry of Home Affairs has since issued orders, exempting the members and employees of SGPC from special surveillance procedure.

Dr. Alag Honoured in Canada

Renowned Sikh scholar and writer Dr. Sarup Singh Alag, Chairman, who visited England, Canada and U.S.A. for twelve weeks in 2003 was honoured with a gold medal at a function held in Grand Taj, Vancouver, for his writings. His book titled 'The Turban' and its Panjabi version '*Dastar*' were distributed at this function. At his suggestion, it was decided by the Sikh organizers to observe *Vaisakhi* day as '*Dastar Divas*' to revive the glory of turban.

During his stay abroad, Dr. Alag attended many meetings on connection with the celebrations of Quatercentenary of Prakash Utsav of holy Sri Guru Granth Sahib in 2004. His two books written especially for centenary celebrations were released in London and Toronto.

S. Gurbax Malhi, M.P. and Minister in Canada Govt. honoured Dr. Alag with a Certificate of Commendation on behalf of Govt. of Canada for his meritorious services being rendered to humanity.

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Sunil Dutt Chosen for “Punjab Today” Award

Noted film star, social activist and Member of Parliament, Sunil Dutt has been chosen to receive this year’s “*Punjab Today*” Award. A team comprising leading Punjab and Delhi based intellectuals and public figures selected Dutt out of panel of five Punajbis who have made outstanding contribution in different walks of life. Dutt won the nomination for his “outstanding contribution to the promotion of a polity based on commitment to national values, transparency in public life and the cause of Punjab and Punjabiath throughout the world. He has inspired a whole generation to believe that it was possible to be successful and famous without compromising on truth, honesty, simplicity and an undying compassion for the suffering. His role during the turbulent days of Punjab crisis was a saga in courage and love for his home state and the country.”

Earlier recipients of the award include former Prime Minister, Mr. I. K. Gujral, former Union Finance Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, Governor, Andhra Pradesh, S. Surjit Singh Barnala, former Test Cricketer and current commentator Navjot Singh Sidhu and the spiritualist Harbhajan Singh Yogi of USA.

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Cartoonist sorry for Sikh slur

Washington: A cartoonist who offended Sikhs in the US by associating them with Osama bin Laden in her caricatures has apologised, saying her “insensitivity to the Sikh situation was idiotic and unfortunate”, and clarified that she meant no harm.

Carol Lay’s cartoon depicting a Sikh as “Randy bin Laden, Osama’s no-good cousin” sparked an uproar in the Sikh community here with a legal team of the United Sikhs Organisation accumulating more than 2,500 signatures on a petition demanding a public apology.

Lay did remove the cartoon from her website after the backlash but later tried to make light of the controversy and put up another cartoon on the site titled Field Guide to Turbans, in which she illustrated the different kinds of turbans worn.

“Lay’s attempts to make a connection between a Sikh man and the world’s biggest fugitive, especially by using remarks such as ‘a shady character’ and ‘Osama’s no-good cousin Randy bin Laden’, amount to stereotyping and are likely to trigger more misdirected behaviour and hate crimes against Sikh Americans,” the legal team said.

While Lay apologised for both cartoons, she said she had been flooded with thousands of hate mails, some of which threatened her safety, and appealed to the United Sikhs to withdraw the petition.

A copy of the petition was also forwarded to the *Hartford Courant*, a Connecticut newspaper that published the cartoon.

In an e-mail to the *India-West*, Lay contended that her target in the original strip was California governor Gray Davis but said her attempt was “too complicated”.

“A Couple of Sikh readers understood what I was attempting and saw that I did not intend to harm Sikhs but did so accidentally. I don’t consider the strip successful because it offended many, and I have had to explain it. Any strip that needs to be explained is a bad cartoon. It was a pleasure to remove it from my site – I hope I never see it again,” Lay said in her e-mail.

In its press release, the United Sikhs appealed to all Sikhs to be considerate and respectful in all forms of communication, saying hate mail and threats are not only anti-Sikh behaviour but continue the cycle of mistrust and miscommunication.

[Courtesy: *The Telegraph*]

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I love your India

DISCOVERY Channel is fast discovering that if it has to maintain its lead over competition it just has to follow one dictum – when in India do as the Indians do. That seems to be the only logic behind its sudden newfound love for India.

Now the channel has pulled all stops and is going regional. On Saturday, 17 January it aired *The Miracle of Malerkotla* – the tiny Muslim ruled district of Punjab that many feel has the blessing of Guru Gobind Singh and is protected by the shrine of the Muslim Sufi Saint Sadruddin. In these difficult times could there be a bigger symbol of religious harmony?

[Courtesy: *The Statesman*]

