

A Plea for Reforms in SGPC

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It was sometime towards the end of 1979 that a few well-meaning Sikhs of Chandigarh called a meeting at Gurdwara Nadha Sahib, to discuss the then prevailing Panthic situation. The Late Jathedar Gurcharan Singh Tohra was the special invitee and I was supposed to be what they call 'the main speaker'.

Those who responded were mostly the ones who had been called 'Akali watchers', or the 'Akali think tank', for over four decades, and had themselves been active in the All India Sikh Students' Federation. Starting as a body of student activists at Lahore in the early 1940's, this Federation brought together some highly motivated and intelligent young men who tried to give a broader vision to the Sikh (i.e. Akali) politics, vis-a-vis the then emerging political ferment in the country.

The veteran Akali leaders, Master Tara Singh and Giani Kartar Singh, listened to them with all seriousness, and even included one of them in the powerful Executive Committee of the Akali Dal. In 1979, these people were mostly middle-aged and their attention had then been drawn towards the sharp decline that had set into the conduct of Sikh public life. Viewed in this context, they had an apprehension that the Akali rank and file finding political power within their reach will become selfcentred - even 'corrupt', and it would be difficult then to keep the Gurdwara administrative set up insulated from the emerging vagrant demoratic forces. They were rightly concerned about this great Sikh institution - the SGPC - that was supposed to be the very nerve centre of all spiritual-socio-political activity.

Jathedar Gurcharan Singh Tohra reached late for the meeting. I addressed the meeting in his presence wherein I referred to post-partition Sikh situation, the importance of creation of Punjabi Suba and perceptible change in the political scenario. I also referred to SGPC as the nerve-centre of the Khalsa Panth, and the need to keep its image above board. It may be mentioend that the air was then thick with the loud voices being raised regarding the malpractices that had crept into the SGPC working during a decade of the hegemony of the Sants (Sant Fateh Singh and Sant Chanan Singh). Ironically, the Sikhs had fought against such a hegemony when the Gurdwara Reform Movement was launched. After having mentioned all this, I suggested that it was the right time to set-up a Gurdwara Reforms Committee under a High Court judge to review the entire SGOC set-up and have a fresh look at the Sikh Gurdwara Act 1925 itself. Surprisingly, the suggestion was not taken favourably by Jathedar Tohra, the then President of the SGPC and he even mentioned this in his short speech. But after about a decade, whenever Mr. Tohra met me, he would say 'you said the right thing, but what to do; how to go about it; given the present circumstances?' At this, I would just smile.

Since then, much water has flown down the Sutlej. Now again, after a quarter of a century, a mention has been made to this effect by the Working President of the Akal Dal, Mr Sukhbir Singh Badal. In this context, I will like him to know that Akal Dal was created as a task force of the SGPC to cleanse the Sikh shrines of all the ills, like hegenomic *Brahminical* practices; corrupt practices and evil influences of *Mahants*. After 1925, gradually, the Akali Dal got transformed into a political organization to

safeguard the interests of the Sikh community and preserve its identity. But while talking of reforms in Gurdwara administration or the SGPC hierarchy, he had used a current popular term 'professional approach'. I fail to understand how this so-called 'professional approach' is relevant here. The basic character of the Gurdwara administration is voluntary service of the devotees; wherein the bureaucracy of the SGPC does not have any authoritarian role to play towards the *sangat*, or towards the subordinates, to ensure dedicated service towards the devotees. 'Professional approach' is a business term and this cannot be the key to the administration of religious institutions.

What is needed is to ward off political interference and stem the rot in the moral values of the elected members of the SGPC and its office bearers. We should stop all hypocritical talk about the 'status of elected members' of SGPC and officers associated with Gurdwara administration. In common Sikh practice, they enjoy more respect than any ordinary administrative officer of the Government, provided they ensure clean holy service, and their honesty and integrity remains above board.

This is the simple key to all reforms in the SGPC. This august body should in no case be used as lever of power and patronage. There has to be no friend or foe before the Guru. The very concept of 'party in power' and opposition is repugnant for a body managing holy shrines, where all stand equal. Those who serve the Guru best and conform to the way of life delineated by the great Guru Nanak; are closest to him. Reforms launched with such a spirit will surely revive the true Sikh values and the entire Sikh community shall gather a new glow with fresh inspiration. Likewise, the administration of educational institutions run by the SGPC can be cleansed only if we respect merit and autonomy and shun the very idea of nepotism and favouritism. The Sikhs must be inspired to achieve excellence by honest means and hard work.

What we need to revive is an earnest desire of humble service to the *Sangat* and community - beyond and above petty politics.

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Sikhs in France: Need for Understanding

Sr. Tarlochan Singh, MP (RS) has sent us copies of the following correspondence which he received from the French Embassy in India:

Sr. Tarlochan Singh's letter to the President of the French Republic

Your Excellency,

We are very happy that Hon'ble President of France is visiting in India as Guest on the Republic Day celebrations. We greet him on this occasion. You are well aware that, the Sikh community has historic friendly relations with France since 1810 A.D. We always got desired help from Govt. of France. During the two world wars more than 90,000 Sikh soldiers laid their lives for defence of democracy in Europe.

The issue of ban on turban for the Sikhs students in school of France is still pending.

The Sikhs have taken out processions in Delhi for putting forward their demand to your government. All Sikh newspapers are also publishing stories on this issue.

I request you to kindly organize a meeting of the Sikh members of the Parliament with the President of France so that they can greet him and also request him for lifting the ban on turban.

Yours sincerely,
Tarlochan Singh

I gave this letter personally to the President of France on 26 January at Rashtrapati Bhawan.

Ambassador's Letter: I have the honour of conveying herewith the response of Mr. Jean-David Lévitte, Diplomatic Adviser, Presidency of the French Republic, to your letter addressed to the President of the French Republic with reference to wearing the turban in France.

For your convenience, an unofficial translation of Mr. Lévitte's letter to you has been enclosed.

Please accept, Sir, the assurance of my distinguished consideration.

Jérôme Bonnafont
Ambassador of France in India
Dated 20 Feb. 2008

Sir,

The President of the French Republic has read with great interest your letter concerning the Sikh community in France, which was conveyed to him during the State visit he recently made to India. He has asked to reply to you.

I would like to assure you straightway that Sikhs are welcome in France and are fully respected by the French. The historic ties that link France and the Sikhs and the sacrifices that they have willingly made in the past at the side of France have earned them our friendship, respect and gratitude.

As you know, France welcomes all cultures and religions on its territory as long as public law and order and republican values are respected. Among the founding constitutional principles of the French Republic, secularism constitutes a cement of French society. Secularism grants all religions their place and treats them equally. It guarantees the liberty of conscience through the protection of the freedom to adhere to a faith, or not adhere to a faith, and upholds the principle of neutrality within the public education system. This principle of neutrality obviously applies to all communities, including the Sikhs.

The Law of 15th March 2004 lays down that none shall bear conspicuous religious signs at primary and secondary public schools. Today, all communities apply this rule without any difficulty, for they have understood that this law is a guarantee of impartiality at school and hence, the quality of the education imparted to children.

I would like to know that the goal of secularism is not to prohibit the bearing of signs of this nature in any and every circumstance. Thus, the Law of 2004 does not hinder Sikhs from choosing to send their children to private schools. It does not forbid Sikhs to wear the turban in any other circumstance whatsoever, be it at the university or other places, public and private.

As for the French law of 6th December 2005 that imposes posing bareheaded for identity photographs on driving licences, it has so happened that the State Council, the supreme judicial body for settling litigation involving the administration, has ruled on 15th December 2006 that the disputed regulation did not contravene Articles 9 and 14 of the European Convention relating to human rights on the freedom of religion and discrimination. In this, the State Council was inspired by the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, which admits certain restrictions to the freedom to display one's religion or convictions. I would like to assure you that this rule applies in the same manner to all similar cases.

In the same spirit which characterizes the remarks made by the President of the French Republic during the previous session of the United Nations General Assembly, I wish to

reaffirm to you the commitment of the French authorities to being vigilant about cultural and religious diversity continuing to be accepted and encouraged in France, as they always have been, and the pleasure that the President of the French Republic had in meeting certain eminent members of your community in India.

Kindly accept, Sir, the expression of my distinguished consideration.

Signed: Jean-David Lévitte



UNESCO Report on Punjabi

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Recent months provided us with an opportunity to introspect about a UNESCO Report on the grave possibility of extinction of Punjabi language in the next 50 years.

I would like to draw the attention of the Panth towards the recent history of Punjabi and non-Punjabi speaking Sikhs. Sikhs inhabit many remote parts of the world, many settled since centuries and maintaining a distinctive separate identity, though they have lost all access to the Punjabi language and literature. In India, Sikhs are spread all over the country residing and adopting the respective regional languages as their mother tongue, such as Hindi, Marathi, Telugu, Kannada, Assamese, Bengali and so on.

It is a matter of pride for us that they have held onto their religious values in the most adverse and unfavourable circumstances over centuries.

I belong to the area of erstwhile Hyderabad State, where the contingent of the Khalsa army was sent by the Great Maharaja Ranjit Singh to help the Nizam, a Muslim ruler, in the year 1830. I am in the 4th generation of Sikhs here, and I attend Gurmata Camps all over the country and have a personal knowledge about the statement I am making. You will be surprised to know that most of the non-Punjabi speaking Sikhs read Gurbani in Gurmukhi Script only and maintain complete *Sikhi Saroop*, though they have lost access to spoken Punjabi language because of their local circumstances. It is an admitted fact that language belongs to the land not to any religion. The most unfortunate aspect I have observed that the Punjabi speaking children of Punjabi speaking parents read Gurbani in Hindi (Devnagiri) script.

Right from the inception of Sikhism, every effort was made to assimilate Sikhs into the so-called mainstream of Hinduism. After independence of India, to snuff out the Sikhs and to destroy their separate identity, a prolonged plan had been hatched by the communal elements of the majority community that started a war of nerves. Apart from several other fronts, I will discuss about only one front of attempts to extinct the Gurmukhi Script. In Pakistan, Punjabi language is written in Urdu (Persian) script and in India it is written in Gurmukhi script.

From the 1951 Census onwards, in Punjab, a shaven man (Hindu) registers his mother tongue as *Hindi* and a bearded son (Sikh) as Punjabi, often from the offspring of same mother of Punjabi speaking family. Every effort was made to write Punjabi in Hindi Script (Devnagari) instead of Gurmukhi, which could not succeed. But they have succeeded in imposing Hindi and writing the regional languages in Hindi of entire North India. The Gujrati, Punjabi, Asamese, Bengali, Oriya and Kashmiri, were saved after

struggling for survival of their separate scripts. All the other such as Dogri, Pahari, Haryanavi, Rajasthani, Marwadi, Bihari, Bhojpuri, Maithali, Magahai, Malvi, Bundali, Gondi, Munda etc. were clean swept. These languages survived even during thousands of years of slavery of foreign invaders, but could not bear the invasion of indigenous rulers for few years.

Urdu was literally 'buried' with a stroke of the pen by changing the Charter and the medium of instruction of Osmania University of Hyderabad, where medicine, engineering, law and all other faculties were taught in Urdu, the only Indian language medium of any university of the world. The same rulers are now digging it out from its grave for appeasement of Muslim community due to their en bloc voting pattern.

The mother tongue, obviously, has not to be taught; what has to be taught is the script in which the mother tongue is written. Now a new methodology at public level is adopted to eradicate Gurmukhi without declaring war and making any announcements. We have not yet noticed the new danger and plans for replacing the Gurmukhi script. Slowly the Hindi News Papers of Punjab are publishing some Prominent News Items with interesting headlines on their front page in Punjabi language, but in Hindi script, to popularize it in public. When the cancer of reading Punjabi in Hindi script will spread among the masses, no remedy can save the Gurmukhi script from dying with the poisonous effects of the Hindi script. You will be surprised to know that Haryana, a state carved out of Punjab has actually cremated Punjabi in its soil and made " Telugu " of the south as the second official language of the state. Instead of taking any constructive measures for promoting Punjabi language and script, unfortunately some of the fanatic Sikh religious and political leaders to show off speak in Punjabi at World Religions' Conference of UNO, Parliament, Hindi T. V. Channels and Hindi knowing audience at public places. They do not realize by doing so, they are losing a chance of projecting their views and genuine grievances of the Sikh community. Whereas all the Gurus and Sri Guru Granth Sahib have practiced and given us the guide lines to use communicative languages to influence the audience.

Before independence, Punjabi was written in Urdu script in the urban areas of united Punjab, but that never posed any danger of elimination of the Gurmukhi script. But now attempts to write Punjabi in Hindi script will definitely wipe off the Gurmukhi script. Instead of propagating, reading, understanding and respecting Gurmukhi and Gurbani, we are supporting to cremate it on a grand scale at " Angitha Sahib " the hidden government sponsored establishment in the name of " Satkar ". The real " Satkar of Gurbani " is to make the common usage of the Gurbani and Gurmukhi for its survival and save it from extinction at the hands of friends and foes. If we prevent the masses from commonly using Gurbani and Gurmukhi it will meet the fate of Sanskrit language and script which was destroyed in the name of " Dev Bhasha " (divine language). The languages and scripts " Zend " of the Zend-Avastha of Zoroastrians (Parsi) and " Hebrew " of the Torah and Bible of the Jews and Christians, Pali of the Dampadda of Buddhism, Prakrit of Jain Sutras, Agams, and Mahavir Vani of Jainism, have disappeared. Only after the formation of the Jews homeland state Israel in 1948, that Hebrew was revived by making it a state official language of Israel. The Arabic of the scriptures of Muslims is saved, as it is the official language of Arabian countries.

In 1982 Sant Bhindranwale voluntarily courted arrest at Mehta Chowk, Amritsar, and was unconditionally released without asking from any corner. But in 1984 the same

government by imposing blanket curfew all over the state, stormed Harmandir Sahib (Golden temple) and seventy four other Gurdwaras in the name of flushing out the same favourite and so far pampered Sant and his associates. The day chosen was Martyrdom Day of Shri Guru Arjun Dev, the founder of Harmandir Sahib and compiler of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, when all Gurdwaras are overcrowded, to inflict the maximum damage.

In 1984, our indigenous rulers stormed the holy shrine. They reportedly looted valuable jewels from the Tosha Khana (treasury), hundreds of paintings from Central Sikh Museum, thousands of rare books and manuscripts from Sikh Reference Library and took them away in truck loads.

Even after several questions raised in the media, parliament, Punjab and Haryana High Court orders for return of the taken away properties, nothing has been returned so far, which might have been certainly destroyed. If not, why they have not been returned even after twenty four years of so much hue and cry? Our indigenous rulers treated Sikhs as enemy. Now it is the prime responsibility of every Sikh to search for ways and means in his own individual way to counter every attempt to damage the Gurmukhi Script, instead of looking towards the self-centered leadership which has got only two words agenda of " Save the Seat " by hook or crook.

According to the Government of India 2001 Census, 39.45% of the Sikhs are totally illiterate and the maximum illiteracy is in Punjab.. A large number of Sikhs in Punjab do not know how to read or write any language! Out of those who know how to read, how many of us read Sri Guru Granth Sahib is a question each Sikh should ask himself.

