

Turbanators around the Globe

Capt. M.S. Kohli*

* Leader of the successful 1965 Everest expedition, ex-Navy Captain and AVSM, FRGS awarded Order of the Khalsa. Add: E-4, East of Kailash, New Delhi. 110 065.

According to the World Book Dictionary, published in 1978, *turban* has been described 'a scarf worn around the head or around a cap, worn originally by Moslem men, but now worn also by Sikhs and certain others who are of Asian origin but not of the Muslim faith'. Today, especially after the 9/11 episode in USA, and the stand taken by the French Government against wearing of turbans by students, the Sikh turban has become well-known all over the world as the most important and distinct identity of Sikhs. 'Turbanator' does not figure in any dictionary so far, but the Australian media, by describing the Indian Sikh bowler, Harbhajan Singh, recently a 'turbanator', the word has become quite popular, describing a Sikh (wearing a turban) creating a sensational impact.

The significance of turban, as a hoary article of faith, was realised by me from my early childhood. Since my ancestor, Sardar Kirpa Singh, was 'baptised' at the hands of Guru Gobind Singh in 1699 and was martyred in the historic battle of Chamkaur wearing a turban, I had come to regard turban as a unique privilege and always accorded it a very high respect.

During my 20 years with Air-India, I widely travelled around the globe visiting over 50 countries, some several times. During these wanderings I encountered several interesting experiences associated with my turban. My turban created unusual impact in several situations. These made me feel very proud of my turban and I thought to share these with others.

Most of the people remember me as the leader of the first successful Indian expedition to Everest in 1965 that saw a record-breaking nine climbers atop the peak. Interestingly the 19 member-team included six turban-wearing Sikhs, of whom three reached the summit.

In 1965, along with some Indian and American climbers, I happened to spend a month in Alaska as a guest of the CIA to climb Mount McKinley in preparation for putting up a nuclear censor on top of India's well-known peak of Nanda Devi. On the very first evening, while dining at a restaurant, I attracted a lot of attention on account of my turban. The next day, American's most famous mountaineer, Barry Bishop, borrowed my turban and entered a local club wearing my turban. He became a great hit. We passed a word around that he was the 'Maharaja of Patiala'. A number of ladies flocked round him. Barry never felt so good in his life! He kept my turban for repeat performances!

In 1967, I was invited by the French Mountaineering Federation to visit Chamonix for a month to climb in the French Alps. I was perhaps the only Sikh around in Chamonix, attracting attention of hundreds of tourists. Once, I travelled to Grenoble at the invitation of the President, International Winter-Sports Federation. On arrival at Grenoble my car was stopped by a girl hailing from Mumbai. She said, "I have been here for the past three years but have not come across a single Indian". There must have been some Indians around but perhaps she could not be sure. She was so excited to see an Indian after a gap of three years. She invited me to lunch at her University Campus.

On another occasion at Chamonix, while dining at a local restaurant, a Lebanese young man came to me and said, "*Monsieur, Votre Tourbane est tres jolie* (Mr, your turban is very beautiful). Can you please give it to me?" I told him, "I cannot give you now. Tomorrow I leave for Paris, you can visit my hotel and collect one of my spare turbans." The next morning he duly arrived and I gave him one of my turbans. To reciprocate, he gave me a

present. To my shock it was a hubble-bubble. But soon realised that it was not a real one – just a souvenir sold commonly in Chamonix. A few year later, I had a smaller encounter with another Lebanese in Paris. He too came to me and said, “*Votre tourbane est, tres jolie, can I have it?*”

On return to Paris, passing through Pigale – the French centre for painters – I had an interesting experience. A Frenchman came running to meet me. He hugged me and took me and two of my companions to his shop and presented us with some exquisite paintings. I could not understand the reason for his warmth and hospitality. With my knowledge of French I discovered that he originally hailed from Amritsar and had migrated to Paris at the age of five. He was so fair and looked every inch a Frenchman. He did not speak any English. The sight of turban had brought him the memories of his Amritsar days.

In 1971, I visited Japan to introduce *trekking in the Himalayas*. I was accompanied by Nawang Gombu, the first man in the world to climb Everest twice. During the very first talk in Tokyo there were some 2,000 Japanese mountaineers. At the end of the talk while I was mobbed and made to sign some 1,000 autographs, Nawang Gombu, with his Mongolian features, was taken to be a Japanese and was left completely ignored! Similar was the case during other functions in Nagoya and Osaka. At the end of the visit, disappointed Gombu declared, “Kohli Sahib, next time I go abroad with you, I must wear a turban!”

In Australia, I had two Air-India postings. From 1975 to 1979, I was Manager for Australia and New Zealand, and later, from 1985 to 1989, I was Regional Director, Far East, Australasia and South East Asia. During these postings I received an unprecedented attention and popularity. Soon after my arrival in Sydney, I was invited to address the Sydney Journalists Club. I narrated the story of our 1965 Everest expedition which had put nine climbers on the summit in four parties. At the end of the talk, I received a standing ovation and Honorary Membership of the Club.

My talk received front-page coverage in the local newspapers resulting in a flurry of invitations from the Rotary, Lions, Legacy and RSL Clubs throughout Australia to address their clubs. During the next three years, I delivered as many as 500 talks which made me a sort of celebrity.

I soon realised that, besides my mountaineering credentials, my turban too had started playing an important role. My photographs were frequently published. With the help of my turban I could be recognised among a crowd of several thousands. Once, I remember, I had gone to Melbourne to watch the Australian Open Golf Tournament. My friend, Peter Thomson – a five-times British Open Champion – was the chief commentator. He recognised me standing far away in the crowds. He immediately announced on the live TV show, “There on the 7th Green is my friend, Capt. M.S. Kohli, who had set up a world record on Mount Everest in 1965.” The next day I met scores of friends in Sydney exclaiming, “Mohan, we saw you on the T.V. yesterday”.

Those days, apart from my Saturday Golf competition, I used to play a friendly match with two or three close friends on Sundays. To start with we were two Sikhs playing together. Many curious eyes followed us. After a few months we became three. The curiosity of Australian golfers increased tremendously. During my 4th year in Sydney, a fourth Sikh golfer joined us and we started creating a near riot.

During those days, I remember there was not a single Sikh Gurdwara in Sydney. Once I invited Khushwant Singh to Australia. Both of us went to Woolgoolga. The first batch of Sikhs had come to Australia more than 150 years ago and they had settled down there. On arrival we found not a single Sikh in a turban. Names of the local Sikhs were also mixed – Michael Dillon, John Gill, Chris Sidhu, etc. We also discovered that there were hardly 30 to

40 Sikh families in Woolgoolga. As usual despite a small minority they were divided into two factions. Each one had their own Gurdwara. Khushwant and I provided the first opportunity to locals to see Sikhs in turbans. Back to Sydney, with the help of one local Sikh, Inderjit Singh Khuman, first Gurdwara came up in Sydney, sometime in 1977. Now, I believe, there are half a dozen Sikh Gurdwaras in Sydney alone.

Once during my stay in Sydney, Morarji Desai came to Australia. There was a meeting of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers. The meeting took place in the Hilton Hotel. I had made arrangements for Prime Minister's special food. Those days Anand Margis, who were plenty in Sydney, had turned very hostile towards the Indian Government. I had brought a gun for safety. The very first day of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Meeting, there was a bomb blast in Hilton. Fortunately, nobody was injured. While Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock wanted to shift the venue to Canberra, it continued in Sydney on the insistence of Morarji Desai. "I am their main target. I will not die until my time is over. Shifting the Conference will give them victory". Morarji said forcefully.

At the end of the Conference, Morarji Desai called a meeting of the Indian officials in Sydney. The Indian Ambassador was in the usual western dress. Morarji Desai, confronted him first, "Tell me, when you walk on the streets of Sydney, can nobody recognise you as an Indian? Look at Capt. Kohli. With his turban every Australian would know there was an Indian there". He admonished the Ambassador to wear an Indian dress.

During the very first year of my posting in Sydney, many local journalists came to meet me. One well-known Australian writer, David Martin, became a good friend. After meeting me a few times, he showed interest in writing a novel about Sikhs. I arranged his visit to Punjab. On return, he wrote "The Man in the Red Turban" which made Sikhs popular throughout Australia. The book revolves around a character Ganda Singh, who is known and liked by hundreds along Australia's Murray River. The story is set in 1933 when many had no work. Travelling through villages and towns, and meeting rogues and adventurers,

Ganda Singh was depicted a man of courage and high morals. "The Man in the Red Turban" is an exciting novel with haunting quality. In the last chapter of his novel, he wrote:

"It was just as he had dreamt it. He was in Amritsar, and although he was tired from the long train journey from the coast he went straight to the Golden Temple. No one knew him as a home comer, not even the beggars who could always tell a pilgrim to the holy capital of the Sikhs. There were any number of red turbans, and almost every man wore the bracelet of the Brotherhood. If you wanted one you could buy it from any of the numerous shops and stalls that crowded the temple's precincts.

Ganda Singh took off his shoes. And his socks, since they were not new and unsoiled. Barefoot, as in his dream, he walked through the shallow trough filled with clean water. He mounted the broad staircase and passed under the archway, and there before him lay the tank that held the purifying *Amrit*. It was wide like a lake and square, shimmering under a cobalt sky. The people on the far bank looked as small as toys.

When he came to the causeway that led to the Shrine he knelt. His lips touched the marbled paving. He crossed over to the noble hall, its dome covered with gold-leaf. And as he came near he heard the chanters sing:

"He is one. He is the first. He is all that is. His name is Truth. He has created all. Fearless yet without enmity."

The sacred song, evenly falling and rising, went on beyond what he remembered of it.

"Fearing nothing, making none afraid,

Timeless and birthless

He rests in Himself.

By the grace of our Teacher He is known.

He is the first. True in all ages,

True for ever.”

He wanted to make a small offering and was given the communion sweet. He ate it. He prayed, one Sikh amongst hundreds. He went out onto the terrace, the processional path. He descended a few steps and cupping his hand, scooped up some water from the lake-like tank. He drank a few drops.

As he poured the rest of the divine nectar over his face and neck and felt its coolness, he thought of the Murray River.

Then he went to the temple treasury and gave up a tenth part of what he had brought from home, the money from the sale of all his goods and chattels in Australia, including his two horses.”

During my years with Air-India I became the first man in the world to introduce *trekking in the Himalayas*. And I wrote the first ever book on the subject. Air-India printed 25,000 copies for distribution all over the world. On the cover it depicted the Air-India Maharaja, wearing a turban. It made me a living symbol of the theme attracting worldwide attention and coverage. So apart from being the most visible symbol of the Sikh identity, and an essential part of the Khalsa tradition, the turban became my most cherished asset.

The above is the brief account of my personal experiences. There are hundreds of turbanators around the globe playing significant roles in the world forums and societies, headed by Dr. Manmohan Singh, leading the world’s biggest democracy. The turban has become a symbol of *courage, grit, objectivity and secularism; fight against injustice and terrorism, and above all a reminder of Guru Gobind Singh and the spirit he infused among his followers*.



(The author, recipient of Padma Bhushan, Arjuna Award and Order of the Khalsa, is a former President, Indian Mountaineering Foundation; Captain, Indian Navy; Advisor, Indo-Tibetan Border Police and Regional Director Air India. He is author of 22 books. His book “Miracles of Ardaas”, whose royalty goes to Pingalwara, has been widely acclaimed. - Ed. SR)