

# Marginalised Sikhs: Predicament of Banjaras & Sikligar Sikhs

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Since 1994, we have been representing before the Andhra Pradesh Backward Classes Commission to include the Sikligar community in the list of backward classes. The list is yet to be finalised. In January 2006, we have successfully got included the Sikligar community in Andhra Pradesh list of Central Backward Classes Commission. The State Commission visited their places for physical verification of the facts; I would like to share with you an observation made by then chairman, Justice Puttu Swamy. He said, "We were astonished to see their living conditions. I know the Sikh people spend crores of rupees on festivals and buildings, but I could not understand how can they ignore their own brethren like this?"

**Literacy:** This situation is not confined to this particular community only, but most of the rural Sikhs are living under the poverty line. To substantiate my contention, I would like to draw your attention towards the Government of India Census 2001 showing the literacy percentage of the Jains 84.1%, Christians 69.46%, Buddhists 62.16%, Sikhs 60.55 %, Hindus 54.92 % and Muslims 48.05%. **Among the Sikhs, the illiteracy is much higher in Punjab. For census purpose a person is considered literate if he is able to read and write with understanding in any one language, regular education is not necessary. This alarming rate of 39.45% illiteracy among Sikhs is only because of poverty. This shows that about half of the Sikh population is living at poverty or below the poverty line.** They are ranked third from the bottom, i.e., slightly better placed than people who do not have shelter on their heads and do not get even one square meal a day. They cannot dream of educating their children, and are prone to conversion to other religions due to their attractive incentives. The May 2008 issue of *The Sikh Review* is an eye opener. A article "Are Sikhs being targeted for conversions?", shows the fact that even after annually crores of rupees are spent in the name of Guru and Panth, how Sikhs are being aggressively converted to Christianity in their own home land of Punjab. Let us frankly admit that we have utterly failed in resisting the conversion of our people in other parts of the country also.

**Too Little:** I appreciate that some organisations and individuals are rendering help to the Sikligar people. Their present services are like watering a plant from our own small sources, whereas making them to avail of the benefits is like spreading the plantations at the cost of the Government. It will be more beneficial for the Guru Panth, if they could extend their activities among the under-privileged Sikh people also, to whom they have to search and serve. Let us start a crusade against the illiteracy and poverty among the Sikhs at our own individual level. Kindly do not blame others for not doing any community welfare activity, just think, are you not capable to do something which you are not doing? What is the worth of your existence for the society?

The minorities, including Sikhs, throughout India are given handsome scholarships by the Government of India from class 1 to 10. Under this scheme, the last date of submitting application was 31<sup>st</sup> July 2008. For submission of applications for post-metric scholarships,

up to doctorate level, will be notified shortly. I would like to suggest that we acquire and provide the information to the deserving students, locate, teach and help them to avail all the government benefits, fixing them within the prescribed frame work of the government.

For availing of these opportunities for minority scholarships, the procedure is very simple. **The income of the parent should be less than one lakh per annum, and the previous final examination marks should not be less than 50%.** The candidates of class 1, need not submit any marks. More than 2 candidates from a family are not entitled. For obtaining the religion's certificate and income certificate you need not go to any Tehsildar, or any other officer, your personal separate declarations are sufficient. We can visit the website [www.minorityaffairs.gov.in](http://www.minorityaffairs.gov.in) for details and application format. We have just to fill up and submit with enclosures to the head of the institution where the candidate is studying. The offices of every district collector, minority welfare department or Minorities' Finance Corporation may be in a position to welcome and help you. Nowadays, information in detail and application format is available on the internet and we can visit and download from our own State website too.

Recently, the burning topic of the country was the agitation of the Gujjar community for inclusion in the list of Scheduled Tribes, which took more than 50 lives and crores of private and government properties are lost so far. The agitation was started in Rajasthan, and is spreading in the nearby states. From this we can understand the importance and benefits of getting reservations for the community's welfare. After the Justice Sachar Committee's recommendations, some of the Muslim communities have been given backward class status in almost all the states and the Muslims got reservations in admissions and services.

On these lines, some of our leaders are demanding a committee to be appointed to survey the economical and social status of the Sikhs and inclusion of Sikligar, Banjaras and Satnamis in the list of Scheduled Castes. I am afraid, if such a committee is appointed, we may be losing the advantages for which we are now entitled as a minority at par with Muslims and other minorities of the country. I would like to recall the appointment of Shah Commission for looking into the discrimination and grievances of the Sikhs. The terms of reference were not in accordance to our demands. Master Tara Singh and the Khalsa Panth rightly boycotted the commission. But Dr. Gopal Singh represented before the Commission saying that the Sikhs are given more than their share and that there is no discrimination against the Sikhs. We all know how he was rewarded for betraying the Sikh community. At the time of Operation Blue Star and the cold-blooded genocide in Punjab and throughout the country, the Sikh leaders who were instrumental were also rewarded. Even now, if any such committee is appointed it will meet with the same fate of betrayal and back-stabbing by our own leadership.

I would like to share a few words about Sikligar, Banjaras and Satnamis. **The Sikligars are the Keshadhari Sikhs for generations.** The Banjaras and Satnamis are Hindus; whoever embraces Sikhism has to be looked after by our people and at the cost of our funds. **Initially, when the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were listed and those who embraced Sikhism were kept out from enjoying the privileges. A strong agitation under the able guidance of Master Tara Singh compelled the Government to change its stand.** Now the Government of India, and all State governments, are extending the benefits to the people who embrace Hinduism and Sikhism also. Here, in Andhra Pradesh, we have successfully represented the cases of converted Sikhs from Banjaras who are listed as Scheduled Tribes and are now enjoying the benefits of the community they belonged to previously. Similarly, throughout the country, we should stand by them and

represent their cases for getting the conferred rights and facilities after embracing Sikhism. **Banjaras and Satnamis are listed as Backward in some of the States; we should get the list from the Social Welfare Department and help them to get the government facilities.**

The Sikligar community is listed as Scheduled Caste at least in three states of Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Haryana. In most of the other states and Union Territories, the Sikligar community is listed as backward and eligible for all sorts of reservations in admissions and services, other benefits and scholarships at all levels. Any number of members from a family are eligible for scholarships, no minimum percentage of marks is required for them and the different income limit is also prescribed. **The Head of the Institution, District Social Welfare Officer or the district Collector office may be contacted for further details.** Nowadays, information in detail and application format is available on internet and you can visit and download from your own State website.

#### **Ignorance is not Bliss:**

Our problem is that we are not aware of utilising the conferred privileges nor we try to get acquainted with any such information which the government is providing to the deserving people for which we the Sikhs are also entitled. In Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh some of the communities of Sikhs are listed as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Back Ward Classes. We are not at all bothered to make them avail the government facilities, which will be continued for them life long and even for their next generation.

Most unfortunately, Sikhism has been reduced to a merry-making party. Pomp and show in festivals and celebrations to boost the ego of the professional *Parcharaks* and *parbandhaks*, who have become event managers for arranging the spectacular shows. **The object of Sikhism is for the individual person to change one's own life style according to the Gurmat. Instead of that, we have formed several committees for Kirtan Samagams, Rein Sabais and Yatras of historical places, whereas all these practices are repeatedly condemned in Sri Guru Granth Sahib.** We don't want to spare any time to catch hold of anybody's hand, or at least to show them the right way by collecting and passing the information for betterment of an individual person provided by the Government, or by any other voluntary organisations.

We have a tradition of not learning any lessons from the observations or experiences of the others, nor of our own. Instead of the fruitless discussion on the role of Sikh

Organisations and Gurdwaras, I would like to draw your attention towards the service you can render in your personal capacity on the basis of "*One To One*" formula. This is not an imaginary theory, but proven to be most successful outcome, based on my personal experiences, experiments and achievements during more than half of a century's working. Let us make up our mind to spend our offerings with our own hands for the "Charhdi Di Kala of Guru Panth", instead of dumping our Daswandh in the ritualistic manner in the hands of those persons who criminally waste *Guru ki Golak* contributions, for non-productive purposes in a vulgar show of wealth and strength to boost the image of a few individuals. These are not my simple words of black ink, but are the most valuable "**Tears of Blood**" **oozing from the heart and eyes of a Panth Dardi Gursikh who has become a helpless and speechless viewer of the spectacular goings on, in the name of the Guru, from top to bottom.**

