

MINORITIES: SIKH-2004

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Headscarf ban: What will Paris Sikhs do? (7)

Bobigny (France), Jan. 14: No one, it seems, thought about the Sikhs and their turbans. As part of a struggle to separate religion from the state, France is poised to pass a law banning religious symbols such as Muslim veils, Jewish yarmulkes and large Christian crosses from public schools, but a report by an official commission of experts and a speech by President Jacques Chirac last month recommending passage of a legal ban said nothing about the turbans worn by Sikhs. After all, France is home to only several thousand Sikhs, compared with about a hundred times as many Jews and a thousand times as many Muslims. Historically, the Sikh community is quiet, law-abiding, apolitical and almost invisible, living, working and worshipping mainly in a few isolated pockets of suburban Paris. Now the Sikhs have suddenly found their voice, demanding that they be exempted from the anticipated prohibition on religious symbols in schools. (Asian Age 15.1.04)

French Sikhs protest move to ban religious signs in schools (7)

PARIS, JAN. 31. An estimated 3,000 members of the Sikh community, waving placards, singing hymns and shouting slogans protested here today against the French Government's plans to ban "ostensive" religious signs in public schools. The turnout was strong despite a cold wind and intermittent rain. Busloads of Sikh men, women and children came from Holland, Germany, Britain, Belgium and from as far away as Canada, in support of France's 6,000-strong Sikh community. The Sikhs will be affected by, the Government's intention to ban the wearing of all "ostensive" religious symbols from State schools. The draft Bill, which was adopted by the French Cabinet on January 28 and which will be tabled for debate in Parliament on February 3, is seen primarily as an attack against the Islamic head scarf worn by Muslim girls. The French are deeply attached to the idea of a secular republic which maintains a strict separation of the church and the state. "The Sikhs have become collateral damage in this tug-of-war between those wanting a strict application of secular principles and those in favour of total freedom of religious expression," said sociologist Jean-Pierre Langelot. (The Hindu 1.2.04)

India, France to talk turban ban (7)

New Delhi: Two traditions of secularism (or 'pseudo-secularism') will debate each other later this week when Indian officials gently take up the 'turban ban' with French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin, arriving here on February 12 on a one-day visit. Officially, the visit is to continue the high-level interaction between the two countries. But with the French national assembly set to pass the controversial 'secularity' law on Tuesday — banning "signs or clothes which conspicuously display a pupil's religious affiliations" from government schools — the question of how this will affect the 6000-strong Sikh community in France looms large.

For the record, the Indian government has made no written representation to the French on this matter. And it is not concerned with how the law will affect Muslims. "There are no Indian Muslims in France," a senior external affairs ministry official bluntly told this reporter on condition of anonymity "But on the turban issue, we have told the French government it has to be handled with great sensitivity. The turban cannot be compared to the headscarf or cross. The ambassador has taken this up, but the Sikhs in France need to do so themselves." (Times of India 10.2.04)

Memorandum on turban ban presented to French envoy (7)

New Delhi: A delegation of Punjabi and Sikh dignitaries met the French ambassador here on Wednesday to hand over a memorandum with 100,000 signatures appealing to the authorities in France to reconsider their ban on "religious symbols" in public schools. Led by Vikramjit Singh Sahney of the World Punjabi Organisation, Prehlad Singh Chandhok of the Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee and Lt Gen (retd) M S Bhullar, the delegation stressed that the Sikh turban is an integral part of the Sikh way of life

and not just a religious symbol. "We are confident the French government will revisit the premise on which this issue is based and revise its decision". As matters stand, Sikh children in French government schools will no longer be able to wear turbans or patkas from the next academic year in September. Muslim children too will not be allowed to wear the hijab, or head-scarf. The law also bans "large crosses", yarmulkes etc. There have been widespread protests across France, England and India on this order of the French government. (Times of India 12.2.04)

Headscarf ban: Not first struggle for Sikhs (7)

New Delhi, Feb. 15: The French headscarf bill is not the first time that Sikhs are protesting for their religious rights. In 1976, they had to fight against helmets in Britain, and of late, protests in Canada helped them get turban wearing rights in the Army. However, the US armed forces still bar Sikhs from serving due to their outer appearance. "There have been issues from time to time when Sikhs had to fight against discrimination at workplace due to their articles of faith, mainly turban and beard," says Dr Rajwant Singh, president, Sikh Council on Religion and Education, Washington. "In England, Canada and US, there have been many cases where Sikhs struggled for their right to work without sacrificing their symbols," he says in an email response, noting these cases pop up here and there mainly in the private sector. Attributing such cases to lack of knowledge about the Sikh faith, Tarlochan Singh, chairman, National Commission for Minorities, says "most governments and people all over the world are still ignorant about what Sikhism stands for." "The fault lies with us. We have to educate foreigners about our religion, what it stands for and the fact that articles of faith like turban and beard are an integral part of a Sikh's life," he says. (Asian Age 16.2.04)

16th March

On hunger strike, Sikh priest dies in California jail (7)

FRESNO (CALIFORNIA), MARCH 15: FOR two months, guards and medical staff at a California state prison failed to provide meals or emergency care to an imprisoned Sikh priest from India, Khem Singh, dying of malnutrition, according to inmate accounts given to a state senator. In the days before 72-year-old Singh—who spoke no English and was crippled—starved to death at the Substance Abuse Treatment Facility in Corcoran last month, inmates said, they alerted correctional officers to his condition and filed complaints. But no medical help was provided. While some accounts said Singh was on a hunger strike, others insisted he wanted vegetarian meals but was consistently served meat. An inmate wrote a letter to state Senator Gloria Romero, a Los Angeles Democrat, pleading that she intervene, but it arrived a few days after Singh's death on February 16. The inmate alleged that a guard had brutalised Singh in December, and that Singh was afraid of a second assault and hadn't left his cell for meals or medical appointments for nearly 60 days. (Indian Express 16.3.04)

30th April

Sikh freedom march from Akal Takht (7)

CHANDIGARH, APRIL 29. The radical Sikh organisation, Dal Khalsa, today launched a 'Sikh Freedom March' after performing "Ardas" (Sikh prayer) at the supreme temporal seat of the community, the Akal Takht, inside the Golden Temple complex this morning. It is scheduled culminate at Takhat Damdama Sahib in Bathinda on May 5. After the 'Ardas', the organisers of the march honoured 20 slain militants and "whose contributions for the 'Sikh nation' had not been recognised so far." At a brief function organised in the Information Office of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), the families of these ultras were presented with a 'si-ropa' (robes of religious honour) by Isher Singh, son of the firebrand militant leader, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Speaking on the occasion, the president of the Dal Khalsa, H.S. Dhami, conveyed the anguish of Kulbir Singh Barapind, who has been confined in the U.S. and is to be extradited to India shortly. Mr. Dhami said that while the "Sikh quom" remained indifferent to the prolonged incarceration of a youth who had struggled for the community's self respect, people in large numbers came out to protest when Akali leaders were sent to prison for just three days on charges of corruption. (The Hindu 30.4.04)

21st May

Sikh clergy happy with decision, ready to forgive (7)

Amritsar, May 20: Several religious Sikh leaders have hailed Congress president Sonia Gandhi for her decision to nominate Dr Manmohan Singh as India's first Sikh Prime Minister. This is being seen as most

significant since these leaders have consistently blamed the Congress and the Gandhi family for the military attack on the Golden Temple in 1984 and what they describe as a genocide of Sikhs through the 1980s and early 1990s. Bibi Kiranjot Kaur is one of the few woman members of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, the apex Sikh committee responsible for administering religious affairs and the management of all historic Sikh shrines and institutions in north India. She has never stopped blaming the Congress and the Gandhi family for what she views as the desecration of the Golden Temple and the subsequent killing of thousands of Sikhs after branding them as terrorists. Ms Kaur can still recall the horror of the day in June 1984, when the then Prime Minister of India and Mrs Sonia Gandhi's mother-in-law, Indira Gandhi, ordered the Army to flush out armed separatists from inside the Golden Temple. (Asian Age 21.5.04)

5TH September

'Sikhs not a minority in Punjab' - (5)

NEW DELHI, SEPT. 4. Can Sikhs who form 62.95 per cent of the population in Punjab be called a minority community? Yes, the Punjab Government by a notification in April 2001 granted the minority status to the Sikh educational institutions and allowed them to reserve up to 50 per cent of the seats exclusively for the community. The notification was justified on the ground that Sikhs in the whole of India should be taken into consideration. However, the committee for overseeing the entrance test conducted by the association of private professional colleges, headed by Justice G.R. Majithia, a retired judge of the Punjab and Haryana High Court, recently held invalid this notification and cancelled the minority status granted to two colleges on that basis. The Association of the Unaided Sikh Minority Medical and Dental Institutions (Punjab) made a representation to the committee seeking permission to hold its own entrance test and absolute right for minority institutions to fill the total seats allocated for them. The committee while allowing the association to have its own entrance test, by a majority rejected the contention that Sikhs were a minority. Citing the ruling of the Supreme Court in the T.M.A. Pai Foundation case, the committee held that the status of the minority of an institution had to be determined by taking the State as a unit and not the country as a whole. (The Hindu, 5-9-2004)

28th September

All steps to protect Sikh shrines (7)

ISLAMABAD, SEPT. 27. Nankana Sahib, the holy shrine of Sikhs, in the Punjab province of Pakistan has been the centre of attention for the last two days as a mob attacked it on Saturday protesting against the Government's decision to return the adjacent Government college building to the Nankana Sahib Trust. The issue figured in the provincial Assembly today. In response to concerns expressed by the Opposition, the provincial Law Minister described the incident as "unfortunate" and said the Government was determined to punish the culprits. Taking a serious note of the incident, the Punjab Chief Minister, Pervaiz Elahi, has directed the Inspector-General of Police to investigate the matter and action against the take stem attackers.

The Pakistani English daily from Lahore, Daily Times in a report said the police had not registered any case so far. It appears that neither the Trust nor the college has so far approached police to register a complaint. According to local media reports, a mob attacked the shrine on Saturday protesting against a Government Committee's recommendation that the Punjab government return the Govt. Guru Nanak Degree College building to the Nankana Sahib Trust to accommodate sikh pilgrims. (The Hindu 28.9.04)

7th Nov.

France school expels Sikhs for turbans (7)

London, Nov. 6: Three Sikh students in France were 'expelled from a school on Friday for refusing to remove their turbans. The move is expected to trigger off a massive outcry in France. It is the first time that Sikhs have been forced out of school under a new French law banning conspicuous religious signs and apparel in the classroom, their lawyer said. Officials of the Louise Michel high school in Bobigny, northeast of Paris, decided to expel the three teenagers at disciplinary hearings ordered by a court, said lawyer Felix de Belloy. The ruling was the latest twist in France's effort to apply a new law banning religious symbols at public schools. The ban, which includes Islamic headscarves, Jewish skullcaps and large Christian crosses, took effect at the start of the school year. According to reports in the British media, at least eight Muslim girls have been expelled under the law. Islamic headscarves were the law's main target because of concerns that growing Muslim fundamentalism in France was weakening the

nation's secular roots. (Asian Age 7.11.04)

UK's Sikh community under fire (7)

London: Britain's Sikh community is under fire from all sides for violently forcing the premature closure of a play they said mocked their religion, even as a wide swathe of British opinion condemned the threat to artistic freedoms by outraged minorities. In echoes of The Satanic Verses affair from 1989, when riots in the north-western English city of Bradford led to Ayatollah Khomeini's infamous fatwa on Salman Rushdie, young second-generation British Indian writers began to campaign for the right to defy mob rule, censorship and end the silence that exists around abuses within (our) communities. The offending play, Behzti, by actor-turned-writer Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, shows sexual abuse, paedophilia and murder within a fictional gurdwara. On Saturday, a violent mob of several hundred Sikhs trashed sections of a theatre in the central English city of Birmingham for daring to continue with the performance. The thuggery was slammed by leading politicians, forced into digesting implications of the Sikh violence, even as Neal Foster, of the Birmingham Stage Company putting on the play described it as one of "the blackest days for the arts in this country I've ever experienced." (Times of India 22.12.04)