

# Responding to the challenge of government interference in the Sikh religious affairs

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It has been often contended that the main aim of the political dispensation in India since 1947, has been the dissolution of the Sikh identity held intact by the Order of the Khalsa. This will be denied as it always has been but woe to him who cannot read confirmation in the official denial. 'Nothing is more confirmed than what has been officially denied,' has already been said. The powers that be in India are so sure of themselves since the complete take over of the Shiromani Akali Dal since its Moga Conference of 1996, that they are increasingly throwing caution to the winds and have been often quite vocal regarding the detailed plan that they have prepared for the total extermination of the Sikh religious and political entity. If the Sikhs just applied their minds to what appears openly in the Press, they would be better informed about the schemes and could perhaps devise ways and means of escaping the increasingly tightening stranglehold.

One of the more significant news items to have appeared in the Press in recent times has been published by *The Times of India* on July 26, 2007 at page 1. The screaming headline is: "FIR against Khalsa march protesters, Hardliners May Be Arrested." The news write up mentions that in the Khalsa march of June 24, 2007, "Khalistan Zindabad, pro-Bhinderanwale and separatist slogans" were raised. For this crime a First Information Report has been registered by the police on the information provided by Mohan Singh a minor police official. The case has been registered against "unknown persons." Then comes the punch-line, "any of the radicals who played a key-role in the Khalsa march against the wishes of the state government, could be implicated in this case if they continue confronting the state government on the Dera issue," said a senior police officer on condition of anonymity.

Raising slogans is no crime in democracy and the law on the issue has been made amply clear by the highest judiciary in a number of cases. It has been specifically held that even seeking Khalistan by peaceful means is no crime and is covered by the freedom of expression. Separatism would be well covered by the judicial fiat on peaceful propagation of Khalistan. Slogans in favour of Bhinderanwale are here nor there even if construed to be slogans in favour of separatism. Bhinderanwale is a Sikh hero of the recent past. He has been accepted by the Sikh psyche as a martyr for the faith. He will continue to enjoy this status forever. 'A king dies and his reign ends; a martyr dies and his reign begins,' goes the popular saying. By popular vote taken all over the globe, the Sikhs elected him, "Sikh of the Century." The Sikhs will now continue to cherish his memory and to eulogise his achievements. If the authorities become so touchy on the issue of Bhinderanwale and decide to legally punish every expression of admiration for the only Sant deserving the title, then they will have to be prepared to put every Sikh behind bars. Prudent people are always persuaded to ignore such universally held, deeply rooted views.

While analysing the views expressed by the state government through the event of recording the FIR and the philosophy of the act as propounded by the junior police functionary, it has to be kept in mind that the ruling Akali Dal abandoned the Sikh plank in 1996 when it denied the glorious legacy of the Shiromani Akali Dal and in the most immoral political gesture of all times, defected to the enemy forces trying to destroy the Sikhs and their religion. It is now aligned to the political party that is vociferous in denying the separate identity of the Sikhs, are the protagonists of the rival religious philosophy wedded to a uni-central caste based way of life and an intolerant political philosophy. In the circumstances, the political interference of the Akali-BJP government in the religious affairs of the Sikhs is both a repudiation of the secular nature of the Indian polity and is also a reflection of their innermost desire to destroy Sikhi root and branch. The government intervention is both unauthorised as well as undesirable.

Over the years, this consistent interference, inclusive of the misuse of the criminal system and the law and order machinery that it inspires, has become a potent instrument of blackmailing the genuine Sikh religious and political leadership. It paves the way for interference in the functioning of the Akal Takhat and the exploitation of the Sikh religious sentiment through the manipulation of the 5 Singhs. It is therefore doubly reprehensible, particularly in the context of a non-denominational democracy.

It should be obvious to anyone who has followed the sedition case registered against Simranjit Singh Mann at Jalandhar that the blackmail threat by the government is real. Mann's offence was that he placed a placard with a portrait of his killer Dilawar Singh around the neck of the statue of Beant Singh. Beant Singh is by no means the most respected figure in the Punjab. He was a common criminal involved in the Payal Murder Case and was ultimately responsible for the death of many people of the rival Rarewala faction. He most ignominiously derailed democracy in the state and shamelessly assumed political leadership although only 6% of the voters had voted for him. He compared himself to Gurus and incarnations implying that he was a shade better than them. He practised bloodstained politics of any other political figure in the Punjab. So, Mann was right in agitating for the removal of the statue from the public place. Moreover, his act of placing a portrait of Dilawar Singh around his neck was just a juvenile prank at best constituting an offence of mischief under the Indian Penal Code. As is well known he has been charged with sedition just to retain him behind bars for long without a trial. The contrast is that the dera head who slighted the Guru, flung insults at the Sikh society and wronged Sikh history is roaming free with the same government inventing every conceivable excuse to protect his freedom to slander and abuse. This is the concrete evidence that the government is keen on using blackmail as political instrument.

The Sikhs must defend their leaders against blatant blackmail if they want them to remain in peoples service. If the government persists in this kind of blackmail, then the Sikhs must organise a Sarbat Khalsa with a comprehensive agenda. It should consider the issue of the mushrooming *deras* of various kinds and all other issues facing the Khalsa *panth*. The Sarbat Khalsa should be requested to organise anew all the important Sikh institutions and to devise other ways and means of escaping the onslaught mounted by the government. In no case must the interference be allowed to develop into the proportions of the 1984 holocaust. The Sikhs must act while there is still time. It is better than regretting later, spending much time on locating scapegoats and apportioning blame after the event.

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