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## **Historical and religious background material for the logic to allow Sikhs to wear their Turban**

### **The Turban as a Sikh form and Symbol:**

The religion of the Sikhs enjoins its followers to keep five external symbols of their faith, universally known as the Five Ks, the *Keshas* (unshorn hair), *Kangha* (comb), *Kirpan* (sword), *Kachhera* (breaches) and *Kara* (iron bangle). The unshorn hair on the head of a Sikh has to be covered with a turban. It is mandatory and obligatory for the Sikh to do so. The apparel of a Sikh is incomplete without the turban.

The Turban is the Crowning Glory of the Sikhs. It is the inheritance of a proud legacy to protect and preserve the distinct visible identity at all costs and by all means. Sikh leaders have spent years in prison and thousands of lives have been lost to protect the turban and the legacy associated with it.

The turban makes the Sikh an integral part of the Sikh Commonwealth. Without the turban, the Sikh loses his self. According to the celebrated Christian thinker, Nicholas Berdyaev, the turban is a God-given religious thing and attempts to deturbanise the Sikhs would amount to a repudiation of their glorious heritage.

The hair of the head is naturally connected with the comb and turban in the Sikh discipline. The comb as one of the Ks (*Kangha*) signifies that the hair must be kept clean and healthy, like other parts of the body. Matted or dishevelled hair is not permitted, as this is a sign of lethargy, uncleanliness, indifference to social responsibility and a betrayed and cynical attitude towards life. Going out bareheaded in the street is akin to the Sikh being undressed. To keep hair clean by washing it regularly is also part of the Sikh code of conduct."

The turban of a Sikh has spiritual significance. It links him to the divine sphere of commandments. The turban worn by traditional Sikhs as directed by Guru Gobind Singh, the Tenth Master, was conical with its cone raised high towards heaven, where the cone disappears into air signifying its invisible continuance to touch the divine spheres from where the divine rules of conduct are revealed. So a Sikh wearing a turban is in association with *Hukam*, the Commandment of the Almighty.

Sirdar Kapur Singh, Sikh thinker, historian and ideologue, in his magnum opus, "The Baisakhi of Guru Gobind Singh", citing a quote from Khushwaqt Rai, an employee and news-writer of John Company at Fort William, who wrote an account of the Sikhs in 1811, at the specific suggestion of Colonel David Ochterloney, illustrates the above point by saying,

Guru's change in his turban-style: *"he tied his turban in a high cone of one hand altitude," and he adopted this fashion as his "future practice."* In the Louvre, Paris, there is an exhibit in the Assyro-Babylonian section, 'the Steels of Hammurabi', about four thousand years old (circa 2000 B.C.) on the top of which stela is engraved the scene depicting the God on High, god Shammas, dictating to King Hammurabi the Laws for the guidance of mankind to show eternal concern of divine powers to help and aid the mortals. In this scene, god Shammas, in contrast to

that of Hammurabi, wears a conical high altitude turban exactly similar to the style that Guru Gobind Singh adopted on this occasion to proclaim his divine status as well as his fundamental concern for the welfare of mankind.

### **Role of Turban wearing Sikhs during the two World Wars:**

Sikhs of today, proudly state that our forefathers, as part of the Commonwealth armies, fought the enemy tooth and nail to protect and preserve the fundamental rights of the French people along with other Allied nations. They liberated France twice, in World War I and II from German occupation.

These turban wearing soldiers, whose unflinching commitment to righteousness and zeal to defeat the enemy has not only been praised but has been referred to as a glorious chapter in the history of nations with whom the Sikh soldiers and officers worked

Many Sikhs in the UK and France commemorate the sacrifice of Sikh soldiers by visiting their cemeteries in Ieper and the Memorial erected in the town hall of the same city.

Sir Winston Churchill stated in the British Parliament, while talking of the Sikh's kesh, turban and morality, that it was "a matter of deep regret that consequent to contemporary cynicism, people had been toying with many precious social and religious values, but those who want to retain and maintain them with due respect should receive our appreciation as well as help. The Sikhs need our help for such a cause. We should help them willingly. He who is familiar with Sikh history knows the Sikhs' relationship with England, the high degree of their achievements, and must help them with full strength. The Sikhs should be exempted from wearing steel helmets because it hurts their religious feelings". Churchill went on to state: the English people have been under obligation of the Sikhs for a long time. "I know that during this very century when we were in trouble and needed their help they came to our rescue. It is because of their timely help that we are today with dignity, honour and freedom. In both the World Wars they fought for us and sacrificed their lives, with turbans as their uniforms. At that time we did not insist that they must wear steel helmets because we knew that they would not agree to this and we would so be deprived of their help. At that time because of our own critical position, we did not compel them to wear steel helmets; we should now earn their appreciation by respecting their religious feelings and symbols and therefore happily exempt them from the obligation of wearing steel helmets".

Taking the argument ahead, another Member of Parliament, Mr. Mobre, spoke with passion about the Sikhs. He stated "the Sikhs are a wonderful people. I cannot refrain myself from sharing with the House an example of the Sikhs discipline, loyalty and commitment to duty: in World War I, the Sikh Regiment went to Gallipoli (in the Dardanelles) on 4 July 1915. The 14th (KGO) Sikhs comprised 10 officers and 700 men. By the evening, after the offensive only 2 officers and 70 men remained alive. Just think, for whom were they fighting? For themselves? No! They were fighting for us, or, we can say they were fighting to fulfil their commitment. Their Gurus and their religion have taught them to behave and act in this fashion. Therefore, we must pay due respect to their hair and turban which are their religious symbols. This is also our moral obligation".

Sikhs fought, while wearing their turbans, for the Allied Forces in many European countries, the United States, Asia and Africa. More than **83,000 Sikhs died** and over **109,000 were injured** to protect the honour and integrity of people of all faiths. It is not only sad but also ironic and extremely painful that this community that fought for the freedom of France while wearing their Turbans, now has to fight for the freedom to wear the Turban in France.

## **An overview of The Sikh-French connection under Maharaja Ranjit Singh:**

Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the sovereign of the Sikh Commonwealth, entertained an expensive staff of French generals and colonels writes Jean Marrie Lafont in her book, "Fauj-I-khas Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his French Officers." Allard, Ventura, Court and Avitabile were senior officers, who reached Panjab because of their thorough knowledge of the Persian language. By 1830, the Maharaja had at his disposal, among other forces, three full-fledged brigades trained on European model and commanded by French officers. Ventura was appointed Qazi of Lahore from 1835-1837, giving him quasi-judicial powers.

Ranjit Singh was very much influenced by the art of diplomacy of these French officers. From 1823 to 1827 they were often connected with the settlement of border areas and the establishment of amiable relations between Lahore and petty Muslim rulers or heads of tribes on the North-west frontier. Avitabile was made governor of Wazirabad and he ensured peace in the region.

It is interesting to note the relation, which the French generals entertained with France and what they tried to achieve encouraging Ranjit Singh to initiate a direct communication with the French government.

As far as their presence in Punjab was concerned, France did not know it before 1826, and at that time there was no hope of the slightest connection between officers of Napoleon and members of the Cabinet at Paris. But the situation changed with the Revolution of July 1830. There was also a change in the relation of London and Paris. The new king of France, Louis Philippe, was a very old friend of Lord William Bentinck. The benefit of this changed situation was taken by a French young scientist, Victor Jacquemont, who was on a scientific mission to British India for the Museum of Paris at Delhi, en-route to little Tibet. He got permission of Bentinck to visit Lahore in 1831. Jacquemont was well received and treated by Allard. Jacquemont was very much impressed by Allard's high position in Lahore Darbar and it was he who sent in 1832 the first official letter to Paris concerning the French generals in Punjab. In this letter he even recommended to the King of France to promote Allard, ex-Captain of Cavalry and Aide-de-Camp to Marechal Brune, to the grade of officer of the Legion d' Honneur. Allard was promoted by Louis-Philippe and decoration was sent to him from Paris through Pondicherry and Ludhiana. So Allard suddenly became famous in his native country.

Allard went to France on leave in 1834 and came back to Lahore in 1837. A letter was given to Allard in which Allard was introduced as the representative of the French government at Lahore. It also indicated the possibility, in the long run, of diplomatic relations between Lahore and Paris. Emphasis was also laid on commercial and peaceful exchanges, development of trade, scientific mission, etc....., and Allard received many letters from businessmen and industrialists interested in products of the Punjab and the potentiality of its markets.

But British authorities in London took a very serious note of the "rumours" concerning the nomination of Allard at the court of Lahore. So Wade was instructed to obtain a copy of the letter of Louis-Philippe and verify if Allard was really acting as Charge d'affaires. Moreover, when Ventura applied for home leave, the British refused to deliver a passport for British territories if he was to carry a letter from Ranjit Singh to the King of France. Later on, due to the changing political situation at the end of 1837 and with so many pressures on him, and his French officers at Peshawar, Ranjit Singh had to give up his idea of sending a reply to Louis-Philippe. More urgent matters soon took precedence over the problem of the political relations between France and the Panjab. While negotiating the Tripartite treaty, some British officers found an occasion to point that none of his French officer should be trusted, not even Allard and Ventura. But Allard died in January 1839 and Ranjit Singh five months later. Today, the letter of Louis-Philippe to Maharaja of Panjab is lying in the small museum of India office in London. This was how Allard and Ventura strived for a political connection between Lahore and Paris and the British political agents scuttled it.

It is significant to mention that when it dawned on Maharaja Dalip Singh, the last sovereign of the Sikh empire, that he was cheated by the British (as according to the Articles of Agreement concluded between the British government and the Lahore Durbar on December 16, 1846, the sovereignty of the Sikh empire was only suspended and was to be handed over to Maharaja Dalip Singh on his becoming a major) he fled to Paris from England. He was granted political asylum in the 1880s by the then government of France. This was the culmination of the Sikh-French ties between Lahore Darbar and the French government.

The French interest in Panjabi culture can be gauged from the fact that the French generals sponsored historical research in the Punjab. Court started these researches in 1827 and he published scholarly articles in the Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1827 and in the Journal Asiatique in Paris.

### **Turban wearing Sikhs in other parts of the world:**

Sikhs with turbans are living as second-to-none citizens in Canada, United States, other parts of Europe and the United Kingdom. In Canada, in the French-speaking province of Quebec, The Sikhs are held in great esteem. The Sikhs as a people are no threat to any definition of "secularism". In fact, the Sikhs as a distinct people are conscious of their responsibility to self and society. The turban-wearing Sikh knows that he carries the onus of history on his head and would shy away from doing anything, which will put him, his family or the Sikh nation to shame.

The contribution of turban-wearing Sikhs in the Canadian parliament, the steadfast role of turban-wearing Sikhs in the American army, the role of turban wearing Sikhs in the political sphere at all levels in the United Kingdom and the role of turban-wearing medical professionals in South-East-Asia and Africa exemplifies the godliness and societal conviction of the Sikh people.

### **The Turban in the UK:**

The Sikhs have waged a relentless struggle to maintain their religious right to wear the turban. When the Sikhs living in England asserted their right to wear the turban, there was a big hue and cry. Two cases highlight the plight of the Sikhs.

In the first such case in the UK, the Sikhs were exempted from wearing helmets while riding motorcycles. An Act was promulgated in England in 1972-73, which directed that everybody riding a motorcycle or scooter must wear a crash helmet on the head to ensure safety, which certainly became a problem for the Sikh riders, who stopped riding two-wheelers, but refused to wear helmets. Finally, an agitation started. Sydney Bidwill, a Member of Parliament from the Southall Constituency pleaded the Sikh case in the British Parliament. Consequently, the British Parliament witnessed long discussions on the question of turbans (from January till October 1976). Several white members of Parliament surprised the entire British nation by taking up cudgels in support of the Sikhs by stressing the religious, social and moral importance of the turban for Sikhs and went on to stating that any reference to Sikh history revealed this fact. Bidwill asked a turbaned Sikh working in the car park outside Parliament as to what he would do if asked to work with a steel helmet on his head, he very coolly answered that he would give up the job. "This shows that Sikhs hold their religious symbols very seriously ... they are very hardworking and have left on British society a very strong impression with their numerous qualities. They are very loyal, obedient to law and dedicated to their jobs. We can feel proud of them. If we impart justice to such people, the coming English generation will appreciate our liberal and tolerant behaviour-otherwise we shall be labelled mean and bigoted".

In the second such case, a Sikh boy, Gurinder Singh was denied admission in school as the headmaster refused to allow him to attend school with the turban (almost similar to what is happening in France today). The case went upto the British House of Lords and the judgement in March 1983, allowing the turban, concluded, "the Sikhs are almost a race, almost a nation." Not only was Gurinder Singh allowed to go to school, but gradually there was a sea-change in the thinking of British Academics all over England.

### **Appeal:**

The Sikh turban is an inheritance Sikhs cannot do without. It is an inalienable right of the Sikhs established by religion, sanctified by tradition and history; a right, which has withstood the trials and tribulations of modernity, a privilege, which has been upheld with sacrifice, and a fundamental right guaranteed by international law.

Every new theory in the social sciences today owes its debt to the French thought. Past history of every country is usually bright but it is France, which has continued to shine in the modern age also. Who is not aware of the intellectual contributions of Sartre, Camu, Derrida, Guattari, Irigaray, Kristeva, Baudrillard, Lacan, Fanon, Foucault, Bataille, Barthes, Levi-Strauss and many more. One thing common to all of them was up-keeping the human dignity and freedom for all. In their writings they strongly criticised the suppressing forces that curb the rights of freedom of the downtrodden and the minorities. Sartre's statement 'Man is condemned to be free' declares freedom is not something exogenous, it is endogenous or ontological, that is, human existence is freedom!

I very humbly submit that it is not in the French ethos to disallow Sikhs to wear the turban. Homogeneity in heterogeneity should be the norm for the country, which gave the world the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. We are sure and we have expressed so in the media also, that anxiety over the feared loss of social order owing to the TURBAN is totally unfounded.

Sikhs in France have socially integrated into the French social life, political, cultural and economic and respect the high value system of French society. In visiting them year after year in France, I have found them learned in the French language, culture, education system, its rich cuisine and history. Most of them, who have taken up French citizenship, are voters in the French political system. They are proud to call themselves French Sikhs. They have totally integrated themselves into the French way of life. Some of them aspire to join the French armed services and other professions, through skills they have acquired by the French education.