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Democracy and Minorities in India: The Sikh Community

Abstract

The Sikhs are an important community in India. Despite being a religious minority it contributes significantly to India's state system and society. This paper examines the socio-political position of the Sikhs in India. How their religious identity developed and how did they perform in history. They ruled the Punjab for a long time and engaged in a constant struggle to protect and promote their religious and cultural identity in India.

Key Words: National Commission for Minorities (NCM), UN Declaration of Minorities, Darbaar Sahib, The Golden Temple, Special Agent Services (SAS)

Introduction

India is described as “a constitutional liberal democracy — a political system marked not only by free and fair elections but also by rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion and property” (Zakria, 2004). However, in practice, India has not been able to profess claims. Democracy has continued to work in India but its quality has been poor.

A major test of democracy is the treatment it extends to religious minorities and other disadvantaged section of population. India, a predominantly Hindu society, has several religious minorities.

According to the 2011 census, the total population is 1.21 billion. According to the 2001 census, the latest year for which disaggregated statistics have been released, Hindu 80.5 percent, Muslims 13.4 percent, Christians 2.3 percent, and Sikhs 1.9 percent of the population. Groups that together constitute less than 1 percent of the populations include Buddhists, Jains, Parsis (Zoroastrians), Jews, and Bahais.

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Background of the Sikhs Community

The present article focuses on the political and societal position of the Sikh community. How are they treated by the state and society in India. The Sikhs are one of the oldest community of India. They have developed a common religious tradition a scripture, a separate linguistic script called Gurumukhi and a number of socio-political and economic institutions. According to an estimate, there are approximately 25 million people in the whole world who identify themselves as adherents of the Sikh religion. Thus, Sikhism is known to be the 5th largest religion in the world. The Sikh doctrine, known as Gurumat, teaches its followers that all the human beings in the world have the inborn ability to realize God, provided they actualize the attributes of Devotion, Truthfulness in their living, Implementing Justice and Serving the Creation.

Beginning of the Sikh Religion

Guru Nanak founded the Sikh religion in 1469 and preached it by himself till 1539. He had nine successors in the Punjab who overtook the task of preaching and shaping the said religion in the 16th and 17th centuries respectively.

The Sikh faith does not separate the politics from religion; however, there is no provision of a theocratic state also. "History is the witness that all Sikh states have been secular in nature with non-theocratic skeleton of law because the Sikhs do not have a priestly class which may rule in the name of an invisible God. The Sikhs also do not have a corpus of civil law, of divine origin and sanction" (Singh, 2004).

The following table gives the names of the Gurus who built up the Sikh religion and community.

The Ten Gurus

Name	Born	Ascension to Guruship	Died
Guru Nanak	1469		1539
Guru Angad	1504	1539	1545
Guru Amar Das	1479	1552	1574
Guru Ram Das	1534	1574	1581
Guru Arjan	1563	1581	1604
Guru Hargobind	1595	1606	1644
Guru Har Rai	1630	1644	1661
Guru Har Krishan	1656	1661	1664
Guru Tegh Bahadur	1621	1664	1675
Guru Gobind Singh	1666	1675	1708

Source: "The Khalistan Riddle" (Book) 1988 p.8

Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru was arrested by the Mughal state and killed. The Sikhs started living under the fear of persecution. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, thought of forming Sikhs into a religious military union and “executed his design with the systematic spirit of a Grecian lawgiver” (Singh I. , 1986). He also said “These articles of Faith had to be adorned on their uniform under a strict code of conduct and the members of the Panth were ordered not to hide their identity even under extreme conditions” (Singh I. , 1986).

The Sikhs’ show of political strength gave an alarming indication to the Mughal Regime which ordered for the extermination of the Sikhs. It was in 1715 when the Mughal Army besieged Banda Singh’s forces for many months. Consequently, a large number of the Sikhs died of starvation. According to Iqbal Singh, “(The Sikh military leader)...his family and 740 of his soldiers were led in chains to Delhi. They were subjected to inhuman tortures and then publicly beheaded on seven successive days. On 9th June came the turn of Banda. He was forced to kill his infant and was then beheaded. The governors of Punjab were determined to wipe out the Sikhs and ordered the immediate execution of anyone who wore his hair and beard unshorn. The Harmander in Amritsar was blown up and thousands of men, women and children butchered. The Sikhs fled the plains and bided their time in the Himalayan foothills” (Singh I. , 1986).

While hiding and biding in the Himalayan foothills, the Sikhs started guerilla warfare against the Mughals in the Lahore area. The Sikhs acquired a great power in this period and set up several confederacies that asserted their rule over several territories across Punjab having substantial support for the next fifty years. Under the leadership of Jassa Singh, the Sikhs occupied Lahore during this period and ruled over areas “from the banks of the Indus in the West to the Ganes in the East, and from the Himalayas in the North to the desert wastes of Sindh in the South” (Singh I. , 1986). In the meantime, they had to fight against the Afghan invaders and suffer two more holocausts, one in “June 1746 and the other in May 1762. Ahmed Shah Abdali also destroyed the Darbar Sahib (the Golden Temple) and from 10,000 to 70,000 Sikhs was massacred in the second holocaust” (Singh I. , 1986). Indian Army attack on the Darbar Sahib in June 1984 is compared to that of Abdali’s invasion; likewise Indra Gandhi’s assassination in October 1984 to that of Abdali’s sudden death on his way back to Afghanistan. It is a common belief of the “Sikhs that all the enemies have opted to invade the Darbar Sahib and commit genocide against the Sikhs on a Sikh holiday” (Singh P. , 1999).

The Sikh Identity Debate

The Sikh leadership could foresee the end of the British rule over India and became concerned about the future of the Sikhs. In the Minto - Morley scheme of 1909 (Singh P. , 1999), the Sikhs along with the Muslims had claimed for the separate representation of their respective communities but their claim was left unsuccessful rather the Congress, having predominantly a Hindu majority, denied the Sikhs their separate and distinct identity and declared the Sikhs a sect of Hinduism. Despite the fact that the Sikhs could acquire 19.1 percent of the seats in the Punjab Legislature, the Congress leader, "Motilal Nehru related the future of British-India, in response to the Simon Commission 1927, referring to the Hindus and Muslims only which revoked strong condemnation from the Sikh leaders" (Singh P. , 1999).

In 1935, the Hindus changed their moods towards the Sikhs when government by two independent authority's i.e diarchy was introduced in Punjab and the Muslim majority was politically and legally recognized. The Hindus wanted to change the Muslim majority into minority in Punjab Legislative Council, they started considering Sikh demands for the sake of political expediency (Singh P. , 1999). Later on in "December 1929, Motilal Nehru and Mohandas Gandhi assured the Sikh leaders that no future plans about the British India would be approved or implemented against the aspirations of the Sikh community" (Singh P. , 1999). In this regard, the Congress also passed a resolution in its Lahore session. The resolution stated... "as the Sikhs in particular, and Muslims and other minorities in general have expressed their dissatisfaction over the solution of communal questions in the Nehru Report; this Congress assures the Sikhs, the Muslims and the other minorities that no solution thereof in any future constitution will be acceptable to the Congress that, does not give full satisfaction to the parties concerned" (Singh P. , 1999).

It was, then, stated by Gandhi that the Congress passed the resolution in order to satisfy the Sikh community (Singh P. , 1999). Gandhi visited Gurdwara Sis Ganj in Delhi, addressed a meeting and said, I ask you to accept my word...and all the resolution of the Congress that it will not betray a single individual, much less a community...our Sikh friends have no reason to fear that it would betray them. For, the moment it does so, the Congress would not only thereby seal its own doom but that of the country too. Moreover, "Sikhs are a brave people. They know how to safeguard their rights by exercise of their arms if it should ever come to that" (The Stateman, 1946). Jawaharlal Nehru also reaffirmed Gandhi's statement about the

Sikhs at the All India Congress Committee in Calcutta in 1946 saying that: "The brave Sikhs of Punjab are entitled to special consideration. I see nothing wrong in an area and a set-up in the North wherein the Sikhs can experience the glow of freedom" (Bhatti, 1986).

The Khalistan Demand

When the All India Muslim League the creation of Pakistan in order to safeguard their socio-cultural, political and economic rights, some of the Sikh leaders also put up their plan to carve out a Sikh state by the name of Khalistan (Bhatti, 1986). From 1940 till the division of the Subcontinent, the Congress party kept promising the Sikhs of their autonomy, lest they should ally with the Muslims.

Indian leaders demanded that "Adequate safeguards would be provided for minorities in India...it was a declaration pledge and an undertaking before the world, a contract with millions of Indians and, therefore, in the nature of oath we must keep" (Bhatti, 1986). The Indian state and its leaders did not fully honor their community to religious minorities' right from the beginning. They employed of autocratic rule to suppress the minorities. The Sikhs were not at all accommodated as equal partners in running the affairs of the country. They witnessed with great anger and despair how the Congress had shifted from its minority's liberalism to coercive measures. Having been clearly disappointed, the Sikhs opted for aggressive protests.

The 1984 Attack on the Golden Temple

Jarnail Singh Bhindranwala, who was the leader of the Damdami Taksal and political revolutionary and is notable for his support of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution; he called for a return to what is considered to be the "pure" roots of Sikhism, (Bhatti, 1986) he initiated agitation movement on September, 1981. He offered his arrest voluntarily in Amritsar on the said date. The police detained and interrogated him "for 25 days but had to release him because no evidence was found against him. However, Bhindrawala left his headquarters and stayed in the Darbar Sahib precincts" (Deol, 2000).

The Indian army followed him there and attacked not only the Sikhs' most venerated shrine, The Golden Temple, Amritsar but several other shrines across Punjab, massacring a large number of innocent people. "The operation, named as Operation Blue Star, took place 3-8 June 1984, ordered by the Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indra Gandhi" ("Operation Blue Star, 20 Years on", 1984). The factor behind this massive operation was to suppress and eliminate Bhindrawala and his followers, involved in the uprising against Indra's government, from

the Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar, Punjab. Bhindranwala had made the Harmandir Sahib as his headquarter in April 1980. "Bhindranwala was accused of amassing weapons in the gurudwara in order to start a major armed uprising" (Operation Blue Star, 1984).

The Operation Blue Star was not restricted to Dabar Sahib only rather it had a number of dimensions; for example, "Operation Metal, confined to the Harmandir Sahib complex, and Operation Shop, which raided the Punjabi countryside to capture any suspects"-- (Singh S. , 1995). After that "Operation Woodrose was launched to thoroughly scan the Punjab countryside. The operation was carried out by Indian Army troops with tanks artillery, helicopters, armoured vehicles, and chemical weapons"-- (Singh S. , 1995). Kuldip Singh Brar states that the actual number of casualties had been 83 in the Indian Army and the number of the injured ones rose to 220 ("Army Reveals Starting facts on Bluestar", 1984). "According to the official estimate, 492 civilians were killed, though some independent claims run as high as 5, 000" (Martha, 1995).

Apart from this gruesome massacre, after seizing the historical artifacts and manuscripts, the Sikh Reference Library was burnt down allegedly by the CBI (<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gunishakaur/remembering-the-massacre-of-sikhs-in-june-of-1984>). The reaction to the military attack was indescribably severe and led to an uproar amongst the Sikhs all over the world. Tension inside India had increased to this extent that a number of Sikh soldiers in the "Indian Army mutinied, many Sikhs resigned from civil administrative offices and several returned their honours and awards they had been conferred by the Indian government" (Tully & Jacob). Even in face of the Sikhs' demonstration and forceful protest, the Indian Army went on chasing the suspects and subjecting them either to imprisonment, torture or death penalty.

Assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi

Upset by the attack on the Golden Temple, Amritsar two Sikh bodyguards of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi assassinated her on October 31, 1984. The Delhi city witnessed the most bloody riots against the Sikhs in the immediate aftermath of the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The houses and business centres were destroyed and thousands of Sikhs were killed in Cold blood by Congress activists. The police was unable to protect the Sikhs. It was the biggest massacre of the Sikhs in India.

Dr. Awatar Sekhon a prominent Sikh leader wrote to Mary Robinson, High Commissioner, on Human Rights, Geneva, Switzerland on June 1, 2001 that since the independence of India i.e. 15th August, 1947 more than 1.4 million Sikhs have been killed in different genocides and massacres. More than 26, 000 Sikhs have been perished since the Operation Blue Star of June 1984 along with innumerable cases of rapes, desecration, humiliation and staged encounters. There are more than 70, 000 Sikhs lingering on in jails without their trials. As regards the other minorities in India, the situation is no less different. More than 200,000 Muslims, a similar number of Christians and approximately 80,000 Kashmiris have been subjected to extermination. Hundreds of thousands of Dalits, Manipuri's, Tamils, Andivassis or aboriginals of India and other Non-Hindu minorities of have had the same fate. There have been instances of rape wherein the foreigners like Roman Catholic nuns were not even spared.

Conclusion

The Sikhs are one of the oldest community in India. Though a religious minority the Sikhs have played important role in India's state system and society. They are more known for military and police services, agriculture and business.

The Sikhs had to make continuous struggle to protect their religious and cultural identity. The attack of Indian Army on the Golden Temple, Amritsar, 1984, had a profound impact on their mindset. They were angry and felt hurt by this incident. Now, they have overcome this shock and they continue to function as an important community in India.

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