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Sikhs in France holding French flags stage a demonstration in Paris on Saturday protesting against the law banning "the wearing of signs or clothes which conspicuously display a pupil's religious affiliation" in schools. — AFP (Report on Page 8)



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French Sikhs protest move to ban religious signs in schools

By Vaiju Naravane

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.

Chain Singh, the leader of the Sikh community in Paris,

told *The Hindu*: "We are discussing the question with the Education Ministry. The Government appointed a special commission to discuss the issue but the Sikh community was not called to give its views. They did not even know of our existence. But several thousand Sikh soldiers died to protect France during the last war

when they served in the British Army. We expect better treatment from the French Government."

The French Education Minister, Luc Ferry, has suggested that the Sikhs could wear transparent nets to cover their hair. The Sikhs have completely rejected this suggestion as "insulting."

Secularity is not secularism: Pope

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, JAN. 31. Sympathetic to the cause of Sikhs fighting the French Government's move to ban students of the community from wearing turbans to schools, Pope John Paul II has responded to the National Commission for Minorities' (NCM) plea for his intervention in the matter and noted that "secularity is not secularism."

Without once mentioning France in a letter to the Commission, the Pope said: "Unfortunately in recent times, we have witnessed in some European countries an attitude that could endanger the effective respect for religious freedom."

Of the view that believers have a right to participate in public dialogue, he said: "Everyone may agree to respect the

religious sentiment of individuals but the same cannot be said of the 'religious factor,' that is, the social dimension of religions."

Elaborating his contention that "secularity is not secularism," the Pope said: "It is nothing other than respect for all beliefs on the part of the State that assures the free exercise of ritual, spiritual and cultural and charitable activities by communities of believers. In a pluralistic society, secularity is a place for communication between the different spiritual traditions and the nation."

The papal message was sent to the NCM chairman, Tarlochan Singh, on Friday in reply to his correspondence with the Vatican regarding the ban on Sikh children wearing turbans to school in France.


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