



RANVIR NAYAR

A meeting at the Bobigny Gurudwara to chart the future course of action

French Inquisition

Sikhs protest an impending legislation that will force them to choose between the turban and public schools

A clash of civilisations or a tussle between modernity and tradition, a protest against secular fundamentalism or a fiat to adhere to the tenets of their religion—these are some of the categories the French might invoke to explain thousands of Sikhs marching on the streets of Paris on January 31, protesting against a possible law banning their children from wearing turban or *patka* (mini-turban) in state-funded schools.

At Gurudwara Singh Sabha in Bobigny, a north-eastern suburb of Paris, preparations are afoot to ensure the protest rally is a success. Activists are preparing placards and banners, and making arrangements for the hundreds of Sikh brethren who will travel to Paris from countries neighbouring France as well as the United States, Canada and India.

What has the Sikhs agitated is a new legislation education minister Luc Ferry is expected to introduce in the French parliament early February. The new law was decided upon after the Stasi Commission on *Laïcité*, or secularism, recom-

mended to President Jacques Chirac that ostentatious display of religious symbols at public places, especially public schools, be banned. The proscribed symbols include scarves worn by Muslim women, large crosses and kippas, or Jewish caps. And though no one has said it explicitly (largely because the Sikhs number an invisible 15,000 in France), it's presumed the Sikh turban is as much an ostentatious symbol as, say, the scarf Muslim women wear.

Once the proposed legislation is adopted—and it should, considering the overwhelming support it enjoys among different political parties—the Sikhs fear the choice before their children would be a cruel one: give up the turban or don't attend public schools. For the devout, not wearing the turban is a transgression of their faith. The Sikhs say both the Stasi Commission and the government ignored their religious

sensibilities. As Chain Singh, president of the Bobigny Gurudwara, says, "The commission invited representatives of all major religions, including Buddhists and Hindus. But neither the commission nor government officials consulted us on a law that will impact the Sikhs the hardest."

The law banning religious symbols is expected to be implemented from September, the start of a new academic year. But the Sikhs are already feeling the pinch. Take Karamvir Singh, 19, who finished school and decided to enrol for a professional course in commercial sales. He says, "I passed the entrance test of a professional institute. But the principal summoned me and said I could join the institute only if I agreed not to attend classes with a turban. I refused." He knocked on the doors of four other institutes and encountered the same precondition: cast aside the turban or stay away.

Karamvir is willing to fight it out. He says, "As a French citizen I have the same rights to education as anyone else here. I refuse to leave the country or accept any infringement of my basic rights." Private school isn't a option for most Sikhs. As Manprit Singh, 19, explains, "We are not so rich that our parents can afford to send us to private schools, nor can we go to another country. We will have no option but to discontinue studies." Some 100 Sikh schoolchildren in Paris are in the same quandary. For Vikramjit Singh, 14, the choice is clear: "If I have to choose between my studies and my turban, I will keep the turban. If I give up my education, it will affect my material life. But if I have to give up the turban, I risk compromising my spiritual life."

The Sikhs are preparing for a long hard battle. Letters have been sent to Chirac and other French leaders seeking meetings to explain why wearing the turban is an integral part of their religion and identity. French historian Odon Vallet agrees, "The turban is absolutely essen-

tial for the Sikhs, and they have already won their right to wear it as part of police or army uniform in several countries. We have to exempt them from the proposed law." And, should it be added, from France's extreme passion for demonstrable secularism. ■

RANVIR NAYAR IN PARIS

"SIKHS have won the right to wear the turban in many other countries. We have to exempt them," says French historian Odon Vallet.