

# A Sikh in Greece

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## Preface

This we believe, is an inspiring story. Every time we read it, we get new emotions. I have read it once, twice, thrice, perhaps, even more times. This true story motivates the reader to be a true Sikh. It seems as fresh today as it was thirty years ago.

Dr. Brij Pal Singh is one of the five Asians who was awarded a doctoral study scholarship by Government of Greece in 1976-77. He was in Athens from 1977 to 1980.

Dr. Brij Pal Singh worked as Professor of Economics from 1984 to 1996 at Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie that trains top administrators of Government of India.

BookPalz is an innovative, non-profit venture to spread the universal

message of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. We are publishing this story with the hope that it will inculcate the much-needed devotion and zeal amongst Sikh youth to live the Sikh way, which is the best that one can get in this life.

Thanks to our Guru, we are Sikhs. Let His blessings and benedictions be showered upon all. I pray that no one is left with an imperfect Sikh presentation.

This liny booklet will also enrich the English vocabulary and chiesel the expression of thoughts. Hene some words are being published is bold letters for the benefit of students.

I, also, sincerely appreciate the efforts of S. Jaswinder Singh Khalsa, Manchester, U.K. and Sukrit Trust for taking this message to Sikh youth across the globe.

Captain Yashpal Singh  
Merchant Navy  
Honorary Director, BookPalz

## A SIKH IN GREECE

“Are you from Sudan?” asks the conductor of the tram (or trolley as the Greeks call it) as I sit down in a seat next to him.

I say 'no'. He suggests 'Somalia'. I repeat 'no'.

Both of us are amused and to enjoy the fun, I refuse to tell him my country until he names half a dozen lesser known countries from Arabia and Africa. He smiles in defeat. As I utter the word 'India', he gives out a big breath, 'Ah'. He had least expected such a well-known country.

Then he turns his head immediately to his job of issuing tickets. At the next respite, he beckons me with his friendly gesture and asks, 'You are Buddhist?'

My 'no' makes him curious and he suggests such names as Brahmanism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Judaism until his glossary of world religions is exhausted.

He gasps his defeat and his eyes open wide with astonishment when I tell him, "I am a Sikh".

No, he has never heard the word. He has never read about it. He has never met a Sikh. And then I am compelled to explain what Sikhism is and what it stands for, to a small group who has gathered around us by now. All what I said was Greek to them, in Greece!

Such incidents occur frequently as I walk in the busy avenues, visit offices, libraries or even the crowded departmental stores in the course of my

ordinary business of life. I have been in Athens for the last eleven months or so, on a Greek government scholarship for doctoral research. My topic of research is 'Tourism and Greek Balance of Payments'. I have to visit libraries and offices to collect data and information.

My professors, two specimens of the finest among Greeks, had told me, rather warned me, that to collect statistics in this field would be the most difficult task in Greece, not only because of the language problem but also because research traditions of ancient Greece are not somehow grounded in the grassroots of modern public and private offices. It was indeed a pleasant surprise that my exterior Sikh form turned out to be my greatest asset.

The moment I enter any office, the

receptionists noticing my turban and beard seem interested in me. It is easy to get to the person concerned. Here again I am asked first of all, to explain my religion, my religious beliefs, the state of politics and economy in India and so on. The discussion makes the person friendly and my formal work proceeds more smoothly.

Thirst for knowledge is an age-old tradition with the Greek people. The distance of India from Greece running into thousands of miles and its ancient culture and civilization lend more charm. My religion and its form prompts them to know more.

Even otherwise, Greece is a fairly good exception to the whole of Europe. Here a foreigner feels at home. Racial feelings are non-existent. Africans mix up freely

with the local population.

Greeks take the initiative in talking to foreigners. And when a Sikh presents himself as a Sikh, they show unusual interest. A Sikh is a foreigner beyond doubt; indeed he is a hundred percent foreigner.

Fortunately or unfortunately, it seems, I am the only Sikh living in Athens; may be in Greece. Athens is the birth-place of democracy and European civilization. But modern Athens is a highly urbanized city like any other European capital. In some respects it is unique. Almost 25-30 percent of the total population of Greece lives in Greater Athens alone. Millions of tourists visit this country every year and almost all of them come to Athens.



Any foreigner is absorbed in this vast ocean of humanity, but not a Sikh. Thanks to our Gurus, he is spotted at once. And he is rather more welcome.

Greek economy is heavily dependent on tourist receipts and the Greeks realize it quite well. The government has a well-executed tourist policy. Greeks are very hospitable and extrovert people. A Sikh should have an easy time maintaining his religion. Why am I the only Sikh seen here, I ponder?

After a stay of about eleven months, I have come to know that there are hundreds of my brethren here but they are all 'monas' or 'shaven'. I have met dozens of them by now. To be true, they have met me; invariably they call me from a little distance in sweet Punjabi

tone, "Sat Sri Akal Ji." I am so pleased. But it is distressing to note that not one of them has kept his form.

I always ask them, "why so? Do they face any problem from the government, industry or people if they keep unshorn hair?"

No, surely, there is no such problem and they do agree with me on that. They are, however, mostly illegal entrants to this country and almost all of them are illegal residents. They want to conceal their identity.

Most of them come here attracted by higher wages and search for a better life. Unscrupulous travel agents first lure them and then dump them here. Most of them work on ships as unskilled crewmen. Because of inflation, scarcity

of this type of labour and the psychological temperament of all of us to convert all money in our currency, they feel happy to find such work on ships.

Visa and resident permits are not required on high seas. They can save some money and send home as well. So the parents are made to believe that they are earning 'decent' salaries and living in 'phoren lands'. Shipping companies welcome the cheap labour supplied by India and Pakistan so long as they do not create problems of law and order.

Everything seems to be in the knowledge of the government here as well. They simply tolerate it in their own economic interest. The fair name of my country is blemished.

The name of my religion is not, because they dare not keep their religion. They dare not declare who they are. They are not Sikhs. If they want to indulge in misdeeds they have to conceal it. In order to conceal, they forsake the religion which is so open, so conspicuous that always one has to have an insignia, something like a flag on the very face and the head.

At first I felt sorry that these brethren of mine, who were my own brothers born of one father - Guru Gobind Singh, have forsaken this religion. But why do I feel that way? I reasoned with myself; because the number of Sikhs has been reduced by some few hundreds or even thousands?

Ah! Our great Guru knew how an ordinary Sikh would feel about it. So he

made the exterior form compulsory, which only a person with very deep conviction to the content of this great religion could adopt and maintain. Any one with a superficial belief in the basic tenets of Sikhism would be the first to question the need, relevance and significance of his unique Sikh face.

To the modern man whose philosophy of life is to lead a comfortable and luxurious life, this form would seem to be too difficult, almost an uneasy burden.

On the other hand, one who is fired with Truth, one who has realized the meaning of life, one who wants to live a good, dutiful and purposeful life, beyond the worldly goods and commodities and one who seeks to live

as the Gurus ordained us to live, for that person this exterior form of Sikhism is the prime content of this great religion.

Indeed the more one reflects, the more one realizes that this form is actually, truly and basically a part of the content of the Sikh way of life.

Every Sikh must ask himself or herself these questions. Have I conquered my ego (*haumai*) if I want to appear as most others are according to the contemporary concept of beauty, smartness and easy life?

Are these concepts not relative to time, place and even the current economic power of an alien culture? Have I understood the concept of God's Will ('*Hukam*'), if I object to one part (the so-called exterior aspect) of Sikhism but

give lip-sympathy to the other?

Those who do not believe in the basics of Sikhism but keep its form just by tradition or only at the behest of their social group, are more likely to slide downside when they want to lead the loose life of crime, illegal existence, extramarital sex and alcohol abuse.

They may appear to be 'enjoying' the 'pleasure' for some moments. I do not know, but I do know, and most of them agree with me voluntarily, that they have permanently ruined their health and happiness. Spiritual bliss is beyond their imagination and reach.

In order to be a true Sikh you have to be a good citizen. Which country would object to have such residents? A Sikh as a Sikh is more welcome

anywhere and perhaps lives happier in foreign countries.

This is not to say that one does not face 'problems.' There are two sides to the question. We have to define the word 'problem' first. If others look at me with curiosity and a question-mark, is it a problem? I can address and face such a situation in two ways. One is to feel embarrassed and depressed. Then it is a problem. The other way is to take these looks as an opportunity for self-expression and a step towards social introduction. Then, the same strange looks are not a problem but an asset!

'Problem' after all, is my reaction towards events, more so my psychological fear. At least I have never felt this sort of problem or fear. I often wave my hand in a friendly gesture to



curious eyes and get in return beaming smiles and hands waving back from little children, young boys and old people alike.

Of course, in the course of an actual discussion, one has to be bold, forthright and without any sense of inferiority. A lady asked me at a shop, "Why do you keep hair? It must be too hot with them during summer, especially in India."

I said, "Why don't you replace your skirt with mini-shorts as young girls do in America? Athens is surely hotter than New York!" She thought for a few moments and then said "Why should I remove my skirt? It is a part of my dress. And it is my national custom. And I do not feel as 'hot' as Americans do".

Calmly, I replied, "My dear sister, if you have the rightful claim to keep a part of your dress, have I not to keep a part of my being? And I do not keep hair, they are there! Just as my eyes and nose. If you do not feel 'too hot' to cast off a part of your traditional dress, why should you expect me to feel "too hot" to remove a part of my body merely because others have removed this part for fashion or convenience or may be without any understanding.

It is an exclusive outer sign of my religion. In case you have the time and patience to study, you shall know that unshorn hair is much more than a dress or a symbol."

The other aspect of the 'problem' is the practical difficulty of finding a job or adjusting to the environment of law and

common regulations in a land where ignorance may be on the other side. This is a situation where perseverance is tested. But I faithfully believe that after the initial testing period, the Guru with his divine grace sees us through.

God save me from ego, but I did have one such experience. With an assured four year scholarship I did not have to face the problem of finding a job, but the keeping of my '*kirpan*' in Athens was legally objectionable. I was warned about it by some Greek friends here within a few days of my arrival.

My people at home in Punjab, to my great dismay suggested that I need not be 'very rigid' and 'fanatic' about it. I asked the Indian counsellor (who happened to be a Greek) to give me a certificate that '*kirpan*' is a necessary

symbol of my religion. He neither knew about it nor did he understand. He tried to argue a little by saying what would it matter if I did not keep it.

It took me less than two minutes to make him act. I said that the law allows freedom to adopt and practice the religion of one's choice. Nobody and no law have the power to question the necessity of the beliefs of another religion.

He forwarded my application to the Indian Embassy at Belgrade wherefrom by the grace of God a certificate did arrive in due course. Then I met the chief of the Athens police service after one of my professors had helpfully introduced me to him. The police chief said that whatever the particular case, the law here would not allow one to go

about with the 'Gatra' and 'Kirpan'.

My face conveyed my feelings. He added, "What would you do now?"

I had, in fact, already made up my mind and I had conveyed to people at home as well. I promptly said, "I shall take the first plane available to go home." He was visibly surprised. He tried to dissuade me, "Do you know that you are one of the five persons selected for this international scholarship meant for all Asian countries; are you refusing the scholarship?"

I replied a little more firmly, "I am rejecting the scholarship as well as the country."

He thought for a few seconds. Then there were telephonic consultations

with some other authorities.

He smiled at last. "We do not want to lose a research scholar, especially one like you. You will continue to have your way and I have taken personal responsibility against any misuse of your weapon."

Feeling greatly relieved, I thanked him profusely. Then I showed him my '*Kara*' and explained that with a '*Kara*' on my wrist, I am already under the love bond of my Guru and cannot misuse my weapon, body or mind.

He felt pleased. The man promised to be my friend during the course of my stay.

A pain lurks within me. Why do I have to be treated as an exception? It reminds me of a similar incident in the Rajasthan

State Assembly where I was disallowed to sit in the visitors gallery because of my '*Kirpan*', even though I was a gazetted officer of the same state government. Later at the personal discretion of the Speaker I was admitted as an 'exception'.

I reflect now and believe that one becomes an 'exception' and a difficult case, because most of the times, so many of us bend too easily for personal convenience.

Sometimes there are pleasant surprises. I was to go through a medical examination in a state hospital. As I entered the room the doctor-on-duty shot at me a question,

"Are you a Sikh?"

He had recently attended an international conference in India and visited Sri Harimandir Sahib (Golden Temple) at Amritsar, where Sikhism was explained to him. He would not believe me until he had physically seen and counted himself all my five '*Kakkars*'. He then showed the same to a group of doctors and explained to them their symbolic value.

The young here, as elsewhere, are not religious minded. For them socialism seems to be the future hope of a just society. I live in a hostel with these young people. My daily prayers and reading from Sri Guru Granth Sahib (Sehaj Paath) within the hostel room (I had taken care in India that my Guru accompanies me) and some of my ideas on national economic organization perplexes them.



When I explain at length, they agree that Sikhism is a "*Kaliethriskeia*" - a good religion.

A brother-like Muslim friend of mine introduced me once to another person, saying "for my purposes he is a Muslim." A staunch orthodox Christian friend, who is going to become a priest in a couple of months, introduced my religion to another priest as, "it is very similar, indeed very near to our own religion". Sikhism is now known all around where I live.

I have not yet been to any other European country. My teacher in a college at Chandigarh, where I helped him in translating '*Pinnocchio*' into Punjabi had then fired my imagination to go to Italy. My Guru's grace was with me in Greece. May be Greece is an

exception. I do not know. I have my wishes and plans to visit some East European countries. These are the countries where Sikhs are rarely known or seen. Ah! the Grace of God is every where, even where He is not believed!

I have realized the value of Sikhism, its form and content, often with tears flowing through my eyes to my beard. Something constantly pricks me. I realize my feelings too well. Let me express it in a few words of prayer,

"Guru Ji,  
make me really live  
the life of a true Sikh  
till my last breath.  
Let me be that good at least  
Which others think me to be."