

Free speech & call for Sikh homeland

Iqbal Sidhu

June 9, 2019

A typical gurdwara in Canada is a syncretic marvel. Metaphorically, it takes the Canadian ideal of free speech and incorporates it with devotion, giving an almost unprecedented leadership to the community. Architecturally, its sloping wooden roof juts out in congruity with a distinctive Sikh dome, majestically overlooking a typical Canadian parking lot, sprawling adjacent to a raised platform on which stands the Nishan Sahib. To anyone unfamiliar yet, it may only look like an enormous house from outside with an unconventional roof and an unusually tall flagpole, but once inside, no one can mistake the atmosphere for anywhere but that of a gurdwara — an atmosphere which is same all around the world.

But if one were to look more closely, there is indeed one peculiarity present in these houses of worship which is almost absent in them in India: the posters decrying Operation Bluestar. The first six days of June are sensitive to Sikhs everywhere irrespective of their political sympathies, and going by the scale of commemoration, it would seem as if this sensitivity is felt more by Sikh Canadians than their cousins in India.

It's not uncommon to find slogans, or even maps alluding to a Sikh homeland adorning the walls of congressional and langar halls of major gurdwaras in Canada. This paraphernalia hangs innocuously for the most part, only serving as a reminder of the freedom of speech and thought in Canada. The sloganeers belonging to the Khalistan school of political philosophy — who themselves are only a tiny majority among the Sikh population here — remain busy with their personal businesses to be even of the slightest harm to the Indian state, but the Indian state has found in them a bugbear for scaremongering and vote-engineering; a part which these sloganeers are unwittingly happy to play.

As per Cato Institute's 2018 Human Freedom Index for 162 countries, Canada is the fifth freest country in the world. India ranks 110th in the same report. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the protesters in Canada are outspoken about their grievances while voices in India remain mum, lest they be branded enemies of the state and consequently, its people. "I came to Canada as an asylum seeker from India during the late 80s. There was a massive crackdown on Sikhs and I fled, and this country has allowed to me live with dignity and without fear," says Gurbaksh Singh of Montreal. Now in his retirement years, he is a regular presence at the gurdwara. "If Indians could demand independence from the British, shouldn't we get the same right?" he sternly replies when asked about the posters and maps.

Singh has his grievances with the Indian state, and if his story is to be believed, he is justified in holding them. He is not alone, there are thousands like him who feel wronged in some way: economically, socially, culturally, and even statistically by India and they sporadically choose to channel their disillusionment by burning flags and carrying out 'freedom marches'. Sikh

Canadians demand that their government officially recognise their persecution and killing in India during the 1980s as genocide, but so far they have been unsuccessful.

As harangues over 'self-rule' laced with half-baked political theories and preposterous analogies go on as testaments to Canada's ideal of free speech, the denouncements over genuine issues of state tyranny and repression should not be glossed over. Sikhs have, indeed, paid heavy price throughout history for their existence but as anyone in the world would happily concur: Freedom is the most basic of rights.