

Sikh Schools - the debate continues

On 10th April we published a blog by John Hunt entitled ['Why so little openness in the establishment of these Sikh schools'](#)

We subsequently received the following complaint from the Network of Sikh Organisations.

We were dismayed and disappointed having read your article 'Why so little openness in the establishment of these Sikh schools' published online on the National Secular Societies website on the 10th of April.

You discuss two proposed Sikh Schools and question recruitment drives for them. We see no issues with raising important questions, but given your criticism, can you highlight an example demonstrating how the process should best work? John Hunt then inexplicably moves to discuss a report "into the causes" of the 2001 race riots commissioned by David Blunkett, somehow weaving this disconnect into a flawed argument.

I wonder if John Hunt is aware of Sikhism view on other faiths and beliefs? Guru Nanak the founder of the faith declared that all religions are paths to the same goal. He declared God is not interested in our various labels, be you Hindu or Muslim, but how we treat others. The Guru's teachings explicitly taught 'recognize the human race as one.' Thereby promoting equality amongst all citizens irrespective of race, religion, denomination or caste. What is wrong with children in schools learning we are all equal?

It's understandable if your complaint focuses on faith-based schools that promote the denigration of others, using language such as "heathen" or "infidel", but this is alien to Sikhism.

It's both saddening and disappointing that the smear of Sikhs schools evolves into impugning Sikh teachings. Can we ask which extracts from Sikhs in Britain: the making of a community, 2006. Gurharpal Singh & Darshan Singh Tatla 'paints an extremely damaging picture of Sikh ethos?'

On the question of community cohesion and how we 'avert further segregation and violence' perhaps the NSS should actively support the proposals for Sikhs Schools in Hounslow, Stoke Poges and Leeds? Maybe Sikh children and others may benefit in emulating elders who protected places of worship other than their own, during the London riots. Is it really a bad thing that children in schools are taught we are all part of one big family and all faiths should be equally respected?

Please can you publish a suitable correction with prominence on your website.

Yours sincerely,

Hardeep Singh, Press Secretary
Network of Sikh Organisations

We asked John Hunt to respond to this, and this is what he wrote:

The [Network of Sikh Organisations](#) (NSO) response to [my article of 10th April](#) begins by asking whether I can "*highlight an example demonstrating how the process should best work*". I assume this means the process of opening a school: specifically a school with a "religious ethos". Sadly I cannot, as the proposed "Sikh-ethos" school (planned to open this September at a still secret location somewhere in Hounslow, west London) is the first example I have encountered.

The "public consultation" on the Hounslow school has been a sham: as I emailed Hounslow Civic Centre on 16th January, and the [Nishkam Trust](#) on 1st March. Subsequent events confirm this as a complete and utter sham: one public meeting, attended, I estimated, by at most a dozen non-Sikh members of the public. Questions there were not answered but "fielded". Local press and Hounslow Civic Centre have ignored this. The [Nishkam Trust](#) responded to emailed questions with more fielding, denial, and blatant lies. [Another Sikh "trust"](#) also plans to open a school this September, in Stoke Poges, near Slough, (as the NSS [reported in February](#)): but it was manifestly clear from [the parish council's website](#) and from speaking to two representatives that the process there is far from being considered a success. Indeed, as the home page of the trust's website has a glaring spelling mistake in large, bold, red text, it appears that the values it advocates include neither spelling nor checking. I feel this is somewhat damning for a would-be school.



The NSO are next mystified that I mentioned David Blunkett. Blunkett's name is, I imagine, more familiar to the general public than Ted Cantle's. Prof. Cantle's continuing work on community cohesion warns of the severe dangers of religious segregation: including segregating children in religious schools. So why are the NSO mystified, accusing me of "*weaving this disconnect into a flawed argument*"? Have they genuinely totally failed to understand my concerns? Or are they just desperately seeking to deflect them?

The NSO then ask whether I am "*aware of Sikhism view on other faiths and beliefs*" [sic]. As Nishkam's "Brochure" mentioned "*Respect and revere all faiths*", I sought clarification of this very point amongst the questions I put to the [Nishkam Trust](#) on 1st March. This was their reply. -- "*The Trust does not define the constitution of faiths, however does teach common values; respect is not limited, and includes those of religious beliefs and those of none.*"

The NSO continue. -- "*Thereby promoting equality amongst all citizens irrespective of race, religion, denomination or caste. What is wrong with children in schools*

learning we are all equal?" Nothing whatsoever. The NSS [Charter](#) advocates "**one law for all and its application is not hindered or replaced by religious codes or processes**". I specifically asked Nishkam about discrimination on **caste**, (currently highly topical, as last week the Commons refused to ban caste discrimination, though this week the Lords have [reinstated the amendment](#)), **sex** (including aborting female foetuses –[Telegraph](#) and [Mail](#)– "[most marked among the Sikh and Muslim population rather than among Hindus](#)"), and **sexual orientation**. Nishkam replied, (untruthfully and evasively): "*The examples given are not related to the Sikh faith. The faith encompasses diversity and respect for all, and does not condone violence or hatred*". My local college had to call police because of violence between students and Sikh gangs travelling from Slough explicitly seeking confrontation. National press have reported considerable aggression in recent years within the Sikh community, (e.g. [violence stopped play Behzti](#), [community centre "trashed" in Dudley](#), and [opposition to mixed marriages](#)). The book I mentioned (*Sikhs in Britain: the making of a community* by Prof. Gurharpal Singh and Dr. Darshan Singh Tatla) adds a wealth of truly horrifying examples. It thus appears that Sikhism in practice remains far removed from the ideals of the inventor, Guru Nanak.

Paragraph 4 of the NSO reply introduces the words "heathen" and "infidel". If this is an attempt to win sympathy by invoking outrage at my "intemperate" views, readers will find neither word in my original article. The reply then (slightly) misquotes me, asking which extracts from *Sikhs in Britain* "paints an extremely damaging picture of Sikh ethos". **Examples below.**

I am dumbfounded by the NSO suggestion that "*the NSS should actively support the proposals for Sikhs [sic] Schools in Hounslow, Stoke Poges and Leeds*". Is this gall and effrontery? Or have they totally failed to understand not only my concerns, but the advice of Prof. Cattle as well? What world do they inhabit? I fear it is a highly segregated one, where "community cohesion" is interpreted as cohesion to their own, insular, faith community. And I continue to fear that neither they nor the rest of UK society will benefit if these "religious ethos" schools are inflicted upon us. Quite the reverse.

Extracts (as requested by NSO) from chapters 1 and 2 of *Sikhs in Britain*.

- p.2: "in the 1980s and 1990s ... infamously associated with terrorism throughout the globe";
- p.2: "as the furore over the play *Behzti* in December 2004 illustrated, British Sikhs are not reluctant forcibly to assert their right to defend religious sensibilities in a secular liberal democracy";
- p.2: "Localities in west London and the West Midlands ... have been transformed into 'Little Punjabs' "
- p.2: "Sikh political organisations have perfected single-issue politics."
- p.3: "In just over sixty years the British Sikh community has grown from fewer than 2,000 to 336,000."

- p.4: "in the 1980s and 1990s, to a bloody campaign for an independent Sikh state of Khalistan. The vexed relationship between British Sikhs and India is one of the key factors in understanding the community's development."
- p.6: "The Sikhs ... can always ... negotiate an opt-out from general rule making."
- p.6: "While the Sikh community appears to be exhibiting trends similar to broader British society --high divorce rates, family breakdowns, lone-parenthood-- its responses to these issues highlight the underlying tension ... [which] has come to the fore in a number of highly publicised cases and also appears to be far more pervasive than has been recognised."
- p.7: "the failure of efforts to institutionalise the teaching of Punjabi and the broader use of the mother tongue in the British Sikh media".
- p.9: "For most Sikhs, however, Punjab remains the homeland"
- p.13: "the execution of Guru Arjan in 1606 ... marked the beginnings of the transformation of Sikhism from pacifist reformers to a militant creed."
- p.15: "the position of the Singhs, who led the Khalsa army, was strengthened at the expense of the non-Singh Sikhs"
- p.15: "a wide gulf separated the Khalsa nobility and the ordinary Sikhs"
- pp.17-19: Distinction between *amrit-dhari Khalsa* (orthodox minority, wear all five K's; hold important positions; *kesh-dhari Khalsa* (majority, unshorn hair, committed to only some of the K's); *mona-Singhs*, (increasing minority, clean-shaven); non-Singh Sikhs (*sahaj-dharis*, declining minority -- some assimilating with Hindus, others "encourag[ing] the proliferation of Sikh heterodoxy", presumably meaning further Sikh sects).
- p.24: 1984 -- Indian Army evicted Sikh militants from Golden Temple: "resulted in the deaths of 1,000 security personnel and Sikh militants"
- p.24: "Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was killed by her Sikh bodyguards ... Between 1984 and 1993, almost 30,000 people were killed in Punjab as a result of militant violence and counter-insurgency operations ... Punjab became an 'area of darkness' where people lived in constant fear of violence by Sikh militants and the security forces. By the end of 1993 the army's use of overwhelming force, including nearly 250,000 military and paramilitary personnel, succeeded in eliminating most of the militant groups operating in Punjab."
- p.26: "Sikh values with their special emphasis on equality, community and service have always nestled uncomfortably within broader Punjabi values. Ethnicity and cultural tradition have often overshadowed them"

- p.27: "Caste ... cuts across all Sikh formations as an ineradicable distinction, whether in India or overseas ... [and] provides the justification for a social hierarchy that is sustained by endogamy."
- p.27: "Most British Sikhs, whether they arrived via East Africa or other regions such as the Far East, can trace their origins to the ancestral family village. ... the social structure of Punjab was determined by access to landholding ... reinforced by caste."
- pp.27-28: "Punjabi villages in the mid-twentieth century --when the mass migration to Britain began-- were organised along the lines of caste hierarchy. ... At the bottom ... were the outcastes ... [who] lived in segregated areas of the village and ... were most prone to economic, political and sexual exploitation by the Jat [land-owning farmer] Sikhs."
- p.29: "a family's esteem was measured by its prestige and honour (*izzat*) and capacity to limit dishonour (*behzti*). Families acquired high social status through wealth, principally landholdings, which determined their ability to forge future marital alliances for their children. Fear or prospects of loss of honour (*behzti*) ... was a powerful factor driving Sikh peasants ... overseas."
- pp.29-30: "A family's social standing was determined by its ability to maintain its *izzat*, a concept intimately bound up with ... women's purity ... a moral code liable to visit revenge ... women's chastity was central to *izzat* ... In a strictly patriarchal society women's place was defined primarily within the home"
- pp.30-31: "Factions were so systemic that the history of Sikh institutions is probably best understood as the history of internecine factional conflict. ... Factionalism therefore, regardless of caste background, is endemic in Sikh organisation ... [and] has neither diminished nor lost its significance after several generations of British Sikh society"
- p.31: "The 'remembered' village of British Sikh migrants was to exercise a powerful hold over the imagination of subsequent Sikh generations in Britain"
- pp.34-35: "in the 1950s when ... India ... limit[ed] the issue of passports, many Sikhs crossed the border and secured passports from Pakistan with Islamic names."
- pp.37-39: "most of the migration to Britain has taken place from ... the Doaba region ... the most sophisticated migration industry in India, if not the whole of Asia. ... it has now blossomed into a multi-billion-dollar enterprise that is singularly responsible for creating the current size of the Sikh diaspora. The Doaba has more travel agents per square mile than any other region in the world ... [and has developed] complex networks of people-trafficking that extend to all regions of the globe. There is, indeed, nowhere in the world where the travel agents of Jalandhar [in Doaba] cannot deliver a migrant: the only constraint is the ability of the would-be migrant to raise the requisite funding. ... A recent visit to travel agents in Jalandhar highlighted the easy access a potential migrant has to details of the immigration and welfare policies of most Western states. ... In view of further plans to expand cheap airline travel to Punjab by most

Western airliners [sic], the size of this industry is likely to increase substantially in the near future."

pp.39-40: "Several villages, known as *barapinds* (large villages), have been transplanted overseas *en bloc*. ... These were central to the construction of many overseas Sikh communities as waves of chain migration followed the early settlers: they created bridgeheads for future arrivals, as well as staging posts for further movement and dispersal. Gravesend has been noted as a leading UK example of a bridgehead ... Similar examples can be found in many other British Sikh localities ... such as Leicester, Derby, Coventry, Leamington Spa, Smethwick, Bedford, Walsall, Glasgow, East Ham and Erith. Big-village chain migration has been so successful that today many of these villages [in the Punjab] are populated only by the elderly or migrant labourers from other states of India."

p.40: "the myriad factional disputes that bedevil Sikh organisations and that often have their roots in the ancestral village."

p.41: "the principal importance of Punjabi Dalit [untouchable] migration to Britain was that it ... provided a caste-based frame of reference ... The fraught caste relations of the Punjabi village were thus transferred to the British foundry, the pub and even the school playground. In the development of British Sikh society over the decades these tensions were to play a not inconsiderable part in the struggle for the control of Sikh institutions such as gurdwaras, trade unions and political parties."