

SIKH ADVISORY BOARD

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Guideline for visiting *Kirtani Jathas* and other Sikh Preachers

The Background

1. It is a practice for Sikh Gurdwara Managements, in Singapore, to bring in Sikh Kirtani Jathas (groups singing hymns) and Preachers, from India and other parts of the world, for special religious occasions, at different times of the year.
2. The paper highlights the various policy measures the Singapore Government has instituted to maintain and enhance religious and racial harmony; and proposes a framework for the leaders of the Sikh Gurdwaras for identifying and managing overseas *Jathas* and Sikh preachers so that Singapore's national policy, on racial and religious harmony continues to be supported by the Sikh community.

Steps taken by the Government to Maintain Racial and Religious Harmony in Singapore

3. Singapore Government's stand on religion and race, since independence in 1965, is based on a secular national policy of multiracialism, which is based on meritocracy. However the policy on race and religions has been heavily influenced by various domestic and international developments.
4. In the context of racial harmony and developing greater social cohesion, the government has, over the years, instituted the following:
 - (a) Setting up the *Presidential Council of Minority Rights* in 1970¹;
 - (b) Passing of the *Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act*, by the Parliament, in 1990² and the appointment of the *Presidential Council for Religious Harmony (PCRH)* in 1992; and

¹ The setting up of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights (1970), was one of the numerous policy measures taken by the Government of newly independent Singapore to safeguard minority rights, and against the backdrop of racial riots of 1966 and 1969, to ensure that the nation was spared the repetition of such a painful and tragic trauma in future.

(c) Setting up of the *National Steering Committee on Inter Racial Confidence Circles* (presently called the National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony)³.

5. The above demonstrates how the Singapore Government has over the decades worked diligently with a high level of vigilance to protect and promote religious harmony in the country.

The Contribution of the Sikh Community to the national Policy on Religious Harmony

6. The Sikh Community, over the decades, has actively supported the government's policy to promote religious harmony. The best example of this was during the debate, amongst the various religious groups, about the desirability of passing law in Parliament, to protect the religious harmony in the country. The Sikh Community leadership staunchly supported the Government's stand to promote and protect the religious harmony in Singapore. The stand was in line with the Sikh philosophy of "Sarbat Da Bhalla" (for the betterment of all) and every one being truthful to their respective faith.
7. In view of the regard the government has for the Sikh religion, it regularly seeks the views of the Sikh Advisory Board (SAB) through the various national bodies (mentioned in paragraph 6), set up to protect and promote religious and racial harmony in the country.

The Need to Support the National Policy on Religious and Racial Harmony

8. In view of the fundamental importance of religious and racial harmony, our community needs to support the national policy related to this.
9. One of the important ways in which we can do this is to adhere to a set of common guidelines outlined below (paragraphs 12 – 17), when inviting overseas Kirtni Jathas and the Sikh preachers.⁴

² The 1980s saw a resurgence of religious-based conflicts in some countries in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. There was evidence from the Department of Internal Security that religious harmony in Singapore was being affected by religious conflicts outside the country. This led the Government to take a major decision to enact a law to safeguard religious harmony in Singapore by protecting it particularly from outside influences and events.

³ This resulted from the rise of international terrorism following, in 2001, of the bombing of the World Trade Centre, in New York, USA. In Singapore the security agencies uncovered a terrorist plot, in December 2001, to destabilize Singapore by a local group called the Jemaah Islamiyah.

⁴ The guidelines build on existing practices which were discussed and approved at SAB meeting on 4 July 2018.

Points to bear in mind when identifying/ inviting overseas Sikh Jathas and Preachers

10. In inviting any overseas Jatha, Heads of Sikh religious Institutions need to ensure, such groups or individuals:
 - (a) Carry out their devotional singing (kirtan) or preaching based on the teachings of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib and the Sikh Rehat Maryada, from the Akaal Takhat;
 - (b) Are not affiliated with any controversial Dera or Sect;
 - (c) Are not actively involved in any political activity in their country of origin;
 - (d) Do not have a record of being involved in any controversial religious activity related to Sikhism and or other religions; and
 - (e) Have not been convicted in any court of law.

Pre-Invitation/Confirmation Checks

11. It is important to carry out independent verification of the Invitees' suitability, bearing in mind the points listed at paragraph 12.

Guideline and Undertaking for the Visiting Sikh *Jathas* and Preachers

12. A formal structured briefing of the visiting *Jatha*, or preacher, should be carried out, upon arrival, as part of their induction, which will explain the Do's and Don'ts during the visit and programmes in Singapore.
13. The Member of the Jatha and Preachers should also be asked sign an Undertaking not to, through their conduct or speeches/sermon, indulge in using words or action which may affect the reputation of the hosting institution in particular, and the Sikh Community of Singapore in General.
14. A proposed sample of undertaking is provided at Annex A.

Monitoring of the Programmes/Performances and Speeches

15. A member or members of the institution's Management Committee may be assigned to monitor and review the contents of the programme of invitees in the context of our national policy.

Conclusion

16. The above suggestions are only a broad framework. Gurdwaras/ Institutions may use their discretion to put in place additional measures to ensure that the visiting Jatha or

Preacher keeps within the parameters of our national policy on racial and religious harmony.