

**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SIKH ADVISORY BOARD
FOR THE PERIOD NOVEMBER 2010 – OCTOBER 2011**

1. Appointment of Board Members

- 1.1 The composition of the Sikh Advisory Board (“the Board”) remained unchanged over the previous year. The following members were appointed to the Board by the Minister for Community Development, Youth & Sports (“MCYS”) for the period from November 2008 to October 2011.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Institution</u>
Mr Amarjit Singh	Government Representative
Mr Darshan Singh Bajaj	Sri Guru Nanak Sat Sang Sabha
Mr Habhajan Singh	Government Representative
Mr Harbhajan Singh	Sri Guru Nanak Sat Sang Sabha
Mr Harjit Singh	Pardesi Khalsa Dharmak Diwan
Mr Jodh Singh	Khalsa Jiwan Sudhar Sabha
Ms Narinder Kaur	Government Representative
Mr Pritpal Singh	Khalsa Dharmak Sabha
Mr Ranjit Singh	Sri Guru Singh Sabha
Mr Rashbar Singh	Gurdwara Sahib Yishun
Mr Santa Singh	Pardesi Khalsa Dharmak Diwan
Mr Sarban Singh	Central Sikh Gurdwara Board
Mr Sukhbir Singh	Sri Guru Singh Sabha
Mr Sukhbir Singh S/O SS	Khalsa Dharmak Sabha
Mr Surjit Singh	Government Representative

2. Meetings of the Board in 2011

- 2.1 The Board met quarterly as scheduled on 1 February 2011, 3 May 2011, 2 August 2011 and 2 November 2011.

3. Major Issues Addressed by the Board

3.1 Sikh Retreat – The Way Forward

- 3.1.1 A Sikh Retreat involving the heads of Sikh institutions, community leaders, professionals, youth and expatriates was planned and organised by the Board on Saturday, 22 January 2011 at the Holiday Inn City Centre, Singapore. Funding for the Retreat was provided by MCYS. The purpose of the Retreat was to surface issues of concern to the community, have members discuss the areas identified and collectively work out solutions or recommend specific projects that could be undertaken by the community.

- 3.1.2 Prior to the Retreat, the Board put out a call to the invited participants for discussion points. Issues highlighted were grouped under six areas and touched on the need to promote Sikhi and the Punjabi language, improving the academic and sporting excellence of Sikhs, extending a helping hand to the less fortunate, reaching out and engaging the youth, improving governance and management systems in Sikh institutions and establishing an Umbrella Body for the Sikh community.
- 3.1.3 The Retreat was facilitated by Prof Tan Tai Yong, Vice-Provost of the National University of Singapore. Prof Tan is a renowned researcher and writer on Sikhism and Sikhs in Singapore and has long familiarity and a relationship of trust and confidence with the community. The 64 participants engaged actively on the topics of their choice and made a number of very useful suggestions. Following the one day Retreat, the groups met separately to work out action plans and timelines for one or two projects each that could be implemented over the subsequent months. The projects identified for possible implementation were presented at an appreciation dinner at the Singapore Khalsa Association on 18 March 2011.
- 3.1.4 Participants felt that the organization of the Retreat was timely as it provided a platform for the exchange of ideas and views but more importantly, allowed them to discuss problems and co-create action plans on projects to help move the Sikh community forward.

3.2 The Prison Inmate's Issue

- 3.2.1 The Prisons Department's policy on Sikh inmates is that those who enter the prison with unshorn hair are allowed to keep their hair during their incarceration but those who came in shorn would not be allowed to keep their hair even though they may have had a change of heart. The Board and Heads of Sikh Institutions, on the other hand, felt strongly that it was in order for a shorn Sikh inmate to keep facial and head hair should he become motivated to do so. This is consistent with rehabilitation and religious study and counseling during internment. The Board on 17 December 2010 informed the Prisons Department of the Sikh community's aforesaid position on this matter.
- 3.2.2 On 22 March 2011, 9 members of the Board, together with MP Inderjit Singh, met with the Minister for Home Affairs, Mr K. Shanmugam, Senior MOS A/P Ho Peng Kee, MOS Mr Masagoes Zulkifli, Permanent Secretary Benny Lim and other senior officers of the Ministry to discuss this issue.
- 3.2.3 During the meeting, Minister Shanmugam explained that, by its very nature, the environment in the Prisons was unique and tough. It was focused on security and the need to maintain order and, in line with this consideration, the Prisons must treat and be seen to treat all inmates equally. He explained that exceptions were hard to make as all citizens should be treated even handedly. Where exceptions existed, they needed to be looked at carefully, but there were limits to which the exceptions could go to. The Minister went on to explain that the rule requiring inmates to cut their hair and shave applied to all other races and the Prison (as well

as the SAF) had not allowed any other races to keep their hair or beards while serving. The exception made to practicing Sikhs had always been explained by the government on historical grounds.

- 3.2.4 The Minister also explained that members of other religious groups had asked the Prisons for exemptions before and that these requests were turned down. For example, Muslims had asked Prisons for female Muslim prisoners to be allowed to wear the “tudong” (head scarf). In view of this, the Minister explained that it was difficult for the government to justify exempting Sikhs who had already cut their hair on admission to Prison to be exempted from the rules and regulations applying to all prisoners.
- 3.2.5 The Minister however assured the Sikh community that the Prisons Department would continue to fully facilitate religious counseling as well as the imparting of religious lessons to all Sikh inmates (whether practicing or otherwise) so that they could improve themselves spiritually as well as become more attuned with the tenets of Sikhism while serving their sentences.
- 3.2.6 The Board members highlighted to the Minister and officers present that the Sikh religion had an overarching religious requirement that its adherents keep unshorn hair and beards. It was also impressed on the Minister that the community, small as it was, was losing practicing members due to inter marriages, conversions etc. As such, Sikh institutions wanted to see and encourage efforts that would result in bringing back non-practicing Sikhs to the true path. Allowing non-practicing Sikhs to keep their hair and beards was therefore something that the Sikh institutions would welcome and encourage. Further, a policy of disallowing shaven Sikhs from keeping their hair and beards would be viewed very adversely by Sikhs in Singapore.
- 3.2.7 The Board also urged that, at the very least, non-practicing Sikh inmates serving long imprisonment terms be exempted from the policy and be given an opportunity to reform by keeping their hair and beards. The Minister, whilst appreciating all the views expressed remarked on the difficulty of changing the Prisons’ policy on this matter. Nevertheless, the Minister mentioned that a holistic review of the Prisons Department’s policy would be undertaken and that should there be no change in the Prisons Department’s policy, he would meet up with the leaders of the Sikh community in Singapore to personally explain the decision to them.
- 3.2.8 The Board also surfaced that allegations had been made from some quarters that the hair of some Sikh inmates had been forcefully cut by the Prisons Department. The Board requested the Prisons Department to seriously investigate these allegations and to report back. Investigations by the Prisons Department found these allegations to be untrue, and the Board accepted this conclusion.

3.3 Documentary on the Sikh Community’s Response to the 9/11 and 2001 JI Arrests

- 3.3.1 Ms Zixin of Channel News Asia contacted the Board on 4 August 2011 informing it of the Ministry of Home Affairs’ intention to produce a 1 hour documentary on the

community's response to 9/11 and the 2001 JI arrests. In particular, they wanted to learn about the Sikh community's involvement in promoting racial and religious harmony after 9/11.

3.3.2 The Board sought the views of the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board, Young Sikh Association (Singapore), Singapore Sikh Education Foundation and the Singapore Khalsa Association and on 29 August 2011 forwarded the Sikh community's response, summarized below, to Channel News Asia.

3.3.3 In summary, the Sikh community had embarked on a proactive approach to educate the Singapore community on who the Sikhs are, especially after the fatal shooting of an innocent Sikh gentleman in the United States soon after the 9/11 incident. It also sought to generate better understanding and appreciation of other religions by visiting churches, mosques, temples, etc. A slide deck on Sikhism and the contribution of Sikhs in Singapore to nation building was prepared and presented to groups of grassroots leaders, school children, civil service officers, university students and many others. This was timely since over the past few years a number of cases of surprising ignorance about the Sikh faith among some civil servants and private sector persons had come to light. Sporting events too were organized that required each team to have at least a number of non-Sikhs participants with the intention of getting the participants to subtly break down barriers and get to know each other better.

3.4 Project on Teasing of Sikhs

3.4.1 Mr. Satwant Singh, who headed this project on behalf of the Board to survey the ground sentiment on teasing of Sikhs, gave a presentation on the survey findings to the Board on 1 February 2011. The presentation highlighted the background to the problem, and the survey's approach, findings and recommendations. The findings revealed that out of 534 respondents surveyed, 252 (47%) indicated that they had experienced being teased because of their appearance by members of other communities. Out of these, 131 respondents (52%) indicated that they faced such teasing at least a few times a month. Most of those who faced such teasing reacted by ignoring and walking away (117 respondents or 46%), while a significant number of Sikhs indicated that they would react with varying degrees of force (85 respondents or 34%).

3.4.2 The project team recommended the following:

- i. To provide more platforms and opportunities for Sikhs to learn and better understand Sikhism and its fundamentals. A lack of these resulted in failure to appreciate and be proud of their religious and social identity.
- ii. A dedicated organization that would educate the community on dealing with and responding to such circumstances, to mitigate the risk of any potentially volatile incident occurring and escalating.
- iii. A concerted effort to enhance outreach efforts to ensure that there is a greater, regular and dignified projection of the Sikh community.

3.4.3 Board members deliberated on the report and made the following suggestions:

- i. The education of school children from other communities on the basic tenets of the Sikh religion and culture and in particular, the reasons for the outward appearance of Sikhs. (It was noted that such information was provided in schools through the Civics and Moral Education programme though much more could be done in this regard). It was suggested that such educational and awareness sessions should also be held for other Singaporeans who visited gurdwaras to learn about the Sikh way of life, much as the Muslim community had done in a limited context with the Harmony Centre. Talks and exhibitions could also be conducted at Community Clubs.
- ii. That those affected by such teasing be encouraged to seek assistance from Sikh institutions such as the Sikh Welfare Council (SIWEC) through their hotline number which is managed by qualified counselors for guidance and assistance. This would help gauge the extent of the problem, and give advance indication of fissures in the wider community.
- iii. That a mentoring scheme be set up to assist younger Sikhs, particularly those attending schools, on how to respond appropriately when teased, as well as mentoring them generally in other areas as well.

3.4.4 More details of the survey report on the teasing of Sikhs are available at the Board's website sikhadvisoryboard.org.

3.4.5 The Board wishes to express its gratitude and thanks to Mr Satwant Singh and his team for undertaking this task and for coming up with detailed recommendations that will be of tremendous help to the Sikh community on how to handle the teasing of Sikhs.

4. Other Issues Handled by the Board

4.1 Cases of Unfair Employment Practices

4.1.1 3 cases of unfair employment practices against Sikhs were handled by the Board. One case involved a Sikh working in a fast food restaurant that required him to remove his beard as a condition for working there. Another involved 2 Sikhs who were required to remove their "kara" (bangle) when serving patrons at a local hotel. The Board worked with officials from the Ministry of Manpower to resolve the matter without the need for the Sikh to remove his beard and for the other 2 Sikhs to remove their "karas".

4.1.2 The Board also had to intervene and help 2 Sikh national servicemen who had difficulties with their commanding officers. One was told to remove his beard and the other to wear a turban throughout the duration of national service. These 2

cases were also amicably resolved without the need for one Sikh to remove the beard and for the other to wear a “patka” during physical exercises and a turban during parades.

- 4.1.3 These cases validate the concerns of the Sikh community (including those raised at the Retreat) that more needs to be done to promote better understanding of their religion and to counter ignorance about their faith among the wider Singapore community.

4.2 Religious terms to be made unavailable for registration as domain names

- 4.2.1 MCYS had sought the recommendations of the Sikh community on religious words and terms that should not be made available for use under the .xxx domain which was essentially for pornographic purposes. Though the authorities could ban some pornographic sites, the reality was that it was impossible to do so for many other thousands of such sites on the net. The Board, after consulting Heads of Sikh institutions, submitted the following names:

Sikh	- a racial group
Sikhism	- religion of the Sikhs
Khalsa	- collective body of baptized Sikhs
Gurdwara	- a Sikh temple and place of worship
Sikh Temple	- place of worship for the Sikhs
Guru Granth Sahib	- the holy book of the Sikhs
Waheguru	- the Sikh term for God
Ek Om Kar	- God is one

- 4.2.2 The Board urges the authorities to be vigilant in this respect about the registration of names closely matching the above terms.

4.3 SAB Website

The Board is pleased to report that its website now carries the reports on Project Fateh and the Teasing of Sikhs. This will assist in the dissemination of the reports to the Sikh community to seek their views, support and involvement in resulting efforts.

5. Interaction with Sikh Institutions and other Organisations

5.1 Interfaith Dinner hosted by the Taoist Federation

The Taoist Federation's annual inter-faith dinner was held on 3rd December 2010 at the Singapore Expo Hall. The dinner celebrated the Federation's anniversary as well as the promotion of inter-racial and religious harmony. Two tables (for 20 attendees) were allocated to the Sikh community, one for the Board and the other for the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board. The Prime Minister was the Guest of Honour. Board members got the opportunity to meet members from other faiths and to discuss matters of common interest.

5.2 Lunch with Director of Community Relations, MCYS

The Chairman and Secretary of the Board attended a lunch with the new Director of Community Relations, MCYS, Ms Charlene Chang and other MCYS officials on 31 March 2011. The Director was interested in learning about the issues facing the Sikh community and the needs of the Board. Chairman of the Board requested for MCYS' assistance in procuring a new computer for the Board's office at the Central Sikh Temple and for funds for the printing of the Sikh Retreat 2011 Report. A sum of \$4000/- was subsequently allocated to the Board for the printing of the report.

5.3 Sinda Community Forum

Sinda held its community forum on 2nd July 2011. Members of the Sikh Community were invited. Information on the educational performance of Indian students was released at this forum and subsequently circulated to all Board members and Heads of Sikh institutions. In general, the performance of Indian students was, worryingly, below the national average and, in particular, that of Chinese students. The attendees noted the need to do much more to shore up and improve the academic performance of the Indian community, including that of the Sikh community.

5.4 Harmony Games Day

The Buddhist Federation organized the Harmony Games on 20 August 2011. As in previous years, the Sikh community participated at the Games with teams from the Young Sikh Association (Singapore) and Singapore Khalsa Association participating.

5.5 Dialogue session with Dr Tony Tan organized by the SICCI

The Singapore Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SICCI) organized a dialogue session with Dr Tony Tan on the 4th August 2011. Board members attended to lend support to the event.

6. Acknowledgements

- 6.1 This was another eventful as well as challenging year for the Board. At the same time it was fruitful and rewarding. The Board would like to put on record the support, encouragement, and involvement of MP Inderjit Singh and the cooperation received from all Sikh institutions, which enabled it to perform its duties and fulfill its obligations efficiently and effectively.
- 6.2 The Board would especially like to thank the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board for its continued support, cooperation and assistance and for allowing it the use of its premises at the Silat Road Sikh Temple for its meetings.
- 6.3 Finally, the Board would also like to thank MCYS officials, in particular Mr. Yoganathan Ammayappan and Ms Sheila Koh, for their advice, assistance and support. The close cooperation and facilitation rendered by these officers made the work of the Board that much easier to manage and handle. The Board also welcomes the opportunity to work with the new leadership and senior staff at MCYS.

Prepared by:
Amarjit Singh
Past Secretary
Sikh Advisory Board

Amended and Approved by:
Surjit Singh
Chairman
Sikh Advisory Board