

Open letter to Rishi Sunak from over 350 Gurdwaras and Sikh organisations

24 April 2023

Rt. Hon. Rishi Sunak MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
SW1A 2AA

Dear Prime Minister,

Negative actions by the UK Government towards the British Sikh community since you became PM

As representatives of Gurdwaras and Sikh organisations throughout the UK, we write on behalf of the British Sikh community to express grave concern over the increasing and unacceptable demonisation of British Sikhs as “extremists” and “terrorists”. These labels are being regularly used as the Indian authorities are nervous that most Sikhs support the right to self-determination and the re-establishment of a Sikh homeland referred to as Khalistan.

On 9 February 2022, we issued an [open letter](#) to the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, following offensive comments by the Home Secretary, Priti Patel in a speech in the US, where she falsely labelled British Sikhs as extremists. On 7 July 2022 Boris Johnson as PM responded to the open letter with an apology and expressing regret to the British Sikh community on behalf of the UK Government. Boris Johnson’s letter to Bhai Amrik Singh, the Chair of the Sikh Federation (UK) is attached for information.

As PM he personally committed to ensure important days in the Sikh calendar are properly acknowledged by the UK Government in future and specifically confirmed to the British Sikh community that Jagtar Singh Johal has been in arbitrary detention in India since November 2017. Despite his apology and commitments to the British Sikh community we are now having to fathom your actions towards the British Sikh community since you became PM in October 2022.

You have reneged on the specific assurances given by Boris Johnson to the British Sikh community to properly acknowledge important days in the Sikh calendar i.e. you issued no video message to the British Sikh community on Guru Nanak Dev Ji’s Gurpurb in November 2022 or Vaisakhi in April 2023. Alongside this, you have made an ill-founded and unexplained U-turn on the arbitrary detention of Jagtar Singh Johal in an Indian jail for nearly five and half years since November 2017. These developments are deeply disturbing as it has publicly emerged there may have been British collusion in the kidnapping, torture and his continued arbitrary detention in India.

Your actions as the first British Hindu PM are extremely worrying set in the backdrop of a pattern of suspicion towards the British Sikh community from the UK Government, evidently under pressure from the Indian Government. This has included very aggressive policing of entirely peaceful protests, outside the Indian High Commission prior to the November 2015 UK visit of Narendra Modi and more recently the attempted extradition to India of three British born Sikhs following Indian pressure.

We are all too conscious of the fact that praise is readily afforded when Sikhs serve others, such as during the pandemic or the cost of living crisis when Gurdwaras provide Langar (free food) to the vulnerable. Yet when we raise our voices against injustices faced by Sikhs in India we are vilified, all at the apparent price of hypothetical trade deals with India.

The UK Government under your watch is enabling a narrative that is not only factually wrong by mislabelling British Sikhs as extremists, they are abdicating themselves from any responsibility they should carry as a result of the past actions of the British Empire against Sikhs:

- the annexation of the last Sikh Kingdom in 1849;
- the massacre of thousands of innocents at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar in April 1919 and Nankana Sahib (the birthplace of Guru Nanak Dev Ji) in February 1921 for which there have been no UK Government apologies more than 100 years later;
- calling upon Sikhs to make up the largest volunteer army for the two World Wars through which 83,005 turban wearing Sikhs laid down their lives for the British Indian Army, with a further 109,045 being wounded; and
- offering Sikhs a separate homeland during the partition of India in 1947, then in haste drawing a line through the Sikh homeland of Panjab to create a Hindu-dominated India and Muslim-dominated Pakistan to exit India.

Clearly, the UK Government has a responsibility to recognise and defend the legitimacy of self-determination as a human right and given the treatment of Sikhs since 1947 the movement to secure the re-establishment of a Sikh Kingdom.

Governments in countries where Sikhs live and in our case the UK need to understand and accept “Raj Karega Khalsa” is a phrase that is part of the anthem recited by the entire congregation after Ardaas at the end of every service at all Gurdwaras across the globe. This phrase can be traced to the 10th Guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji. It refers to the Khalsa becoming sovereign, or the Pure will Rule. The word “Khalistan” has been demonised by the Indian authorities but literally translates to “Land of the Khalsa”.

Following the desecration of the Sikhs holiest shrine Sri Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple), Amritsar in 1984, by the Indian authorities and the Genocide of Sikhs in June and November 1984, UK Sikh organisations and Gurdwaras have been highlighting human rights violations against them in India and peacefully exerting their legal right to support a Sikh homeland for some 40 years now.

The Genocide of Sikhs in 1984 after the Indian Army desecrated Harmandir Sahib, killing thousands of Sikhs remains heavily traumatic for Sikhs in Britain. Many have been triggered by the parallels of the Indian Government today, namely:

- Media blackouts for news outlets who reported human rights violations;
- Mass arrests and innocent Sikhs detained by the Indian police, in a system that is infamous, and documented by the UN as state sponsored torture;
- Forced internet and SMS outage in Panjab akin to the 1984 telephone lines being cut; and
- UK citizens visiting Panjab during March 2023 being unreachable by their families.

Following these barbaric acts by the Indian authorities on 18 March 2023, a small group of British Sikhs who protested spontaneously outside the Indian High Commission the next day were labelled “terrorists” for a single act of lowering the Indian flag. Senior UK politicians condemned these protesters without referring to the reason why they were protesting following a massive overreaction by the Indian Government.

However, the same UK politicians have been silent about the provocation and attacks on Sikhs who peacefully protested in their thousands outside the Indian High Commission a few days later on 22 March 2023. Metropolitan Police officers described the provocation, incitement and attacks on peaceful Sikh protesters by those inside the Indian High Commission as unacceptable and have communicated this to senior UK politicians.

Self-determination is a basic human right and not a crime. As you will be aware, there are SNP, Plaid Cymru and Sinn Féin MPs. Self-determination is enshrined within international law and the UN charter of human rights. Which makes it even more unacceptable for any UK MP (i.e. Bob Blackman), to abuse Parliamentary privilege to propagate #AntiSikhHate by calling all Sikhs who exercise their right to self-determination “terrorists” to appease the Indian Government.

We urge you as Prime Minister to explain why you have reneged on the assurances given by Boris Johnson to the British Sikh community in July 2022, including the unexplained U-turn on the arbitrary detention of Jagtar Singh Johal in an Indian jail since November 2017.

The UK Government, political parties and all Parliamentarians should:

- **Condemn outrageous and dangerous commentary about British Sikhs being labelled as extremists or terrorists without evidence or substance. Especially as evidence shows that the CTU have zero open cases relating to Sikhs and data from the Commission on Counter Terrorism states that Sikhs pose no threat to the UK.**
- **Call out human rights violations against minorities and women in India and recognise the Sikhs basic human right of self-determination.**

Putting human rights violations perpetrated in India on the backburner for the purposes of trade is dishonourable as a foreign policy approach by the UK Government with regards to India. Silence regarding state sponsored atrocities in India as a strategy is not befitting of successive UK Governments and has not worked for decades and is no longer acceptable

As British Sikhs, we are the most visible minority in this country, our presence, as with many minorities, is the legacy of British colonialism. We do not ask for special treatment, but we do demand equal treatment. **We look forward to your response to the points raised and are arranging a lobby of Parliament for mid-May 2023 on the Sikhs right to self-determination to demonstrate the strength of feeling of the British Sikh community.**

This letter is being copied to all MPs and constituents will be writing separately attaching this letter to ask their MPs to show solidarity and support for the British Sikh community.

Signed and supported by over 350 UK Gurdwaras and Sikh organisations



10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

THE PRIME MINISTER

7 July 2022

Dear Bhai Amrik Singh,

I am writing to thank you and your co-signatories for your letter of 9 February, regarding the Gurburb of Guru Nanak Dev Ji and the imprisonment of Jagtar Singh Johal. I apologise for the delay in my response.

Firstly, I want to assure you that the Government understands the importance and significance of the Gurburb of Guru Nanak Dev Ji to Sikhs all over the world. I express my regret to the British Sikh community that this was not acknowledged by the UK Government last year. I am personally committed to ensuring that this does not happen again in the future.

The Government remains concerned with the case of Jagtar Singh Johal, who has been detained arbitrarily in India for the past four years. Ministers and officials have raised our concerns directly with the Government of India, especially regarding Mr Johal's treatment and right to a fair trial, on almost a hundred occasions since November 2017.

More recently, during visits to India in October 2021 and March 2022, the Foreign Secretary raised Mr Johal's situation with India's External Affairs Minister Dr Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. During my visit to Delhi in April, I also raised this case personally with Prime Minister Modi, as part of our wide-ranging discussion concerning bilateral and international affairs.

We will continue to work with the Indian Government to resolve Mr Johal's case. As recently as 9 June, the Foreign Secretary met Martin Docherty-Hughes, Mr Johal's MP for West Dunbartonshire, as well as members of Mr Johal's family, to discuss our involvement in the case.

Thank you, once again, for writing.

Mr Bhai Amrik Singh