Wolverhampton, UK, Sikh Transport Workers Fight to Wear Beards and Turbans, 1969

- local community or neighborhood-level campaign [1]

### Timing

**Time period notes:**

Immigration and radicalized debates, policy, and sentiments were highly controversial at this time in the UK.

**June 1967**

**to:**

**April 9th 1969**

### Location and Goals

**Country:**

United Kingdom

**Location City/State/Province:**

Wolverhampton

**Location Description:**

Industrial City

[View Location on Map](#)

**Goals:**

To overturn the ban on beards and turbans for Wolverhampton transport workers (as beards and turbans are required by Sikh religion).

### Methods

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 019. Wearing of symbols›Traditional Sikh beard and turban

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 019. Wearing of symbols›Traditional Sikh beard and turban
- 038. Marches

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- Other...›Threat of self-immolation

**Methods in 4th segment:**


• 001. Public speeches
• 002. Letters of opposition or support
• 015. Group lobbying
• 038. Marches
• Other...›Threat of self-immolation

Methods in 5th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 015. Group lobbying
• 038. Marches
• Other...›Threat of self-immolation

Methods in 6th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• Other...›Threat of self-immolation

Segment Length:
3.5 months

Classifications
 Classification:
 Change
 Cluster:
 Human Rights
 National/Ethnic Identity
 Group characterization:

• Sikh transport workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites
 Leaders:
 Sohan Singh Jolly, Tarsem Sandhu, Jathedar Santokh Singh, C.S. Panchhi
 Partners:
 Transport and General Workers Union, Indian Workers Association, Sikh Temples, Sikh leaders in India
 External allies:
 Ernest Fernhyhouse

Joining/exiting order of social groups
 Groups in 1st Segment:

• Sikh transport workers

Groups in 2nd Segment:
• Indian Workers Association
• Sikh community and religious leaders
• Transport and General Workers’ Union

Groups in 3rd Segment:

• Akali party
• Shiromani Akah Dal

Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:

• Indian High Commission of London

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:
It is unclear how supportive of the campaign the Supreme Council of Sikhs was prior to Jolly's proposal for self-immolation, but the council expressed separation from that course of action afterwards

Segment Length:
3.5 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Wolverhampton Corporation (Transport Committee and Department)

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Speeches (Enoch Powel, April 20th 1968 “rivers of blood speech” in Birmingham)

Campaigner violence:
No campaigner violence

Repressive Violence:
Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

Total points:
9 out of 10 points

In June of 1967, a Sikh man named Tarsem Sandhu returned to his job as a bus driver in Wolverhampton after a three week break, wearing a turban and newly grown beard. His supervisor immediately assessed that his turban violated the dress code and being unshaven was considered unprofessional, and sent him Sandhu home without pay. Sandhu called upon C.S. Panchhi, a prominent Sikh community leader in Birmingham, for help. The case
sparked the beginning of a British-Sikh led campaign to challenge the Wolverhampton Transport Committee ban as an unjust attack on religious freedom and Sikh identity. The Sikh community in Wolverhampton quickly organized themselves to push for conversation on the turban and beard ban, at a time when anti-immigrant sentiment was creating controversy throughout the United Kingdom.

Panchhi organized a meeting with managers of the transport department in order to explain the religious significance of Sandhu’s appearance and demand his freedom to wear a turban and beard, but he was met with rejection. He then turned to the Transport and General Workers’ Union, where a motion in favor of Sikh attire was voted upon and passed. However, the transport committee refused to lift the ban and argued that allowing Sikhs to break dress code was unequal treatment.

The local Indian Workers Association and Sikh temples increased their support of religious expression at work, and proposed public meetings to address members of Parliament. Viewing this action as passive, the Sikh Akali party (a Sikhism-centric political party) instead organized a nonviolent march of 6,000 people to increase attention on the issue. The president of the Sikh organization Shiromani Akah Dal, a 66 year-old Sohan Singh Jolly, quickly became a leader of the campaign. Willing to become a martyr in order to give the transport company a deadline to take action, Jolly threatened self-immolation and declared that he would publicly set himself on fire on 13 April 1969 (the first day of the Sikh new year).

As the media picked up on the campaign, multiple viewpoints emerged. Generally, passengers expressed that they didn’t object to bus drivers in religious attire (as long as the buses ran on time, which was really what mattered to them). Many Sikhs in the UK as well as India supported Jolly’s bravery, and 14 other Sikhs pledged to also commit suicide if the transport corporation did not meet requests. One of the pledgers, journalist Jarman Singh Parman, explained the decision as standing up “for the dignity of the people.” Others, however, such as Dr A. K. S. Aujila of the Supreme Council of Sikhs, worried that race relations would be further damaged by such radical action: "We are going to wage relentless war on the idea that individuals can take this sort of action involving the whole community and very likely lead to a worsening of community harmony in Britain", he said.

Marches continued throughout 1968 in New Delhi, India and Wolverhampton, UK, including the most successful public demonstration in March where 4,000 people walked in silence through Wolverhampton. Sikhs also lobbied, wrote letters, and held speeches promoting Sikh rights. The Indian High Commission in London and the Transport and General Workers Union continued to try and put pressure on Wolverhampton.

On the opposition side, anti-Sikh sentiment also intensified. Local white press reiterated that “this is Britain, not India” (where they suggested the Sikhs and their attire truly belonged). On April 20th, Parliament member Enoch Powell delivered his “Rivers of Blood” speech, in which he warned the white population of the dangers of immigrants such as Sikhs gaining power. He was widely endorsed by government labour department agencies and conservatives of Wolverhampton. Government Minister John Stonehouse reprimanded Sikhs and argued that “working in Britain, particularly in the public services, they should be prepared to accept the terms and conditions of their employment. To claim special communal rights (or should one say rites?) leads to a dangerous fragmentation within society.” By July, a few non-Sikh transport workers publicly dismissed the idea of the right to wear turbans as “special treatment” for immigrants, and protested with a “hat parade” of their own.

The issue became more pressing as Jolly’s proposed suicide drew closer. On 20 January, the Indian High Commissioner Shanti Sarup Shawan met with the department of transportation in Whitehall, warning of the consequences of racial tension that Sikh deaths at the hands of the committee would bring. The Mayor of Wolverhampton called this “blackmail”. Similarly, a Sikh leader in Delhi, Jathedar Santokh Singh, gave speeches throughout the UK as a voice for India explaining the “serious repercussions” the death of Jolly would have on British interests in India. On 8 April, the Wolverhampton Transport Committee received a surprise visit
from Ernest Fernyhouse, the respected Under-Secretary for the Department of Employment and Productivity. He too warned about what suicides on Sunday would mean for Wolverhampton and British positionally.

Twenty-four hours later, on 9 April, the transport committee of eight men reconvened in a two hour long meeting. They had finally reached a decision, though with great reluctance. The chairman of the committee, Alderman Gough, stated that the committee members were “men of honour” and had decided on “a suitable form of regulation permitting the wearing of turbans (and beards).” He made sure to let it be known that “the committee remains strongly of the view that its original decision was right and its rule both reasonable, and clearly nondiscriminatory” and that “we have been pressured into doing this.” Gough also expressed that they now feared that other racial minority groups might seek to put pressure on the council for their own ends.

Nonetheless, the campaigners had achieved the victory that they had worked for two years. Jolly, who was four days away from his pledged immolation, expressed that he “saw no danger of an epidemic of similar suicide threats.” “This case had been unique in injustice,” he said. Though he wished the moral consciences of the committee members had led to the lifting of the ban, he was pleased that religious expression had achieved freedom. Jolly resigned from the presidency of Shiromani Akah Dal because he no longer “desired power” and went on to work towards lifting the bans on turbans and beards at other transport companies throughout the UK.

**Research Notes**

Influences:

(1) In 1960, the Birmingham City Transport placed a ban on turbans for all employees, which led to Sikhs going on strike. That ban was lifted in 1962. Similarly, there was a campaign for the right to wear traditional religious attire in Manchester, from 1959-1966

(2) Sohan Singh Jolly moved on to tackle Nottingham's bus bosses where turbans and beards were not allowed.

Sources:


Dr Katrina Navickas, review of Structures and Transformations in Modern British History, (review no. 1082)

http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1082

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Additional Notes:
Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy: Jasmine Rashid 2/4/15

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