



# SIKH ADVISORY BOARD

(Statutory Board Established Under Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth)

## Annual Report of the Sikh Advisory Board

### for the Period November 2019 to October 2020

#### 1. Meetings of the Sikh Advisory Board (SAB or Board)

The Board, which has been appointed to serve a 3-year term from November 2017 to November 2020, met for its final year first quarterly meeting as scheduled on 5 February 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 restrictions, in person meetings were cancelled and virtual meetings were held on 21 July and 6 November 2020.

#### 2. Major Items discussed or addressed by the Board

##### 1. COVID-19

The community faced unprecedented challenges in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The SAB assisted both Gurdwaras and groups from the community to overcome these challenges. The detailed list of actions taken which ranged from circulating government advisories to holding zoom meetings with Gurdwara heads to discuss and clarify the evolving rules related to congregation gatherings, weddings, funerals and more, is documented in Appendix 1.

##### 2. Proposed Amendments to the SAB Rules

Proposed amendments regarding a more equitable representation of the structure of the community and sustainability and diversity of the Board were approved by the Minister, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) on 12 November 2020. The SAB will have 17 members on the board when the new term begins in November 2020 instead of the current 15, with one more representative each from the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board (CSGB) and Gurdwara Sahib Yishun.

3. *Sikhi Hub*

The tender for the 0.25 hectare site reserved for a Gurdwara in Bukit Batok closed on January 8, 2020. Two bids were submitted – one by the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board (CSGB) and the other by Modern Wealth Creators LLP.

On 12 August 2020, the SAB had an urgent meeting at the Ministry of National Development (MND) with MND, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), and Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) officials after being informed that the tender for the plot submitted by CSGB had been rejected. The tender submitted by the other party, Modern Wealth Creators LLP, was also unsuccessful in its bid.

We were informed that the tender price submitted by CSGB was too low. Secondly, no more than 10 percent of the area can be used for ancillary uses, leaving 90 percent or more to be used solely for religious purposes – a criteria that the CSGB proposal did not meet.

The authorities were agreeable to a revised bid being submitted. The CSGB team has requested for more time to deliberate on the next steps forward.

### **3. Supporting Sikh Institutions in Singapore**

1. *Work Permits and Miscellaneous Work Passes*

3.1.1. Sri Guru Singh Sabha submitted an application to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) for two extra work permits which is above the quota of six permits they are presently allowed. The SAB supported the application given their reasons for the additional manpower needed.

3.1.2. Assisted Sri Guru Nanak Sat Sang Sabha, Pardesi Khalsa Dharmak Diwan and Gurdwara Sahib Yishun with their manpower issues, particularly in replacing and getting new *ragi jathas* and *sewadars*.

3.1.3. A suggestion was made to look into giving permanent residency status to good foreign *granthis* or *ragi jathas* in order to remove the need to constantly apply for permits for them. The Immigrations and Checkpoints Authority has a list of requirements for such applications which must be met before an applicant is considered for permanent residency.

- 3.1.4. The SAB helped facilitate the Miscellaneous Work Pass for Sikh Sewaks for Khalsa Week.
2. *“Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQ) booklet*  
The Chairman met with the President of CSGB to look into institutionalising the FAQ booklet on Sikhism which was put together for the conference on Building Cohesive Societies in June 2019. The booklet is a work-in-progress of a group which will improve it by adding more questions and answers to address the queries of both Sikhs and non-Sikhs. It will then be uploaded onto the relevant websites and social media platforms.
3. *Pool of Sikh Speakers for National Discussions*  
The SAB requested that Sikh individuals with Sikhi knowledge on diverse topics and subjects be recommended by the Sikh institutions with the intention of forming a pool of Sikh speakers for national level discussions. Ideally the speakers would be from across the strata of the community and represent its general views on Sikhi. The FAQ booklet referred to above would be the first step in this direction. These names would then be forwarded to MCCY and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to draw on for national-level panel discussions.  
After some discussions and deliberations on this matter it was decided that as and when the need arises, the SAB will seek the advice of Sikh institutions to recommend suitable speakers on a case by case basis.
4. *Singapore Sikh Education Foundation (SSEF)*  
On 12 November 2019, the Chairman vetted a submission by the SSEF Chairperson Gurdial Kaur to DPM Heng Swee Keat seeking the Government’s approval for SSEF to conduct enrichment classes for students not taking Punjabi as a second language.

#### **4. Other matters handled, managed and supported by the SAB**

1. *Guru Nanak’s 550<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations*
- 4.1.1. The year’s celebrations ended with the grand finale of the Sri Nankana Sahib float which was paraded through the streets of Singapore as it made its way to all Gurdwaras in Singapore. It drew much publicity for the Sikh community and was well-received by the public as well.
- 4.1.2. The float was dismantled and due to its modular nature, was to be recycled for use during the Naam Ras event in 2020. However, due to COVID-19, the plan did not materialise.

- 4.1.3. The celebrations at Central Sikh Temple (CST) where the Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Heng Swee Keat was the Guest of Honour (GOH) was also picked up and reported by the media.
- 4.1.4. A coffee table book documenting the 18 events held throughout 2019 was scheduled to be launched during Vesakhi celebrations in conjunction with the Sikh Welfare Council (SIWEC) dinner on 29 March 2020. The launch has been postponed due to COVID-19.
- 4.1.5. The Sewa Pledge drive was very successful with more than the pledged 550,000 hours clocked by the target date of Guru Nanak's birthday on 12 November 2020.
- 4.1.6. The SAB drafted a congratulatory message for the Prime Minister to post on his social media to the Sikh community on the 550<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji.

## 2. *Supporting Sikhs in the community*

### 4.2.1 *Marriage Counsellors*

The SAB corresponded with the Ministry of Social and Family Development and three nominating Gurdwaras to support the renewal of the licenses of four marriage solemnisers whose licenses were expiring in June and December 2020.

### 4.2.2 *Sikh denied temporary job due to beard*

On 12 February 2020, Pavan Singh Mehta's relative complained that he was denied a temporary job at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) because his facial hair interfered with wearing a mask. The SAB contacted the IMH, which explained that Pavan was being assigned a job to check on patients who might have COVID-19 and that since his mask could not be tightly fastened because of his facial hair, he was therefore denied the job for his own safety as well as that of other patients. Pavan's relative accepted the explanation from the IMH.

### 4.2.3 *Mediating a complaint against Sri Guru Singh Sabha (SGSS) – a summary:-*

a. On 29 July 2020, the SAB Chairman and Secretary received a complaint from a Sikh couple against the management committee

of SGSS and one of its preachers. The couple wanted SAB to mediate as advised by AWARE. SGSS was agreeable to help in the matter.

b. The couple cited an incident on 2 February 2020, where at a prayer session in SGSS to celebrate the 21<sup>st</sup> birthday of their eldest daughter, the *Giani Ji* had made an insensitive comment in his *katha* on families with daughters, that hurt the family's feelings and dignity.

c. Over the following fortnight, Chairman and Secretary held separate meetings with SGSS and the couple on 31 July and 2 August respectively ending finally with a joint meeting on 8 August 2020 of both parties at SGSS.

d. SGSS agreed to apologise in writing and in person to the couple and to counsel the *Giani Ji*, which they did. But this offer was not to the satisfaction of the couple who wanted further action to be taken against the *Giani Ji*. SGSS was not agreeable to this.

(Afternote: The matter was amicably resolved in December 2020 after a new leadership was voted onto the SGSS management committee.)

#### 4.2.4 *Sikh intern asked to trim hair*

On 15 August 2020, the SAB successfully intervened by assisting a Sikh student from a special school who was asked to trim his hair by the organisation with which he was doing his attachment.

#### 4.2.5 *Letter of support*

On 21 October 2020, the SAB provided a letter of support to a Singaporean Sikh in the hospitality industry to keep his hair, explaining the tenets and importance of unshorn hair in the Sikh faith.

#### 4.2.6 *Computers for Home-Based Learning (HBL)*

Sikh students were advised that those who needed a personal computer for HBL can approach the SAB or any Gurdwara and a computer will be arranged through SINDA for them. No student should be deprived of a proper education for not having a computer.

#### 4.2.7 *Family legal dispute*

A Sikh individual had approached the Chairman and Secretary on a personal family legal dispute involving frozen property which is pending decision by the courts. The board felt this matter is beyond the purview of the SAB as it is a private and legal matter

and that it should not be involved. Chairman and Secretary then discontinued their engagement with this individual as he had started harassing them and was verbally abusive.

3. *Ministry of Education (MOE)– Social Studies Book*

On 14 September 2020, the Chairman assisted the Ministry of Education in determining the accuracy of the photo of Sikh policemen that was featured in the Secondary 1 Social Studies course book. The SAB recommended to MOE that since it does not seem that the individuals in the picture appeared to be clearly Sikhs, it was best to replace it with more of a definitive picture.

4. *Promoting Religious Harmony in Singapore*

The SAB represented the community on the 123<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Burhani Mosque at Hill Street on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2020 where Minister K Shanmugam was the Guest of Honour.

5. *Building Community Relations*

4.5.1. *OnePeople.SG*

In August 2020, the SAB participated in a video recording organised by OnePeople.sg where members of faith groups encourage Singaporeans to stay strong and resilient during the pandemic.

4.5.2. *Indian Community Matters*

On 17 August 2020, SAB met MCCY Deputy Director Vendesan Somo at Central Sikh Temple on concerns facing the Indian Community.

6. *Afghanistan Attacks*

The SAB issued an SAB press release to the media on the attack on Sikhs in Afghanistan. In response, the MFA issued a press release on 30 March 2020 and the Mufti, IRO and other organisations sent their condolences as well.

7. *Indian Heritage Centre Exhibition*

On 13 May 2020, the SAB met the Indian Heritage Centre organisers to discuss the exhibition planned for 2021 on the contribution of Sikhs to Singapore.

8. *SAB Annual Report*

The SAB Annual Report of November 2018-October 2019 was shared with the Sikh institutions and uploaded to the SAB website.

9. *SAB website*

The annual cost of hosting the website is S\$150. Board members agreed to share the cost by contributing \$10 each.

10. *Events and other meetings*

4.10.1. Besides the events/sessions mentioned in this report, Appendix 2 lists other matters attended to by the Chairman throughout this term.

4.10.2. The SAB represented the community at SG Bicentennial Dinner at Gardens by the Bay on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2020 and received a token of appreciation for our community's participation in the celebrations.

4.10.3. The SAB met officers from the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) on LGBT issues at Café Melba @ Mediapolis on 4 February 2020.

4.10.4. The SAB attended a Zoom workshop on Precision Medicine on 1 October 2020.

4.10.5. The SAB attended a Zoom meeting with the Bioethics Advisory Committee on 14 October 2020. It was felt that guidance was needed on the Sikhi perspective on organ donation. The CSGB will be consulted to help shed light on this topic and the information made available to the public.

## **5. Acknowledgements**

The Board would like to thank former MP Inderjit Singh for working together with the SAB as well as all Sikh Institutions for their cooperation and support.

The Board would also like to thank the CSGB for its assistance and support and for allowing it the use of its premises at the Central Sikh Temple for its meetings.

6 November 2020 was the last meeting of the current board members appointed for the term 15 November 2017 to 14 November 2020. Mr Surjit Singh, the Chairman, first served on the board in 1989 and has over the years dedicated a total of 20 years of service to SAB. These included two stints, over four terms, as

Chairman. He has stepped down as Chairman and will not be serving on the board for the next term. The board members thanked him for his service and commitment to the SAB and the Sikh community.

Prepared by Satwant Kaur Khaira, Assistant Secretary, SAB

Vetted by Malminderjit Singh, Secretary, SAB

Approved by Surjit Singh, Chairman, SAB

### **COVID-19 Measures and action taken by SAB in 2020**

1. 1 February – Circulated to Gurdwara heads the MCCY 31 January Public Health Advisory on scheduled February events for more than 1000 persons as well as general advice.
2. 10 February – Circulated to Gurdwara heads the MCCY 7 February Advisory on Ministry of Health (MOH) Dorscon Risk Level being raised from Yellow to Orange.
3. 25 February – Chairman attended a Zoom Institute of Policy Studies forum on Singapore’s response to COVID–19.
4. 16 March – Circulated to Gurdwara heads an email received from the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) on 16 March regarding the Temasek Trust donation of hand sanitisers for religious organisations. Interested Gurdwaras communicated directly with the IRO for delivery of the hand sanitisers.
5. 19 March – Held a Zoom meeting with Gurdwara heads to discuss COVID-19 matters.
6. 21 March – Circulated to Gurdwara heads the MCCY 20 March Advisory on suspension of all events and gatherings with 250 or more participants from 21 March to 30 June.
7. 21 March – Circulated to Gurdwara heads an Advisory from Government on safe distancing measures to be adopted by all.
8. 24 March – The Secretary attended a COVID-19 meeting with Minister Grace Fu on safe distancing guidance measures.
9. 25 March – Circulated to Sikh institutions the statement issued by the National Steering Committee on Racial and Religious Harmony in support of staying united against COVID-19.
10. 27 March – The Secretary helped The New Paper with questions on how the community was battling COVID-19.
11. 4 April – Circulated to Gurdwara heads the MCCY 3 April Advisory on elevated safe distancing measures. On 26 March, religious places of worship were only open for private worship for a maximum of 10 persons.

12. 9 April – Circulated to Gurdwara heads the SAB *Langgar* Advisory for Gurdwaras pursuant to the Circuit Breaker in place with effect from 7 April to 1 June 2020. Places of worship were closed to public.
13. 10 April – Circulated to Gurdwara heads the SAB Advisory on additional measures for *sewadars* in Gurdwaras.
14. 11 April – Initiated, scripted and coordinated a Vesakhi video featuring community leaders' messages to the community as circuit breaker was in place which meant the usual annual Vesakhi celebrations could not go ahead. The video was shared and circulated on social media platforms.
15. 20 April – Foreign worker and student related matters
  - a. MOM and foreign workers in dormitories- assisted the multilevel task force deal with the issues faced by Sikh workers in the dormitories.
  - b. Students – Separately, a group of students had filmed a video outside the Silat Road Gurdwara of them not getting any assistance from the Gurdwara when they were displaced during COVID-19. The secretary raised this matter with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Indian High Commission in identifying the students who needed assistance for either relocation or repatriation to India.
16. 22 April – Circulated an Advisory from Government on further restrictions on faith-based activities.
17. 23 April – Attended a Zoom meeting with CCSI members to gather their feedback on concerns they were having with regard to Covid-19 restrictions.
18. 23 April – Following this meeting, appealed to MCCY and succeeded in having the government allow 10 family members who have already attended the funeral ceremony at the crematorium to proceed to the Gurdwara for post-funeral rites.
19. 25 April – Coordinated with MOM by providing assistance to Gurdwaras Katong and Yishun in helping extend the Miscellaneous Work Pass (MWP) and work permits for staff stranded due to COVID-19.
20. 29 April – Issued a circular from MCCY to Gurdwaras on measures to be taken for serving of *langgar* to members of the public.

21. 2 May – Vasantham show on Sikh community and COVID-19.
22. 22 May – Chairman, Secretary and some Gurdwara heads, attended a virtual meeting with MCCY Minister Grace Fu on the gradual resumption of religious activities.
23. 26 May – Zoom meeting held with Gurdwara heads on the MCCY 25 May Advisory on the gradual resumption of religious activities in Phase 1 Safe Reopening on 2 June. 25 persons limit in places of worship implemented.
24. 30 May – Coordinated the coverage of the Sikh community's response to COVID-19 and what it was doing to help the society at large. There was generous and wide coverage on the Sikh response by the Straits Times, Tabla!, Asia Samachar and Vasantham.  
Over May and June, other Singapore youth groups who had set up the SG Seva helpline assisted with providing rations to the needy. They distributed \$80,000 worth of rations which consisted of roughly 1500 rations per week.
25. 1 June – Coordinated app development on the Sewa Pledge platform for Sikhs to be able to visit the Gurdwaras by booking slots in Phase 1 and 2 of the Safe Reopening.
26. 4 June – Circulated to Gurdwara heads the MCCY 3 June Advisory on recommended practices for close living environments in religious organisations.
27. 15 June – Coordinated with the Hindu Endowment Board to channel excess rations received to a Hindu temple.
28. 17 June – Zoom meeting with Gurdwara Heads.  
Only Sri Guru Nanak Sat Sang Sabha had been given permission for live singing of kirtan from its separate room on the mezzanine floor.  
The SAB followed up with MCCY regularly on plans for the other Gurdwaras which had been submitted to MCCY for safe singing of *shabads* by *ragi jathas* as *kirtan* is an integral part of worship in Sikhism.
29. 19 June – Circulated to Gurdwara heads the MCCY 18 June Advisory on the Phase 2 opening on 19 June. 50 persons limit in places of worship implemented.
30. Phase 2 opening : Liaised with MCCY and assisted our Gurdwaras on a number of matters pertaining to Covid-19:
  - a. Recommended CST to be the Gurdwara to undergo a pilot programme for 100 congregants divided into 2 separate zones being allowed in the *darbar* hall at any

one point in time subject to Safety Management Plans being cleared by MCCY first.

- b. Advised Gurdwaras on doubts and concerns they had on the detailed Advisories issued by Government.
  - c. Assisted Dharmak Sabha in getting MCCY's approval for them to conduct a hybrid AGM with 50 members allowed in person at the Gurdwara and others through Zoom.
  - d. Arranged through a draw for 3 out of 7 Gurdwaras to pilot the singing of kirtan in our Gurdwaras. The 3 are CST, Yishun Gurdwara and Singh Sabha. (PKDD were gracious in offering their slot to Singh Sabha).
31. 23 September 2020 – Attended Zoom meeting with SMS Janil Puthucheary and other faith leaders on COVID-19 issues.

### **Chairman's Report**

Events and meetings attended

#### ***Supporting Sikh individuals and institutions***

1. 4 December 2019 – Attended a co-creation workshop by MCCY to develop a crisis preparedness scheme for religious organisations along with Sukhbir Singh from CSGB.
2. 11 December 2019 – Attended the SIWEC Council Review meeting in CST.
3. 14 December 2019 – Attended the premiere screening of the Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji documentary at the Asian Civilisations Museum.
4. 27 December 2019 – Supported the invitation to Minister Chan Chun Sing to be the GOH at the Sikh community dinner to be held on 29 Mar 2020.
5. 28 January 2020 – Took up a matter raised by SAB member Taranjit Singh with MCCY on his difficulty in opening an account with a bank for being a “politically exposed person” (PEP) because he is a member of the SAB. Asked MCCY to check with the banks if SAB members do indeed need to be classified as PEPs since it is a voluntary, advisory and non-political position.
6. 15 February 2020 – Attended a Coordinating Council of Sikh Institutions (CCSI) meeting at the CST.
7. 21 February 2020 – Made a payment of \$150 to Manjeet Singh Usma for the domain registration and hosting of the SAB website. (SAB members agreed to share the hosting cost by contributing \$10 each).
8. 17 April 2020 – Attended a Zoom CCSI meeting.
9. 28 May – Attended a Zoom SSEF MC meeting.
10. 1 June – MCCY sent a note to all Gurdwaras and to Chairman seeking nominations on the appointment of members to the next term of the SAB beginning from 14 November.
11. 16 June – Attended a Zoom AGM meeting of the SSEF.
12. 23 June – Attended a Zoom SIWEC AGM meeting.
13. 15 August 2020– Took part in a Zoom meeting organized by former MP Inderjit Singh with SSEF officials to look into written complaints by two parents of Punjabi school children against various aspects of the teaching and running of the SSEF. SSEF agreed

to look into these complaints and to address them with the parents of Punjabi school children after national level examinations are over.

***Promoting Religious Harmony in Singapore and Building Community Relations***

14. 13 December 2019 – Attended a Bicentennial Christmas Carol Service organised by the National Council of Christian Churches at the St Andrew’s Cathedral.
15. 26 December 2019 – Attended the Christmas celebrations organised by the Catholic faith at the St Joseph’s Church in Upper Bukit Timah Road.
16. 10 January 2020 – Attended a dinner organised by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) at the Park Royal hotel on Beach Road.
17. Recommended Harjit Kaur to attend the launch of the “Crisis Preparedness Scheme for Religious Organisations” at the Suntec Convention Centre on 14 January 2020.
18. 15 January 2020 – Attended the launch of the “Future Together” art exhibition at the Gardens by the Bay at the invitation of the Bicentennial organisers.
19. 22 January 2020 – Attended a reception by the Indian High Commission on India's 71<sup>st</sup> Republic Day anniversary at Raffles City.
20. 7 February 2020 – Attended the lunar reception at the Istana.
21. 16 February 2020 – Along with Malminderjit gave an interview to two research staff from Chiangmai University on the policies and approaches related to promoting racial and religious harmony in Singapore at the CST.
22. 28 February 2020 – Together with Malminderjit and Satwant Kaur attended a lunch meeting with MCCY officials on the Sikh community organizing the Harmony Games.
23. 30 March 2020 – Received a condolence message from the Mufti of Singapore, Dr Nazirudin on the senseless attack and killing of innocent Sikhs in Afghanistan.
24. 1 June 2020 – Along with Malminderjit gave an interview to a writer Nilanjana Sengupta on some aspects of our community and religion for her book.
25. 17 June 2020 – Attended a virtual Hari Raya celebration organized by the Harmony Centre.
26. 21 July 2020 – Met the new head of Harmony Centre and two of her staff on furthering cooperation between the two institutions.
27. 24 September – Attended the Zoom launch of an IRO book on “Religions for Peace and Harmony”.

### ***Other meetings and events***

28. 24 July 2020 – A private medical practitioner Dr Lee sought advice on how to handle Sikhs who are not happy to remove their chest hair before an ECG is carried out. Advised the doctor to let the patient know that as it is important to have a proper reading of the ECG for the patient's own safety as well as on medical grounds that it should be alright for the chest hair to be removed. The patient if in doubt could always consult the *Granthi/Giani* at the *gurdwara* or the SAB for guidance.
29. 9 August 2020 – Attended the National Day parade at the Padang.
30. 11 August 2020 – Attended a Zoom meeting on proposed amendments to the gambling legislation by MHA and MSF officials.
31. 27 August 2020 – Met up with three officials from the Indian Heritage Centre on the Sikh exhibition that they were organizing at the Centre next year. They wanted information on Sikh pioneers, the SAB etc.
32. 1 October 2020 – Attended a Zoom session by the Institute of Policy Studies on a survey they did on the General Elections.
33. 2 October 2020 – Together with Malminderjit attended a lunch meeting with MCCY officials on the SAB and other Sikh-related matters.
34. 16 October 2020 – Attended the Zoom award ceremony organized by the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre.