

Sikhs outraged by immigration plan that asks Singhs, Kaurs to change names

OTTAWA: Federal policy wants common Indian monikers altered to avoid applicant mix-ups

BY JACK KEATING
STAFF REPORTER

Vancouver Sikhs were outraged yesterday to learn that a federal policy asks immigrants to Canada with the surnames Singh or Kaur — two of the most common in India — to change them to avoid applicant mix-ups.

"We are totally against this order. It's degrading to the Sikhs," bristled Sewa Singh Gidda, standing outside Indo-Canadian shops at 49th and Fraser.

"The government is demeaning the Sikhs. It is very bad."

Others in the neighbourhood were also incensed.

"Our name is very essential to us," said Nardeep Singh Grewal. "The government is putting down the Sikhs. It's a very bad idea."

"People should not change their names," said Abtar Singh Gugay.

"It is a bad idea by the government because my parents gave me that name. Why should I change my name?"

The names Singh and Kaur — for males and females, respectively — have been in use among Sikhs worldwide for over 300 years.

They were given to all initiated Sikhs to represent the abolition of class and caste inequalities in Indian society.

"It is not fair to ask people to change their names," said Jasbeer Singh of the World Sikh Organization.

"My name is a part of me, my personality, my identity. To say that it is too common and ask me to change it is an assault on my rights, my religion."

"Today, they have singled out Singh and Kaur. Tomorrow, they may dislike Mohammed, and how soon before names such as Lee or Smith are targeted?" he said.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada spokeswoman Karen Shadd-Evelyn said the practice benefits permanent resident applicants "by ensuring fewer misfiled or mis-mailed pieces of correspondence as well as fewer incidents of mistaken identity."

She noted a high volume of applications at its New Delhi visa office from persons named Singh or Kaur.

"Doing so also allows us to ensure the safety and security of Canadians," but it is "not a mandatory requirement" for immigration to Canada, she added.

The furor erupted after would-be



Nardeep Singh Grewal (right) and Sewa Singh Gidda (centre) speak to The Province in Vancouver yesterday. They called the policy 'degrading' and said the government was 'putting down the Sikhs.' ARLEN REDEKOP — THE PROVINCE

History of the surnames Kaur and Singh

In 1699, Sikh women were given the surname Kaur and men Singh by Guru Gobind Singh, the 10th Guru of the Sikhs.

The surnames were intended to symbolize the abolition of class and caste inequalities.

Based on the premises of gender equality, Kaur was also given to Sikh women to establish an identity independent of their father or husband.

The majority of Sikh first names

are gender-neutral.

For example, Harpreet could be a male's or female's first name. What identifies Harpreet Kaur as a female is the word Kaur following the first name.

The literal meaning of the name Kaur is prince (not princess). It is a derivative of the Sanskrit word Kanwar, meaning prince, whereas the name Singh is derived from the Sanskrit word Simha, meaning lion.

immigrants in New Delhi complained to authorities that the administrative policy was unfair. According to reports, hundreds of

thousands of people named Singh or Kaur are currently looking to immigrate to Canada. World Sikh Organization of Canada

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da president Gurpreet Singh Bal said the immigration policy "flies in the face of everything the Canadian Charter stands for, and we as Canadians value."

He said Canada must scrap the policy "so that Sikhs with the surname Singh and Kaur are treated fairly and with dignity, like all others in our society."

Satbir Singh Cheema of the Surrey-based Progressive Intercultural Community Services Society also blasted the policy.

"The government is just putting some unnecessary barriers for somebody coming to Canada," said Cheema, director of the society's employment program.

"You're asking them to change their name. And I don't see any reason why somebody should be asked or forced to change their name to be legal to come to Canada."

The names Singh and Kaur are not the world's most common surnames.

In China, the vast majority of people share a mere 100 surnames. There are 93 million Wangs, 88 million Zhangs, 92 million people named Li, 20 million called Chen and 20 million named Zhou.

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