

Obituary: Awtar Singh

[RANJIT SRAI](#) | Tuesday 17 May 1994 23:02 BST |



Awtar Singh Sarai, campaigner:

Born Dhapai, Kapurthala, Punjab, 29th August 1953; died London, UK, 9th April 1994.

AWTAR SINGH became, at a relatively young age, one of the most widely respected Sikh leaders in Britain. He was a key member of the UK Sikh Organisations Co-ordination Committee and his organisational ability and scholarly contribution to the Sikh cause buoyed his community during a turbulent political phase.

He was born Awtar Singh Sarai in 1951, at his mother's ancestral home at Dhapai, Kapurthala, in the Punjab. Although he was of prominent Sikh landowning (Jat) 'Sarai' stock he always preferred to use the 'Singh' surname as ordained by his Sikh faith.

Awtar Singh arrived in Britain in 1961, aged 10, and was one of the first group of Sikhs from the Punjab entering the country at the time. He gained First Class honours at Loughborough College, and won a prize in Chemical Engineering in 1974.

As an undergraduate he was a founder of the Loughborough Sikh Temple and founder President of the Sikh Students Federation whose counterpart in the Punjab, the All-India Sikh Students Federation, later took up the struggle for Sikh independence from the Indian State.

Following the storming of the Golden Temple, in Amritsar, by the Indian army in 1984, and its violent aftermath, Singh devoted much of his time and energy to the service of his traumatised community. As National Organiser and General Secretary of the largest grass-roots Sikh organisation in Britain, the International Sikh Youth Federation, he was an active campaigner and took up a large number of cases on behalf of Sikhs fleeing to Europe from persecution in their homeland.

He mobilised political support at Westminster and elsewhere. In 1989, while he was caretaker manager of one of the largest Sikh Temples in Britain, at Southall, west London, he won an exemption for British Sikhs from the requirement to wear safety helmets on construction sites, as enacted in the 1990 Employment Act.

The Sarbat Khalsa (general body and highest temporal authority of the Sikh religion) held a gathering at the Akal Takht, Amritsar, on 26 January 1986, and instituted the Panthic Committee, charging it with the responsibility of establishing a sovereign Sikh state. In 1987 the Panthic Committee nominated the Council of Khalistan as its international political wing, and appointed Singh the first General Secretary in 1989, an office he held until his death. He was also publisher of the Khalistan Gazette, which reports to the Sikh community on the progress of the Sikh Movement and is also sent to British MPs.