

How much of a Sikh am I?

BHAI HARBANS LAL*

* 6415 Amicable Drive, Arlington TX 76016. USA Email: japji@comcast.com

I CANNOT RECALL ANY ONE asking this question, was I a Sikh, either during my childhood in Pakistan or after partition of 1947 in India. I remember being asked this only at the time of census, or at the time of school registration. It never worried me either as, more than once, I was elected to serve as a leader of Sikh organizations or Sikh institutions.

Affirmation:

But if some one did ask me if I was a Sikh, I found no hesitation in answering “yes,” in a persuasive tone, and then go on doing my work. I always responded in affirmative. The question was undemanding, the answer was easy, and the matter was swiftly concluded.

In North America the situation changed. The frequency of grilling on the identification question increased in the last few years. It should be of no surprise. I am a stranger to many and not visibly recognizable as a Sikh. But, it is still not a big deal. I politely answer that I am a Sikh. If some one persists with additional questions, I further qualify myself as a *Sehajdhari Sikh*. The matter usually ends; except sometime I may have to explain politely what a *Sehajdhari Sikh* is.

Situation changes completely, when I ask myself this question and when the term Sikh is not a noun but an adjective.

Then I find it a searching question, and rather a disquieting one that undermines my self-righteousness. Indeed, to ponder the question is to be set all a-tremble and stomach churning. The question is not so easy; nor is the answer that straightforward.

To avoid unpleasantries, clever linguists use plural for adjectives as well as nouns so that the distinction that I wish to make here is left to the subtlety and appreciation of the listener. This way the translator is free to choose from the imaginations.

Attribute:

But really there is a difference. **The noun is still, the adjective dynamic. The noun is comforting, the adjective demanding.** The noun asserts, the adjective pleads. The noun is worldly, the adjective spiritual. That is why I make fuss between “Sikh” and “a Sikh.”

Certainly it is not a yes-or-no matter; the question ought rather to be, “How much Sikh are you?”

I cannot be confident in laying claim to any large or small share of Sikh-ness and say, “Oh, I am very Sikh indeed.” That answer will be both arrogant, and false. However, can I absolve myself by admitting that, alas, I am hardly Sikh at all? Thus I may become aware of how little Sikh I really am. Although discouraging, it will give me a powerful sense to haunt me that I ought to be more Sikh than I am.

A Pilgrimage:

Whereas an assertive answer is pretentious; a down-to-earth answer is just not good enough. Something in between has the fault of both of these. Therefore, I just cannot answer the question without big compromises with my own-consciousness. Yet, neither can I dismiss it. Once the question is put to me, it goes on probing my conscience within, a dynamic restlessness that impels me to a life not of much or of little, but of the pilgrimage towards my sacred space.

The answer to the question has a very dynamic quality because the response varies from day to day. The first of my two questions “am I a Sikh” need to be answered usually once; a tick in the appropriate column of the Census report or the membership application of a local Gurdwara, will carry over from one year to the next. Most of my friends do not change their formal “religion,” and neither do I. If some one asked me, “Are you a Sikh?” in 1999, I should not expect him or her to repeat the question this year, unless my response was forgotten.

“Am I Sikh?” however, is far from being so unvarying an issue when the term Sikh is used as an adjective. Perhaps yesterday morning, for a brief spell I was indeed fairly Sikh in my starting of the day with meditation and thoughtful readings from Sri Guru Granth Sahib, and later when I treated my fellow drivers humanly as I zoomed to my work. But I was perhaps poorly Sikh in the evening when I yelled at the cleaning lady at the office and forgot any courtesy to other drivers at rush hour.

The Core Question:

How Sikh was I yesterday when I saw a hungry homeless person standing in the heat of Arizona sun and drove away in my air-conditioned car? How Sikh was I last year when I voted in the American elections, on the issue of food stamps for the poor, rights of women or banning the human field mines?

Do you find that there are certain issues when you feel usually less Sikh in your dealings with other fellow humans? The issues are not only ethical: but in the deep, they are questions how Sikh am I doctrine wise. Was I truly Sikh as I spoke to the congregation last Sunday? Was the congregation truly Sikh when it formulated the election bye-laws to exclude others? How Sikh are we as we hammer out a liturgy on comparative religion or a religion of our neighbors?

Inclusivity:

Let me illustrate the matter in another way. A few years ago, I was reading an article on a Sikh gurdwara. I came across a sentence saying that the gurdwara was a house of worship for the Sikhs. We read such assertions every day. Does that mean that others ought not to worship there? Should we not recite the following *Gurbani* verse addressed to a Muslim?

ਉੱਠ ਫਰੀਦਾ ਉੱਠੁ ਸਾਜਿ ਸੁਬਹ ਨਿਵਾਜ ਗੁਜਾਰਿ ॥

Farid, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, P. 1381.

Rise up, Fareed, and cleanse yourself; chant your morning Muslim prayer.

Are we shocked first at the arrogance of our co-religionists and, more profoundly, at the self-righteousness of our excuse? That sin of labeling a place of worship for a Sikh only is threatening to the faith itself. Although at the level of being a Sikh, one

may not think of it as unsettling, the illustration sets forth the present point under discussion. Theologically, no sensitive or decent Sikh could patronize that proposal, but it is done routinely by those counting themselves as Sikhs.

A gurdwara that *excludes* those who are not Sikhs, by the same act excludes those who are Sikh. Noun and adjective are here torn shredding apart.

Who were those who were first to be called Sikhs and when did these terms come into literature? When the noun and adjective terms as we used them today came into existence, I have not searched much. Some one could make a thesis research project to investigate this particular point more thoroughly. However one may cite the following.

Bhai Gurdas wrote extensively in his sixteenth century compositions on who is Sikh. Let me quote only one verse as:

ਗੁਰ ਸਿਖੀ ਬਾਰੀਕ ਹੈ ਖੰਡੇ ਧਾਰ ਗਲੀ ਅਤਿ ਭੀੜੀ॥ Bhai Gurdas, Vaar 11, Pauri 5.

To be Sikh is walking on a very fine path. It is like walking on the blade of a sharp sword and walking through a tightly narrow path.

Definitions:

In modern times, the sensitivity arose only half a century ago. The question surfaced at the Sikhs' holy place in Amritsar. The premier Sikh organization, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee wished to define a Sikh for the purpose of census and for the purpose of a manual being prepared for those taking initiation of *khande di pahul*. The terms, as we use them today, one recalls, developed there. The organization invited representatives of all shades and opinions for almost a week long deliberations.

There was a genuine effort to preserve both the noun "Sikh" and the adjective "Sikh". As with other names designating members of a new or newly encountered religious community - "Quaker," "Pietist," "Methodist," "Jains," "Muhammadan," "Hindu," "Buddhist," "Confucian," "Shintoist" - so "Sikh" term, too, was introduced by clerics and politicians I was included through my colleagues in All India Sikh Students Federation in the deliberations that followed to solidify the consensus into a published document; not without a touch of the selfishness and missionary zeal. But they succeeded in providing the best yet definition a part of which defined "a Sikh" and remaining defined "Sikh." A Sikh was one who committed to be a Sikh and did not claim affiliation to any other religion. Then Sikh was defined in term of faith to live by such sacred beliefs that were incorporated in the Guru Granth.

But soon we forgot the two-tier definition of "Sikh". We have gotten so used to the term over a few decades that we are becoming accustomed to employing it so carelessly and irreverently that we have lost any clear grasp of why I should be hesitant in responding to the question.

How worthy are we?

Bhai Mani Singh, however, accepted martyrdom to keep us reminding. He was the high cleric of *Sri Harmandir Sahib* and *Akal Takht*, and was martyred in protecting our sacred institutions. In those days, those who remember, the term "Sikh" designated not those who had privileged entry to exclusive organizations or clubs, but those whom the rulers of land had marked out for scalping from skulls. Yet

“we are not worthy of it”, said those to whom the term applied. Every Sikh replied to the executioner: I must accept the name; not as something of which I am worthy, but as something to which I aspire in the presence of my Guru. You will put me to death because I say I am Sikh. I hope that you will find me worthy - not that much in name, but in my ability to stand by my beliefs and cheerfully face the Will of God.

Bhai Mani Singh - and thousands of others - who gave their life for their belief were actually following the footsteps of their mentors, like Guru Arjun and Guru Teg Bahadur, who endured extreme sufferings to uphold their belief in religious freedom and human rights. The Sikh scripture supports this allegiance as:

ਜਉ ਤਨੁ ਚੀਰਹਿ ਅੰਗੁ ਨ ਮੋਰਉ ॥ ਪਿੰਡੁ ਪਰੈ ਤਉ ਪ੍ਰੀਤਿ ਨ ਤੋਰਉ ॥

- Kabir, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, P. 484.

‘Even if You cut my body apart, I shall not pull my limbs away from You. Even if my body falls, I shall not break my bond of love with You. ‘

It would add quite a new quality to our thinking of our belief and boasts, and perhaps to our mode of living if, today, we recaptured the martyr’s belief that being martyred may perhaps justify a little more than the otherwise undeserved application to us of the term “Sikh,” which to the martyrs evidently meant “his Guru-like.” Sikh theologian, Bhai Gurdas elaborated on this theology in his *Pauri 3, Vaar 11*, by verse: gur isK isK gur soie AIK IKwieAw. Further, Guru Gobind Singh told his Khalsa: “If you will die for your faith, perhaps you will deserve the name; but hardly otherwise. “

Half a Sikh:

And yet dare we reject this standard? I have investigated certain facets of the evolving history to understand the use of the adjective “Sikh”; and have discovered some quite startling instances. To cite one_is - an instance from the life of Guru Arjun.

The fifth Guru once wished to award a coin to a performing bard in his court on behalf of each Sikh. He produced four and half coins and announced that *the half coin was on his own behalf*. He further elaborated that he was counting himself half a Sikh because he had not reached the level of spiritual practices required of full Sikhs. Keep in mind that Guru Arjun was the one who compiled most of the scripture that we adore today as our eternal Guru. Thus he set in stone the theology that we adore. His labeling of himself as half a Sikh, although an instance of total humility, was nevertheless an example of a deep meaning. He was constructing a scale with which to measure one’s *Sikhee*.

Then we can go to our Scripture to seek guidance in this matter. Guru Gobind Singh asked us, in no uncertain terms on October 20, 1708 in his last sermon that we ought to surrender to Sri Guru Granth Sahib for an answer when in doubt. But I am petrified, and perhaps frightened what my eternal mentor might tell me on being Sikh if I asked the Scripture to give a definition of Sikh. As a way around my weakest spot let me ask instead what my Guru would say in another similar situation.

Universality:

There were many Muslims who regularly came to the Guru's presence to seek guidance. If any one of them wanted to claim himself as Muslim, the Guru would humble him by saying the following:

ਮੁਸਲਮਾਣੁ ਕਹਾਵਣੁ ਮੁਸਕਲੁ ਜਾ ਹੋਇ ਤਾ ਮੁਸਲਮਾਣੁ ਕਹਾਵੈ ॥ ਅਵਲਿ ਅਉਲਿ ਦੀਨੁ ਕਰਿ ਮਿਠਾ ਮਸਕਲ ਮਾਨਾ
ਮਾਲੁ ਮੁਸਾਵੈ ॥ ਹੋਇ ਮੁਸਲਿਮੁ ਦੀਨੁ ਮੁਹਾਣੈ ਮਰਣ ਜੀਵਣ ਕਾ ਭਰਮੁ ਚੁਕਾਵੈ ॥ ਰਬ ਕੀ ਰਜਾਇ ਮੰਨੇ ਸਿਰ ਉਪਰਿ
ਕਰਤਾ ਮੰਨੇ ਆਪੁ ਗਵਾਵੈ ॥ ਤਉ ਨਾਨਕ ਸਰਬ ਜੀਆ ਮਿਹਰੰਮਤਿ ਹੋਇ ਤ ਮੁਸਲਮਾਣੁ ਕਹਾਵੈ ॥

- Guru Nanak, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 141.

A True Muslim:

It is difficult to be called Muslim; if one is truly Muslim, then he may be called one. First, let him savor the religion of the Prophet as sweet; then, let his pride of his possessions be scrapped away. Becoming a true Muslim, a disciple of the faith of Mohammed, let him put aside the delusion of death and life. As he submits to God's Will, and surrenders to the Creator, he is rid of selfishness and conceit. **And when, says Nanak, he is merciful to all beings, only then shall he be called a Muslim.**

Our founder, Guru Nanak went into a great deal of theology to counsel his Muslim followers.

ਮਿਹਰ ਮਸੀਤਿ ਸਿਦਕੁ ਮੁਸਲਾ ਹਕੁ ਹਲਾਲੁ ਕੁਰਾਣੁ ॥ ਸਰਮ ਸੁੰਨਤਿ ਸੀਲੁ ਰੋਜਾ ਹੋਹੁ ਮੁਸਲਮਾਣੁ ॥ ਕਰਣੀ ਕਾਬਾ ਸਚੁ
ਪੀਰੁ ਕਲਮਾ ਕਰਮ ਨਿਵਾਜ ॥ ਤਸਬੀ ਸਾ ਤਿਸੁ ਭਾਵਸੀ ਨਾਨਕ ਰਖੈ ਲਾਜ ॥ ੧ ॥ ਮਃ ੧ ॥ ਹਕੁ ਪਰਾਇਆ
ਨਾਨਕਾ ਉਸੁ ਸੂਅਰ ਉਸੁ ਗਾਇ ॥ ਗੁਰੁ ਪੀਰੁ ਹਾਮਾ ਤਾ ਭਰੇ ਜਾ ਮੁਰਦਾਰੁ ਨ ਖਾਇ ॥ ਗਲੀ ਭਿਸਤਿ ਨ ਜਾਈਐ ਛੁਟੈ
ਸਚੁ ਕਮਾਇ ॥ ਮਾਰਣ ਪਾਹਿ ਹਰਾਮ ਮਹਿ ਹੋਇ ਹਲਾਲੁ ਨ ਜਾਇ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਗਲੀ ਕੂੜੀਈ ਕੂੜੇ ਪਲੈ ਪਾਇ ॥ ੨ ॥
ਮਃ ੧ ॥ ਪੰਜਿ ਨਿਵਾਜਾ ਵਖਤ ਪੰਜਿ ਪੰਜਾ ਪੰਜੇ ਨਾਉ ॥ ਪਹਿਲਾ ਸਚੁ ਹਲਾਲ ਦੁਇ ਤੀਜਾ ਖੈਰ ਖੁਦਾਇ ॥ ਚਉਥੀ
ਨੀਅਤਿ ਰਾਸਿ ਮਨੁ ਪੰਜਵੀ ਸਿਫਤਿ ਸਨਾਇ ॥ ਕਰਣੀ ਕਲਮਾ ਆਖਿ ਕੈ ਤਾ ਮੁਸਲਮਾਣੁ ਸਦਾਇ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਜੇਤੇ
ਕੂੜਿਆਰ ਕੂੜੈ ਕੂੜੀ ਪਾਇ ॥

'Let mercy be your mosque, faith your prayer-mat and honest living your holy book. Make modesty your circumcision, and good conduct your fasting. In this way, you shall be a True Muslim. Let good conduct be your holy place, Ka'aba, Truth your spiritual guide, and good deeds your kalma prayer and chant. Let that be your rosary, which is pleasing to God's Will. O Nanak, then God shall preserve your honor. To take away what rightfully belongs to another is like a Muslim eating the forbidden pork, or a Hindu eating forbidden beef. Our Guru, our Spiritual Guide, stands by us only if we do not commit bad deeds (eat those carcasses). By mere talking, people do not earn passage to the Heaven. Salvation comes only from the practice of Truth. By adding spices to forbidden foods, they are not made the sanctioned ones. O Nanak, from false speech, only falsehood is obtained. There are *five prayers* and five prayer times of day; they have five names. Let the first be truthfulness, the *second* honest living and the *third* charity in the Name of God. Let the *fourth* be good will to all, and the *fifth* the praise of the Lord. Repeat the prayer of good deeds, and then, you may call yourself a Muslim. O Nanak, the false ones obtain falsehood, and only falsehood.'

The example of Muslims in this paper brings to our attention certain parallels to our situation from another community and to similarities that originate cross-culturally; both elaborate and enrich our understanding of who is Sikh. Let me explain.

An ambiguity detected in the Islamic tradition is similar to ours. There, as with us, the word “Muslim” is used both as a noun and as an adjective: the noun formal, mundane, designating membership in an historical community as a superficial fact, while the adjective refers to content - designating an internal attitude and orientation.

Ask a member of the Islamic community if one is “a Muslim,” and the answer will be “yes” forthrightly, sensing no problem and registering no prior or subsequent thought.

Ask him, however, if he is Muslim, and he will show great sensitivity and responsibility if he can answer convincingly and without a reverent consternation.

“Muslim” in Arabic means “submitter” or “self- committing,” so that to affirm that a person is Muslim is to speak of one’s quality of heart, one’s commitment to God, and one’s readiness to obey whatever injunctions the moral law may make incumbent on that person. Two persons may both be Muslims, but one of them may be more Muslim than the other, may be more Muslim in one situation than in another, more Muslim one morning than in the same afternoon.

Tradition:

Returning to Sikh traditions we can also consider our sacred Scriptural tradition. To take a Scriptural figure of Sheikh Farid, might one say that he was not a Sikh as he was a Muslim, but was Sikh on account of his theology and high living. His verses were included in our holy book even though he claimed himself to be a Muslim and he employed Muslim idioms in his verses. Same can be said of Bhagat Kabir and other non-Sikh authors of the Sikh Scripture, the Guru Granth. All of them are accepted as channels of revelation that formed the Sikh scripture.

In the Sikh history, Bhai Mian Mir can be taken as another controversial figure for our discussion. Guru Arjun picked him out of all his contemporaries, Sikhs and others, to lay the foundation stone of what the Guru was going to construct as the Sikhs’ holiest place, *Sri Harimander Sahib*.

Since that time Sikhs treated Mian with highest regard in spite that he was a Muslim. In quality he was Sikh to be given this unique honor.

Humanism:

We can consider many individuals of today for illustration. A part of Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela was Sikh even though neither one was a Sikh. I realize that considerations such as these will arouse cross-cultural implications that may even complicate the issue. However, their discussion may enrich this whole matter.

Personally I am not a Muslim or a Hindu or a Christian, but I am a Sikh. Again, my answer to a question on this point can be quick, clear, and definite. Yet if the question is raised, am I Sikh, Muslim or Hindu, the answer is not quick, clear nor definite. Normally I do not speak Arabic or Sanskrit, nor do I observe Hindu rituals or ceremonies. Instead I was given a name in the historic Gurdwara *Panja Sahib* and married according to Sikh tradition of *Anand Karaj*. Here the adjective is in the form of a question; does it apply to me, or can I apply it to myself.

The only possible answer that I can give to this question is that I hope to be Muslim terms of Baba in terms of Baba Farid as much as I long to be Sikh as my Guru ordained. Any other answer would be blasphemous and arrogant. I can be as

“Muslim” in the sense that the Guru respected Islam on occasions himself. Guru Nanak even wore Muslim clothing and carried the Qur’an to Mecca with the intension of participating in the *haj*. I should be obedient to God’s Will and be charitable to God’s creation; as readily as God gives me the courage. I am not, alas, in the practice of my life, as Muslim as a good Sikh could be. But certainly I could aspire to be.

One cannot be both a Sikh and a Muslim or a Hindu at the same time. The nouns keep us apart. On the other hand, it is not, I suggest, as ridiculous or fanciful as might look, to ask whether, in the realm of adjectives, it might not be possible for a person to be both Sikh and Muslim some times. I for one can understand and consent to the meanings for the terms in which this is possible. I could even say that to be truly Sikh is *ipso facto* to be truly a Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or Christian some times.

Those of you whose hearts God has opened to surrender and who are fortunate to be blessed by the Guru’s commandments, would not think in terms of such particularities of adjectives to characterize the quality of their orientation; whether you know it or not, these adjectives are there in *Sikhee* to actually describe the mind-set to which you hope to rise in your best moments.

It is a highly rewarding exercise to inquire more discerningly what our founders and the enlightened souls have meant when they understood “Sikh” as a noun or an adjective. It is equally rewarding to ask oneself what one means, or proposes to mean, by this term of our faith, not merely when one is about to use it in speech or in writing, but also when one is in one’s trying moments.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, let us make life simpler and enjoyable by claiming only one faith, the noun Sikh and the adjective Sikh. Then, in the silence of your room, in the hub-bubs of the daily scuffle, in the busy current of your routine or in your crises and predicaments, look for opportunities to value your faith in reflecting on what “Sikh” might mean right then and there. Each morning as you arise; you might well ask yourself what you intend to make the_word Sikh mean for yourself this day.

