

Turban Legends: WSU students discuss turban culture on campus

AMARINDER KAUR SINGH *

** Medical student and contributing writer for WSU, D/o Sardar Harpal Singh & Sdni Pushpinder Kaur (d/o Dr. Harnam Singh Shan, Chandigarh) 4111, Narwich Court, Rochester. Michigan. USA.*

EVER HAD A BAD HAIR DAY? Probably. Ever had a bad turban day? Probably not. And you may not have even realized that a “bad turban day” really does exist.

“Mine are sort of sloppy, but that’s the way I roll,” 20-year-old Vikram Singh Chawla laughed in regards to his turban.

Vikram, a Wayne State University junior pursuing a career in medicine, begins every morning by covering his *kes* - the uncut hair on his head with approximately five yards of brightly colored fabric. First, he prepares the cloth by stretching it out. Then he holds about one foot of the fabric in one hand while simultaneously wrapping the longer length of the fabric around his head. He finishes the act of tying his turban by tucking in the short end of fabric under the piece he just wrapped around his head.

“For me, it takes about three minutes every morning,” said Vikram, who has had a turban since the second grade.

He belongs to the Sikhism faith, a monotheistic religion that originated in northern India and Pakistan in the 15th century. Sikh men, explained Emeritus Professor Dr. Harnam Singh Shan of Punjab University in India, wear a peaked turban and don’t cut their hair out of respect for God’s creation.

“In the ancient period most people kept their beard, hair and turban. So we link up with this sanctity. Why should we cut what grows on us everyday? If we do this we are defying the plan of the Almighty,” Shan, who is head of the department of Sikh studies at Punjab University, explained.

“Since we keep our hair uncut some headgear is necessary to embellish it and that is the turban. The turban, however, is not just a headgear. It is Sikh’s glory and pride.”

“The media definitely give the turban a negative image,” Vikram said. “Most Muslims don’t wear turbans anymore, but the ones they show on TV are always wearing turbans. They do this because it’s easy, the media is all about making connections and it’s easy for them to connect the turban to terrorism.”

Cultural distinctions in turban tradition

But the turban, which has a Persian origin, has a rich history associated with it. Beyond the images portrayed by the media and beyond the considerable fabric used to tie it, the turban has historically been associated with royalty kingship, said Shan.

Van Overbeke, who works for the Road Commission of Macomb County, just recently returned from fighting in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq.

“Before I went over there, I’d see a turban and say, ‘Oh, there’s a bad guy,’” he said. “I didn’t know the difference between religions.”

Van Overbeke took it upon himself to study and understand the different uses of the turban. He started to notice differences in the ways people tied their turbans.

“The turban belonged to all Eastern people. It has been there before the Sikhs and has always been a symbol of nobility and respect. But the Sikhs put a stamp on it and owned it,” said Singh.

In India, when the father in a family would die, a turban-tying ceremony took place to transfer leadership to the eldest son. Because of this, the turban symbolized the passage of responsibility, he said.

The turban-tying ceremony is still celebrated by Sikh families today. It is no longer associated with the passing of a family member but is now associated with a new sense of maturity.

“My turban-tying ceremony took place about three months ago,” said 20-year-old senior Harpreet Wadhwa. “For me it symbolized commitment to my religion and more maturity and I did it because I wanted to.”

Sikh men are the only men who wear the turban to cover their uncut hair. Unlike a hat, the Sikhs retie a fresh turban every morning.

“This act of retying the turban symbolizes good hygiene. It should be shaken everyday, particularly in Indian areas where there is a lot of dust,” said Singh.

Muslim religious leaders also wear the turban. Their turban is usually wrapped around a cap known in Arabic as a Kalansuwa. A white turban is thought to be the holiest turban color for Muslims. The green turban symbolizes paradise.

Unlike Sikhs, however, all Muslims are not required to wear the turban.

“The Sikh turban is neatly tied and composed of a variety of colors,” Shan said. For Sikh men the turban is an important aspect of their uniform, said Singh. The turban distinguishes Sikh men and establishes a sense of brotherhood amongst them.

“It’s more than just a turban and a beard,” said Simran Dulay, 21, president of the Sikh Student Organization. “There’s a spiritual satisfaction I get from it.”

For Chawla, his turban is his way of being different. He said he wishes everyone had an open information policy. He said that more people should ask him questions, as they should know he won’t get offended and on the contrary would love to explain the significance of the turban.

“I feel like some people take my turban the wrong way. You can’t say Sikhs wear turbans and Muslims don’t because it’s good that they do if it’s part of their culture. It’s just not fair to relate all turbaned people to the images we see on TV,” said Vikram. He, Dulay and Wadhwa all agreed that the WSU student body has been very receptive to their appearance and value of the turban. “Turbans break conformity in a sense,” said Dulay, who started keeping his hair in fifth grade. “I love wearing it; it gives you something to believe in. The turban is a catalyst in discovering who you are and who you want to be. It really sets you apart.”

Some people hesitate when they see his turban, seeming a little uptight, said Wadhwa. “I can’t describe it, it’s an instinctual feeling. But I don’t think I’ve ever gotten a bad reaction on campus,” he said.

For Wadhwa, like many other Sikhs, the period following Sept. 11 was a very frustrating time. The whole point of his unique identity was to represent his community in a positive light and then all of a sudden people started making the wrong assumptions, he said. "We're a really peaceful people and we're one of the most liberal religions".

"You have to be very cautious, you can be recognized," said Shan. "If there are 500 people and I am the one with a turban and I commit a crime, it's very easy to recognize me. So as a Sikh, it is important to uphold high standards for yourself and your community."

Chawla, Wadhwa and Dulay are just a few examples of Sikh students on campus. They are students who are learning how to deal with different reactions in a changing world where mass media plays a significant role in shaping people's opinions.

"Coming to WSU was a big culture shock for me," said Jarois. "I think people should be educated about turbans and different cultures in general. It's really important to distinguish between different groups of people. They are entitled to that respect and acknowledgment."

According to Singh, we are part of a growing process. "We didn't educate people enough about the Sikhs prior to 9/11 and then all of a sudden we got caught up in a bad situation," he said.

"Now I'm very satisfied that young people and organizations are working hard to educate people. We are making progress, but we have a long way to go."



England hails new Spin King: Monty Singh

LAST JUNE, THE ENGLAND CAPTAIN, Michael Vaughan, struggled to find new superlatives for Man-of-the-Series Monty Panesar after watching his most consistent match-winner bowl his side to a seven-wicket victory and a 3-0 series win over the West Indies here yesterday.

Panesar was the key instrument in the West Indies collapse in the afternoon session, finishing with five for 46 as the tourists lost their last six wickets for 88 to raise his own tally to 23 wickets in the four-Test series. It was another masterful display from the 25-year-old Northamptonshire player, prompting Vaughan to nominate one delivery as a ball that every left-arm spinner should be seeking to emulate.

"Monty took wickets in favourable conditions at Old Trafford, in complete contrast to the slow wicket here, and yet he produced a delivery to get Denesh Ramdin out that should be shown to every left-arm spinner for a long time to come," Vaughan said. "It was the perfect left-arm spinner's ball."

Panesar's fourth five-wicket haul in four matches proved he can be as effective an attacking weapon for England in cool, damp conditions as he is with the sun on his back and cracks in the pitch. It raised his tally for England in 16 Tests to 60

wickets. Among England left-arm spinners, only Derek Underwood, with 67 successes after the same number of matches, has made a more impressive start.

The West Indies' collapse to 222 all out left England needing 110 to win, a task completed in 91 minutes for the loss of three wickets, Vaughan finishing unbeaten on 48.

When you look at a bowler figures don't tell the whole story, it is the amount of pressure they put on the opposition that counts.

[Courtesy: *The Independent*]

