

The Sikh Identity - The Challenge Abroad*

Khushwant Singh

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THE large majority of Sikhs who live abroad do not observe the norms and symbols of their faith. As matter of fact, very rarely does the second generation of settlers retain anything of the traditions and the way of life which is the integral part of our religion.

This is a depressing state of affairs in Canada, the United States and Great Britain—perhaps in other foreign countries too. What is more depressing is the ostrich attitude of the leaders of our community who will not see the writing on the wall and only condemn those who draw their attention to it. It is wiser to face facts than humbug ourselves into state of false security.

In order to survive we have to orientate our way of thinking and plan an approach to religion which meets the challenge of the times. The plight of the Sikhs abroad has many lessons to teach us. I put my experience before you and hope your readers will use your columns as a forum for serious thinking and not just fervent affirmations of religious dogma.

My first contact with anyone who questioned the necessity of the forms and symbols of Sikhism was at my college in Lahore more than 20 years ago. A young colleague who had doubts about these traditions expressed them to us and, getting only an expression of disapproval, decided to seek better counsel. He wrote to the S.G.P.C. in Amritsar announcing his intention to remove his hair and beard unless persuaded otherwise. The S.G.P.C. sent two of the most eminent Sikh theologians, Prof. Teja Singh and S. Ganga Singh, to discourse with him. They spent quite some time talking to the young man. But the mission apparently failed for when the youngster reappeared after the long vacation, he no longer wore his hair or beard. The only other change in his pattern of behaviour was that, while the Sikhs were not particularly keen to associate with him, he seemed to resent their indifference and made efforts to be in their company.

The second caste was that of a student who travelled with me on board ship on my first voyage to England. I did not know him, but then Sikhs do not wait for a formal introduction and he was keen to talk to me. He ranted vociferously against a faith which mixed religion which was a matter of the spirit with formalism which had only social implications. Most of the loud criticism was to evoke some response from me and to find out why I did not feel the same way. My reaction was a negative one expressing anger without bothering to see the other man's point of view. This boy and I went to the same hotel on our arrival and on the very first evening he divested himself of his hair and beard. I only saw him next morning when he walked into my room. Apart from his changed appearance, his eyes were bloodshot as he had spent the whole night crying and he again burst into tears on my shoulder asking me, a stranger, for forgiveness. He wanted me to reassure him that he was still a Sikh. That assurance I could not give him.

With the second type of incident, I have now become quite familiar. The behaviour of the apostate falls into a pattern:doubts... irritation... apostasy... remorse... desire to be rein corporated into the Sikh fold.

The pattern indicates the line action we should now adopt:

1. Let us clearly recognize that Sikhism is not only a matter of religious beliefs (which are purly personal) but a social phenomenon. One may claim to be a good Sikh without the hair and beard as indeed most *sahajdharis* (a sect of Sikhs who do not keep the 'forms) are. But one cannot have the sense of belonging to the Sikh community without the forms and symbols.
2. The forms and symbols of Sikhism are so inextricably mixed with our religious history that in explaining their purpose and importance one must go beyond the ethical teachings of the Gurus, and the scripture, to the traditions which upheld them with their lives; for instance, of the last Guru's infant sons who preferred death to the easy course of cutting their hair, and to the thousands of martyrs who followed their example through 250 years of our sanguine history. No Sikh shorn of the symbols can share these traditions however good and religious he may be, and no one who is not imbued with the spirit of this tradition can possibly be convinced of their importance.
3. We should foster the sense of belonging with each other. It is the strongest bond which can weld a small community like ours into a united group. That is one reason why I believe that Sikhs must remain united in their objective. It is only in this way that we can foster our faith in our own language, and cherish our traditions and values among our own people.

