

“Modern” Sikhs, Is there such an Entity?

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SINCE TIMES IMMEMORIAL THE HUMAN beings have been in a race to get ahead of their peers. In order to achieve their personal short-term objectives; some will not hesitate in treading over the established values of certain important aspects of life. This is especially true in the realm of religion for it is here that deliberate attempts are often made to meddle with the original codes of established religions to suit individual needs. Such actions indirectly belittle those who remain steadfast against any diversion or pollution of the true concepts of their faiths, regardless of the hurdles in their way and the subtle pressure that is often exerted upon them.

Re-inventing the Wheel:

The proponents for modifications, on the other hand, justify their stand by arguing that rules, regulations and codes of established religions are neither up to date nor in synch with modern world. They wish to “reinvent the wheel” under the garb of reforms, and justify their actions as the natural extension of the modern times labelling it as a need of the hour.

Such phenomenon is not only prevalent in Judeo-Christian faiths but is rapidly taking hold amongst the migrant people of Eastern heritage, thanks to the prevalent culture of so-called modern society that tries to promote freedom of what it designates as a “new thought and action” in each and every facet of our lives, religions included.

The Sikhs in the Western world are no exception. In fact they seem to have been particularly affected by this phenomenon. This could be explained, in part, due to natural loosening of religious restraints in the multicultural and multi-religious society of the West. This is brought to them by a pseudo-feeling of “liberation” from the back home societal web that kept them under the folds of true dictums of Sikh faith ordaining its followers to maintain a unique identity, with uncut hair and turban as a pre-requisite for being and becoming a true Sikh. The incident of 9-11 and its negative repercussions upon Sikh identity in the Western world caused further harm by providing a ready made excuse to those on the edge to shun this fundamental code. The philosophy that “Every thing goes here” led several Sikhs in the western world to make personal choices contrary to the norms of their religion.

Scared Immigrants:

It is a well known fact that a significant number of Sikhs abandon their identities as soon as they land on the western shores in order to look like majority. It will not be an exaggeration to state that their numbers might exceed over 90% amongst all immigrant Sikhs in North America. Had each and every Sikh who migrated to western world tried to maintain his or her original form, the issue of lack of awareness about Sikh identity that we are facing today would not have been as serious?

Apologists:

This problem becomes further compounded when, after doing away with Sikh identity, they try to turn into activists against the dictums of their own faith and start

preaching home grown philosophy in labeling the fundamental articles of Sikh faith as mere symbols, superfluous and non-essentials. They often state that “Sikhi does not rest in outward appearance, rather it is something internal.”

In saying so, it is conveniently forgotten that the first step in being, or becoming, a Sikh, or a student of Gurus, is to accept their commands “in toto”, much akin to a soldier who must wear the uniform first before he could be identified like one.

When essential fundamentals, the cornerstones and the foundations of Sikh faith are mislabeled as “mere tradition”, the entire significance is lost. If it were “mere tradition”, one could certainly have argued in favour of letting them go, because there is nothing wrong in following the traditions of Romans while in Rome; but “they are not”.

Courage of Conviction:

Such attitude affects adversely and causes confusion in the minds of newly-arrived un-established, economically dependent relatives and friends, as well as other weaklings in the faith who sincerely try to understand the Sikh faith in its true perspective from the so-called trend-setters pioneers. But unfortunately the latter themselves quite often don't have much high religious grounds to stand upon. Coming from one's own faith, this negative ideology hurts more; for human beings perceive more pain on being hit with flowers by their friends, or relatives, than by rocks thrown by foes.

Premium on Ignorance?

Currently Sikhs with beard and turbans living in the Western world find themselves in a pull that is oppositely directed. On one hand, they have this strong sense of maintaining their full identity, with beards and turbans. Perhaps equally strong is the difficulty that they encounter, on daily basis, as a result of a widely prevalent ignorance and curiosity about Sikh faith and its identity in foreign cultures. Often times, harsh verbal comments, hateful frowns and queer looks create many difficulties, including obtaining and maintaining their jobs. The subtle but continuous ongoing pressure exerted by their friends and relatives, who had already bid farewell to the Sikh identity, adds fuel to the fire. Had it been simply an element of curiosity or ignorance, one could have reasoned it out, but when it turns into hatred erupting into physical violence as it did times and again after 9-11, this becomes an issue of grave concern that simply can not be lost sight of and requires careful analysis.

Hate-crime Scare:

Sikh Americans, despite not having any role in the horrible crime against America on that day, ended up paying heavily in the form of violence against them, including loss of a few lives. Such physical incidents of hate against turbans and beards provided ready made justification of saying good bye to Sikh identity in the minds of those who were already on shaky grounds, making them inappropriately question the very rationale of following the dictums of their Gurus under such environments. Those who steadfastly believed that the articles of Sikh identity bestowed on them by Guru Gobind Singh Ji were to be maintained under all circumstance; happened to be the ones who ended up facing such issues single-handedly. It was here that the leaders of Sikh community in India failed miserably, for they could have intervened by exerting their political pressure in helping Sikhs living abroad, but unfortunately,

their own petty internal fighting and mud throwing battle with one another kept them mired into their own cocoons.

Identity Vs Anonymity:

For providing credence to their views, many Sikhs who shun their Sikh identities try to label themselves as “Modern Sikhs” having a “Liberal outlook”, thus implying indirectly that those who still do, are some how “primitive living in caves”, as the good doctor Prof. I.J. Singh has stated. Such individuals ignore the fact that assimilation does not - and need not - have to be automatically translated into de-identification. In their opinion the outward show of purity without purity of heart and deeds is not worth the effort. True, but it also should not have led them to assume that having outward Sikh identity will somehow lead to the pollution of the internal purity.

It is no denying the fact that either kind of individuals, both with and without Sikh identity, exist in plenty in this universe-some pure at heart and others not. **The fact of the matter is that to live a true Sikh way of life one has to believe and live with a full belief in outward appearance of Sikh faith while maintaining total internal purity.** Sikhism comes in a package deal. How could one ask a Sikh to be pure at heart and in deeds, yet ignore the first and fundamental step of preserving a visible distinct Sikh identity? Sikhs are ordained to have certain codes: both moral and external, which are not mutually exclusive. To justify certain elements that might suite one which ignoring others is to twist the facts of the history and mislead the youth.

Personality Plus:

There are countless turban-wearing Sikhs with unshorn hair in every sphere and profession who are very successful in their chosen professions and are as modern as any body could be in the true meaning of this word. Their enhanced performance in day to day Sikh way of life often reinforces that their faith, its philosophy and precepts are very much modern, and in tune with modern day. In words of Dr. I J Singh “A crew cut would not necessarily endow them with so-called characteristics of modernity any more than long hair would automatically transform them into sage or savage”

Here I am also reminded about the beautiful lines of Mr. Gosal “To be modern does not necessarily mean that we reject the lessons emanating from the past. **The Tenth Guru knew that Sikhs will always be in a minority. He was aware of that proverbial rite of passage where the urge to be different collides with the innate desire to belong to a group.**” Mr. Gosal states further that **‘Vaisakhi was the masterful answer to that dilemma-be different - wear the articles of faith - but be individuals; know yourself; be immersed in the ultimate reality and the agonizing over daily fads will dwindle. Think long term -character; not short term fashion.’**”

Dr I.J. Singh further clarifies by stating “Unassailable definition of modernity for a Sikh is to understand and lived by the very tenets and postulates of Sikhism, and that includes the lifestyle of a Sikh, including the turban and beard” “Having such a life style” he goes on to say “would be very clear outcome of the logic on the modernity of Sikhism.”

And, finally, I must conclude by saying that when a Sikh tries to use personal misconstrued perception as a license to mislead others about the significance of the Sikh articles of faith, as well as its true original teachings, his or her actions must be viewed as tantamount to blasphemy; no less, no more.

