

“A Turban is to a Sikh what the Crown is to a King”

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DARBAR-E-KHALSA IS ONE of the largest Sikh gatherings in Southern California where nearly ten thousand Sikhs assemble on every Christmas day. The IIGS (International Institute of Gurmat Studies) has been hosting this function every year on a very grand scale. During last year's function, I came across a banner with a very interesting statement that caught my attention so much that I decided to use it as the heading of this essay.

Natural: In many non-western countries, wearing a turban on cut or uncut hair is practiced by several people belonging to different faiths and cultures. Upon landing on the shores of western world, however, such individuals often shun their turbans even if they had been wearing them back home throughout their lives. They seem not to have any serious obligation or commitment to maintain their turbans. The Sikh faith, on the other hand, happens to be unique in that aspect. It requires maintenance of full uncut hair as one of the main pre-requisites for its members. In order to cover their natural hair, a unique style of Sikh turban has come to be recognized as one of important symbols for Sikh identity. Irrespective of whether one is an ordinary individual or a religious leader of significance, and regardless of place of residence, a Sikh is always expected to wear a turban. So much so that a turban on uncut hair has become the symbolic of being a Sikh. Much like a King who doesn't have his identity without a Crown, a Sikh without a turban would often have difficulty in being identified as a true Sikh. In western countries, the Sikhs are the only people who wear turbans. It is often a truism that almost 99% of the turban-wearing people in the west happen to be Sikhs.

Respect: In the past much had been stated about turbans and the people who wear them. But since the 9/11 terrorist attack on U.S. soil, the turban has been continuously denigrated not only in US but in other western countries. It is no secret that Sikhs didn't have any thing to do with the events of 9-11 and were not responsible for its genesis. The hijackers of the planes were neither Sikhs nor did they wear turbans. Yet ongoing television screening of Osama-bin-Laden and his lieutenants, the presumed sponsors of those attacks, a mistaken impression about the turbans and the people who wear them has been continuously implanted in the minds of many ill-informed westerners. The people not familiar with Sikh identity often equate turban-wearing Sikhs with the fundamental religious leadership of the mid-east. Consequently, many innocent Sikhs and some other turbaned individuals had been made target for a misdirected hate. A few of them have even suffered very serious negative repercussions including death. The life of a Sikh in the west who tries to maintain his turban as per tenets of his or her faith has not remained the same any more as it was prior to 9-11.

I vividly remember my daily commute in New York Subways in early seventies. My fellow passengers, totally unknown to me, would often ask others to vacate a seat for 'the good doctor' so that I could sit. It often made me perplexed as to how on earth the passengers, whom I never knew or met before, could ever figure out that I

were a physician. And finally one day my curiosity led me to question one of the fellow passengers who had rightly assumed me to be an MD. The response equally surprised me when he responded "It is because of your turban," then he said further "Are you not a Sikh from India?" He went on to add, "You see, in America, the Sikhs with their turbans are mostly professionals such as MDs, Engineers, professors and teachers or students. Therefore, I automatically presumed that you with your beautiful turban must be one of them. Besides, you have just taken a train from close to the hospital, confirming my belief that an MD you must be"

Let us compare this with what is happening now-a-days in New York City as well as in other large metropolises in US and, for that matter, in rest of the western countries. Since early seventies many more Sikhs have been continuously arriving as immigrants making these cities as their homes. The initial groups of immigrant Sikhs, like other Asians, were hard-core professionals. The newer groups on the other hand are not necessarily limited to the professions enumerated by that stranger in my subway encounter. Having full awareness of the fact that their faith always encouraged an honest and hard labor, the immigrant Sikhs started diversifying their search for livelihood based on their needs, past training and interest. They started myriads of different businesses and accepted various jobs they could lay their hands upon for making a reasonable good living. But this alone in any way should not have been the cause of concern. What became bothersome however that with the passage of time and increase in the number of Sikhs in the west, the respect, love and a desire to maintain *Saabt-Soorat* as ordained by Guru Gobind Singh Ji started taking a back seat.

Ignorance: This is not to say that Sikhs didn't encounter serious hurdles en-route. Oftentimes turbans and beards did stand in their paths and collided with the strange environments they were thrust into. At times they were - and are still - told that turbans and beards belong to old world, have no meaning or space in these countries and are therefore unnecessary. Despite such uttering, those who truly believed in the dictum of their faith and saw a truthful meaning to the turban, created a space for it and stood firm. But unfortunately, the story didn't have a happy ending. The major damage to Sikh identity started coming from those who themselves had forsaken this beautiful gift of Guru. Having done what was not to be done, they turned themselves into activists *against* Sikh identity. Gradually they started promoting their anti-turban behavior to the newly arrived relatives and friends. As soon as a poor innocent young Sikh soul, totally ignorant about west, landed at the airport from a remote village of Punjab, he was first driven to the barber shop and made to get rid of long hair and beard so as to sport a new look. Their own fellow Sikhs, having already shunned Sikh identity, often told these new entrants, albeit incorrectly, that turbans and beards in the west are only meant for the Raagis, Granthis, and Bhais of Gurdwaras much akin to the religious hierarchy of the other faiths. Even an iota of chance was not given to a poor new entrant to assess for himself as to what the new life holds.

Under such circumstances, many of the newly-arrived helpless young Sikh boys, on being confronted with a difficult situation, often end up dumping their identities by getting rid of their turbans, 'the crowns' and adopt an easy route. Should they decide to keep their identities, their daily lives are made extremely miserable through subtle pressures exerted upon them by their turban-less relatives and friends. Uninformed

and unarmed with the needed armamentarium to defend their identities, the true Sikh image, with full hair and turban, thus keeps on taking a beating as a result of continuous loss of turbaned young Sikhs. Thus, day in and day out the crown of a Sikh "the turban" has been conveniently -and at times - voluntarily forsaken by the freshly arrived.

Confused: There is another unfortunate phenomenon that needs mention. Some of the turbaned Sikh parents living in these countries do not give a choice to their young child and take him, or her, to a barber's shop even before the Sikh child can understand the wider and life long implications of having his or her hair chopped off. On the other hand, there are certain parents who themselves do not maintain Sikh identities but for reasons unknown, perhaps as consequence of a guilt complex, try to maintain their children's hair for sometime. As soon as the child reaches 7-12 years of age, the head is shaved off. They justify such an action through many different excuses. But it causes a great deal of emotional trauma to the other Sikh friends of such children as well as to their parents who desperately worked hard during the formative years of their children to make them understand the concept of *Saabat-Surat*.

Whose fault is it? And who is to blame? Answers, as always, might not be easy. A critical analysis makes it somewhat obvious that our religious hierarchy has failed in its responsibility towards an ordinary Sikh in his or her pursuit to maintain his identity especially under painfully hostile environments. Many leaders and managers of various Gurdwaras in the west do not maintain Sikh identities themselves and have no true interest in promoting such cause. In a very subtle way, these men of power often prevent the preachers, Ragis and Granthis from uttering such sermons. And if some independent-minded preachers ever dare try, they land themselves in trouble with the managements. In contrast, once proper information about Sikh faith and Sikh identity is laid open to the uninformed non-Sikh people of the west, they usually do not have any difficulty in accepting the Sikhs in who they are and what they are. Even at places of work once colleagues understand and realize the skills and hard work ethics of Sikhs, the appearance becomes of secondary consequence. Having no personal axe to grind, they often seem not to care as to how a Sikh lives or looks!

Home-Truth: Likewise, turning our eyes towards Punjab in seeking emotional support from Sikh hierarchy for maintaining some semblance, one is literally shell-shocked. The true state of affairs has become despicable not only amongst the ordinary Sikh youth of Punjab but in the progeny of Sikh leadership as well. With each passing day, the Sikh youth, including that of the leadership, both religious and political, is continuously and actively turning apostate. Cutting hair, drinking alcohol, using intoxicants and getting mired into antisocial and morally degrading behavior have become fashions and talks of the day. The negativity and inferiority complex about its own faith and lack of self pride, keeps the Sikh youth away from Sikh dictums and keeps them engulfed within all the vices. Such behavior ultimately encourage young Sikhs into decimating their own articles of faith, thus making the survival of Sikh identity next to impossible. As they say, the fence that was supposed to protect the crop has started to gulp it at an animalistic speed.

The way and the speed with which we are ignoring the dictums of our Gurus and losing our identity, one thing is becoming painfully obvious. The days do not seem to

be far, when ordinary turbaned Sikhs might become scarce to find, especially in the west. My fear is, and I pray this doesn't turn out to be the case, that turbans might only be left to be worn by those in religious professions, much akin to the followers of the other Eastern faiths. The question one needs to ask oneself as a Sikh then, "Is that what we wish for the ultimate fate of this precious gift bestowed upon us by our Father Guru Gobind Singh Ji?" And if the answer is no, then the collective will and efforts of those who care about Sikh identity must stand up against this onslaught of constant decline in our fundamental tenets of Sikh identity. We need to assert that 'The Turban of a Singh' must be preserved, for this truly happens to be 'The Crown of a King', no less.

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