

The Sikh Identity

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GURU GOBIND SINGH ON VAISAKHI of 1699 established the Khalsa brotherhood. As integral to the moral discipline he ordained that all his Sikhs keep unshorn hair. Essentially he created a casteless and classless society and assigned the title 'Singh' to all males, meaning lions and 'Kaur' meaning princess to females. After the partition of India in 1947 and more so after the genocide of the Sikhs in 1984, some disturbing trends among the Sikhs need serious thinking by our intelligentsia, religious and political leaders as how to arrest and counteract them without any further loss of time. The following trends need to be urgently addressed:

1. A large number of Sikhs have started trimming their beards. Some trim so badly that they give a poor image of a Sikh. Usually sons of such Sikhs who indulge in trimming their beards do the same or simply shave off. We often see a father or a grandfather holding a clean shaven son or a grandson. Trimming of long hair by the Sikh girls has also become fashionable. The result is, that it is not uncommon to see a Sikh and his wife with bob hair.
2. Many Sikhs now feel shy to use 'Singh' or 'Kaur' in their names. You come across names like Harjit Soni, Birinder Kohli, Gurdeep Gill, and so on, without using 'Singh' or 'Kaur'. **It appears that perhaps they want to hide their Sikh identity. This defeats the very purpose and the spirit in which Khalsa was created as one brotherhood.**
3. All over the world, people converse in their mother tongue. In India also, Marathis, Bengalis, Tamils, Gujaratis, etc. speak in their mother tongue among themselves, including their children whether they are living in their own state or any other state in India or out of India. Surprisingly, only Punjabis, both Sikhs and Hindus, who consider themselves "modern" speak Hindi with their children. They falsely consider it more refined than Punjabi. Even many grown ups and well-to-do Punjabi Sikhs converse in Hindi although they can speak in Punjabi as well. This is indeed very strange. Those who consider themselves elite or upper class prefer to speak in English. This trend is primarily due to the fact that Punjabi Hindus disowned Punjabi and declared Hindi as their mother tongue. Since well-to-do Hindus converse in Hindi with their children and quite often, among themselves, Punjabi Sikhs thought it to be more 'fashionable' to converse in Hindi and elite Sikhs in English. This complex from the minds of the Sikh need to be removed, especially because Punjabi Muslims also declared Urdu as their mother tongue. So Punjabi is now left to be the mother tongue of the Punjabi Sikhs only. If Sikhs don't take a note of this, then, in few years time, they may be speaking only Hindi which will become their mother tongue.
4. Young Sikh boys wear a 'patka' to cover their hair. It is o.k. till they are 13-14 years old. Thereafter they should start wearing a turban especially from class 9th onwards if not earlier. Those who don't start wearing turban at this stage, continue to wear a 'patka' not only till they finish school, but also when they go to the university, which does not give proper image of a Sikh. Some of our sportsmen are in a 'patka' even while giving interviews for TV coverage or to the press or in ads. Wearing of 'patka' while playing games is ok but not in social,

official or other public functions and occasions. Quite a few Sikhs are seen in a 'patka' in TV serials, which is not correct.

5. Although over 50 years have passed since independence, not a single good Punjabi movie has been made. This is in spite of the fact that a large number of actors and producers are Punjabis. Sikhs are occasionally shown in Hindi movies, but more so as jokers, taxi drivers, doormen at five star hotels, and so on. Moreover, they are not shown in proper Sikh form. Their beards don't look normal and natural and they wear funny type of turbans. During the course of the movie, a Sikh character alternates with trimmed beard and a turban, and then without a turban and shorn hair on the head. This is highly objectionable. They are never shown in proper respectable Sikh form. Since Punjabi Hindus disown Punjabi as their language, the Sikhs have to seriously think of producing some good Punjabi movies based on novels, plays and stories by well known authors. Sikh characters in respectable and proper Sikh form should be heroes and heroines. If Hindi movies revolving around a Muslim family with a Muslim hero can be made, then why not around a Sikh family with Sikh youth as a hero.
6. Well known Sikhs in their respective fields who get media coverage need to take special care about their form and behavior as they are an example for the younger generation to emulate.
7. I hope my suggestions will be taken seriously by the Sikhs, both in India and abroad, and will take immediate steps to take remedial measures.



Sehajdharis and Sikhism

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A LOT HAS BEEN SAID AND WRITTEN about the status of *Sehajdharis* in the Sikh religion, but controversies continue to arise. The *Sehajdharis* are an important wing of the religion and were recognised as such even during the lifetime of Guru Gobind Singh Ji, and the turbulent period that followed. They have all along been considered to be the breeding ground for *Amritdharis*, and there is no room for any controversy on this issue. Dr. (Bhai) Harbans Lal, himself a *Sehajdhari* deserves all praise for the research he conducted on the subject, and his findings published in ***The Sikh Review*** of September 1999, deserve to be respected by one and all. In fairness, however, to themselves and to the religion, the *Sehajdharis* should adopt and confirm Sikhism as their religion for census and all other statistical purposes.

Dream Unrealised:

In the matter of propagating our religion around the world, we have miserably failed. We have not been able to spread the *Gurus'* message beyond the four corners of Punjab. The efforts of S.Harbhajan Singh Yogi's organisation to bring in new converts to Sikhism in certain parts of North America are indeed laudable but, beyond that, precious little has been done. There is vast scope for preaching our religion, not only in India but throughout the world, but we have so far been lacking in efforts. *Parcharaks*, well educated and well versed in religion, need to be sent all around the world to preach the *Gurus'* message of love and universal brotherhood. In this endeavour, the S.G.P.C., the D.S.G.M.C, and the wealthy *Sardars* around the

world have to pool in their resources and set up a suitable organisation for the purpose. How otherwise can the Guru's dream of 960 million Khalsa be realised?

Gradual Evolution:

In preaching Sikhism to new persons, the emphasis should be on converting them as *Sehajdhari Sikhs* initially, instead of offering them "*khande-baatey da pahu*" straight away. They will become *Keshadharis* and *Amritdharis* when they have fully understood the religion, together with the significance of the five "*kakars*". It has to be realised that being an *Amritdhari* is the highest stage in the religious development of a *Sikh*, and we cannot expect every newcomer to begin with it. Guru Gobind Singh did not administer Amrit to the five "Beloved Ones" without subjecting them to a severe fitness test. Until they reach that stage, the new converts have a right to be called "Sikhs", by virtue of their faith in the religion. It is said, that in spreading Islam in African and Asian countries, the Muslim preachers merely changed the convert's names first, and asked them not to eat pork. The rest of the things, they learnt in due course.

Adoption of new strategy:

A similar approach has to be dogmatically adopted by us. There is no harm in changing the strategy, keeping the right goal in view. Let us stop putting the cart before the horse. Undoubtedly we have already lost millions of prospective Sikhs to Buddhism and other religions, by our orthodox and faulty approach to preaching.

Status of patits:

Another related important issue facing the Sikh community is that of the so called "*patits*" or apostates, whose religious status in Sikhism is shrouded in ambiguity. The solution does not lie in discarding them, as some of our leaders would suggest. There is hardly any Sikh family without one or more such members, and the community can hardly afford to lose them all. By discarding them, they will be unwillingly pushed towards other religions; and believe me, any religion will welcome them with open arms. The only sensible solution lies in treating them as having "reverted" to the *Sehajdhari* status, but still forming an integral part of the Sikh community. Should their link with Sikh religion continue, many of them could be expected to become *Keshadharis* (or even *Amritdharis*) again by intensive *parchar* and family persuasion. **The wide-spread impression that a Sikh's religion automatically, changes when he ceases to be *Keshadhari* must be curbed effectively, if Sikhism has to survive as an independent world religion.**

Matrimonial Discards:

Besides, young Sikh girls, in increasing numbers, are preferring to marry clean-shaven boys irrespective of whether they are Sikhs or non-Sikhs. In fact, in a majority of cases, they end up marrying non-Sikhs. This unfortunate tendency can be halted if the so called "*patits*" are accepted as genuine Sikhs. The community is passing through a serious crisis and we can ignore this fact only at our peril. No problem can be solved by turning a blind eye to it. These views are in line with the teachings of the great *Gurus*, and in the best interests of the Sikh community. If the leaders think otherwise, the *panth* (under the patronage of Guru Granth) is competent to decide all important issues, under the powers vested in it, by no less an authority than the Tenth Master himself.

Will the panthic leaders along with the Sikh intellectuals rise to the occasion, and come up with a practical solution with due regard to the situation on the ground?

The present generation leaders, will go down in history for having presided over the disintegration of the religion of the great Gurus, if things are allowed to drift any further. The time to act is NOW.



All India Gurdwara Bill: A case for enfranchising Sehajdhari Sikhs

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The SGPC's decision to debar the Sehajdhari Sikhs from the right to vote for electing members of the SGPC has put the Sikh world in a sharp and needless cleavage. Is the decision a rightful one? Or, is it merely symptomatic of some inherent malady? We would like to analyze the different aspects of the issue with some objectivity.

Rehat Maryada describes an *Amritdhari Sikh* as a person "who has taken *Khande-ka-Amrit* prepared and administered according to the tenets of Sikh religion and rites at the hands of the beloved five (*Panj Piaras*) and a *Sehajdhari Sikh* as a person "who professes Sikh religion, believes in one God, follows the teaching of Guru Granth Sahib and the ten Gurus only, who does not smoke tobacco, eat *kutha...* and is not a *patit*." *Mahan Kosh* brings out the essential difference between the two. A *Sehajdhari Sikh*, it says, is a person "who is not baptised with *Khande-da-Amrit* and does not keep the customary sword and underwear but who does not believe in any other religion."

These two types represent the different shades of the essentially same religion. Bhai Kahan Singh in *Mahan Kosh* quotes the below given hymn which is attributed to Guru Gobind Singh wherein the Guru cites a trinity in Sikhism:

Trai Prakar(u) mum(u) Sikh hai sahaji, carni, khanda

(There are three categories of my Sikhs, *Sehajdhari*, *Charandhari* and *Khande-da-Amritdhari*)

It is obvious that the Guru who started the Order of Khalsa also accepted the other members of the Sikh community on equal terms as an inseparable part of the community.

The above descriptions of the *Amritdhari* and *Sehajdhari* Sikhs emphasize the difference in the way they have adopted the same faith. There may be some difference in the outward form but in spirit they essentially remain the same. They both mean to follow and propagate the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib.

Guru Nanak writes in the *Japuji*:

Manai mug(u) na calai panth(u)

(A man who reflects on the One Universal Being does not follow this or that narrow path.)

Guru Nanak did not see any difference between people of different religions. When, for instance, he emerged out of his *samadhi* at the bank of Veini stream, he declared: "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim."

In *Akal Ustat*, Guru Gobind Singh writes: "The temple and mosque are one, the Hindu worship and Muslim *Nimaz* are one, all men are the same, though, through different influences, they appear different." The Gurus wanted to abolish all differences between different religions and let the faith in One Universal Being prevail.

But one is really puzzled to see the electoral politics seeking to create difference between a Sikh and a Sikh by attempting to deny the voting right to Sehajdhari Sikhs. By doing so, it is putting itself in a paradoxical situation, whereby, it would no longer remain a representative body of the whole Sikh community. Secondly, it has a temporal character, the purpose of which is to control institutions (i.e. the Sikh Gurdwaras) which have the sole objective of working for the spiritual ascendance of mankind. There is thus generated an inherent contradiction within the body temporal itself which debar it from taking any decision that is anti-spiritualistic or politically motivated, especially when the Gurus have expressed their opinion about it in clear terms. It can, no doubt, preserve the right to take care of the Sikh places of worship but it cannot *debar* a certain section of the community from participating in the care of the institutions which are the seats of spiritual inspiration for them.

What is primary function of religion after all? It is to work for the spiritual ascendance of mankind. Spiritual ascendance is achieved, says Guru Nanak in the Japuji, by perceiving the cosmic order (*hukam*) and the energy aspect (*eka mai*) of the one universal being that is manifested in the forces of creation, preservation and destruction (30th *Pauri*). The devotee, like the great saints, uses the knowledge as a weapon (*ved hathiar - Pauri 38th*) and in the crucible of love and devotion develops an immortal vision and evolves a holy principle that gains currency with the whole mankind and enables it to have a vision of the divine. The spiritual seeker thus, uses the divine principle (*sabad (u) saci taksal - 38th Pauri*) for the salvation of mankind by taking it to a higher level of spiritual perception and endeavour.

Mark the words: "salvation of mankind". If this is the objective of a Gursikh, for him the distinctions of caste, creed, religion, etc. get completely obliterated. Then why create new distinctions on the basis of amritdhari and non-amritdhari Sikhs? The essential difference between them is of form and not of essence. Just as the core of a dry fruit is its essence and the outer shell its form, the same way the spiritual content of a religion is its essence while its form, like the outer shell, is only a mantle covering for the essence of religio-philosophical thought. What actually is to be grasped is the essence of religion for without it the form has no significance.

A religion must have a capacity to evolve as the society evolves. Any religion with too much emphasis on form and a neglect of spiritual content becomes anti-evolutionary in nature and starts decaying and very soon becomes obsolete. When Guru Nanak was asked at a ceremony to wear the sacred thread to be admitted to the position of the twice born, the Guru instead of obeying asked Hardial, the Pandit who was performing the ceremony: "How can this thread made from cotton give an honour in the life to come? It remains with the body... Give me the thread that will really help my soul in the life to come." When asked what sort of thread he would

have, the Guru replied **“Let mercy be the cotton, contentment the thread, purity the knots and truth the needed twist. Blend these virtues together in every day life. Thereby the soul will be invested with the thread which will never get old or dirty or burnt or lost and which will never break.”** What the Guru is actually emphasising here is that the spiritual essence of a religion has an eternal aspect while the form has only a temporary aspect.

In order to survive, a religion must expand, and must have the power to assimilate people from other religions. As compared to other religions, the Sikh religion seems to lack this capacity and is already showing signs of incipient shrinkage.

The SGPC must use its ingenuity and innovative thinking to see how this power can be increased. Debarring the Sehajdhari Sikhs from voting right will further reduce this power. By denying the Sehajdhari Sikhs the right to vote in the SGPC elections the law tends to inflict an irreparable cleavage on the community that would result in the shrinkage of the Sikh population and also lead to the devaluation of the spiritual content of the faith. The proposed legislation should open the doors to Sehajdhari's franchise.

