

Globalization: A Case Study of Sikhism

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Globalization today constitutes an important and, in some respects, unique force in world society, economy and culture. Like many other nations, the issues relating to Sikhism have become global due to technological advancement particularly information technology. Globalization motivates changes occurring in traditions, culture, and mentality, collective as well as individual, and, indeed, in education, arts, communication and other social institutions. These changes are central to the transformation of not only a national intellectual capacity of local knowledge of being sufficient in a global environment, but also to a promotion of worldwide practices necessary to update individual knowledge and skills. A widespread discourse of these changes demonstrates that Globalization is more influential than ever in respect of the social and cultural transformation.

At the same time, to challenge the global influence appears to be the most critical dimension in the process of socio-cultural transformation. The increasing importance of local knowledge, tradition and culture is significant for surfacing the inverse changes answerable for a reoccurrence of traditionalism, conservatism, and nationalism in the post-industrial, industrial and transitional societies. It is also responsible for maintaining the various forms of social and cultural estrangement and for developing an intricacy of socio-cultural perceptions in different societies.

The Sikhs and Globalization:

The Sikhs are now in direct contact with the other nations settled in the different parts of the globe. Apart from this, it is a well known fact that a major portion of the Sikh population has permanently settled in different parts of the world. However, in case of Punjab, the birth place of Sikhism, the settlement and immigration is a regular feature which in turn has made the Sikh issues more complicated globally. Moreover, in this era of globalization, the issue of Sikh identity and other related matters are being hotly debated, but in an entirely different form. Let us have close look at the pre-globalization and the changes which have become subject of an endless debate.

Before the era of globalization, the Sikh religion and its history were debated in the broader context of Indian nationalism. This was mainly due to political reasons.

To some extent, it was the product of the need of the hour, or the requirement of the then developing Indian nationalism. Due to political compulsions, the history, religion and traditions of the Sikhs were projected in a manner in tune with the Indian nationalism. A beginning was made in this directions through a political –cum-philosophical movement wherein the Sikh Gurus were shown as nationalists.¹

In the contemporary global context, the history and religion of the Sikhs is being studied, reviewed and interpreted afresh. At the same time, it is a fact, however bitter it may be, that the Sikh religion can not and must not be interpreted in the context of " Indian nationalism" or even "*Punjabi*" (a term coined in our times).

The message of Sikhism can not and should not be confined to a particular state, territory or region. Globalization has proved a boon, as it has opened new vistas towards a fresh thinking on the issues directly concerning the Sikh religion and history and the future of Sikhism.

Cultural identity:

Under the era of globalization, the whole world is becoming a global-cultural village. Values, ethics, music, dress, beliefs and art of one land are coming closer to one another. There is a great impingement of technology on the traditional culture. Mass media as a whole has played a great role to shed light on the yet unknown tribal lives. Gone are the days of cultural shock in the present day global world. **It is a great paradox that when a man lives in another country, his love, pride and attachment for his language, dress and culture becomes more alive. At least he wants to keep alive his cultural roots in him.**

In this state of affairs, of cultural globalization, if we take only one example of dress, particularly of the headgear, we find different type of caps, turbans, *burqas*, *chunnies* and *dupattas*, etc. Arabs wear a particular headgear, a cloth, covering their shoulders tied with a rope on the top of their heads. Even diplomats, prime ministers and presidents when visiting abroad wear such a dress. Thus a community adopting a particular dress has its own emotional feelings about it because his dress has its own geographical, social and religious roots in its society. **Turban, for example, inherits a value of pride, dignity and honour in the minds of the Sikh community.**

Under the era of globalization, when there are tremendous opportunities for mobility all over the world, a greater understanding of the dress codes is needed for the smooth functioning of the countries. A slight social disturbance can be a big issue for another social group or community. **For example in France, there are 5000 Sikhs and one can easily estimate the number of school going students in the country, for whom the government of France has put a ban on the wearing of turbans.**

The behaviour of a Sikh, consequent upon his settlement in any part of the globe becomes questionable. He finds himself at cross-roads, as a representative of Punjabi or *Gurmat* culture. (in accordance with the Sikh religion and beliefs). If he inculcates the former, he is prone to all sorts of anti-social and uncivilized acts, which are also common among the various other religions. These two common, yet different, attributes will always remain a subject of debate globally.

Punjabi language:

Language has never been a problem in the Indian sub-continent right from early days to our own times and no language posed any danger to our lingo-diversity because there was no cultural domination using language as a medium. However, it is an undeniable fact that language has been a powerful medium of self expression and cultural identity of every group of people in the world. Even UNO is making every effort to ensure the enjoyment of cultural rights by all ethnic groups on the earth. In the Indian context, the principle of multi-lingualism has been an accepted fact and reality.

However, globalization has posed a new challenge to the principle of multi-lingualism. It is an undeniable fact that under the globalization effect, smaller languages are losing their existence, as English has emerged as the main language for global communication. In case of Punjabi language, it is pertinent to mention here that UNESCO, in its latest report, has concluded that by the end of this century, 50 world languages would lose existence and Punjabi could be one of these.

Inter-dependence:

An important feature of the new global world is the element of inter-dependence. Gone are the days when the terms 'locals' or 'natives' were used within the national boundaries in a particular country or state. The pre-globalization era was about nation

states with its fetish for territorial sovereignty and the sanctity of the soil. The era of globalization is characterized by its accent on de-territoriality. People and their professional identity become more important as marker than their territorial location.

National pride:

Globalization is also about migration and mobility, about displacement and dislocation. Not that these processes were not there earlier- but they have become more intense in a new global world. Indira Nooyi, for example, heads the American Cola giant, and it is matter of pride for the Indians, a Bobby Jindal or a Ujjawal Dosanjh or a Shashi Tharoor, likewise represent India's national pride.

Globalization has opened new vistas for each individual in any part of the globe. The new world has moved far ahead and away from the rhetoric of brain drain and son-of-the-soil theories of yore. In the present context those who are better equipped in terms of skill and technical qualifications tend to find the globalization more smooth and congenial for them.

Ethnic minorities:

Admittedly, globalization has the potential to rake up conflagrations, be it Tamil Elam from Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Punjab and the north Indian states from India. Globalization has given a new hope to the ethnic groups struggling for independence. It has in fact facilitated their task.

In case of the Sikhs, several organizations, supported by the global Sikh community, have been advocating sovereignty for the Sikhs. Despite a multitude of barriers in their way, some groups have remained steadfast to their ideal and pursuing their cause world-wide without being threatened or scared away. This is partly due to the financial and moral support from the native as well as global Sikh community. Whether their cause of freedom, dignity and rule of law remains a myth or becomes a reality, only future will tell. Presently, however, their actions and conduct are being taken as a grave threat to the international relations and security by the Indian state as well as some western countries where the Sikhs have settled in sizeable numbers.

Westernization and Sikhism:

The impact of westernization and globalization has seen a phenomenal rise in all walks of Indians, including the Sikhs. Globalization has undoubtedly brought not only the new ideas and institutions but it has also brought significant rationalization on some of the traditional Sikh institutions and ideas.

The concept of westernization and globalization has broadly been identified with modernization which has affected various aspects of the global society. It has affected every section of the Indian society. However, in case of the Sikhs its effect is steadily increasing. The Sikhs in the western world have adopted many attractive aspects of modernization world-wide. However, it may be pointed out in their social and domestic life they still continue to be largely orthodox or traditional in tune with the guiding principles of the Sikh religion which is based on three cardinal principles:

Nam Japo, Kirt Karo, Wand Chhako (Recite the Lord's name, Do your duty and share the fruit of your labour with others). A Sikh endowed with these qualities is an enlightened being, without pride, wants no praise, has no enmity, remains calm, is not aggressive and is not afraid of anybody. He is not trapped by the lust, wrath, avarice, infatuation or ego.

While selecting the "first or given name" of their child, the newly arrived immigrant

parents, not fully conversant with the western culture, or its subtle intricacies, often decide to settle on a name based on back-home culture, that might be too long, alien and difficult to pronounce for the indigenous population in which they have decided to live. Coupled with an alien background, skin color and other distinct characteristics, it could haunt them later on, particularly to the deserving children in seeking admissions in professional colleges or competitive jobs. The difficult to pronounce "first or given names," often leads children and their parents to avoid using such lengthy names.

Such names therefore end up being left reserved for official use only, on legal documents, such as, driving license or social security numbers, etc. In their place, short and easy to pronounce "nick names" or abbreviation of original names start taking over. It is a phenomenon that seems to be fairly popular among the Sikh immigrants.

It has been observed that the Western culture has influenced, to some extent, several Sikh and Punjabi children into using English nicknames, such as Bobby, Gary, Goldie, Janice, Kim, Rocky, Sam, Susan, Vicki, Winnie, etc. In this way the Sikh parents try to fulfil both the obligations, i.e. of religious needs as well as societal perspective around them. When it comes to maintaining the ordained requirement of Sikh faith, there could not be a second view. **The Sikh parents follow the established guidelines in seeking help from *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* as far as the first letter of the first names is concerned which is followed by 'Singh' or 'Kaur' as the case might be.**

Global impact:

A majority of Sikh children, particularly those born and raised in western countries, will ultimately live in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies. Some might question, then, why could not the Sikhs make the western society learn about their names like they do for theirs? However, this will only lead to satisfying one's ego whereas the ground realities do not tend to support such wishful thinking. The fact is that the discrimination is bound to persist in any multi-cultural society and multi-ethnic community regardless of the pious upfront put forth by the majority of the given country.

The Diaspora Sikhs:

The diaspora Sikhs today constitute an important and, in some respects, unique force in the world culture. Gone are the days when Indians, including the Sikhs were taken over as indentured labour to far-flung parts of the British empire in the nineteenth century- a circumstance to which the modern Indian populations of Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam, Malaysia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and other places, attest in their own peculiar ways. In the post Second world War period, the dispersal of Indian labour and professionals has been a nearly world-wide phenomenon, the Indians, including the Sikhs, and other South Asians provided the labour that helped in the reconstruction of war-torn Europe.

In the recent years, the skilled and un-skilled labour has been the main force, in the transformation of physical landscape of much of the Middle East. In countries such as United States, Canada and Australia, the Sikhs have made their presence visibly felt in various professions... The major issues that come to the fore in case of Indians abroad, particularly, the Sikhs include relations between the parents and children, race relations, the place of language, food and music and responsibility of the Indian Government about the future prospects of the Sikh community settled abroad. For the sake of better opportunities in life, taking any (and every) risk has been an ingredient of their culture and character. They remain deeply insular and fiercely protective of their

religious and cultural identity.

There was a time when the Sikh "question" sparked the same sort of controversies that the Muslim "question" sows these days. It may be admitted that the issues regarding the Sikh identity and religious sensitivity have not completely disappeared and are being debated from time to time. For example, through the 1960s and 1980s, the Sikhs in Britain fought a series of bitter and long drawn-out battles over their right to have beards, wear turbans and carry *kirpans*.

The Sikhs have been able to adjust themselves amidst different communities all over the world, while largely maintaining their distinct identity. However, in case of Diaspora Sikhs, there is a spontaneity in borrowing the western elements. He is at pains to compromise between modernity and spirituality in far off lands. Fundamentally, he is conscious of the Sikh Holy Scripture which lays emphasis on the fact that education, wisdom, scholarship and intellect, without a spiritual perspective are all vanity. A Sikh, wherever he is settled, basically believes in spirituality in conventional context. As a member of the Sikh faith, the diasporic Sikh is outside his limited surroundings and has therefore, grown more mature, collectively or individually. He is conscious of the fact that any one who defies the laws of Nature, including the country where he has settled, will invite the consequences, irrespective of the fact how good, bad or religious he is.

The diaspora Sikhs, generally well established in professional fields, have made great impact in foreign countries and have built religious and social platforms in their countries of domicile. Efforts are also on to form a vibrant and credible institution, like the World Sikh Council as pre-requisite for meaningful contribution in the rapidly transforming global scene.

There is no evidence that the Sikhs did harm to any country or a place of their domicile. On the other hand, the Sikhs abroad always contributed to help not only their kith and kin in the place of their origin but also contributed financially to make Punjab as a model and best developed state of free India. Undoubtedly, they are better off than their brothers in Punjab. But, at the same time, there is no reason for them to give up their well established positions to begin anew in Punjab. However, this is possible only if their identity, honour and dignity are safe in their homeland.

Traditionally, a diaspora Sikh, being human, is cautious by nature and has always been worried about future, and thus spoils his present. At the same time he believes in fundamental truth that "God helps those who help themselves". His revised idiom is 'God trusts those who trust in themselves'. As a human being he considers all others as human beings. Again, it is the impact of globalization which has made him conscious of the fact that immeasurable distance can be covered at a speed faster than light, but only when you look into yourself and know thyself.

Be that as it may, the Sikhs in their native dress can easily be seen as an embodiment of sheer otherness. Due to their appearance, the 9/11 events have put their life in danger in the United States. **They are being mistaken as Arabs, Afghans or Iranians and have become the target of hate crime. Post-September 11, there have been pretty widespread incidents in the US of harassment, intimidation, vandalism and violence against the Sikhs. They also became victims of profiling, as evidenced so vividly by their being selectively subjected to intense security checking at airports, on highways, etc.** Their dress has come up for public scrutiny and discussion in altogether different respect. The Sikhs have insisted that they be exempt from the

law that compels them to wear helmets, although it is a fact that a helmet cannot be worn over turbans and their faith requires to wear turbans. Again, the *kirpan* has been an issue of contention in several countries. The Sikh diaspora in fact has been affected even in case of the issue of a driving license, or admission in a Government school due to their religious practices, appearance and dress - a turban or even a *kara*.

According to one estimate, among the Asian cultures, Sikhism was most neglected of India's religious traditions. However, thanks to globalization, there is now universal awareness and interest in Sikhism. There are now chairs of Sikhism and Punjab Studies in U.S.A, Canada and several other western countries, where research as well as courses in Punjabi and Sikh religion and history are offered to interested scholars. In many of these institutions, apart from summer schools, international conferences are also held from time to time, most of which focus on the issues like the Sikh identity, religion and history in global context.

Thus the crisis which has emerged in Sikhism has a multi-cultural base and appears to be mainly due to the onslaught of globalization. As a result, the Sikhs particularly are facing deep crises of identity. In spite of it being most cosmopolitan and liberal religion, Sikhism is at cross roads- courtesy - a challenge thrown by globalization. In case of Sikhs, a sense of belongingness, identity and nationality questions are the big issues to be sorted out globally, if one wants a real and pro-people emergence of globalization. □

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