

Laptop in the Gurdwara: Initiatives in Calcutta

*Sangeetha Nair**

It is 4 a.m. on a Sunday morning and Ranvir Singh leaves the nightclub on Camac Street

like everyone else. But the 24-year-old man-about-town isn't heading home to catch up on his sleep. He takes a detour, instead, to the Sri Guru Singh Sabha gurdwara. To sit, talk, meditate.

Ranvir works as an insurance broker and loves to party. But like many other Kolkata Sikhs, his faith is strong. And his religious identity is an important layer of the facets that make him whole. Like many city boys from the community who dabble with the idea of discarding the turban at least once, Ranvir spent days arguing with his parents on the issue. He says: "When I was a teenager I wanted to remove my turban, but Mom eventually taught me to respect it. She told me not to be ashamed because everybody respects a Sikh – the 'ji' in Sardarji is a suffix of "respect".

The turban is one of the most visible symbols of Sikh identity and an overwhelming majority of men wear it with pride. There are some who say they don't feel the need to wear a turban to feel Sikh. Says Harmeet Johar, a student at a city college who recently had his *kes* (hair) cut: "Today, I'm not ready to wear a turban. Maybe one day I will. It doesn't make me any less of a Sikh." But, strikingly, Harmeet's experience of having gone against the wishes of his parents and community leaders, while not having endeared him to them, hasn't led to his being ostracized. "That's one of the great things; fundamentalism doesn't go very far here," he adds.

An estimated 2,00,000 Sikhs call Kolkata home. They came from all over – Burma, Assam, Punjab and Bihar – but the reason was always the same: better livelihood and a secure future. If there was ever a community that subscribed to the pull-yourself-up-from-the-bootstraps motto, this is it. Among the early migrants to the city were those who managed to escape the "The Burmese Way To Socialism". One of them was Gurmukh Singh Patheja. He recounts his arrival: "I came here penniless in 1963. I was in the automobile trade in Burma and wanted to continue doing the same here. There were already Sikhs in Kolkata who had arrived looking for opportunity after Partition. They were mostly taxi drivers and they extended all the help they could to a fellow Sikh trying to make it. I remember offering a driver the fare but he refused and asked me, a complete stranger, as only a forthright Sikh can: 'do you have too much money to spend?' I've thought about it a lot since then. Did he not take the money because of community feeling? Or was it his empathy for a fellow refugee?"

Gurmukh Singh is a well established hotelier today. With his three brothers – "we worked like madmen" – he is the proprietor of the Embassy Hotel. But his children, nephews and nieces have all migrated overseas. He says: "My kids left after the death of Indira Gandhi... they didn't want a repetition of what the older generation had to put up with in Burma." So, what will he do with his hotel? "Maybe I will give it away to the gurdwara."

You keep coming back to it – the gurdwara. For the Sikh or "learner", the gurdwara imparts knowledge and spiritual solace and functions as a community centre, a meeting place and weary travellers' place of rest. Remember Ranvir, our man-about-town? Well, he sometimes carries his work to the gurdwara. "I take my laptop there as I can just be with myself. No one has stopped me and I never asked anyone whether it was allowed."

At the Sri Guru Singh Sabha gurdwara, near Kalighat, pilgrims get food and shelter for Rs 25. Gurwinder Singh, a polytechnic student from Punjab is a tourist. He says: "I've spent three days here. I prefer staying in a gurdwara as it is cheap. But I follow all the rules.

Though I pay Rs 25, I also do seva in the kitchen.” The Sikhs have their very own take on that old advertisement – Join the army, see the world.

Gurdwaras are also responsible for establishing the handful of Khalsa schools in Kolkata, which seem to making a huge effort to secularise and are insistent that they want their children to be an integral part of the mainstream while retaining their cultural-religious identity. The Khalsa higher secondary school in Paddapukur was started in 1934. According to Parminder Kaur, the headmistress: “All our children are well behaved – we emphasis moral studies. We do have separate timings for boys and girls but only because of a space constraint; there are only 16 classrooms for 960 students.”

Asked how many Sikh students study here, she replies: “less than 25 per cent.” The rest are students from UP and, surprisingly, many Bengali Muslims. The separate timing for boys and girls is apparently a major factor in attracting Muslim parents who queue up to enroll their daughters. And there’s a great sporting tradition – hockey stars such as Baljit Singh Saini and Joginder Singh were students. The second Khalsa School was established in 1969 to meet the growing needs of the Sikh population in the city. Some 3,000 students study here and Sikhs make up only 25 per cent of the strength. Ranjit Singh Ludhianwi, a Punjabi language journalist associated with the school, points out: “The Sikh community is very aware of moving with the times. Those who can afford it send their kids to the better-known public schools. But the Khalsa school too is very secular in its outlook.”

“Girls in the Sikh community are equal to boys,” asserts Hardev Singh Garewal, editor of a Punjabi daily published from Kolkata. “This sense of equality is inculcated in our Gurus’ teachings; all Sikh women are princesses who go by the surname Kaur! Female foeticide is considered sacrilegious... no gurdwara has place for those who support this terrible trend.”

Sikhs seem to find the local population easy to get along with. “Bengalis are a warm lot,” says Bunt Sethi, a city entrepreneur who recently opened the Star Stuck Retro Lounge at INOX Forum. His work involves interacting with Bengalis on an everyday basis. “I have many Bengali friends and I’m always invited over during festivities. Sikhs adjust to the culture that surrounds them quite easily.”

As a community, the Sikhs of the East punch above their weight. Calcutta University was one of the first universities outside Punjab to have a corpus of work on Sikh studies and on the occasion of the 500th birth anniversary (1969) of Guru Nanak, the University Grants Commission agreed to set up for a chair for the pursuance of Sikh studies in Eastern India. While students in Bengal aren’t exactly queuing up to study Sikh culture the various Sikh *biradiris* have been doing their bit to keep tradition alive.

A crucial piece of the mosaic that’s Kolkata, the Sikhs as a community don’t know the meaning of inertia – the vibrance of their traditions, their strong kinship bonds and their refusal to become ghettoised while maintaining their distinct cultural identity shows not only how much diversity matters, but why difference can be a cause for celebration.

(Some names have been changed to protect identities.)

[Courtesy: *The Statesman*]

