

Let us not blame the young

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WE OFTEN COME ACROSS suggestion like “Reclaim our misguided youth, ignorance of Sikh religion and importance of unshorn hair specially, the young Sikh shave off his hair and when questioned his reply is convenience and I don’t feel it necessary to keep hair. Religion cannot be practiced at one’s convenience, such as if one respects his or her father but does not obey what he says to follow. Such a son or daughter does not deserve all the love from their father. The relationship continues. Our spiritual father is Guru Gobind Singhji. Whose order is to keep hair which is the identity of a Sikh. Further the guru said that he does not love a Sikh without keshas (hair).

In my view the root cause lies at home and specially to the mother since a majority of Sikh homes are not practicing the Sikh way of life. The mother and father lack knowledge of Sikh religion thus children do not get inspiration and do not practice Sikhi at home. The mother must set an example to practice Sikhi and motivate children to follow since the mother is the first teacher of the child since child spends a large part of the day under the care of the mother. But when the mother herself trims eyebrows and hair when she visits beauty parlours to look beautiful by getting her hair set up and grooming which need trimming of hair forgetting that trimming of hair is not allowed as per Sikh Rehat Maryada. Thus the first to follow the mother is the daughter and the son. Some wives motivate husbands to trim beard and then hair of the head because the husband is also ignorant. The present day girls are mothers of tomorrow. Thus it becomes imperative to educate young girls to know the importance of hair.

In our old times the mothers used to get up early in the morning, recite gurbani, visit gurdwara and used to see that children practice and follow Rehat Maryada. Taking the case of Sikhs living in western countries as well as in metropolitan cities in India. The life is fast and busy where parents hardly get time to teach their children. But where the parents are aware of the necessity of religion they some how set apart time out of their busy schedule. There are numerous examples of most busy Sikhs such as Dr Manmohan Singh prime minister of India, Giani Zail Singh ex-president of republic of India and others who are and were practicing Sikhs.

To educate and motivate young Sikhs to follow and know the importance, the Sikh institutions should organize regular youth camps where youth can ask questions and they must be given satisfactory answers. This way the young will know and understand.

Gurdwaras must come forward to organize such camps and spend money to organize and provide literature on Sikhs rather than spending money on expansion and beautification of Gurdwara from where the youth is not getting inspiration although they may be visiting the Gurdwara off and on. As a result, the Sikh youth pay little attention to what is said and preached in the Gurdwara because often it doesn’t meet the test of logic not based on factual reasoning.

The Gurdwara management must understand that unless and until they perform the duty of providing knowledge of the Sikh religion to youth, it will become difficult to see keshadhari Sikhs. This tide of apostasy must be checked before it becomes too late.



The Sawa lakha Foundation of Gurbir - A Shining Example

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THE YEAR THAT HAS GONE BY, witnessed Gurbir Singh Brar attaining heights. Ever since his college days in Guru Nanak Dev Engineering College, Ludhiana and since inception of his software business in the US, Gurbir as a budding entrepreneur set up a base in Chandigarh. He has since reached out to thousands of people through his NGO, The Sawalakh Foundation.

The foundation has its base in Mastuana Sahib in Sangrur district. The organisation has a two point agenda, "To stop Nihangs being treated as outcast, bringing them in the mainstream and by helping the underprivileged children learn Gatka Art. Once the goal was set, the process to accomplish it began, and "I" with a team of Nihangs had visited all the 17 districts of Punjab, which include several villages. Nihangs performed their Gatka art, interacted with localites and stayed at every village for two days. The activity gave people a chance to understand the lifestyle of the Nihangs and change their opinion about them." Besides taking of the cavalcade of Nihangs around Punjab, Gurbir has also held several exhibitions of photographs of Nihangs and their Gatka art. The number of photographs clicked in the eight-month period is an astounding 8,000.

Gurbir's work doesn't end here. The Sawalakh Foundation has undertaken a campaign for elementary education to Nihangs. As Gurbir says, "Basic education is important for anybody today, mere religion knowledge won't help in dealing with the everyday problems."

Coming to the second cause, his foundation has encouraged hundreds of destitute people to take to Gatka art. "Majority of the youth in Punjab are falling victim to drug menace. Gatka art gives them an aim in life. They get a sense of importance when people appreciate their skills. Also, Gatka art helps them keep physically fit." He now plans to make a documentary film and is compiling a coffee table book, both being the effective medium to reach out to people on the life Nihangs.

[Courtesy: The Tribune]

Universal Preschool

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TILL RECENTLY SIXTH YEAR WAS a magic number in life of a person. At this age, or around that number, a big change takes places in every ones life all over the world. Admission to school. At that age you leave the cozy and safe environments of "home" and enter the arena of the unknown world, the school, where all of a sudden you are thrown amongst a bunch of kids your age and you are forced to learn the social skills in a practical way. All of a sudden, you have to cope with the authority of a teacher instead of mother or

father. This authority figure, most of the time, was impersonal, seemingly loveless and more authoritarian, discipline conscious and seemingly devoid of love or compassion.

That borderline was established for decades, - even centuries - all over the world, wherein, institutions and governmental authorities, starts intruding in the life of a child-person. Parents are required to relinquish some of their authority over their children to School-teachers and staff, who in turn are under control of higher authorities, say Local Governments, State or Federal Governments.

Thus Pre-school is defined as the age group from 3 to 5 years. So far, in the industrial societies, where both parents become part of the work force, children of this age group were left under the supervision of either in-house grand-parents, or voluntarily to privately run "Day Care Centers." Regulations under which the Day Care Centers run are minimal. Thus there are not many expectations except that the Childs' physical needs are taken care of.

Recent discoveries in "Child Psychology" have determined that, in fact, the years 3 to 5 are most significant in the intellectual and emotional development of a person. Some innovative entrepreneurs have devised very good programs for this age group, such as Montessori System. But the benefits of these advanced methods are available to the children of enlightened parents. Since these come with a stiff price, most parents skip this option, particularly when virtually free alternative in the form of live-in grand-parents is available (at least in the case of Diaspora).

In the advanced western countries rapid changes are taking place in the educational systems to address the paramount needs of this 3-5 years group. Ahead of the pack is France. Italy is close second. In France, a very extensive and rigorous one-year course followed by a tough examination for certification as a Pre-school teacher is a must. But since the pay scales and the respect now being accorded to these pres-school teachers is equivalent or even better than high school teachers, these programs have started attracting the best talent available. France certainly is in an enviable position.

In USA, many years back, a need base attempt was made in the "Head Start" program. This program is designed mainly for a few months before the start of the formal school year and mainly for the under privileged families. But now a full-fledged debate is underway here in USA as to the necessity of "UNIVERSAL PRE-SCHOOL" programs. Certainly there are no two opinions about its extreme usefulness and advantages. Only thing standing in the way of its adoption is "Commitment of Resources."

The First State in the Union to address "pre-school" is Georgia. In Chicago also certain School Districts have ventured on their own and have started this much-needed program. These initiatives have passed their first tests with flying colors. Think Tanks like "Brookings Institute" have given a close scrutiny to these programs and their evaluations are all "kudos" for them. Tremendous advantages cited are:

- Appreciable fall in drop out rate in later school years
- More aspirants and achievers for college education
- Better citizens
- Seeds of life long success get planted
- And life long love of learning.

Another key word in administration of this program is "QUALITY."

French Nation Wide program gives highest rank to Quality of teachers, their training and their performance. Quality brings reputation for institutions and teachers. In Chicago parents are seen lining up overnight at admission times to get their children in.

Quality and Reputation go hand in hand. The Khalsa Montessori School, in Phoenix (Arizona) USA is probably the most loved school in the area and has a long waiting list for admission. After admission parents drive scores of miles every day to bring their kids to school and to take them back. This century is of the "BRAIN POWER." The race has already started to gain as much of a head start as possible.

Here is an enormous opportunity and challenge to all the community leaders, specially the Managements of the Gurdwaras all over the country nay the world.

For education, the Sikhs have no duality. Even the name is "Sikh" meaning Disciple (Student). A Sikh is a Student from birth till death. Further, Guru Angad Dev Ji has ordained, "*Vidya Veechaari Tan Parupkari*" (*Pursuit of Knowledge is the road to Service of Humanity*).

In actuality, Gurdwaras were supposed to be our Institutes of learning, for all ages. The Gurdwara programs should be structured to address the educational needs of the entire community. It is admirable that many Gurdawaras have started paying attention to establishing "Sunday Schools." But the performance of most of these Sunday Schools is much less than desirable. Quality and Continuity are lacking in the school managements and in the teaching staff. Many times the goals are murky. Worst of all these schools and our children are the victims and casualties of fierce, unending and resource draining personal political fights, both in the Gurdawaras and in courts.

In fact, the age group 3-5 years old is not yet even part of the equation in "Sunday Schools." On the other hand, Gurdawara facilities are ideal for starting "Pre-school Programs". Main Darbar Halls with Langar Halls are mostly not used during daytime from Monday to Friday. Of course some additions and minor modifications will be needed to jump start a daily "Pre-school Program."

Let me also share that already, a new factor is being considered in our "National Debate (USA)". A top agenda item is that Government should encourage and assist such faith based programs, particularly "Universal Pre schools." The time is ripe for enlightened leadership in Gurdawaras to come forward and accept this challenge and at the same time reap benefits for our posterity and in service of humanity.

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