

# The Numbers Racket

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In recent weeks I have been fretting about the number of Sikhs in the world. We have all seen varying figures bandied about - anywhere from 18 million to nearly 30 million. It seems that we ought to know how many we are for it will determine if we are the fifth or the sixth largest religion in the world. Our political visibility and perhaps our societal viability depends upon how many we are and where. And such worries are not unique to us. It is a world where such statistics rule; political power and governmental support depend upon such matters. Sometimes we wonder why we are so few when the message of Sikhism is so progressive and entrancing to us; we are certain it should be equally attractive to others. After all we have had five centuries to pass it along to the world.

But if we are to be in the business of counting noses we need to define whom it is that we count as a Sikh. And that puts us in a pickle, for sure. This assumes added importance these days when the elections to the SGPC (the premier Sikh body in India) are in the offing. This makes the pickle we are in even more complex and messier.

For far too many years and from too many enemies of the faith, Sikhism has been under siege, its survival and viability often been measured by the numbers. It is as if Sikhism was a patient and the simplest, most widely and first used test of life, like the temperature of a patient, was the number of its adherents. Compounding and justifying our preoccupation with numbers is the fact that many Sikhs are abandoning the visible markers of their faith. Too many are getting lost in the murky beauty of interfaith connectivity. Low birth rates, proclivity for interfaith marriages, cultural erosion and declining attendance at gurdwaras only alarm us further. We are in a global village now.

Such worries are not unique to us. The Jews are going through similar contortions of faith and worldly concerns. Every ten years the Jews count their own number in the world. They did so again this year spending six million for the study and eventually decided to put off releasing the report.

Should we count those as Sikhs who are connected to us only at the periphery of our faith by mixed practices and vaguely Sikh loyalties? Are we an endangered species and our future dependant on our numbers? Do we stand on the brink of extinction or are we poised for renaissance? I may not answer any of the questions that I posit today for my primary purpose remains exploration. Answers vary and they also change with time and circumstance. Some Sikhs take comfort in the fact that at one time in India the emperor of the day had declared Sikhism dead. From the nearly ground zero of that patently false pronouncement less than 200 years ago we are now the fifth largest religion in the world. And isn't that encouraging?

But our dilemma is very similar to that of the Jews. What to do with those who identify with Sikhism (or Judaism) and yet their connection to the faith is clearly peripheral and frail, even contaminated by practices that are unquestionably not Sikh. This is why the Jewish report on numbers did not see the light of day and this is exactly why for Sikhs, too, numbers may be meaningless. The core of a religion is faith not demographics, as Douglas Rushkoff pointed out while commenting on Judaism and its unreleased report.

In the simplest sense, a Sikh is anyone who claims to be one. There is a multitude on the same road of becoming Sikh; some are further along than others. Each finds his own point along the path where the journey is the destination. I include in this very general definition the amritdhari with all the qualities of a saint, the amritdhari who is not far removed from a

scoundrel, and all the varieties of people who call themselves Sikhs, even if they know not a word of gurbani, or have never thought about what the word "Sikh" means, and are cultural Sikhs, at best. To many, Sikhism is a religion mainly of obligations; to me the path of becoming one is a privilege.

However, when we face a societal, institutional definition of a Sikh, problems soon surface. It is not just for counting heads for entry into an encyclopedia but because numbers often govern the quality of freedom that Sikhs might enjoy in a society. Our rights to our own practices and legal protections for them ebb and flow with our numbers. Hence the importance of an institutional definition where the needs of institutional governance are the driving force. It is this that lies at the core of the elections to the SGPC and the need to count heads. An institutional definition exists in the *Rehat Maryada* (Code of Conduct) that applies to Sikhs no matter where they live.

The faith of Sikhism lies in human and universal connectivity that we term divine; ergo, the importance of *sangat*. If Sikhism refuses to separate the internal reality from the external life it is because in Sikhism even the notions of a deity are enacted through the very real work of individual and social justice. It is this that defines the concept that we term *Meeri-Peeri*. The message of Sikhism has always been forward looking and outer directed. The central message of Sikhism is that however puny the person, human beings can make a difference and leave the world a better place. Meditating on ones navel is not the essence of Sikhism, involvement in the world but through the lens of spiritual discipline is.

Often this message that is the essence of Sikhism gets obscured in the numbers game. □