

Vanishing Sikhs! Why are the numbers shrinking?

Some plausible reasons and suggestions

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Confusion as to what is more important - The Punjabi or the Sikh way of life?

Unfortunately, after proclaiming that Sanskrit is not a *Deva Bhasha* since the time of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, we have now started claiming that Punjabi is a '*Deva Bhasha*'. Therefore, instead of reaching out to the masses, with the rich Sikh literature as the Gurus did, we wait for the thirsty seeker to approach us for the wisdom of the Gurus. Similarly, after proclaiming that the Brahmins were wicked in restricting the knowledge of the Vedas to themselves we have now started practicing the same trade of not sharing the wisdom contained in Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji (SGGS) even with our own children unless they learn Punjabi. And then we wonder aloud as to why our children are not respecting the traditional Sikh values.

Suggestions

- a) Try to teach the children, even when they are in infancy, values of Sikh religion in any language that they are comfortable in. Punjabi is not required to teach some simple concepts like – As you Sow so Shall you Reap; *Naam Japna, Vand Chakkna, Kirt Karni; Awal Allah Noor Upiah Kudrat ke Sab Bande; Sabna Jihan ka Ik Datta; Jo aiha so chalsi; etc.*
- b) Teach Punjabi, as a language when the child starts going to school.

Role of woman ignored

The most important and distinguishing characteristic of Sikh religion is the equality in religious practice prescribed for both man and woman. After all, only in Sikh religion, woman can take *Amrit*, wear the *Kakkars*, and go to sit in the sanctum sanctorum any day of her life – unlike in any other religion. Guru Amar Das Ji granted nearly one-third *manjis* and *pirhas* to female devotees in mid-sixteenth century, when the society still held women in very low esteem. Also, the Gurus give sole credit to a woman in successfully bringing up the child as a *bhagat, surma* or a *datha*. And the historians as well as *parcharaks*, all males, seem to have underplayed the roles of mothers of the Gurus, *sahibzadas* and the historical Sikh personalities. None of us know the name of the mothers of the Gurus, *Panj Pyaras*, Baba Budhaji, Bhai Gurdas, Bhai Nand Lal, Bhai Attar Singh, Bhai Randhir Singh and Bhai Veer Singh.

Suggestions

- a) Appoint women on at least one-third of all administrative and managerial posts. These women should visibly belong to Sikh religion like Bibi Jagir Kaur, President, SGPC. Incidentally, one American Sikh lady brought to my notice that "*Sabat Soorat Dastar Sira*" applies commonly to men and women, as does all the other parts of *Gurbani*. She also felt that Indian Sikh men, in the tradition of Manu, continue to subjugate their women, including depriving them the privilege of tying *dastar*.
- b) Allow women to undertake duties of a Priest or Head Priest in our Gurdwaras, especially historical Gurdwaras at Delhi and Amritsar.
- c) Encourage and train female *Kathakars, Kirtani Jathas, and Dhadhis*.

Ignoring Gurudwara Sahib as a focal-point of Activities

It is noted in Sikh religion, that no effort is made in a *Gurdwara* to explain the meanings or implications of the *Gurbani* to the young child. Consequently, the young child does not want

to participate in the *Kirtan/Sangat* and if forced to, then only disturbs others. It needs to be emphasized that if children do not understand *Gurbani Kirtan*, they will never understand the rich philosophy and may not benefit adequately from the time spent in *Gurdwara* – how can then we expect them to become a Sikh. In addition, in the times of the Gurus, various educational events, medical camps, relief operations, physical sports and literary competitions used to be organized and supervised by the Gurus themselves. The *Gurdwara Sahib* served as a social and cultural center for all the devotees.

Suggestions

- a) It may be necessary to advise the speaker or *Ragi Jatha*, to explain word meaning of the crucial lines that they sing, may be before they start to do *kirtan*, or illustrate their discourse with simple illustrations that even a child can understand. One easy solution could be to follow the practice prevalent in the *Gurdwaras/Ashrams* run by the American Sikhs where English translation of the *shabad* being sung is distributed in the *sangat*, similar to the practice followed in India of keeping a copy of the *Amrit Kirtan Pothi* in front during *Kirtan* – may be a similar *Pothi* in English/other languages can be provided in the respective *Gurdwaras*, taking into account the location and spoken language of the area, for the benefit of children and others who do not know Punjabi. The other could be the installation of the electronic display screen, with meanings of the hymns being sung then, in the *Gurdwara*.
- b) The most important event of the time at *Gurdwara* is the *Hukam* – which our children do not understand. Can we read them just a translation, and not *katha* please, from a standard accepted book of meanings (this minimizes the scope of dilution/bias by the speaker) – say for English from S. Manmohan Singh (eight volumes are available world-wide) and for Punjabi from Prof. Sahib Singh (ten volumes).
- c) The visit to a *Gurdwara* premises should be made attractive for young Sikhs. For the Sikh children, our Committees should be encouraged to organize competitions of all varieties - *Gurbani*, sports, poetry, music, painting, *phulkari*, Karate, Olympic events like fencing, and then richly reward the winners. The aim should be to make the *Gurdwara* activities so wholesome and interesting that our children should begin to enjoy it as their second home.

Lack of Marketing - World fears Uncertainty but respects Individuality

The Gurus had taught us to be distinct (*Nyara*) but we have interpreted it as isolation. There is a big difference in the two – a) a lion is distinct but integrated in the animal life of the forest, b) a rose is distinct but integrated in the plant and thorns, and c) the *Bani of Bhagats* is distinct from that of the Gurus but integrated in SGGS. We were taught by the Gurus to be distinct in our style of life, conduct of business and pursuit of spirituality but we opted to shroud ourselves in mystery, jealously guard the teachings of SGGS and do not share the rich philosophy contained therein with others. This continues to result in suspicion of our teachings leading to isolation from all others. In restricting ourselves in a confined environment, we have created uncertainty leading to fear in our neighborhood about our faith and purpose. All the Gurus were transparent in their approach towards spirituality and taught universally in common daily spoken language to the wider public. Perhaps, our lack of transparency and communication skills betrays low confidence in our beliefs, which have also led us into a ridicule trap - along with our infighting and washing of linen in public happily portrayed in media. More we are ridiculed, more our children suffer and tend to bend-over-backwards to look like non-Sikhs.

Suggestions

- a) Please advertise the basic tenets of Sikh religion openly in as many languages as

possible. Share with other non-Sikhs (i) our values of *Sewa* and *Simran*; (ii) our concept of one God; and (iii) our concept of conduct of life (*Rehat Maryada*). We should boldly spread the concept that Sikhism Teaches universal religion – a) “*Sarab Dharam mei shresth dharma, har ko naam jap nirmal karm*” and b) permits to a spiritual seeker, to continue to be *Sain* Mian Mir and even a Sikh of Guru Arjan Dev Ji, like holding two passports.

b) We should not be shy of telling that Sikh men and women keep *Kirpan* to help and serve people in distress. If Muslim men can be circumcised and women can wear *Burka*, Brahmin men can wear threads and maintain a *bodhi*, Lord Rama can sport a bow-arrow, Shiva a *Trishul*, and Krishna a *sudarshan chakra* then why a Sikh should be ashamed of a defensive instrument like *kirpan*, which is not a weapon but a deterrent for a rapist and a mischief maker. Also publicize that wearing a *Kirpan* entails a responsibility to meditate at least two and half hours everyday (A Sikh who is baptized and ordained to sport a *Kirpan* has to do *Simran*, *Nitname*, *Rehras* and *Sohilla* everyday). If some Sikh misuses the *Kirpan* (uses it for any purpose to get political mileage or to spread terror), then before the law courts decide, the *Takhts* should hold that Sikh accountable and, if need be, dispense severe punishment too, for having misused an article of Sikh faith and given the community a bad name. This will endear us to our brothers and sisters, within our faith and those in others. After all every way-led behavior and misuse of *Kirpan* cannot transform a Sikh into a *surma* or martyr. The justice dispensed from *Takhts* should take into account wider interests of the community and not only of the individual and the family. Every Sikh, especially young, should be made aware that misadventures would not lead to picture frames in Sikh Museum at Amritsar.

c) Let us be transparent in our approach to problems in every day life and help the needy, poor and sick in the society. Today, we Sikhs seeped in riches have forgotten to contribute one-tenth of our earnings for the welfare of the society. We have stopped funding shelters, orphanages, widow-homes, hospitals and schools in many parts of our country – please count the Sikh run institutions in Assam, Bihar, Orissa, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Northeast states, and other places like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Baghdad, where the Gurus traveled to spread the word of God. The focus should be to encourage more Bhagat Puran Singh ji from amongst us.

d) Ensure that Sikhs are not ridiculed in media – history books, novels, movies, theatre, magazines, papers, etc. This ridicule impacts the young mind in a very profound manner. The administrative Sikh units like SGPC and DSGMC should undertake all steps, permitted by law in a civilized society, to stop the poor portrayal of Sikh Gurus and practices in media. Ridicule of a complete community in a civilized society should not be permitted or tolerated, be it of Parsis, Sikhs, or Hindus.

e) The occasion of *Nagar Kirtans* on every *Gurpurabs* should be used to distribute small pamphlets in different languages in different parts of India. Our effort should concentrate on marketing our viewpoint. The material that is distributed in different languages should preferably originate from SGPC, so that there is uniformity of material distributed across the world. When the fear of uncertainty about our beliefs will be dispelled in our society, we will be respected for our individuality. *Vand Chakna* does not only refer to food, but also to philosophy, beliefs, and spiritual experiences.

f) In the modern times, advertisement and marketing helps to change the perception. We should liberally use media, especially on occasions of *Gurpurabs*, to spread the word of the Guru. The capsules provided for TV/Radio programs/print material should

be brief, focused and in different languages. Time slots can be sponsored on Gurburabs, if necessary.

g) TV serials, stage theatre, documentary films should be encouraged on the life and times of Kabir Ji, Farid Ji, Baba Budha Ji, *Sahibzadas*, Banda Singh, Sant Attar Singh Ji, Bhai Vir Singh Ji, Bibi Kaulan Ji, etc.

h) Sikh Art exhibitions should be sponsored and Sikh artists should be encouraged in their activities.

Lack of Education in Divinity

Today, knowledge of Sikh religion and the meanings of textual material of SGGS are not even understood by many adult Sikhs. All those statements of Gurbani like "*bani virlo vichar see, je ko gurmuk ho*" or "*dhithe mukt na hovai jichar shabad na kare vichar*" have been lost in layers of hypocrisy, rituals, superstitions and dogmas that we have been practising in the name of Sikh religion, openly even in Gurdwaras e.g. observing Saturdays (*chana parshad*) and *sangrands*, and openly paying reverence/garlanding pictures of Gurus (e.g. Picture of Guru Tegh Bhadur Ji at Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib). This hypocrisy of singing Gurus' hymns but practising something else has not given us status, enlightenment, acceptability or recognition amongst others that we so desperately desire. We are no different from others for whom the Gurus used words like "*anay*" or "*kanay*". The tragedy is that we were cautioned and still we have fallen in the same trap. How can our children respect us and promise us to follow in our footsteps – they have been taught to question everything, including our hypocrisy. So now let us learn to be individuals with understanding – Sikhs – and save our children and ourselves.

Suggestions

a) Teach Divinity as taught by the Gurus in every Sikh school. Start from "*Na koi Hindu na Musalman*". Teach common brotherhood of mankind. Inform the children and the world that the foundation stone of the Golden temple was kept by a Muslim *faqir* and that SGGS contains hymns of Hindu and Muslim Bhagats and that the Gurus hymns and the Bhagat Hymns were respected by the Guru alike. This reflects the core Sikh philosophy – *Na koi beri nahe behgana, sagal sangh hum ko ban aiyee*. The same tradition is followed by the Sikhs today. Our Divinity Teachers will then be invited by other schools too, to teach other students. The degradation of moral standards in general should encourage all religio-educational bodies to pool their resources to contain the sad state of affairs.

b) No caste-based Gurudwaras should be encouraged or promoted. This hypocritical behavior leads to ridicule of the basic tenets of Sikh religion which dis-illusion our children.

c) Teach Tolerance and Mutual respect of belief of each other and that the Gurus tolerated the tyranny of many a Mogul and Hindu kings. Teach that we never fight nor believe in violence, we only defend ourselves, as did Lord Rama, Lord Krishna and also Prophet Muhammad.

d) Train Divinity Teachers and reorient them regularly. Accountability should be demanded of each Divinity teacher, for their role is far superior to that of any other teacher in the School. The pay scale of divinity teacher should be the higher than that of other teachers and their selection also should be more rigorous. Divinity Teachers should be of exemplary character, visibly Sikh in appearance and conduct. To illustrate, a Sikh Divinity Teacher, who colors his beard or shapes her eyebrows will do more damage than benefit. The post of Divinity teachers should be treated with utmost respect.

e) An Advisory board of Sikh scholars of repute from across the world should be established by SGPC and DSGMC. The advice of these board members should regularly be solicited on important matters pertaining to divinity. The constitution and tenure of each of the board member should be limited to encourage wider participation.

