

The Turban and the Sikh Scripture

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In the global scenario, the turban had become a recognized symbol of honour, respect, status and dignity much before Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, appeared on the scene in the 15th century. The political and social situation in India was chaotic. Afghan invaders had made the life of the ordinary citizen miserable. No honour was left for them as people were prohibited from riding horses and wearing a turban on their head. The purpose was humiliation and insult in their daily life. All this pained Guru Nanak and he was unable to adjust to the life all around; as he was a born rebel against religious bigotry, unjustified indignity of the people and unwarranted violation of basic human rights. He did not hesitate to lodge a protest –

ਦੇਤੀ ਮਾਰ ਪਈ ਕਰਲਾਣੇ ਤੈ ਕੀ ਦਰਦੁ ਨ ਆਇਆ ॥

[SGGS:360]

[*Humanity was cruelly thrashed, did you feel no remorse?*], - with God against the inhumanity of Mughal invader, Babar. It was outright insult and cruelty to the creation of God. Guru Nanak found it hard to reconcile with such treatment of human beings against the norms of civilization. He had a sublime vision of life. It is a free, honorable and respectful living, on which Guru Nanak laid the foundation of his new creed, viz. Sikhism. He exhorted the enslaved and spineless people in the words:

ਜੇ ਜੀਵੈ ਪਤਿ ਲਬੀ ਜਾਇ ॥

ਸਭੁ ਹਰਾਮੁ ਜੇਤਾ ਕਿਛੁ ਖਾਇ ॥

[SGGS:142]

[*To live without self respect is to eat in shame*]. He invited those people to join him in his new creed, who had the guts and courage to face all the odds of life, even death for the sake of honorable living. Shameless people without human dignity had no place in his company.

ਜਉ ਤਉ ਪ੍ਰੇਮ ਖੇਲਣ ਕਾ ਚਾਉ ॥ ਸਿਰੁ ਧਰਿ ਤਲੀ ਗਲੀ ਮੇਰੀ ਆਉ ॥

[SGGS-1412]

[If you love to play the game of love come with readiness to sacrifice your life], were the words of his open invitation to join the glorious adventure of life. Donning the turban, a musical instrument – Rabab – in the hands of his Muslim companion, he set out to sing his message in the four corners of the world. The dignity in all spheres of life – dress, language and conduct – was the cornerstone of his teachings. Internal evidence from Sri Guru Granth is sufficient to prove that Guru Nanak regularly wore a turban – the symbol of civil dignity. Bhagat Namdev (1270–1318 A.D.) envisioned God with a turban on his head. His hymn as recorded in Guru Granth Sahib reveals this fact:

ਖੁਬੁ ਤੇਰੀ ਪਗਰੀ ਮੀਠੇ ਤੇਰੇ ਬੋਲ ॥ ਦੁਾਰਿਕਾ ਨਗਰੀ ਕਾਹੇ ਕੇ ਮਗੋਲ ॥ਚੰਦੀ ਹਜਾਰ ਆਲਮ ਏਕਲ ਖਾਨਾ ॥

ਹਮ ਚਿਨੀ ਪਾਤਿਸਾਹ ਸਾਵਲੇ ਬਰਨਾ ॥ ਅਸਪਤਿ ਗਜਪਤਿ ਨਰਹ ਨਰਿਦ ॥ ਨਾਮੇ ਕੇ ਸੁਆਮੀ ਮੀਰ ਮੁਕੰਦ ॥

[SGGS: 727]

[*Handsome Thy turban. How can there be a Mughal in the city of Dwarka? Thou art the Lord of name, the sovereign of all and the giver of salvation*].

Guru Nanak, divine teacher, was in the image of God, Whose praises he sang throughout his life. It is not possible to imagine Guru Nanak without the turban. Guru Nanak perfectly understood the psychology of slave people and condemned such people who in order to please foreign rulers abandon their language, dress and heritage; there cannot be any

greater ingratitude than to forget one's heritage. Guru Nanak's *bani* depicts the position of such people :

ਆਇ ਪੁਰਖ ਕਉ ਅਲਹੁ ਕਹੀਐ ਸੇਖਾ ਆਈ ਵਾਰੀ ॥ ਦੇਵਲ ਦੇਵਤਿਆ ਕਰੁ ਲਾਗਾ ਐਸੀ ਕੀਰਤਿ ਚਾਲੀ ॥

ਕੂਜਾ ਬਾਂਗ ਨਿਵਾਜ ਮੁਸਲਾ ਨੀਲ ਰੂਪ ਬਨਵਾਰੀ ॥ ਘਰਿ ਘਰਿ ਮੀਆ ਸਭਨਾ ਜੀਆ ਬੋਲੀ ਅਵਰ ਤੁਮਾਰੀ ॥

[SGGS:1191]

[*The Primal Lord is called Allah. The turn of the Muslim divines has come. Tax is levied on the temples of gods. Such a practice has come into vogue. The ablution pots, calls to prayers and prayer-carpet are seen everywhere and the Lord appear in blue form. In every house all the persons are called Mian, even your language is alien, i.e. different*].

The turban is the most important piece of the Sikh's heritage. Another reference in Sri Guru Granth Sahib testifies this fact:

ਕਾਇਆ ਕਿਰਦਾਰ ਅਉਰਤ ਯਕੀਨਾ ॥ ਰੰਗ ਤਮਾਸੇ ਮਾਣਿ ਹਕੀਨਾ ॥

ਨਾਪਾਕ ਪਾਕੁ ਕਰਿ ਹਦੂਰਿ ਹਦੀਸਾ ਸਾਬਤ ਸੂਰਤਿ ਦਸਤਾਰ ਸਿਰਾ ॥

[SGGS: 1084]

[*Make good deeds thy body and faith thy bride. Revel thou in the true Lords' love and entertainment. Make pure that is impure. Deem thou in the True Lords' presence, thy counsel. Let the complete body be the turban on thy head*].

That is why all the Sikh Gurus donned the turban in the most majestic manner. Looking at the turban of Guru Hargobind his Dhadi poets Nathmal and Abdulla sang,

do qlvwrW biDAW iek mlrl dl iek plrl dl,

iek rwKI kry vzlrI dl pwg qyrl jhWgir idl [

Similarly, references are found to the turban in the hymn of Baba Farid Shiekh (1173-1265 A.D.) :

ਫਰੀਦਾ ਮੈ ਭੋਲਾਵਾ ਪਗ ਦਾ ਮਤੁ ਮੈਲੀ ਹੋਇ ਜਾਇ ॥

ਗਹਿਲਾ ਰੂਹੁ ਨ ਜਾਣਈ ਸਿਰੁ ਭੀ ਮਿਟੀ ਖਾਇ ॥

[SGGS: 1379]

[*Farid, I am worried about my turban lest it should be soiled, however my thoughtless soul is unaware that dust will eat my head too*]

Bhagat Kabir (1440 – 1518) also refers to the turban:

ਜਿਹ ਸਿਰਿ ਰਚਿ ਰਚਿ ਬਾਧਤ ਪਾਗ ॥ [SGGS: 330]

Showing the importance of the turban. Bhagat Ravi Das brings about the importance of the turban from another angle : ਬੰਕੇ ਬਾਲ ਪਾਗ ਸਿਰਿ ਡੇਰੀ ॥ [SGGS: 659]

The turban is the gift of Guru and also identity of the Sikhs, Bhai Gurdas whose writings are said to be the key to the *Bani* contained in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, refers to what kind of tragic situation can be created by innocuous removal of turban. He writes:

TMfy KuUh nweyky pwg ibswr AwieAw isr nWgy

Gr ivc mw kmIIAW Tusl ilql dyK KuqMgy]

[Var 32:19]

[*A man after taking bath on a well came bareheaded to the house without turban, when ladies of the house saw him in that condition, they started weeping as some relative has died*].

No doubt, all the Sikh Gurus donned the turban but Sri Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and the last Guru of the Sikhs, in 1699 AD at the time of creation of the Khalsa, made it an inseparable part of the Sikhs' personality, and ordained that the Sikhs should make their

turban beautiful (*Dastar Sajoni*). After bestowing *amrit* on the *Panj Piare* and partaking *amrit* from them, the final seal and stamp was put on the personality of the Khalsa, when Guru Gobind Singh said :

^wlsw myro rUp hY ^ws] ^wlsy mih hO krO invws.....
^wlsw myro siggur pUrw] ^wlsw myro s'jn sUrw.....
^wlsw Akwl purK kl &oj] pRgitE ^wlsw pRmwqm kl mOj
jb lg ^wlsw rhy inAwrw] qb lg qyj dlau mYN swrw.....
jb ieh ghY ibprn kl rlq] mYN n kroN ien kl pRqlq]

(*Sarb Loh*)

(Khalsa is my real personification. I live in the Khalsa. Khalsa is my true Satguru. Khalsa is my brave friend..... Khalsa is the army of the Almighty. Khalsa took birth as per the wishes of the Almighty. As long as Khalsa would remain distinctive (*nyara*), till then, I shall give him all the glory. When the Khalsa would disown its principles, then I shall not care for them).

Therefore, after such an assertion of Guru regarding the looks of Khalsa (the Sikhs): Can it be said that the turban is not an essential and inseparable part of a Sikhs' personality, only because it is not one of the five (K's) Kakars? Such an argument would obviously be illogical if not absurd, in the face of the fact that Guru wanted the Sikhs to be *Nirala* (distinctive) through their looks and conduct. The turban, therefore, remains one of the most distinctive and all encompassing article of Sikh faith. Perhaps, no person on earth can imagine Guru Gobind Singh without a turban and so his true Sikh, as Guru had given a new concept of merger of Guru with his *chela* (beloved follower) and it was rightly said :

vwh vwh gurUu goibMd isMG Awpy gur cylw]

[Guru is a truly great as he himself is a guru and himself a *chela* (follower)].

The Guru gave this new concept for the advancement of human race by creating a casteless society of equals, where turban was a symbol of honour, equality, fraternity, dignity and freedom. Nothing like that had earlier happened anywhere in the world and unique history was created; which though is yet to become the basis of worldwide multicultural civilization, surpassing language and cultural limitations and recognizing all humanity as one —

mwns kl jwq siB ieko pihcwnbo]

[*Recognize all humanity as one*] — as Guru Gobind Singh had proclaimed.

(*Sarb Loh*)

When the other people simply used to tie the turban, the Sikhs were supposed to wear it beautifully. It was laid down in the Code of Conduct (*Rehatnama*) as mentioned by Bhai Nand Lal, a distinguished poet of Guru Gobind Singh that —

kMgw dono vk'q kr] pwg cuUn kr bWDI]

ngn hoey bwhr iPry] ngn sls jo kwey]

ngn prSwd jo bWtrl] qn Kwel bVo khwey`

(*Kulli and Goa* by Bhai Nand Lal, page 180)

[*A Sikh should comb his hair twice in a day and should make his turban carefully and a Sikh who roams bareheaded and eats bareheaded, he deserves to be punished and declared a Tankhaia*].

Similar are the injunctions in the *Rehatnamas* of Bhai Desa Singh, Bhai Chopra Singh, Bhai Daya Singh and Sikh *Rehat Maryada* published by the S.G.P.C. on the basis of those Code

of Conduct (*Rehatnamas*). The Sikhs have been ordained not to remove their turban when going out of their house. The religious literature of the Sikhs is full of references to the turban, its importance for them and what use they should make of it in various situations of life. Such was the importance given to the turban by Sri Guru Gobind Singh that he used to hold competitions of tying beautiful and majestic turban at Paonta Sahib. Now a Gurdwara *Dastar Asthan* stands at that place.

In view of such an important place of 'turban' in Sikhism, it cannot be termed only as a cultural symbol of the Sikhs, because culture is always embedded in materialism, environmental factors and the power structure of society; while religion is deep rooted in the inner consciousness of the people, affecting their whole life. Without any doubt, the turban and its symbolism is inseparably woven in the whole gamut of the Sikh's way of life—from birth to death—determining their distinctive identity. Even for Michael Foucault, a renowned modern French philosopher and historian, "the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without landmark or a point of reference." This is what Sikhism had preached in a much broader historical sense regarding the identity of an individual.

The turban in the same sense confirms and openly demonstrates historical connectivity of the Sikhs and their identity. The *Gurbani* makes it clear when Guru Arjun Dev says that his double turban is a sign of victory.

ਹਉ ਗੋਸਾਈ ਦਾ ਪਹਿਲਵਾਨੜਾ ॥ ਮੈ ਗੁਰ ਮਿਲਿ ਉਚ ਦੁਮਾਲੜਾ ॥
ਸਭ ਹੋਈ ਛਿੜ ਇਕਠੀਆ ਦਯੁ ਬੈਠਾ ਵੇਖੇ ਆਪਿ ਜੀਉ ॥

[SGGS: 74]

[I am the petty wrestler of the Lord. Having met the Guru, I have put on a tall plumed turban. All the assemblage to witness wrestling is gathered and the merciful Master Himself is seated to behold it].

Without any doubt, the turban of the Sikhs is rooted in Guru Granth Sahib and its teachings. The Sikh against his will should not be separated from the turban in his life as that would be his spiritual death. Any force or law to do the same would be against the law of life and nature. And it would not be permissible at the present stage of civilization. The principle of freedom of conscience, which is protected in the Constitutions of all the Nations, would be violated. Perhaps, that is why the most precious thing considered in life is **Freedom**, and not the riches. So is the turban to the Sikhs — the symbol of honour and dignity — the lasting distinctive affiliation with their Guru; where the personality of a Sikh is judged from his *Guffar*, *Raftar*, *Te Dastar* i.e. from his language, speed and turban. That is why the Guru at many places in *Gurbani* has indicated that Akal Purakh (Almighty) accepts His devotees by bestowing honour of *Saropa* (short turban) upon them:

ਪਹਿਰਿ ਸਿਰਪਾਉ ਸੇਵਕ ਜਨ ਮੇਲੇ ਨਾਨਕ ਪ੍ਰਗਟ ਪਹਾਰੇ ॥

[SGGS: 631]

[The Lord dressed me with the robe of honour, blended me His attending slave, with Himself and Nanak became renowned in the world].

Sikhs are supposed to live and die with their turbans. The Sikhs cannot have any other option but to defend their turban in the present religio-historical context because it is a universally known fact of history that the people who cannot defend old historical positions will never conquer new big ones. They would be written off history and thrown into its dustbin.

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