

# Changing Perceptions about Rituals & Conventions

*Bhupinder Singh Mahal*

In his novel "1984" George Orwell chronicles the pain and suffering of Winston Smith at the hands of an insensitive government. Strange to say that by a quirk of fate, in that very year of 1984, Orwell's premonitions were, instead, to visit upon members of the Sikh *quom* who were made to suffer the same fate as Smith, at the hands of a government intent upon breaking them physically and to discredit and root out their independent mental existence and their spiritual dignity.

1984 has thus become etched as a watershed date in Sikh history and is responsible for bringing about a sea change in the thinking and behaviour of the Sikh people. As a consequence, Sikhs were to break open and emerge from their own chrysalis to be reborn as faithful disciples of Sikhism. This rebirth would allow the Sikhs to look back and learn from their past.

Once complacent, casual and not steeped in the orthodoxy of their faith the Sikhs were now to dig into their scriptures, heritage, rituals and conventions in search of their history. Such a review led to the examination of current thinking, practices, rituals and customs, and compare them with accepted standards of faith to see the extent to which dilution may have seeped in over time. One aspect of this renewal of faith invokes a microscopic inspection of prevailing rituals and conventions observed by the mainstream Sikhs.

There is nothing wrong in circling the wagons in defence of one's faith. However, in the absence of an established priestly hierarchy and centrally recognized authority in Sikhism, some among the born-again Sikhs are increasingly becoming arbiters of the conduct of fellow Sikhs. Danger lies when these Sikhs, however well intentioned, seek to impose their understanding and definitions of the traditions, rituals and customs of the faith on their fellow-Sikhs. When challenged to explain the basis of their religious or philosophical premise they indulge in nebulous discourse.

**Esseential Principles:** Calls for a return to the settled principles of the faith were, therefore, inevitable as over time some unconventional practices and observances came to be adopted, while some conventions were adapted either because they were seen not to violate any of the established criteria or about which the religion is silent. Such dilution of rituals and conventions will occur when a bucketful of a people [Sikhs] are mixed in a sea of people of a different faith [Hinduism]. No one questions the propriety of ensuring that the Sikh services, ceremonies and conventions comply with established and accepted covenants of the faith. But in the absence of a measuring yardstick policing of unconventional practices and observances is fraught with danger.

Such religious bigotry were to manifest itself over LIFE magazines "Picture of the day" showing two Sikh women touching the feet of saffron-clad *Panj Pyaras* [May 2001]. What some see wrong with the picture is that only women, and not men, are the ones who seem to bow and touch the feet of the holy men, much in keeping with the Brahmanical code assigning Hindu women a secondary role in all their practices and rituals. Such imagery in their minds, therefore,

is an anathema in a faith that holds egalitarian principles to be one of its major pillars. Others argue that if it is true that the Guru is embodied in the *Panj Pyaras* then any respect paid them cannot be seen to flout any of the tenets of the faith. And there are those who wonder why bigots pick and choose what they consider backsliding while all the time ignoring an obvious gender discriminatory practice inherent in *Anand Karaj*, the Sikh wedding ceremony. For example, during *lavan* [four wedding hymns] it is the bride who is made to walk *behind* the groom while circling around the Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

**Ritual Grooves:** Last year, the observance by some Sikh women of *Karva Chauth* - an endurance testing *vrata* (fast) commonly observed by Hindu women to supplicate blessings of securing long life for their husbands - ruffled the temper of some among the Sikh community. Rightly so, as *Karva Chauth* requires washing the husband's feet before the start of the fast and performing of *aarti* when breaking the fast, both of these elements are an anathema for the Sikhs. But, if guilt by association is to be the criterion then how is it that some other instances go unquestioned and unchallenged. Take for example *Diwali*, a quintessential Hindu festival, which the Sikh community has also long celebrated. Today even *Diwali* has not escaped the taint. Sikhs continue to take part in the celebrations but the *raison d'être* for the celebrations has been shifted. Unlike Hindus who on this day commemorate the triumphal return of Rama from exile, the Sikhs claim to mark the day in memory of the triumphal return of Guru Hargobind to Harmandir Sahib accompanied by 52 of his liberated prison inmates. Skeptics will say that this is a convenient alibi since the Sikhs did not, in earlier periods, memorialize the Guru's liberation.

Some questionable practices are simply glossed over. For example, elaborate processions and parades are a feature of *Vaisakhi* festivities in most towns and cities of the world. In some places, like New Delhi, processions celebrating Guru Gobind Singh's birthday are commonplace. The procession is customarily led by the *panj pyaras* followed by a palanquin, motorized these days, carrying a *granthi* and the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. The procession makes its way through major city boulevards thick with spectators and pedestrians heedless of people smoking cigarettes or spitting out their *paan* filled saliva. This runs counter to the obsessive preoccupation of Sikhs in general with ensuring that the holy book remains in a clean and sterile environ. When asked for the *raison d'être* for the holding of these processions, given that the Gurus disapproved of outward trappings, answers are hard to come by. Yet these processions are no different from the perennial *Dussehra* celebrations. On reflection, bowing before the *Panj Pyaras* or adoption of the custom of *Diwali* are much more benign than religious public processions. To be selective about what benign customs and observances to adopt and which to decry is to play games. To suspect Hindu influences creeping in at every turn and corner is to give in to paranoia.

**Tolerance:** To raise a hue and cry over adoption by some Sikhs of a custom or observance from another faith, not in violation of the basic tenets of one's own faith, is a sign of intolerance. In a multicultural milieu interfaith meetings are inevitable. On the passing of a beloved, a Hindu friend will invite his Sikh friends to a *Havan*, a Muslim friend to a *Koranic* reading and a Christian friend to a church service. A Sikh, like any other participant, will be required to observe the forms of whatever the nature of the ceremony. Similar protocol will be followed at other family-oriented events such as weddings and baptism. To view the deferential behaviour of a Sikh at such interfaith functions as subversion of the tenets of his faith is totally unwarranted.

Our Gurus taught us to love, respect and help all of mankind and we pay daily obeisance to this sentiment during *Ardas*.

However, a distinction needs to be drawn between *adopting* a benign custom that does not impinge on one's faith as opposed to *adapting* one's accepted rituals and conventions in conformity with the beliefs of another faith. To adopt is to add to what one has, which is enriching; whereas, to adapt is to give up some aspect of one's faith and have it replaced with something different, which is detrimental. To modify one's own accepted custom, ritual or convention with that of someone else's is another form of adaptation and equally corrupt.

Adaptation can be voluntary or forced. To borrow customs and practices from someone else's faith and to blend it with one's own is a voluntary action and to be deplored. For example, some of the UK Gurudwaras are doing just that during *Diwali* festivities. The congregation is allowed to bring boxes of sweetmeat offerings to be placed alongside the *Karah Parshad* for blessing and to be distributed among the congregation at close of service. Outside the Gurudwara and their residences people are encouraged to place *diwas* [clay lamps] in rows as befitting the festival.

Similarly, *Lohri*, an Indian festival relating to the Solar year is also celebrated by some Sikhs. However, they do so wrongly on the supposition that it is an integral part of their Punjabi culture. Firstly, *Lohri* celebrates the birth of a baby boy, not a girl, and this runs counter to the Sikh credo of equality of the sexes. Secondly, *Lohri* ritualizes the worship of fire, an anathema for the Sikhs.

The same goes for the observance of *Raksha-bandhan*, or *Rakhi*, as it is popularly known which is fairly widespread among urban Sikhs. On this day a sister ties an amulet on her brother's wrist intended to ward off evil. Its genesis lies in the Puranas. Legend goes that in his war against the demon king Daitya-Raja to win back his Celestial kingdom. Indra suffered several setbacks. Dejected, Indra sought counsel of Brihaspati, the guru of the gods. On the propitious day of *Shravan Poornima* the consort of Brihaspati tied silken amulets on Indra's wrists as a guard against ill luck. It is unlikely for a Guru who saw no virtue in superstition and who spurned his investiture with *janeu* - a mark of caste distinction and denoting the "twice-born" - to approve *rakhi* as a talisman.

**Dubious Rituals:** The Hindu practice of reciting *mantra*, defined by religious lexicon as "some word(s) used as an object of concentration and embodying some aspect of spiritual power," has permeated among some Sikh circles. Small bands of Sikhs meeting privately, generally known as the "*Wahe-Guru-Ji group*", have evolved a unique way of conducting their services. Their entire *kirtan* consists of a three-word chant, "*Wahe Guru Ji*," which they repeat over and over in a modulated chorus. Eyes closed, heads swaying in rhythm, they chant in unison their *mantra* as if under a deep spell. They claim that the repetitive rendering brings them closer to divine experience. But, putting oneself in a trance is to take leave of one's consciousness, a form of self-induced cataleptic hypnosis. And, disassociation of self from a conscious state is to become oblivious to the world around. Khushwant Singh maintains that although "an exhortation to repeat the name (*naam japo*) was the main theme of the teaching of Nanak", it is wrong to construe it to mean "repetition *ad nauseam* of a litany". [*A History of The Sikhs* - Volume 1, page 44]

Kirtan (hymn singing) is at the center of Sikh religious worship and is customarily performed at Gurudwaras, in the Sikh diaspora, by a free-lancing devotee, an amateur. Since the '70's a steady stream of Sikh immigrants have made their way to all corners of the globe and as their numbers grew in any city so did the number of their Gurudwaras. Two factors, generous offerings at the local Gurudwara and the epiphany following 1984 events, have led to the habit of inviting professional *Ragi-jathas* from India to enrapture Sikh audiences and congregations. The Diasporan Sikh, in consequence, opens wide his wallet to reward the *Ragi-jathas* on listening to the choicest arrangement of hymns and that, too, in the prescribed raga.

**Greed:** As word of the generosity of the Diasporan Sikh spread, wave after wave of professional *Ragi-jathas* set out from Punjab on their way to one affluent country in the West after another to rake up hard currency and stuffing their *kurta* pockets with wads of banknotes and that, too, tax free. The common practice among devotees is to first pay respects to the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, then approach the dais of the *Ragi-jatha* to make the offering while bowing to them, thereby elevating their status to that of the Guru, before joining the congregation. Such heaping of banknotes at the feet of the *Ragis* without first listening to the *shabad* is a meaningless ritual. Some observers, however, compare this behaviour with the Hindu practice of placing money at the feet of their deity to ensure good luck. On any given day a *Ragi-jatha* will normally try to perform *kirtan* in as many Gurudwaras and homes as is physically possible. They are in constant motion hurrying from one venue to another to feed their greed. They claim to be well versed in the scriptures, yet they harken not the words of the Guru :

"What religious acts can he perform who hath greed in his heart? He uttereth falsehood and eateth poison." - Sorath Ashtapadi.

There is no explicit canon law on dress code in the Sikh faith. That notwithstanding, wearing of a turban is implicit in the scriptures, though the mode of its tying, length, material made from or colour are left to the discretion of its wearer. The Sikh faith requires the head to remain covered at all times, and the unfurling of the turban in public is considered to bring dishonour to its wearer. But given the high probability of its unfolding in a contact sport, such as boxing or hockey, a tradition has grown of wearing a *patka* in place of the turban during play. However, in recent times some young Sikhs are beginning to wear a *patka* in place of a turban; and one tall and handsome Sikh youngman was audacious enough to sport a *patka* as a contestant on a ZEE TV show. Several shops in Southall, nicknamed London's little India, are stocking *patkas* in different styles and colours. Some are emblazoned with eye-catching logos. Some are adorned with the *khanda*, Sikhdom's most cherished symbol. *Patka* is neither a modification nor an adaptation of a turban; and its use as a substitute for a turban is to be condemned.

Despite the post-1984 re-awakening religious relapses continue among Sikhs in metropolitan cities outside of Punjab, such as New Delhi, Mumbai or Kanpur and much more so amid Sikhs of the diaspora. Such regression manifests itself in the changing cultural and religious patterns of the Sikhs to those of the mainstream society often as a result of intermarriage or growing sense of identity association with the core society.

**Diffusion:** As a minority the Sikhs are constantly exposed to the influences of their largely Hindu milieu. Heightened social interaction, coupled with a long tradition of intermarrying, has

resulted in diffusion of some customs and practices and even some perceptions. The children from Sikh-Hindu marriages get exposed to the cultural and religious mores of both their parents. Even in cases where the husband is a Sikh and the wife a Hindu the likelihood of the child leaning towards the values of the core society [Hinduism] is much greater which tends to hybridize their religious thought and practices more willingly and without question. For another thing children born of mixed marriages are often given first names having little or no resonance with the mandated name of "Singh" or "Kaur"

The greatest casualty of Hindu nationalism run amok in November 1984 was the switch to the shaven visage by Sikhs in the name of survival. Although the threat has long disappeared young Sikhs continue to choose the *chikna* appearance. Making matters worse are the stated preferences of many Sikh families of the diaspora for a "clean-shaven" match for their daughters.

These are some of the ways affirming the extent to which the cultural and religious patterns of the Sikhs are changing to those of the core or mainstream society. Whatever the motivation for assimilation or adaptation, it all adds up to religious backsliding. Paradoxically, Hindus welcome such a change among the Sikhs as in their eyes it goes to show that Sikhs are structurally part of the Hindu culture.

**Continuity:** Every society leans on rituals and conventions to reassure its own continuity. In the process it perpetuates the legacy of legends, rituals and dubious myths. In a country like India, where one religion (Hinduism) dominates all others, some overspill of religious values, rituals and conventions is unavoidable. What may constitute an acceptable norm in Hinduism may be foreign and unacceptable to the adherents of minority religions like Christianity, Islam and Sikhism. Historically, Sikhs have more traditions and rituals in common with Hindus (in North India) than any other foreign religion. However, since 1984, Sikhs have started questioning the veracity of Hindu practices that are clearly in conflict with the Sikh tenets.

