

# Being and Becoming a Sikh: The Ideal and The Reality

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THE DEFINITION AND STATUS OF A *sahajdhari*, a *keshadhari* and the *amritdhari* have been debated extensively in these columns in the past few months. Let us pull some of the strands together into a larger picture, if we may.

Let me start with a couple of assumptions. One is that Sikhism has more to do with *becoming* a Sikh than with *being* one. It is a progressive journey that we Sikhs have been privileged to choose. The direction is the same, the progress may not always be. We all walk the same path but not necessarily at the same pace, rate and an energy or equally clear view of the direction and goals. The second assumption would be that the large capacious umbrella of Sikhism embraces - and has room for - all these many (contentious?) people walking at their own different rates. Since it is not a regimentation with troops marching abreast, differences in their paces must exist, and do.

Given the clarity of Sikh teaching and tradition, Let me then define the *amritdhari* existence as the goal. This means an *amritdhari* who personifies the values and ethics of Sikh teaching.) I would then place *keshadhari* Sikhs a few steps behind, and those who have yet to wear the uniform of the Khalsa, somewhat behind the other two. Bear with me a moment. I know that in this I have not said a word yet about the spiritual, moral and social values and lifestyle of the religion. This is because the premise underlying my view and inherent in it is the given that all types of Sikhs – *amritdharis*, *keshadharis*, *sahajdharis* - (whatever their reasons for the choices that they have made) value equally what constitutes the virtuous life of a Sikh.

Since human frailty is universal, I can well understand that individuals of all three types will show shortcomings. I repeat that becoming a Sikh is a life-long journey. Therefore, everyone on the path will be short of the endpoint – some less, some more. It is not for me to judge where an individual might be, but it is enough to realize that we are all on the same trek. To judge another – uninvited – smacks of arrogance and a level of *hubris* (*Haumaî*) that I hope we do not have.

Therefore, to point to the shortcomings of any individual is not fair; in fact, it is both an exercise in futility and a losing battle. It is also not necessary, even risky. **Identifying a falling *amritdhari* does not mean that all *amritdharis* are falling short, finding a saintly *sahajdhari* does not imply that becoming *amritdhari* is no longer necessary, desirable or obligatory requirement of the faith – as a goal.**

Given this kind of reasoning, I could argue that, at a personal level, a Sikh is an individual who professes to be one. How far is he or she from the goal is an entirely different matter. This is a second issue and in it enters the community's historical and institutional definition of who is a Sikh. The Sikh Code of Conduct (*Rehat Maryada*) is the authoritative document that speaks to this matter. It can be

examined, explored, even modified, but not easily. It is indeed more sacrosanct than the constitutions of countries in the context of religion.

Examination and exploration of such a document can take decades and a very careful deliberative process; it is also something to be rarely attempted and, when done, must involve the broad-based, worldwide community of Sikhs. This is precisely what happened when the Sikh *Rehat Maryada* was derived from the written records and unwritten tradition that were then available. (I draw the distinction here between this process and the Indian Constitution, which gets amended anytime a new political faction finds that it has the requisite number of noses to count. Such a hurried process ultimately does more harm than good.)

This brings us to our current dilemma. Most Gurdwaras across the world are run, however poorly, by an electoral system, as is the premier body in India that regulates historical gurdwaras – the SGPC. I realize that when the SGPC was formed we faced a different set of realities. Times are now different and opportunities exist to change how we conduct what it is that we call “self-governance.” Also I personally think the electoral model is not necessarily suited to what we want to achieve in institutional Sikhism. But these are different matters for another time, and I have addressed them elsewhere. The reality is that, at this time, we function by counting heads and by voting.

The question then becomes who to count. Here the question is not what percentage of *amritdharis* is less than virtuous, or how many *sehajdharis* are purer than Caesar’s wife. The question is entirely different and stems from different concerns.

Given the clarity of the majoritarian (Hindu) view in India that Sikhs are just long-haired Hindus, and given their single-minded determination to deny Sikhs their independent identity, it becomes necessary for Sikhs in India to guard their institutions against easy infiltration. Requiring a minimum standard of *keshadhari* for voting will not absolutely seal the borders but will surely make infiltration that much more difficult.

There is a parallel with a slightly different cast for Sikhs living abroad. I remember when the President and Secretary of the only gurdwara in town were not *keshadharis*. This was over 30 years ago, and a local company was willing to hire Sikhs but not with turbans and beards. Neither the gurdwara nor the local Indian consulate or communities were much help. We won the case but not without some serious embarrassment and difficulty.

It was soon after this that the Gurdwara constitution was amended to require management personnel to be *keshadhari*. Now the realities have further changed and management is *amritdhari*. I hasten to point out though that the level of internal conflict in the gurdwara has not decreased with the change of the management. The *amritdhari* management is not more virtuous but it is more visible, and that fact alone makes it somewhat easier when we need to speak for Sikhs in their struggle for equal opportunity, etc.

Therefore, such changes in management, however attractive they may look on the surface, are not always progressive steps in values. Also, remember that even such cosmetic changes may not always be possible; much may depend upon the makeup of the community. There are many enclaves of dedicated Sikhs where one

would not easily find a single keshadhari or amritdhari Sikh or, if you find one, he may not be the person to lead a gurdwara for reasons of character, inclination or dedication and talent.

In such matters the issue is not whether sahajdharis are Sikhs or not. Of course they are. Nor is the idea to deny sahajdharis, or any other kind of Sikhs for that matter, the opportunity and forum for walking along their path of Sikhism at their own pace.

Remember this: Even though we tend to become other-unworldly when we speak of religion, the issues are vital and worldly, and we need to keep in mind the world in which we live.

Also, that “finger pointing” and being judgemental are a poor strategy. Sikhism is a tolerant religion and, while *Gurbani* speaks of human frailty, it illumines our path to perfection in infinite ways.

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