

Turban - A Universal Symbol of Honour

Prof. Paramjeet Singh & Sumeet Kaur Bagga

* Paramjit Singh Bagga, Ph.D., Professor of Biology & convenor, Bioinformatics, Ramapo College of New Jersey, 505 Ramapo Valley Road, Mahwah. NJ. 07430. USA. Email: pbagga@ramapo.edu

“Sikh’s Turban grabbed in a Restaurant”; “Sikh’s Turban Torn From Head in a Hate Assault”; “Sikh Kid Not Allowed To Play Soccer”; “Sikh Student’s Turban set on Fire in the School- While he was wearing it.” - are unfortunately, becoming more common in America, especially in the post 9/11 era.

Victims of such intolerance are not restricted to isolated Sikh individuals. In some cases it has become a national and international issue. For instance, the ban on head coverings in the schools of France includes the Sikh Turban, and has caused enormous suffering to the Sikh families who make their home in France. Ironically, the graveyards, cemeteries & memorials of France are full of Sikh soldiers who laid down their lives in defense of democracy in France against Nazi Germany during the Second World War, as well as the Great War of 1914-19.

Discrimination against the world’s most ‘visible minority’, as the Sikh community has come to be known, is not new. Sikhs are most conspicuous because of their turbans. Historically, head-coverings were associated with many cultures of the world. While the rest of the modern civilization has gradually abandoned the tradition, for a Sikh the turban is not just a head covering. It is an integral part of our unique religious identity. People who are unaware of its connotation to Sikh identity may consider it as passé, a practice of the past - unnecessary in the modern society.

But traditionally, the Sikh turban, commonly referred to as - besides being a cover for *kesh* - the natural hair - *dastaar*, symbolizes a Sikh’s commitment to living the values of humanity, integrity, ethics, honesty and service. It represents trust, faith and a person who is always willing and ready to put oneself forward to serve humanity. The *dastaar* stands for the Sikhs’ willingness to be held accountable so that their character and actions meet the standards set by our Gurus.

How many of us who wear *dastaars* truly understand the significance of it? If we don’t know what it represents, why are we wearing it? Do we merely want to look like a Sikh? Don’t most of us perform this ritual simply because it is just expected of us? No one in his right state of mind would like to sign a contract without reading it first. If we don’t understand the commitment that we make by wearing a *dastaar*, are we honestly committed to the Sikh faith? How can we educate the world about what we don’t know ourselves?

There are doubtless a few choice people - and organizations - from our community who try to educate others on the significance of *Sikhi* and the *dastaar*, but it clearly is not enough. Shouldn’t every Sikh be responsible for it? How many of our children, the future Sikhs of the world, understand? The only way we will generate enthusiasm, awareness and a renewed passion for the *dastaar* and its significance is through our youth.

If you ask anyone from any part of this world about a *bar mitzvah*, they will very likely be able to tell you its significance in Judaism. On the other hand, if you ask that same individual the significance of the *Dastaar Bandi* to Sikhism, they will most likely not have a clue. This is indeed sad given the fact that there are more Sikhs in the world than Jews. We take great pride when our children make the very honorable commitment of wearing the

Sikh turban, but what do we tell them about what it means and the responsibility it entails? And how do we celebrate this giant step into adulthood?

The *Dastaar Bandi* ceremony for the grooming male child is typically performed in a traditional diwan (congregation) at the Gurudwara. Gurbani Keertan is sung, Guru's blessings are sought through Ardaas, and *Hukum* is taken from Sri Guru Granth Sahib. At the conclusion of the diwan, the granthi or a kathakaar says a few words of wisdom describing the history and significance of the Sikh turban before the actual ceremony. Usually then the head granthi ties a *dastaar* around the adolescent's head amid singing of *shabads* by close family members. The ceremony ends with *Bole So Nihal* in enthusiasm, followed by the congregation greeting the young Sardar who has taken the first step into the world of Sikh adulthood, along with responsibility to uphold this moral tradition.

It is self-evident that prior to the big day every Sikh youth should be made aware of the grace, as well as commitment that goes with the wearing the *dastaar*.

During a couple of recent *Dastaar Bandi* ceremonies, we have personally asked the youngmen if they knew the significance of *dastaar*. Most of them had no idea of the responsibilities that come with it. It is not uncommon for the adolescent to be found playing outside the Gurudwara during the *diwan* and the speeches. It is not until the time for tying the *dastaar* when he is called into the prayer hall.

Just as we go through a thoughtful planning process when we prepare for a wedding, why don't we do the same for the *Dastaar Bandi* which, in many ways, is just as much or even more of a life altering phase.

We should like to suggest a few hours of required classes and discussion to prepare the boys for the privilege and responsibility attached to be turban teaching them well in advance the significance and responsibility that the *dastaar* brings. We should make the event a splendid, joyful function, starting with the typical ceremony in the Gurudwara, followed by a grand celebration with a confirmation from the youth of his commitment in representing the collective community. Let that commitment be made not only in front of the local Sikh community, but the larger community in which we live in. Let's invite the boy's friends from school, the neighbors, and other colleagues. Most individuals are genuinely interested in learning about other cultures and religions. Why don't we use this opportunity to educate as many people as we can about Sikhism and the significance of the *dastaar*? We don't hesitate to spend substantial amounts of money on weddings, anniversaries or birthday parties. Why don't we invest into the future of our Sikh children by celebrating *Dastaar Bandi*?

If we instill true practices of Sikhism, into our children's upbringing, they will surely be the passionate ambassadors of *Sikhi*, proud of the *dastaar*, and their dignity that is integral to being a Sikh.

