

# Wearing of helmet by Sikh women

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A controversy regarding, 'wearing helmet by Sikh women' has been raging for several years. Misunderstanding about provisions of *Rahatnamas* and the necessity of helmet for women, need to be logically clarified in order to find workable solution. This is an attempt to bring about a consensus about the subject. The *Rahatnama* in which *topi* is forbidden was written three centuries ago by one of writers of Guru Gobind Singh's *darbar*. It bears no signature of approval by Guru Gobind Singh.

The Sikh '*Rahat Maryada*' was compiled and approved by all India Sikh Missionary board on 1.8.1936. It was approved by SGPC on 12.10.1936. It was revised by Dharmik Salahkar Committee on 7.1.1945 (55 years ago). There is no mention of forbidding helmet/*topi* in this.

There was no two-wheelers or three-wheelers at that time. Nor were there Helicopters and Aeroplanes. With such fast moving modes of transport (some even faster than the speed of sound) it becomes compulsory to protect the head.

Famous writer and Sikh historian, Khushwant Singh writes in *The Tribune*, (Sep. 4, 1999) "I challenge any one of them: granthis, jathedars, scholars, to show me one line in Sikh scriptures to prove that wearing a helmet is against Sikh religion and I will eat six yards of my turban." Even the *Rahatnama* in which *topi* (Muslim type of cap) is forbidden, there is no mention of helmet.

The commanding officers and *Ghorcharas* (cavaliers) of the Khalsa army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh wore helmets. Helmets of steel with gold inlay work, and a feather plume, were worn by the officers. Some wore helmets known as 'turban helmet.' These were turban shaped to be worn over the turban. Such helmets were displayed during tricentenary celebration, in many countries, by the Victorial Albert Museum, London, vide photos by Suzan Stronge, on page 138 Fig. 154 & Fig 155. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a devout Sikh whom the whole world considers a great ruler. He always thought of the welfare of his public and army - considered as one of the best-trained army with bravest soldiers in the world.

Harminder Kaur of Delhi has incorrectly understood about the army rule of men not wearing helmet and acquiring safety with turban alone. These men (of army alone) wear many-layered turbans, which is thick enough to withstand the impact of a bullet. Mind you, they are soldiers who walk (infantry) or use low speed transport (artillery and armed corps). But when they have to use high speed transports, like aeroplanes, where chance of injury to the head are far advanced they wear helmet (as part of uniform) as this is a necessity for their safety.

*Rahatnama* and *Rahatmaryada* are clearly not scriptural commandment. It is a code of conduct compiled by the followers of the Sikh religion. It has to be updated from time to time depending upon the fast evolution of human race and relevant necessities of the society. *Rahatnama* quoted

by a Sikh scholar in "Chandigarh Newline" of 14 Sept. 2000 is an example. Here, author of *Rahatnama* says "if the Sikh wore a *topi*, he would re-born a leper for the next seven incarnations". This was written three centuries ago when people didn't know the cause of leprosy. Medical science (along with all other branches of science) has advanced so much that now every doctor knows that the cause of leprosy is a microbacterium contracted after long contact with a leper. Now it is curable if treatment started earlier. Word of mouth has no role. It confirms that the teachings of the Sikh religion tells us: "don't have blind faith". This is a scientific religion, whose teachings will be useful for two more at the millennia minimum.

While Sikhs in North America are thinking of the viability of this religion in space and on other planets, our Punjabi Sikhs are trying to drag it three centuries backwards. By depriving them from the modes of basic protection from head injury; even types of injury which can effect the brain - to the extent that the affected person may have to live a vegetable existence.

Regarding 'acrobatics' of Sikhs by breaking coconut on the head of a woman, Khushwant Singh writes (*The Tribune*: 04 Sept, 1999) "A fellow was shown cracking a coconut placed on the head of a girl, to prove that Sikh girl's skulls are tougher than skulls of other faith. How silly some people can be! Must they insist on making a laughing stock of themselves?"

This was an acrobatic show and jugglery in the name of the martial race. They have made a mockery of martial race. Martial (appropriate to war or bravery in war) jugglery (motions by artifice or trickery), their action fits with the latter. A few months ago, there was photo of a woman in the paper who could bend an iron bar with her neck. This is far more difficult than breaking coconuts (a hollow and light object) on the head. Skull bones are much tougher than the cartilage of trachea (windpipe) of the neck used for bending the iron rod.

Not long ago a Sikh brigadier's two daughters were involved in road accident while not wearing helmet driving a scooter. They died instantly when hit by another vehicle. Similarly, a colonel's young daughter lost her life just near Chandigarh's Sector 34 Gurdwara. No Sikh man or woman from the gurdwara, or nearby, could save her from sustaining fatal head injury.

These are real life accidents resulting in fatal injuries, not acrobatics nor jugglery. In each case brilliant young girls lost their precious lives. Protection to their heads could have helped at least to some extent.

I ask all Sikh men and women leaders who are misleading youth of today about the use of helmet: "Do you want the government to make a rule that women should not be told to use helmet?" (Naturally they will have to wear turban instead). Most of us are ignorant. Government has already made a rule "Army order 197/68" for Sikh women army officers, that they will wear *Patka* (mini turban) and not a cap. I am the only woman army officer who wore this during my tenure in army. Since no other woman army officer wore this head dress after me, and opted for cap instead, this army order has been cancelled.

It is my earnest plea that, instead of creating unnecessary *hala-gula* for no specific reason, (i) You get in touch with Sikh women army officers and find out why they flouted this army order? (ii) According to *Rahat maryada*, no Sikh man or woman (*Amritdhari*) is to be without head

dress anytime. A handful of agitating Sikh women in Chandigarh, who will opt for turban instead of helmet, their number should be counted. After three months, count the number "who are still wearing turban". This will give true idea about the practice of Sikh women. Then act accordingly. Listen to Khushwant Singh. He says, "Sikh women must comply with regulations and wear helmet to protect their head in the event of accidents. If any one questions them, let them quote this article in their defence - [Khushwant Singh, "Saturday plus" *The Tribune*, Sept. 4, 1999]

