

THE SIKH AND THE TURBAN BRAND IMAGE

The questions are raised with increasing frequency on essentiality of persons with turban, beard etc. to represent the Sikh community in Gurdwaras and other forums. The increasing frequency is due to the fact that more and more persons are not keeping kesh. Non-kashdharis would articulate their not keeping kesh for obvious reasons. The pressure would build up still further in years to come. The reasons are several fold but more significant ones that come to my mind straight away (so it is not the final word but only indicative points):

1. Migration from India and the problem of assimilation in societies where wearing turban creates difficulties. With settling abroad being high on agenda of a vast number of the members of Sikh community, trends with Sikhs abroad get emulated here. It is more so where Sikhs are small in number. Sikhs in Argentina, Bolivia etc have almost in toto become non-turbaned. Marriages with local women accelerated the process. (Sikhs were buried and not even cremated! Should this become the norm, then?)

2. It is not to deny that non-keeping of kesh with newly-borns is becoming a norm rather than an exception even in Punjab and other parts of India. During and post 1980's, the problem of identification through turban in India as a Sikh created problems for several people. Acceptance into main stream was considered more important and TURBAN, THE VISIBLE SYMBOL, was let go.

3. General questioning of religion and religious symbols with increasing affluence and industrialisation and movement to metros and urban areas and tv prevalence are demanding conformity or following of the latest fashion or trend (even though it may keep changing from time to time).

4. General problems associated with being aggressive even for peaceful defence in other words use of "kirpan" etc. is not favourably viewed. It has association with terrorism. There is increasing demand and reliance on following the law of the land (even though justice in several cases is denied or delayed) as an accepted recourse rather than individual or group "sena" for protection of sufferers or as a recourse to injustice however justified. In earlier Mughal times, there was no recourse to justice through law for religious intolerance. The situation is considered different now.....

5. Some people say that they prefer to follow Guru Nanak being a peaceful pacifist (rings bell about Dalai Lama's popularity) and not say the Guru Gobind's call for raising the sword in defence of injustice or unfairness of extreme kinds. So they say we are Sikhs - the-turban etc.

6. Turban and beard have become a symbol of beauty rather than sign of religiosity. I am not against better grooming but emphasis has shifted. There are several other points probably more important and significant than enumerated above. However it cannot be denied that the TRADE OR BRAND IMAGE OF A SIKH IS TURBAN AND BEARD. No one can argue about it or deny it. One may say "Why so?" but the fact remains that it is

a rallying point of the community and the faith. A brand is built over a period and the turban and beard has become so for the Sikhs.

Another important point for the branded Sikhs (if I may use this term) is that they cannot fight for their rights to wear turban, if the community/Gurdwara leaders or representatives do not themselves wear turban. Consider the plight of turbaned Sikh to be represented by a non-turbaned Sikh on say the turban issue. Unless, of course, the non-turbaned Sikhs are saying that the turbaned Sikhs should follow their wisdom to cut hair, pronto, the better. It would give them more comfort! The Sikh Religious Forums like SGPC have done almost nothing to promote the 5K's in a situation which demanded better approach under difficult and fast changing environ (political, cultural, legal, social, commercial) under which Sikhs now live. The priesthood does not command respect of intelligensia and in fact is doing more harm than good. Even if they are not "literate", the least they can do is to "appear pious and be truly sewa oriented". I would welcome a discussion without hype. Many of us face the issue with our siblings, neighbours, relatives and friends. We have to remember that "Faith" cannot be put to last degree of logic. Existence of God itself ia a matter If faith rather than logic. To me "Turban" is nostalgic and has an emotional bond with the community and religion and is an integral part of my past association with my folks and home state etc. This cannot be denied but whether it MUST BE PERPETRATED at any cost, I am open to listen to thers' wise words. Thanks.