

Anglo & Middle East Heritage of the Turban

To Sikhs, their turban is sacred. Their Gurus instructed them to wear it, and they have sacrificed their lives to protect its honor. The following collection of how the turban has been regarded throughout history has been put together for your information.

"Once they enter the gates of the court, they are to wear linen vestments, They shall wear linen turban, and linen drawers on their lions."
(Old Testament: Ezekiel 44:18-19)

The name "turban" is found in this form in European languages only: English-turban, turbaned; French-turban, tulband; German-turban; Italian, Spanish and Portugese-turbante; Dutch-tulbans; Romanian-tulipan; and it is generally traced to the Persian sarband. In Turkish sarik is the usual name for turban. In ancient Egyptian civilization the turban was considered an ornamental head dress. They called it pjr from which perhaps is derived the word pugree, so commonly used in Punjab and India. The Egyptians removed the turban at the time of mourning, a custom which prevailed in the Punjab up to the end of the last century. The Sikh apostle, Bhai Gurdas Ji humorously narrates an incident in his Vars, that when an elderly Punjabi came to his home with his turban accidentally off, the women folk took it to be a sign of mourning and started weeping and wailing although no one was dead. The old man's turban, off his head,gave a false alarm.

Turban in Old Testament

Put on the turban as the Lord has commanded Moses: One of the commands of God to Moses was to wear turban as the symbol of prophet hood, holiness and divine power. This was a command obeyed by the Jews and the Muslims for centuries and ignored or forgotten by the Christians.

"They made the tunic of fine lines, woven work for Aaron and his sons, the turban of fine linen, the tall head dress and their bands all of fine linen, the drawers of finely woven linen, the sash of woven linen, as the Lord had commanded Moses."
(Exodus 39,27)

The Turban, the Tunic, and the Drawer as the Priestly Vestment: All these three costumes, the turban, the robe and the drawer continued to be essential parts of the priestly dress among the Hebrews after the exile. They all have an old independent history, and it is not easy to explain how they came to be combined into an independent priestly uniform:

"These are the vestments they must make: breast plate, ephod, robe, embroidered tunic, turban and girdle."
(Exodus: 28-4)

The Turban as symbol of Dedication, Consecration and Essential for Anointment: The anointing of men with missionary zeal and prophetic missions required some ceremonial activities like pouring oil and fixing some mark on the turban, which was actually the crown of the priests. In a more refined form these ceremonies have symbolically survived in the Punjab till today.

They made a rosette of pure gold as the symbol of their holy dedication and inscribed on it as the engraving on a seal, "Holy to the Lord"; and they fastened it on a violet brand to fix it on the turban at the top as the Lord had commanded Moses.
(Exodus 39-31)

He put the turban upon his head and set the gold rosette as symbol of holy dedication on the front of the turban as the Lord had commanded him. Moses then took the anointing oil, anointed the Tabernacle, and all that was within it and consecrated it.
(Leviticus 8,9)

Set the turban on his head and the symbol of holy dedication on the turban. Take the

anointing oil, pour it on his head and anoint him.

(Exodus 29-6)

You are to make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, "Consecrated to Yahweh as a man engraves a seal." You will secure this to the turban with a ribbon of violet purple, it is to be placed on the front of the turban. The tunic you must weave of fine linen and a girdle, the work of a skilled embroiderer.

(Exodus 28-36)

Kingly Turban

The turban was the symbol of royalty and was used in place of the crown. It was an article of kingly regalia. Throughout the Islamic world, it still continues to be used in place of the crown where monarchy exists.

For Jerusalem's sake I will speak out. Until her light shines forth like the sunrise, her deliverance like a blazing torch, until the nation see the triumph of your right, and all king see the glory. Then you shall be called by a new name, which the Lord will pronounce with his own lips, You shall be a glorious crown in the Lord's hand, a kingly turban in the hand of your God.

(Isaiah 62:2-10)

Turban as the symbol of Stoic Courage in the Face of Grief: During mourning the people usually took off their turban, but the brave and the holy are neither supposed to weep, nor lament, nor take off their turban. They are to wear turban as the symbol of stoic courage.

You are not to lament, not to weep, not to let your tears run down. Groan in silence, do not go into mourning for the dead, knot your turban round your head, put your sandals on your feet, do not cover your beard.

(Ezekiel 24:17-19)

And you are to do as I have done, you must not cover your beards, or eat common bread; you must keep your turban on your head, put your sandals on your feet, do not cover your beard.

(Ezekiel 24:17-19, 23-24)

The Turban as Symbol of Dignity and Self-Respect: The turban, during the biblical world, as it is among the Indians and Arabs who wear it, was a symbol of Dignity, self respect and authority. A blemish on the turban meant a blot on one's character. So it was during the time of Old Testament Prophets, and so it is now among the Sikhs and Arabs. An insult to the turban meant unbearable insult to one's personality. To take away the turban meant subjugating a person and humiliating him. During freedom movement Sikh prisoners were forced to wear caps which they refused.

"When God takes away the turban,"

says Prophet Isaiah,

"he takes away the dignity of man."

That day the Lord will take away the ankle ornaments, tiaras, pendants and bracelets and veils, the expensive dresses, mantles, cloaks and purses, the mirror, linen garments, turban and mantles.

(Isaiah 3:22,23)

For Babylonians Turban was Symbol of Youth and Strength: The turban and beard gave them such attractive personality that women who had not seen them were infatuated by their personality. No sooner had she seen wall engravings of men, painting of Chaldeans, colored vermilion, men with sashes round their waists and elaborate turbans on their heads, all so imperious of bearing portraits of Babylonians from Chaldea, then she fell in love with them at first sight and sent messengers to them in Chaldea.

Belts were round their waists and on the heads turbans with dangling ends; all seemed to be high officers and looked like Babylonians natives of Chaldea.

(Ezekiel 23: 14-17)

Turban as Symbol of Justice and Charity

When Job surveys his life and protests his innocence, he recounts the good he did during his days of prosperity. He identifies the turban

with righteousness and uses it as a metaphor for justice, charity and kingly dignity.

I had dressed myself in righteousness like a garment. Justice for me was a cloak and turban. I was eyes for the blind and feet for the lame. (Job 29:14)

Turban as Symbol of Purity: Now Joshua was dressed in dirty clothes as he stood before the angel of God. The angel said these words to those who stood before him:

"Take off his dirty clothes, cloth him in splendid robes of state and put a clean turban on his head." They clothed him in splendid robes of State and put a clean turban on his head. The angel said, "I have taken away your iniquity from you." (Zechariah 3:4-9)

He shall wear a sacred linen tunic and a linen drawer to cover himself and he shall put on a linen sash around his waist and wind a linen turban round his head and these are sacred vestments and he shall bathe before putting them on.

Thus a clean body, a clean white turban were pre-requisites for spiritual development of clean mind and pure soul. (Leviticus 8:9)

The turban has long been considered the crown of spirituality; it is essential to Sikh Dharm and has a special significance too in religions like Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is interesting to note that in Islam, the angels and all the prophet are represented as wearing turbans.

Prophet Muhammad himself spoke strongly in favor of the turban, as can be seen from the following hadiths (i.e. saying of Prophet Muhammad):

"The turban is a frontier between faith and unbelief."

"My community shall not fall away so long as they wear turban."

"At the day of the judgement, a man shall receive a light for each turn of the turban round his head."

"Wear turbans, for thus you will gain in generosity."

"Wear turbans and thus distinguish yourselves from the peoples who came before you."

It is unfortunate that the tying of turbans has become a rarity in other religions - lets hope we can fare better !

<http://www.sikh-info.com/turban.htm>