

The Sikh Dilemma

-Dr. Sarjeet Singh Sidhu, MBBS, FRCOG, FICS, LLB (Hons.)

INTRODUCTION:

Any minority community, be it religious or ethnic, sooner or later develops a 'siege mentality', that is, a mental make up that causes the community to believe that its identifying features are being eroded. In the case of the Sikhs this feeling takes on a hue more ominous than usual because even in India, where the majority of Sikhs live, they are a minority. Even in Punjab (India) they barely constitute a majority. It is generally recognized that the survival of a community depends upon its continued ability to make a free public expression of its identity. In the Malaysian context this hardly poses any problems; there are no restrictions denying us this free expression. Our freedom of worship is guaranteed by law. What then is the Sikh dilemma? The word 'dilemma' implies a '... *choice between alternatives equally undesirable; a predicament...*'¹ Keeping this in view it is now possible to look at the problems that bother at least some Malaysian Sikhs.

SOME RELEVANT DEFINITIONS

If the question: '*Who is a Sikh?*' is casually posed, especially to a non-Sikh, the answer will generally incorporate a reference to the turban and beard. In other words, and very generally, it conjures an image of the *keshdhari* individual. Let us, however, first look at some of the relevant definitions:

1. Sikh:

· *According to the Rahit Maryada published by the SGPC: "A woman or a man, who believes in one Almighty, ten Guru Sahibans (from Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji to Sri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib), Sri Guru Granth Sahib and Bani and advice of ten Guru Sahibans and the Amrit of Dasmesh Ji and does not accept any other religion, is a Sikh."*²

· *According to the Sikh Gurdwaras Act 1925:*

A Sikh is defined as "*a person who professes the Sikh religion*" adding that the following declaration should be required if any doubt should arise: '*I solemnly affirm that I am a Sikh, that I believe in the Guru Granth Sahib, that I believe in the Ten Gurus, and that I have no other religion*'³

· *According to the Delhi Gurdwara Act 82 of 1971:*

"'Sikh' means a person who professes the Sikh religion, believes and follows the teachings of Sri Guru Granth Sahib and the ten Gurus only and keeps unshorn hair. For the purposes of this Act, if any question arises as to whether any living person is or is not a Sikh, he shall be deemed respectively to be or not to be a Sikh according as he makes or refuses to make in the manner prescribed by rules the following declaration: - 'I solemnly affirm that I am a Keshadhari Sikh, that I believe in and follow the teachings of Sri Guru Granth Sahib and, the ten Gurus only, and that I have no other religion.'" [4]

2. Keshdhari Sikh: A Sikh who retains the *kesh* (unshorn hair) but has not undergone the Khalsa initiation i.e. has not taken *Amrit*.⁵

3. Sahajdhari Sikh: A Sikh who has never been either a *keshdhari* or a member of the Khalsa, and has always shaved and cut his hair. Some have defined *Sahajdhari* as '*...Born in a non-Sikh family but believes in the Sikh faith.*'⁶ This definition does not take into account the Sahajdhari who is

born to Sahajdhari and remains a Sahajdhari.

4. Khalsa or Amritdhari Sikh: A keshdhari Sikh who has undergone the Khalsa initiation by taking *Amrit*, sports the five K's, and abides by the rules of the *Rahit Maryada*.⁴

5. Patit: This is taken to mean 'apostate' by most Sikh writers. 'Apostasy' means '...*the act of renouncing one's faith, principles or party...*' [1]. In the ordinary sense of the word, and as implied by the writers, an apostate is one who has renounced his faith. In fact the word '*patit*' as used in the *Sikh Reht Maryada* actually applies to Amritdhari Sikhs who have committed any one or more of the following *char kurahit* (four transgressions or gross offences):

- Dishonouring the hair (meaning cutting the hair).
- Eating *halal* meat.
- Cohabiting with a person other than one's spouse.
- Using tobacco.

Patit cannot, therefore, apply to either the Sahajdhari or, strictly speaking, to an uninitiated Keshdhari.

Some conclusions can now be drawn from the above definitions. It is obvious that unshorn hair is common to the Khalsa and to the Keshdhari Sikh (who, strictly speaking and by definition, is not a Khalsa). In passing it may be worth noting that whilst the turban has come to be a distinguishing mark of a Sikh, it is not the turban as such but the uncut hair that is the requirement for Khalsa membership.

Let us take a closer look at the definitions of Sikh as given above (see 1.). The SGPC definition as given in the *Rahit Maryada* does say that '...the Khalsa form should be the standard version of the Sikh identity' but it does not 'disqualify those who are outside the Khalsa. One is required to 'believe in' (*jo... nisacha rakhda*) the need to take *amrit*.' This form of words, strictly interpreted, means that 'whereas a devout Sikh will certainly be expected to take *amrit* and assume the full range of Khalsa obligations, it is not an essential step. The essential requirement is that one should affirm the value of so doing. This will imply an intention to seek initiation at some time in the future, but it will not automatically deregister all who refrain from taking that step.'⁷

The Sikh Gurdwaras Act 1925 is by far the 'broadest' in its definition of 'Sikh', in that it encompasses the many who claim to be Sikhs but would, by other definitions, be excluded. Strictly speaking, it does not exclude a non-keshdhari from its definition of Sikh.

The Delhi Gurdwara Act 82 of 1971 has, however, changed the whole complexion of the definition of a Sikh. It does not make the taking of *amrit* mandatory, nor does it require a 'believe in' the need to take it. This Act, however, makes it mandatory for a person to be *keshdhari* to be called a Sikh, even if he is not an *amritdhari* (Khalsa). It is obvious that the particular pressure group that influenced the drafting of this Act took it upon itself to put the *keshdhari* on equal footing with the *amritdhari*. This, evidently, was necessitated by certain 'political' realities peculiar to and in relation to elections to management committees of Delhi Gurdwaras, an issue outside the purview of this paper. It is sufficient to note that being *keshdhari* was (originally) just one of the requirements, after taking *amrit*, to becoming a Khalsa.

All the above definitions do not take into consideration three other categories of Sikhs. Firstly, those who trim their beards whilst maintaining a turban, secondly, those who were keshdhari but went on to cut their hair, and thirdly, those whose parents kept them with shorn hair from the beginning. For convenience members of the latter two categories may be alluded to as *Mona* Sikhs, the protests of the 'Orthodox' notwithstanding.

MALAYSIAN SIKH COMMUNITY

A look at the Sikh community in this country will reveal that only a tiny fraction of its members will qualify to be Khalsas, and a marginally bigger number will qualify as Keshdhari. The overwhelming majority will be made up of the *Monas* and those who trim; which of the two groups outnumbers the other is irrelevant. The point of these statistics is that far too many Malaysian Sikhs would not qualify as 'Sikhs' if the viewpoints of the 'Orthodox' were to prevail - and some of those views can be extreme. One example, though, will be enough to secure the point. In *The Sikh Review* of June 1998, in *Amnesty to Patits* (page 63), the writer, Jaswinder Kaur, makes it abundantly clear that she considers all Sikhs who do not sport the Five K's as *patits*. She goes on to say that a *Hukumnama* should be issued against those who do not "return to the mainstream of Sikhism by wearing the uniform with Five K's by a specific date." She demands that this edict should give "clear instructions... that no Sikh will have anything to do with *Patits*, and Sikhs disobeying the *Hukumnama* will also be open to punishment by the *Panth*... *Patits*... should not be invited to any social function nor should Sikhs respond to their invitations. Let there be a clean break because the paths of the two are different - *Manmat vs Gurmat*." Fortunately for Sikhs worldwide, and for us Malaysians in particular, no heed was paid to such extreme views. It is hard to believe that this was written at the fag end of the 20th Century, and at almost the end of the Second Millennium, the age of increasing tolerance and rapprochement. The freedom to encourage all Sikhs to adopt the Five K's is not contested (even if the absolute necessity of these symbols in attaining spiritual enlightenment is debatable). However, the need to totally cut ties with the so-called *patits* is difficult to comprehend, the practical impossibility notwithstanding. It is, however, noteworthy that there is not even **one** Sikh family in Malaysia that does not have at least one so-called *patit* within its fold, whether a blood relation or through marriage. In fact the numbers involved, in each family, are far greater than just one. Imagine the effect of the above proposed *Hukumnama* on Sikhs in Malaysia. The vast majority would **never** follow such an edict. In any case the Malaysian Sikh Community is not rigid about the 'external' appearance as a necessity for identification or for a claim to be a Sikh. That having been said we can now turn our attention to the question of the 'Sikh Dilemma' in Malaysia.

THE DILEMMAS

The main worries, of at least some Malaysian Sikhs, in relation to our ethno-religious identity are confined to the following issues:

- Identity.
- Language.
- Conversions to other religions.
- Mixed-marriages.
- Unity and Organisation.
- Ecclesiastic Authority.

1. IDENTITY

When the question of identity is raised by Sikhs, it is in reference to the contention that Sikhs and Sikhism enjoy an 'existence' separate and distinct from all other religions, and this generally refers to the question of whether Sikhism is a religion apart from Hinduism. This question is of particular importance to Sikhs in India where there are continuous efforts by the majority community to claim that Sikhs are indeed a sub-sect of Hindus. That this is not a figment of their collective imagination is evident from the activities of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), a part of the Indian political party, the BJP. It has created another organization called *Rashtriya Sikh Sangat* (also conveniently having the acronym RSS, for obvious reasons). This very influential, and some claim militant, Hindu organization, inter alia, makes the claims '...*Sikhs and the Hindu society are an indivisible and unified entity... Sikhs are a part of the Hindu society... Sikhs are a sect of the Hindu*

religion.'⁸ Thus the intention of the RSS to absorb the Sikhs into the Hindu fold is clearly stated by the organization, whatever the motives. This is a cause for concern for all Sikhs. It is for this reason that Sikh scholars go to great lengths to provide proofs and arguments for the Sikh contention of their separateness. Here in Malaysia, however, we have no such problem; we are recognized by one and all as a separate religion; there is no necessity, here, for Sikhs to provide any justifications for the claim to separateness.

In the Malaysian context, the worry of identity, if at all present, is in relation to the physical appearance, i.e. in relation to the hair and turban. Within the community anyone of Punjabi Sikh parentage professing to the Sikh faith is unquestioningly accepted as such, whether he is a *mona* or whether he trims his beard. The only time this liberal attitude on our part generates some heat is when some preacher or *sant* from abroad comes to 'teach' us that a non-keshdhari is a *patit*. Thus, on the question of identity, for us, there is no dilemma.

2. LANGUAGE

The importance of one's mother-tongue in maintaining one's identity and one's culture is recognized by most. Besides our physical appearance it is our language that identifies us with our ethnic group. For the Sikhs the importance of Punjabi is seen not only in relation to cultural identity but also in relation to Sikhism itself. So interwoven are our language and our religion into our identity that we have difficulty separating the two without feeling a loss of identity. Edward Sapir, a linguist, says, '*...the mere fact of a common speech serves as a peculiar potent symbol of the social solidarity of those who speak the language.*'⁹ Language has always played an important role in the formation and expression of identity, a role that has an increasing importance today, given that the other traditional markers of identity, such as food, clothing, celebrations and religion are being destabilized, including that of race. '*Language... fosters feelings of group identity and solidarity. It is the means by which culture and its traditions and shared values may be conveyed and preserved...*'¹⁰.

That an increasing number of Sikhs, particularly the children, have a poor or no understanding of the Punjabi language, is a cause of concern to most Malaysian Sikhs. Even those of us who can speak Punjabi choose to mostly converse in English. It is recognized and accepted that the learning of English and Malay is vital to our survival in the job market, and therefore needs no further elaboration. This has meant the relegation of Punjabi to third place. Many have chosen to abandon the learning of Punjabi, conceding that the mastering of three languages, above and beyond all the other school subjects, amounts to unnecessarily burdening the child. We have this perception that such a task is difficult and therefore an unfair imposition on our children. But is it that much of a task? A look at the Chinese community would appear to belie this perception. In this context it is not the Chinese-school educated children, who generally have a poor command of the English language, that are being alluded to, but those educated in the main, National-Type schools, to which we send our children. Such Chinese children these days almost universally speak Mandarin, can read and write 'Chinese', and also speak their 'native' dialects.

So where have we gone wrong and what can be done to correct the error? We have, quite wrongly, considered the learning of Punjabi as unimportant. We are wrong in assuming that without any working knowledge of Punjabi, i.e. without being able to understand and speak the language, succeeding generations of Sikh children will continue to identify themselves as either Sikhs or Punjabis. Even if they do so continue to identify themselves, they will not put a premium on it and will scarce raise an eyebrow if one or more of their number should 'leave' the community. '*... Within multilingual societies, the maintenance of the languages of the various ethnic and cultural groups is critical for the preservation of cultural heritage and identity. The loss of language means the loss of culture and identity...*' [10]. It has been estimated that '*... Today, only about 6,000 languages are still spoken and many of these are not being taught to children. More than half of*

these languages are unlikely to survive the next century.'¹¹

The dilemma: We either 'burden' our children with an extra language, Punjabi, or we run the risk of losing our identity and, quite possibly, our language itself.

The solution: Some Sikhs in Malaysia have woken up to this dilemma and have chosen to do something about it. We now have our *Punjabi Education Foundation Malaysia* running regular Punjabi classes throughout Malaysia. But this noble effort will not be enough unless all adults and families within the community support the idea. The Foundation-run classes focus mainly on the reading, writing and examination angle. It is not mere conjecture to suggest that most, if not all, Sikh families would be quite satisfied if their children could speak Punjabi with proficiency, even if unable to read or write 'Punjabi'. As a first measure, and with no burden on the child, simply speaking to the child in Punjabi, from birth, at home will lay the foundation for the perpetuation of the language.

3. CONVERSIONS

When just one member of a Sikh family converts to another religion it causes a great deal of distress to the family and to the community; the distress and pain is magnified when whole families convert. A minority community cannot escape the influences of the religion and culture of the other communities. Whilst Malaysia has freedom of worship, the country, nevertheless, has an official State religion - Islam. Admittedly, there is no official policy of trying to convert non-Muslims to Islam, but we are constantly exposed to Islam and the Malay culture. From dawn to dusk, and beyond, we hear the call to prayer (*azan*), including on television (TV). There are regular TV programmes on Islam, actively promoting the religion. To presume that all this has no effect on the Sikhs, especially youths, is to be naive.

Add to that the influences of the other major ethnic groups, the Chinese (many of whom are Christians) and the South Indians (who are mostly Hindus, Christians or Muslims). In all these cases it is the influence of the other religions on the Sikh youth that worries the Sikh elders. The cultural influences that worry us are those that are so intertwined with the religions that the distinction between the two is blurred. During *Thaipusam*, for example, one will find a number of Sikhs carrying *kavadis*, to "fulfill vows" made to the presiding Hindu deity, with the rest of the chanting family members in tow.

Whilst the Muslims do not go from door to door to convert non-Muslims to Islam, the Christians consider it a divine command that they go out and spread the Gospel amongst non-Christians. Being forbidden by law to preach to Muslims, the rest of us become 'fair' targets. In recent years there has arisen a common perception amongst certain Christian evangelists that the Sikhs are more vulnerable to conversion to Christianity, and an increase in the number of Sikh converts to Christianity seems to justify this perception. The question is "Why have Sikhs become vulnerable to conversions?"

Conversions to Islam, in Malaysia at least, have mainly been through marriage, the law of the land being what it is. As far as can be ascertained, conversions to Islam (amongst Sikhs at least) have almost always been conversions of convenience rather than of conviction. Whilst the same holds true in some cases of conversions to Christianity, many have in fact converted out of conviction. Belief in another religion implies a loss of faith in Sikhism. What causes this loss of faith?

For most Sikhs the lack of faith in Sikhism is the result of a lack of understanding of the principles of the religion. In our Gurdwaras religious discourse is in Punjabi. The standard or level of Punjabi used is even beyond those who profess to know Punjabi. The preacher is far from interesting. The usual questions of religion like, "*What is the purpose of life? Is there an afterlife? Do we believe in heaven and hell as in the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic traditions?*" are seldom discussed with lucidity

or depth in the Gurdwaras. Part of the problem with the explanations may lie with the fact that some of those principles are deeply philosophical. But even when some answers and explanations are proffered they vary somewhat from preacher to preacher. This is not to say that there is no consistent theology on these issues, or that they cannot be simply and clearly explained, its just that no one thinks they are more important than, say, the keeping of long hair. So obsessed are we with the need to maintain the Khalsa *roop* that we fail to realize that there are some who yearn for their souls, and minds, to be fed. Such individuals find it easier and simpler to identify with the Christian concept of a 'Loving God' because the 'principles' of the religion are explained in simple, easy-to-understand terms (never mind the logic or lack of it). We spend so much time and energy on minor and meaningless ritual requirements that we fail to focus on the real teachings. Every *sant* that comes to our shores brings with him some new ritual and leaves the community arguing and quarreling about it. Guru Nanak says:

'Je Janas Braham Karam, Sabh Fokat Nischau Karam'

If they happen to know the nature of God, they will realise that all rites and beliefs are futile. (AG 470) ¹²

'Aasa mansa bhandani bhai, Karam dharam bandhkar'i'

Rituals and ceremonies are chains of the mind. (AG 635) ¹³

And still we are mired in pointless rituals, such as:

- Doing *Aarti* despite the fact that the Sikh *Rahit Maryada* rules that "*Rituals derived from other religions, such as...worship with lamps (aarti)...is strictly forbidden.*"¹⁴ Strangely, this practice is also seen at Patna Sahib (one of the Five *Takhts*).
- Doing multiple *akhand paths* at the same time in one 'durbar'.
- *Kumbh Rakhna*.
- Placing bottles of water near the GGS for the duration of the *akhand path* to make 'holy' water for future use.
- Doing several *akhand paths* one after another, without putting 'bhog' and so having a ready stock of *akhand paths* for future 'use' or 'sale'.

There are many other rituals/practices that shock the thinking individual on account of the ridiculousness of the practices, but two have been singled out for mention in some detail, namely:

- **Sach Khand** : The practice of putting the GGS 'to bed' every night, at the close of day, and after the last prayer. A special place has been prepared in every gurdwara for this purpose and named *Sach Khand*. Many have air-conditioned these special rooms, or at least put in a fan. When questioned, one 'learned' *granthi* is alleged to have replied, "If you need an air-conditioned room for your comfort don't you think *Babaji* deserves one?" This practice of providing a separate room for the "rest and retirement" of the AGGS for the night is practiced at the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) also. Several such practices, including some of the requirements listed in the *Rehat Maryada* in relation to the AGGS, make it **very hard** to reconcile them with our strict aversion to idol worship.
- **Nagar Kirtan** : Of late the practice of *Nagar Kirtan* is taking root in this country. It is becoming fashionable to take out the AGGS in ceremonial procession during *Gurpurbs*. Several gurdwara committees have started this practice, which was not in evidence before. This is reminiscent of the Hindu practice of taking out a chariot with the *moorti* of a deity in procession during certain Hindu festivals in this country. Evidently this practice is common in India also. What purpose does this serve? This smacks of idol worship even if some would vehemently deny it.

Over the years our treatment of the AGGS has reached proportions that amount to worship. **Have we begun to worship the AGGS as an idol?** This question and other issues in relation to rituals, both in Malaysia and in India, have been discussed by this writer in another article in some detail ¹⁵

The solution: In this age and time if any principle expounded by any religion cannot stand examination by simple common sense and logic, let alone withstand scientific scrutiny, it is unlikely to persuade anyone, except the credulous, as to its 'truth'. We must stop our preachers from spewing out mindless myths and palming them off as 'truths'. Religious dogmas must pass the test of reason or fail to truly convert the unbeliever. If truth is to prevail we cannot fear reason. As Thomas Jefferson says "*It is ...blasphemy against religion to suppose it cannot stand the test of truth and reason.*" ¹⁶ We will **have** to justify every religious demand or dogma with reason, only then can we point to the defects in the reasoning of other religions - and, mind you, there are many rituals and dogmas these other religions subscribe to, that cannot stand the scrutiny of reason. With every passing day an appeal to reason will be in ascendance and that to 'faith-alone' in decline. Clearly, there is no dilemma here. We must give up these illogical rituals and turn to reason, which will be in keeping with the true teachings of the GGS, so that our youth do not stray on account of being forced to observe rituals that make no sense. Once converted, the new convert, as usually happens, will defend his new-found, adoptive faith to the hilt, even if some of the dogmas of the adoptive religion absolutely fail to stand to reason; for example the issue of the Trinity, or that God had a son, cannot appeal to any logic.

4. MIXED-MARRIAGES

This problem is related to the fact that Malaysia is a multicultural, multiethnic, multi-religious society. In the past arranged marriage was the norm. Now more and more children, rightly, want to choose their partners. As long as a child chooses a spouse from within the community it is generally accepted, even if there is the occasional ripple or even an outright storm initially. But when a child chooses to marry a non-Sikh it is 'crisis' time. The problem gets further compounded if the non-Sikh is of a different ethnic group.

What, then, causes this reaction and despair? Repeated asking of this question of friends fails to produce any sound or consistent answer. In each case a different 'reason' is offered; the only thing offered consistently is the feeling expressed by each: that he/she wants his/her child to marry a Sikh. One reason given with fair consistency is that the children of such marriages are lost to the community, i.e. they are not brought up as Sikhs. A quick look around at such unions will reveal that this observation is substantially, if not almost entirely, true. Where a Sikh girl marries a non-Sikh the children are brought up in the religious tradition and culture of the non-Sikh father. In the case of a Sikh boy marrying a non-Sikh girl, if he has not already converted to her religion he will invariably be a 'liberal' Sikh who places no importance on religion. The wife, on the other hand, will be quite firm in taking the children to, say, the church. So the perception of 'lost to the community' is not invalid. But is this the entire story? It seems very likely that one major reason for the objection is the 'loss of face' and the 'rejection' within the community. The parents feel that they have somehow failed to bring up their children in the right way. This guilt may not be openly admitted or even realized but it must surely play a part. The reaction is the anger and despair. If Sikhs were in the majority, and the law insisted that anyone marrying a Sikh must convert to Sikhism, it is very likely that mixed-marriages would be more readily accepted by Sikhs, even if not entirely welcomed with open arms. This, however, is simply the opinion of this writer, mere conjecture. And yet, there may be more than an iota of truth in the hypothesis.

The dilemma: Whether to 'stick to your guns' and shun your loved one who takes this forbidden step, or whether to accept the reality, no matter how heart-broken you will always be, hoping that the next generation will embrace Sikhism and return to the fold.

And the solution? There is, of course, no 'one', or 'correct', answer to this problem. Speaking strictly from a legal, ethical, moral or even religious viewpoint this should not even be considered a problem. And yet so strong is our urge to preserve our identity, our need to remain within the 'tribe', to view our religion and our Punjabi-ness as wholly essential to our happiness and to our acceptance by the Sikh community that we respond to it as if our world has come to an end. This is a scene that will be played out with increasing frequency in the future; and we will have to come to terms with it on an individual basis, for there can be no 'right' solution to what may actually be a problem only of perception.

5. UNITY and ORGANISATION

Through non-Sikh eyes, the Malaysian Sikh Community is seen as a very cohesive and united community. How do we see ourselves? Many are quick to say that we are a much disunited lot. The truth is probably some where in between. Even as late as the second half of the preceding century Malaysian Sikhs were divided according to their geographical origins in the Punjab, i.e. whether they originated from the Majha, Malwa or Doaba regions. Fortunately for us these divisions are no longer visible amongst most youths and not enforced by most educated families. The same, however, cannot be said regarding certain Gurdwaras and certain Sikh organizations; hopefully even these 'recalcitrant' institutions will demolish these very un-Sikh walls of division. Similarly, in the past, we were conscious of, and maintained, caste affiliations, the very disease from which Guru Nanak, and his successors, had saved us. Fortunately, again, we are now mostly past this problem; the increasing number of "inter-caste marriages" is testimony to this. Today most parents no longer consider caste an issue. It is presumed, and hoped, that this discarding of caste is on account of the enlightenment of the Sikh religion and the true teachings of *Gurbani*).

The Malaysian Sikh population is estimated at around eighty thousand. For such a small community we have innumerable organizations with different aims, performing different functions and all claiming to do so on behalf of the entire community, whether at State level or the National level. It is inevitable that there would be duplication of aims and effort. Each organization endeavours to conduct its activities by raising funds, and they all tap the same meager resources. If the truth be told there is no single organization that can honestly lay claim to being representative of the majority of Sikhs. The total membership of even those organizations that have the appearance of being National organizations is miniscule and skewed. At a recent Sikh Conference, those in attendance were told of a recent incident where members of a particular organization went to the then Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamed (now Tun Mahathir), with some request on behalf of Malaysian Sikhs. The delegation was told that another Sikh organization had visited the PM the previous day with a somewhat similar request. The PM advised the delegation to first ask the Sikhs to decide who represented them. Whilst the details of this little 'incident', as narrated here, may not be absolutely accurate, the gist of the observation is unmistakable: Is there any single organization that represents most Sikhs? The answer is a resounding "No". Even those organizations that claim to deal with religious matters are in explosive disagreement over some of the tenets of the religion, over the priorities, and over several theological issues.

What we need is a National Organisation that would be accepted and respected by the majority, one to which we would willingly give our allegiance, or at least admit that it represents the majority of Sikhs. Of course an organization is only as good as its members in general and its leaders in particular. Its leaders will of necessity have to be men and women of impeccable credentials and character. They will have to be compassionate, liberal, fair-minded people who would cherish reason and diversity of opinion as admirable human traits. The setting up of such an organization will be difficult; given our penchant to hold on to whatever little 'power' we have in any organization, and the finding of such individuals to lead the organization may be well nigh impossible, given our limited resources (population). The validity of these pessimistic assertions arises from the several failed attempts, in recent years, to bring such a national organisation into existence. We cannot, however, just abandon the idea if we wish to have any clout with the

Government or any other non-Sikh organization. The problems of “politics”, personality clashes and self-serving motives must give way to service of the community; jockeying for positions in the various organizations to use them as platforms for acquiring State and National awards and titles (a hangover from our colonial past) must give way to seeking positions in order to altruistically serve.

6. Ecclesiastic Authority

One other problem area for Malaysian Sikhs relates to the question of authority on ‘theological’ issues. We do not have home-grown experts on theological matters. Unlike, say, Christians, we have no real holders of ‘Doctor of Divinity’ or other Degree or Diploma in Sikh Religious study. We tend to hold in awe anyone from India, or abroad, who claims to be a *Giani* and visits our shores. If he has a coterie that calls him a *Sant* we are almost overwhelmed. We tend to follow every command or suggestion of such ‘religious’ men without question. Equally, we tend to accept without question every edict passed by the *Akal Takht*, even when the occupant of that office is hardly worthy of the job. Take the *langar hukumnama* case; there is absolutely no logical reason behind the command to have *langar* whilst seated on the floor, there is no scriptural sanction or demand to that effect. Yet it was issued without thinking through the repercussions and without any consensus. Look at the spate of excommunication *hukumnamas* issued in recent years: any Sikh who questions the judgement of established ecclesiastic authority, or questions any unreasonable dogma, will find himself excommunicated, no matter how logical his argument may be. Here we face a true dilemma: we have no established, reliable local authority to resolve our religious disagreements; if we turn to those in Amritsar, as we rightly should expect to, we see no cause to trust their judgement. The SGPC has been called the “Sikh Parliament”, the authority of the *Akal Takht Jathedar* has been likened to the authority of the Pope, and the *Jathedar*’s edicts to the Pope’s *ex-Cathedra* pronouncements. All these assumptions have no bases in either historical fact or in reality.

The Solution: For the sake of unity, and for historical and practical reasons, we will ultimately have to look to Amritsar for religious leadership. Hopefully those in Punjab will put their house in order and gain our respect and allegiance. In the meantime we have to rely on our common sense, guided by the GGS, to arrive at resolutions that will stand to reason, will keep the local Sikh community united and will serve our best interests.

CONCLUSION:

The dilemmas/problems faced by the Sikh community, and discussed in this paper, do not form a comprehensive list. Nor are the solutions suggested herein going to resolve those issues entirely. These problems are here to stay, and we can only hope to find ways and means to minimize them for the peace of our collective mind. There is no real dilemma in relation to identity. The language problem has a solution; it only needs a will at the parental level. The problem of mixed marriages may, as noted, be simply a matter of perception. The question of unity and organization will be more difficult to resolve, given our penchant for intra-communal arguments. To combat conversions we will need to overhaul our preaching styles. We must not allow ourselves to forget that with a liberal education, an environment where reason and free inquiry are cherished, and where access to information and a diversity of views is available with the click of a ‘mouse’, no one is going to accept everything on faith alone. With the plethora of available information and the inescapable influence of the cultures of the other ethnic groups, there will be an increasing insistence on rational explanations for everything, including a belief in God and religion. Admittedly, ‘*Faith is believing when it is beyond the power of reason to believe*’ (Voltaire), but ‘*To rest one’s case on faith (alone) means to concede... that one has no rational arguments to offer*’ (Ayn Rand). We can either be brave and choose to meet the doubts head-on with reason and logic, or continue to avoid controversy and skirt the issues.

‘Reason and free inquiry are the only effective agents against error. Give a loose to them, they will

support the true religion by bringing every false one to their tribunal, to the test of their investigation. They are the natural enemies of error and error only. **Thomas Jefferson** ¹⁹

'The most formidable weapon against errors of every kind is Reason. I have never used any other, and I trust I never shall' **Thomas Paine** ¹⁸

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Note: A fair proportion of this paper incorporates material presented by the writer in a paper entitled *The Future of Sikh Children in a Multiethnic and Multicultural Society*, at the World Sikh Conference organized by the Singh Sabha International, on Saturday 11 September 2004, at Gurdwara Sahib, Melaka, Malaysia. That paper was published in The Sikh Bulletin issues of Jan. & Feb. 2005 and The Sikh Review of April 2005. The near similarity of the topic necessitated this repetition.



The Sikh Bulletin Issue: August-September 2005 E-Mail: info@sikhbulletin.com