Image of Self in the Sikh Community: Continuity of the Core and Global Presence

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This article explores the social, psychological and historical processes through which the Sikh community has categorised and differentiated itself from other communities to form a distinct self. It traces the socio-historical circumstances that have shaped and helped consolidate the Sikh community's distinctive features including dress code, symbols, and a political ideology. The identity of this community has evolved through a series of struggles spanning a period of five centuries. This has contributed the qualities of adaptation and resilience to the Sikh psyche. The self-construal of the Sikh community is constituted by spiritual, heroic and aesthetic images. It has a core that shares certain religious, social and cultural attributes and maintains strong ties with its past while its adaptability helps accepting new challenges and seeking new opportunities and modes of expression. This unique blending of continuity and change has helped the indigenous and local Sikh community to have a global presence.

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Renewed interest in the study of self has made it possible to realise the reciprocal relationship of culture and self. Thus, while self works as a prism through which we try to view, grasp and examine various aspects of social reality (Bauman, 2001), the structure and experience of self is "invented, constructed, replicated, stereotyped and manipulated" (Leslie & McGee, 2000) through the temporal and spatial dimensions of culture. Recent works (Bauman, 2001; Bhachu, 1999; Giddens, 1999; Leslie & McGee, 2000) have recognised that the search for individual and collective identities is a continuous process situated within the

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indigenous culture as well as the multi-cultural context in the age of globalisation. Against this backdrop this article investigates the dimensions of selfhood in the Sikh community, which presents a paradox in terms of its local origin and global presence. Sikhism is a young monotheistic religion founded by Guru Nanak, who lived in fifteenth century India. He taught the path of self-realisation, which became the foundation for a distinct and separate community. Since he started having followers, he called them *Sikh*s, meaning disciples. Sikhs provide a unique case where a small local group initially formed with a religious faith in the Punjab, gradually engages with social and political processes, and marks its presence on the global scene.

The Context of Sikhism

The roots of Sikhism are traced to the pan-India Bhakti reform movement during the 1500s. This movement started because it provided a radical critique to the prevalent Brahminical social system based on inequalities and oppression (Oberoi, 1994; Purewal, 2000), namely, social division on the basis of caste system, and emphasis on rites and rituals. Guru Nanak's teachings had no place for penances, austerities, or formal worship. His teachings of unity of God, brotherhood of man, rejection of caste were also reflected by other sects of that time such as Nathpanthis, Sahayanis, and Kapalikas (Singh, 1994). It is essential to note that Guru Nanak did not ask people to abandon their faiths, nor did he wish to establish any monastic order. He desired people of all faiths to value and cherish that there was only one Creator or God, but who could be remembered by various names such as Allah, Ram or Rahim. Guru Nanak has referred to Hindu saints and Muslim Sufis. He proclaimed that "There is One Being" (*Ikk Oan Kar*), and there is only one reality.

The desire not to break away from the mainstream society is clearly indicated by the widespread travel by Guru Nanak accompanied by his Muslim companion, Mardana, to places of worship of various religious traditions—temples, mosques, and viharas; he met yogis, Sufis, and Muslim clerics, and held dialogues about their faiths so as to learn about the salient features of each of them. Thus, Guru Nanak came to

realise the religious plurality prevalent during his times, and the problems faced by the masses. He addressed these issues, and his simple teachings attracted people from different religious and cultural backgrounds. In the course of time, as we shall see in the next section, Sikhs had to form a strong community with clearly delineated physical and social boundaries to distinguish itself from the various out groups. The community had to undergo continuous stresses and was compelled to go beyond the spiritual domain and adopt newer strategies for survival and growth. This has led to creation of a complex model of self that incorporates several images.

Images of the Sikh Self

The formation of self-construal involves a play of images. The Sikh self can be best understood by analysing the various images it has formed over its 500-year-old history. Basically three images can be identified; each is associated with particular socio-political experiences of the group, and has resulted in the emergence of a sociotype characterised by intense loyalty towards religion and community. These images are: *spiritual, heroic,* and *aesthetic.* Historically, the spiritual and mystical image is the first to emerge. It is characterised by humility, compassion and piety. The heroic image nurtures bravery and valour. This image has its roots in the historical conditions of the seventeenth century, and continues to inform the dominant Sikh image in contemporary times. The third image of the Sikh self touches the aesthetic dimension. It is illustrated by the lively dances and the joyous songs. The discussion below details the psycho-socio dynamics that have shaped these images of the Sikh self.

The Spiritual Image: Emancipation through Serving and Sharing

The foremost impression of the Sikh self evokes a spiritual image. The persona, who epitomises this image of the Sikh self, is the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak. The characteristics often associated with this image are of humility, compassion, love for all, service before self, harmony, sense of brotherhood, dignity of labour, and community service. To overcome the inequalities, a shared humanity was preached

which, according to Nanak, surpassed all religious, social and caste barriers. As the community grew he established two important institutions, *sangat* and *langar*. *Sangat* is the community congregation which meets to pray and sing the hymns. *Langar* refers to the common kitchen, where people of all castes and faiths share a common meal. Both these aspects have been effective in nurturing social values of equality, humility, sharing, cooperation and comradeship. A person has to live in the society, face its daily trials and tribulations and not renounce the world. It is noteworthy that each of the Sikh Gurus was a religious teacher, and also fulfilled their roles as householder, balancing the duties towards the society. The Gurus insisted that "spiritual fulfilment" involves meeting the everyday social obligations (Singh, 1999). A Sikh believer has to take on social responsibility, which is translated in the form of voluntary labour (*seva*) in the service of the community.

The experience of the Sikh self owes a lot to the *Adi Granth*, Holy Book of the Sikhs, which has been accorded the status of "living Guru" by Guru Gobind Singh, the last Guru and as a mark of respect it is called *Guru Granth Sahib*. It acts like a Guru. It is the main source of their daily prayers, all rites of passage take place in its presence—a newborn is named in its presence, the marriage ceremony involves walking around it four times, and at death it is read continuously. Thus, in joy or sadness, in anxiety or difficulty, the Sikh self turns to the *Guru Granth Sahib* for help and support. The place of worship, the *gurudwara*, has continuously provided a strong bond of the Sikh unity. It provides a sacred place to the Sikhs where they can focus on their personal devotion and a continuing loyalty to the traditional beliefs and practices. All who visit the gurudwara join in a common service of worship, with singing of hymns (*sangat*) and eating the same food (*langar*). The Guru (teacher), Granth (Holy Book) and Gurudwara (place of worship), the three G's—the trinity, became the "litmus test of authentic Sikhism" (Oberoi, 1994).

Thus, the vision of the Sikh self nurtured by Guru Nanak was that of a spiritual self. The Guru period spanning from 1469–1708 (Singh, 1992), followed this basic paradigm, of calling for a common message for spiritual and moral life. The emphasis on liberal traditions allows a person of any faith to follow its tenets. Hence, no matter where the Sikh community resides, it takes with them their founder's vision of meditating (*nam simran*) on the Word (*sabad*) of the One Creator.

The Heroic Image: Consolidating Exclusivity and Resilience

The second image of the Sikh self is of bravery, courage, fortitude, pride, fearlessness, obedience and justice. This image has its roots in the struggles that started from 1604 with the persecution of the Sikhs by the Mughal, and continued till the displacement of the community after Independence, of having a refugee status in their own homeland, to being an ethnic minority in the country, and the suffering during the 1984 riots. The Sikhs had to fight and prove the need for their very existence. Whenever the identity of the collective self and the individual self has been threatened, the people have fought to protect their identity. The outcome of most of these encounters or struggles for their existence has resulted in making the case for their separate identity even stronger.

The compilation of the *Adi Granth*, by the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan, in the early sixteenth century, provided the Sikhs a sacred text to guide their life. The introduction of customs and odes of discipline (*rahits*) and the formation of religious reform movements (the Chief Khalsa Diwan and Tat Khalsa are the older forms, currently it is the Singh Sabhas) constituted the markings of a distinct community (McLeod, 2000; Oberoi, 1994). The execution of Guru Arjan in 1606 was a turning point in Sikh history. The Islamic orientation of the Mughal polity, involving tyranny and oppression of the Sikhs, made Guru Gobind Singh bring about major changes, which started the process of distinguishing "us" and "them". Thus, started the process of establishing the outer and visible boundaries of the community. One notes the introduction of two crucial dimensions: the older term "Sikh" was no longer accorded the same meaning, the new one was "Khalsa", the pure, along with this term, Gobind Singh introduced the well-known Sikh symbols, of *kara, kirpan, kanga, kachha* and *kesh* —the five Ks.

Thus, physical body was used to convey the exclusivity of Sikh community. The body and the modes in which it inhabits space itself come to be organised as a medium through which the "Sikh" as opposed to the "non-Sikh" self, is constituted. The adherence to the symbols, the pride felt in the physical looks and their well-built stature provide an impressive image of an agile and striking looking persona, particularly when he is attired in a well tailored uniform. The notable aspects are the turbans, which increase the height by a few inches, thereby giving the look of a towering personality; the beard has come to reflect

qualities of courage and adventure. The powerful symbolic grid made available still appeals to the emotions and sentiments of the Sikhs, and keeps them as a united group (T. Singh, 2000; G.N. Singh, 2000; B.H. Singh, 2000; M. Singh, 2000; G. Singh, 2000). This conscious use of body as a rich cultural resource is aimed at bringing social order and organisation (Oberoi, 1994).

By the late eighteenth century, the distinct Khalsa self emerged with five inter-related themes as derived from the moral code (*Rahit-namas*) and related texts (Oberoi, 1994): life cycle rituals, to mark birth, initiation, marriage and death, tabooed behaviour, to differentiate from other communities of Punjab, the dynamics of aggression, the constitution of scared space, that is, places of pilgrimage; and the impact of what the Khalsa defines as the Other. They laid the foundation of the cultural identity of the Khalsa Sikhs, which was necessary to consolidate the outer boundaries. The rituals express the relationships between the individual and other society. They ". . . are a condensed statement of the most deeply held values of a society. As metaphors of collective consciousness they distinguish between outsiders and insiders by erecting religious boundaries, they communicate spatial and temporal notions, and they endow people with a significant sense of personal identity" (Oberoi, 1994).

The term Khalsa and the unshorn hair have survived over the ages and is one of the major markers of the *keshdhari* Sikhs. The outward symbols have played a significant role in constructing their identity. They impart a sense of unity and individuality and help preserve the Sikh self from being assimilated by other religions. These symbols have played the role of categorising and differentiating the Sikh community from others. The struggles faced by the Sikh community have increased the Sikh self's steadfast resolve and belief in adhering to their religious faith and maintaining a separate identity. The Sikh self has often, therefore, turned inwards to draw and close its boundaries, those who did not conform, were labelled as "outsiders".

The process of the formation of the Sikh ideology came in during the late 1880s due to the religious reform movement leading to the formation and expansion of the Singh Sabhas, and the modernisation introduced by the British rule. A multitude of factors—the introduction of education, the use of technology and its economic impact on the individual, the introduction of laws, missionary propaganda—played a pivotal role in formulating the ideology of the Sikhs as a distinct community (Sohal, 1997; Oberoi, 1994). The major function of the

Singh Sabhas was to develop a Sikh ideology, that is, the integration of affective and ideational elements. First, the Sikh self had to follow specific codes of conduct expressed through these normative rituals and behaviours. Sikh behaviour has been regularly controlled through the issue of the moral code texts (*Rahit-namas*) (McLeod, 2000; Oberoi, 1994). Second, membership to the Sikh ideological group became psychologically rewarding.

The characteristic of group cohesion and solidarity, mutual support and protection, exclusivity, maintenance of group boundaries, use of symbols, and identification of who is a group member or not became more intense. Such a prominent change came in due to two factors; the Sikhs were bound together by shared ideals and a common belief in a worthy cause. The members were made to believe that they were unique and special, which further made them willing to make sacrifices. The concept of *shahid* or martyrdom has played a significant role in the Sikh ideologue (Fenech, 2000). The Sabhas maintained their control over the Sikh believers by providing a general account of the religion in a systematic way.

Sikh Self and the Role of the Other

A community follows the process of social categorisation and differentiation to establish a separate group. Historically speaking, the Muslim rule served as the first "other" the Sikhs had to face, and as a consequence started the process of the need to establish a separate identity. The Mughal rule made the Sikhs aware of the need to close ranks to survive in a hostile environment. The need for a distinctive community started during this time. During partition, once again, the Muslim community became the other (Gupta, 1996). As a result of the bifurcation of their "homeland", the Sikhs became "minority-refugees" in post-Partition India. Even in the face of such adversity, the Sikhs were able to re-establish themselves in society. The Sikh self became a role model for the other refugees (Gupta, 1996).

With the British imperial rule begins another significant period, which lead to major upheavals and changes in the cultural and socio-political scene of the subcontinent. The basic attempt, as the rulers emphasised, was to civilise and modernise the Indians, but, in fact, the major force behind the official schemes was the political intention of ruling India and to project western thoughts and ideas, which were

portrayed as superior to the existing indigenous cultures. As a consequence, colonialism lead to changes for both the Sikh self and its community. It brought in new forces that allowed and encouraged the formation of new identities.

The first impact was the interest of the rulers to understand the varied communities it had annexed in the north-west of India. The scholarly interest of the rulers was the first crucial step in identifying the Sikhs as a distinct group, particularly after the Mutiny of 1857. The most noteworthy work was by Macauliffe, who openly championed the cause of Sikhs as a separate community. He presented Guru Nanak as the founder of a "new" religion. Such a view set and also quickened the pace of the Sikhs to become a distinct community (Barrier, 1981). This interest lead to a long period of dialogue between the ruler and the ruled, the Sikhs realised the importance of negotiation with the new ruler. Instead of fighting each other they learnt to collaborate to each other's benefit. The "other" in this scenario was in a positive role, which had ramifications for the Sikhs. Some of the salient changes, which went to help the Sikhs create a different identity, are as follows. First, in order to avail the facilities and opportunities provided by the new rulers, the Sikhs had to close ranks and be counted as a distinct community.

This lead to the Sikh "self" turning inwards to bring about changes in personality and adapting to the changing patterns in the socio-political and religious scene. Perhaps due to the repeated exposure to invaders, they came to develop a willingness to accept foreigners, which has had a significant impact on the Sikh self. Each invasion has left its mark on the Sikh psyche, and on delving deep into it, one finds layers of characteristics piled one upon the other from each external impact. Thus one finds that over the centuries, the Sikhs had freely borrowed from each invader to construct himself, while retaining his internal structure. They borrowed and assimilated external forms of culture, food habits, language, learning, and some attitudinal changes too, and in the process they gained in terms of being open to change and adapting to it. This had a cascading effect on the Sikh personality. A new value system started evolving, which brought in professionalism, discipline, and the value of hard work.

The Sikhs basically come from the peasant stock, known for their hard work but also their sense of pride and valour. By first labelling the Sikhs as "criminal tribe" to "agrarian caste" to "martial race" to "the bulwark of the British power", the Sikhs began to change the

perception of themselves from a simple peasant to one who would be respected and honoured if he adapted to the necessary acceptable changes (Oberoi, 1994). The status and position enjoyed by the Sikhs in their own eyes and others further fuelled them to work hard and discipline themselves. Sikhs are well known as enterpreneurs and their slogan has been "Work is worship". Concurrent with these developments, custom and tradition led to the strengthening of the core value system and accepted moral codes of behaviour. Thus, the Sikhs took on the look of modernity by incorporating some modern values to the traditional character of the Sikhs (Tandon, 2000).

In independent India, the Sikh image has swung between extremes. The difference in perception of the image is a function of the prevailing socio-political context. In the following decades, the Sikh community developed with leaps and bounds. The context related changes were on the positive side, being characterised as—the sword arm of the nation, protector of the nation, pride of the nation, a trusty bulwark against foreign invasion, eternally robust, and the Green Revolution earned them the name of the Feeder of the nation. Socially and economically, the Sikh community made a mark for themselves. The per capita income for the Punjab state has always been the highest in the country (Gill, 1999). Even the Human Development Index 2001, is the second highest in the country (Singh, 2002). However, during the 1970s, there was a discernible shift in the perception of the Sikh community. Problems of governance and its consequences had a major impact on the Sikh psyche. The demand for a separate nation and what is often called the period of terrorist activity created another fracture in the Sikh identity. A negative image arose and the Sikhs came to have the image of being hotheaded, wreckers of the nation, and, came to be labelled as militants (Gupta, 1996). Once again the Sikhs worked hard to improve their image, as perceived by themselves and in the eyes of the others.

The Aesthetic Image: Affective Self

The third image of the Sikh self is of the spirited and energetic dances, various songs, enjoyment of good living, delight in humour, love of open spaces, excelling in the field of sports, presenting another picture to the above images of spirituality and socio-cultural dimensions. It is illustrated by the lively dances, especially the *bhangra* and *gidda*, the joyous songs, the colourful fairs and festivals, the melodious hymns,

and the ballads of bravery. It conveys the zest for life and the determination to live life to the fullest. A brief look into the domain of contemporary music tells us how through innovativeness, Daler Mehendi, a well-known Bhangra pop-singer has created a space and a "voice" for the Sikh self to be heard in the global world. It is characterised by the rhythmic beat of drums (*dholak*), and use of Punjabi language and certain idioms, such as *Balle Balle*; postures characteristic of the Bhangra dance; and the particular dress worn by the singer. This indicates the usage of traditions as inspiration and as a resource to indicate their musical history and reference point. Further it is characterised by the usage of modern instruments, such as the synthesizer; the extensive usage of "western" production and shooting techniques in an effort to reach out to contemporary audiences. It exemplifies the use of technological and modern innovations in transgressing cultural boundaries and communication with the other.

Sikh Self in Action

The self-images of the Sikh operate out of a set of values. For the Sikh community, as for any other community, the message of who they are is filtered down through the value system, which keeps on responding to the temporal and spatial dimensions. The salient values are bravery and sacrifice, and thus, the need to develop courage and fortitude; stress on mental and physical health; emphasis on freedom and honour. The Sikh self has courage and shows willingness to take risks, it has the attitude of non-submission to threats, and has the capacity to fight for its freedom; dignity of labour and community service; and, lastly, to accept life in all its colours and hues, no matter what the life conditions are like, it is to be accepted as it is and lived to the fullest. The contemporary Sikhism has been able to construct a culture by taking into consideration the social change introduced by modernity as well as the historical contexts in which it struggled to survive. The Sikh self has realised that its core component is the strong faith in its spiritual, heroic and aesthetic facets.

The Sikh self, characterised by these values, makes its presence felt in the national and international scene. The sense of pride in work has enabled them to be known for their hard work and commitment in

various walks of life. The Sikhs are about 2% of the Indian population, but their contribution to the workforce of the nation is nearly four times the number. Sikh presence in the armed forces, civil administration, the agrarian sector, practical trade and crafts, and in the domain of trade and commerce is well documented. The salience of dignity of labour is worth noting. Since the Sikhs are known for their *dedication to work*, and for their *wanderlust*, these two aspects have allowed the Sikh community to be an asset in foreign lands.

Today the Sikhs are not restricted to their home state of Punjab, but have made a mark for themselves in the global field. The Sikhs known for their wanderlust and search for greener pastures, were one of the first Indians to set the migration patterns. The Sikh community is to be found in all the continents of the world. It must be noted that wherever a Sikh goes he carries his Holy Book, builds his temple, and educational institutions, thereby establishing a "home away from home" for himself in any part of the world. Sociability, living life to the fullest, and, adaptability in any situation, is one of the reasons for the global presence of the Sikh community.

The Sikhs have become a well-known and organised community of 20 million in number. Prudent and progressive in their outlook, they are deeply attached and emotionally involved with their religion. Their devotion and attachment to their religion have resulted in faith becoming a significant component of their psyche. The strong belief in their religion has resulted in an enormous reserve of power, which has been their asset in times of crisis during their 500 years of history. The uphill task faced by the Sikh community from the times of their Gurus to the strife for power and prestige in the ensuing periods, has resulted in the creation of an identity for the Sikh self. Having created a distinct community on the basis of categorisation and differentiation, the Sikh self became more adamant in adhering to its exclusiveness, the images of which are rooted in its religion.

Concluding Comments

If there is one word that captures, and aptly sums up the Sikh self, it is the word, *struggle*. Historical evidence indicates the uphill task the Sikhs have faced from the time of the early Gurus to contemporary

times. Whenever the collective and the individual self have been threatened, they have fought fiercely to protect their identity. The outcome of these instances for their existence has usually resulted in making the case for their self-identity even stronger. Having been categorised and differentiated from other groups, on the basis of a distinct dress code, beliefs and practices, and ideology, the Sikh self is determined to adhere to its exclusivity.

In the search for its identity in the twenty-first century, the Sikh community has indicated that it is the spiritual self, its core component, which provides its continuity and the sameness of the self. It does not tolerate any interference in the domain of religion and its manifestations. On the other hand, its social self changes and evolves according to the demands of the global context. The construction of the boundary between the private and public self enables the Sikhs to experience the private self from within "the desire to be and think from within a Sikh experience" (Mandair, 2001); whereas, the public self is experienced within the multicultural space. This process of compartmentalisation is based on the realisation that the power of knowledge, and its appropriate use and interpretation, is the key to success in the age of multiculturalism. It is essential to establish and sustain the continuity of self with time tested customs and tradition; but, following these same customs and traditions as a fixed entity was not conducive to their continuous growth. Therefore, some of the older patterns of thought and identity were to be retained, some reshaped, some strengthened or rejected, and, some images were to be created, and invented in the changing context of multiculturalism. The contemporary Sikh self has been able to balance the demand for continuing its religious tradition as emphasised by its indigenous culture, and acceptance of the need to "expand" the individualised self to accommodate and also incorporate the experiences from other cultures. However, the balance of continuity and change keeps pulling on the resiliency of the self, and how much the Sikh self can keep on expanding the individualised self in the times to come is of significant interest.

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