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Head First: Young British Sikhs, Hair, and the Turban

JASJIT SINGH

ABSTRACT *A number of recent controversies have highlighted the importance of religious symbols in contemporary British society. As one of the most distinctive minority ethnic communities in Britain today, Sikhs are always affected by these controversies, as many maintain an external identity, the most important aspects of which are arguably uncut hair and the turban. This article presents the results of a qualitative study of the perspectives of young British Sikhs (18–32) on hair and the turban. Twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted with young Sikhs who treat these articles of faith in different ways. The interviews focused on understanding how young British Sikhs view keeping the hair and turban, what these Sikh symbols mean to them, what issues they face in keeping an external identity, and how keeping these symbols fits with the idea of being British and Sikh. Although the importance of these symbols is unique to each individual, the findings may enhance our understanding of why the maintenance of external religious symbols is still important for many young people today.*

Introduction

On 16 November 2006, it was reported that a Sikh teenager from Edinburgh had been “punched and kicked to the ground, causing his turban to come loose at which point a youth pulled out a knife and cut off his hair” (BBC News, “Sikh Boy’s Hair”). The report of this attack sparked widespread condemnation by many British Sikhs and led the vice-president of the local *Gurdwara* to stress that “We are not allowed to get our hair cut. So for someone to cut a Sikh person’s hair off is very serious” (ibid).

The importance that Sikhs place on the hair and turban can be attributed to the tenth Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh. Generations of Sikhs learn that on Vaisakhi 1699, Guru Gobind Singh instructed his first initiates to adopt the ‘Five Ks’, the five outward signs required of a *Khalsa* Sikh, so called because the Punjabi name for each item begins with the letter ‘K’ (Nesbitt, *Sikhism* 51):

- *Kesh* (uncut hair)
- *Kangha* (comb)
- *Kirpan* (sword)
- *Kachh* (cotton breeches)
- *Kara* (steel or iron bangle)

Of these, Ganda Singh describes the *Kesh* as “indispensable and perhaps the main symbol of the Sikh faith” (39) and observes that “with the removal of

his hair, a Sikh becomes an apostate and is excommunicated from the Sikh fold" (ibid). Although the significance of the hair for a Sikh is clear, the situation with the turban is slightly more complex. Singh and Tatla note that, although the turban is not one of the five Ks, it has become an inextricable part of Sikh identity (127). They explain that the turban is now "synonymous with Sikhs and because of this association the turban has become the premier symbol of communal identity and its honour, whereas an inability to wear it is a sign of collective dishonour" (ibid).

Writing in 2006, Singh and Tatla present a useful demographic examination of the British Sikh community, using the 2001 Census figures (57). Of the 336,179 British Sikhs, they calculate that 56.1% are British born, with 59.4% of the total population being below the age of 34 (59), thus highlighting that the population is currently somewhat skewed towards youth. Although many British Sikhs were outraged by the attack in Edinburgh, some wondered whether this was simply a copy-cat incident of a case in Canada, in which a Sikh teenager had fabricated the story of a similar attack.¹ On 24 December 2006, it was announced that the Sikh teenager in Edinburgh had in fact punched himself in the face and cut off his own hair, as he had experienced "cultural identity issues brought about by differences between his Sikh upbringing and Western society" (BBC News, "Sikh Teen Lied").

This article examines the issues which young British Sikhs face in keeping the hair and turban. Unlike previous studies on Sikh youth, which have primarily focused on Sikh children (James; Nesbitt, *Religious Lives*) or on Sikh teenagers (Drury; Hall), this article focuses on the period between the late teens and early thirties, of 'emerging adulthood', which—according to Arnett—offers "the most opportunity for identity exploration" (469). Given the issues raised by the case in Edinburgh and by the recent controversies regarding the veil, cross, and *Kara*,² this examination is particularly relevant at this time.

Methodology

As this study focuses on the symbolic behaviour of British Sikhs regarding their hair and turbans "as it is 'lived' or 'felt' or 'undergone'" (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight 64), qualitative methods were employed to gather data. Semi-structured interviews were used as the main method of data collection, in conjunction with an analysis of Internet forums. In terms of sampling, six 'categories' of Sikh were identified, based on the differing types of externally identifiable Sikhs:

- (A) male wearing the turban with full beard
- (B) male wearing the turban with trimmed beard
- (C) male with haircut
- (D) female wearing the turban
- (E) female not wearing the turban with uncut hair
- (F) female not wearing the turban with haircut

At least three Sikhs from each category were interviewed, to obtain a variety of views on the 'meaning' of the hair and turban.³ This was a challenging task, because youth are a difficult population to study, as they tend to be very busy and mobile (Denton and Smith 2). It was here that being an insider was a real

Table 1. List of Respondents.

Category	M/F	Alias	Age	Taken Amrit?	Married	Marital Preferences		
						Religion	Hair/Turban	British
A	M	Jagtinder	19	N	N	no pref	no pref	no pref
A	M	Beant	21	Y	N	Amritdhari	uncut hair	no pref
A	M	Makhan	25	N	N	Sikh	uncut hair	British
A	M	Gurjeet	28	N	N	Sikh	uncut hair	British
A	M	Santokh	30	N	Y	Sikh	uncut hair	British
A	M	Manjeet	30	Y	Y	Amritdhari	turbaned	no pref
A	M	Darshan	32	Y	Y	Sikh	uncut hair	British
B	M	Balwant	20	N	N	Sikh	not turbaned	British
B	M	Inderjit	27	N	N	Sikh	uncut hair	no pref
B	M	Mohinder	32	N	N	no pref	no pref	no pref
B	M	Bhupinder	32	N	Y	no pref	not turbaned	no pref
C	M	Tirlochan	20	N	N	Sikh	no pref	Western
C	M	Niranjan	26	N	N	no pref	haircut	no pref
C	M	Satpal	31	N	N	Sikh	no pref	British
D	F	Jangbir	24	Y	N	Amritdhari	turbaned	no pref
D	F	Harsimran	30	Y	Y	Sikh	turbaned	no pref
D	F	Parmjot	30	Y	Y	Amritdhari	turbaned	British
E	F	Sujaan	28	N	N	Sikh	turbaned	British
E	F	Amandeep	30	N	N	Sikh	turbaned	British
E	F	Anand	32	Y	Y	Sikh	turbaned	British
F	F	Hardeep	18	N	N	Sikh	no pref	British
F	F	Mandeep	22	N	N	Sikh	turbaned	British
F	F	Surinder	24	N	N	Sikh	turbaned	no pref
F	F	Kulwinder	24	N	N	Sikh	turbaned	British
F	F	Kuldeep	29	N	Y	Sikh	turbaned	British

advantage, as I became aware of, and subsequently attended, a Sikh summer camp catering for university graduates, access to which was a direct result of being a British Sikh. My insider status was also an advantage during the interviews, as the respondents conversed freely in a mixture of English and Punjabi and assumed that I had knowledge of Punjabi cultural practices.⁴ In total, 25 respondents were interviewed (see Table 1); they were all asked to choose a Sikh alias to ensure anonymity.

Situating Hair and the Turban

The importance of hair has been emphasised by a number of scholars. Obeyesekere observes that hair is important, because it “provokes the work of culture, as it cannot be left alone, and must be dealt with” (xii). For Synnott, hair is “perhaps our most powerful symbol of individual and group identity” (381). Delaney highlights the cultural significance of hair by observing that, although hair symbolism can sometimes be applied cross-culturally, in most cases, hair meanings are specific to individual cultures (162).

This view has been substantiated by the number of differing meanings attributed to hair in anthropological studies of hair symbolism. In his analysis

of hair symbolism in Punjabi culture, Hershman argues that “whatever the religious symbolism in the mind of Guru Gobend [sic] Singh ... it certainly does not follow that the same symbolism is necessarily accepted by every present day Sikh who wears the five symbols” (280). Olivelle argues that “hair in ritual has no inherent or absolute meaning; its meaning or meanings are derived always from its relationship or opposition to other ritual functions of hair existing within the same society” (38). Consequently, he believes that “the long hair and beard of Sikh males derive their primary meaning in relation to the shaven head of a Hindu ascetic” (ibid).

Unlike studies of the hair, the scholarly discourse regarding the turban has generally focused on its historical evolution rather than its contemporary meaning. According to McLeod, the turban should not be regarded as a Sikh symbol, but as a *Khalsa* symbol, given that its importance was only emphasised in the seventeenth-century *rehatnamas*, the codes of conduct for the *Khalsa* (“Turban” 57). Cohn, however, maintains that “the current significance of the distinctive turban of the Sikhs was constructed out of the colonial context” (110), as only those Sikhs who wore the turban would be enrolled in the British army. In locating the turban in its diasporic context, Kalra concludes that it is possible “to render both positive and negative associations of the turban.” (87).

Sikhs and their Hair

According to Synnott, in terms of hair symbolism, there are “three zones of social significance: head hair (the scalp); facial hair (beards, moustaches, eyebrows, eyelashes, sideburns); and body hair (chest hair, arm-pit or axillary hair, leg, arm, back and pubic hair)” (382). This article will make use of these three zones to structure the views of young British Sikhs on their hair, highlighting any common themes and issues they raised.

Head Hair

It is clear that many Sikhs keep their head hair uncut, for the simple reason that they have been raised to do so:

It's not because of religious reasons, probably more cultural—family expectation ... it was never religious pressure for me, and it still isn't now, and that's not what prevents me from cutting, it's more family. (Anand)

Family pressure was also noted by Mohinder who recalled how he had been aware of the importance of uncut hair as a child:

It's drilled into you as a little kid—you know not to cut your hair. I wasn't born thinking that, was I? ... It's been force-fed into my brain, by someone. So you can say it's indoctrination.

The importance for parents to transmit ethnic identities to their children has been highlighted by Dasgupta in her study of cultural continuity among Asian Indians in the United States. She describes that the foremost challenge for Asian parents who try to maintain a sense of ethnic self-identity is the “transfer of culturally significant behaviours as well as identity” (954) to their children. The wish of some Sikh parents to encourage their children to keep long hair can therefore be

explained by the fact that “the survival of the community as a distinct ethnic group is dependent on the children’s faithfulness to traditions” (967). As Dasgupta concludes, it is for this reason that tremendous efforts are made to inculcate them with certain beliefs and customs (ibid).

Another reason to justify keeping hair uncut is that, if left alone, hair grows naturally and is therefore a gift from the Divine:

If you believe in God, that God created human beings in God’s image, that God created human beings perfect, then if you have that love for God, then you should keep your hair. (Jagtinder)

For Beant, keeping uncut hair in its unshorn state is “our *nishaani* [sign], it’s what defines a Sikh . . . it’s what connects us to Guru Gobind Singh Ji.” It may be for this reason that both Beant and Harsimran, male and female turban wearing *Amritdhari* Sikhs (those who have undergone initiation), did not recognize those with haircuts as Sikhs. As Hardeep indicated in feeling “less of a Sikh—like whenever I go to *Gurdwara*, sometimes I feel like I really shouldn’t have cut my hair”, it is clear that many Sikhs are aware of the importance attached to uncut hair within the Sikh community. However, for some, the religious emphasis placed on keeping uncut hair makes little sense:

If you’ve trimmed your hair, how does that change you as a person? How does doing that turn you into a rebel or bad person? (Kuldeep)

As well as the religious significance of the hair, Kulwinder noted that her “parents just feel embarrassed that I cut my hair—that they didn’t bring me up well.” This may be explained by Miller’s observation that, in Indian culture, long hair symbolises tradition, whereas short hair symbolises modernity and defiance (264). Gill’s assertion that family honour in Punjabi society is tied to its daughters’ “impeccable moral conduct”, which the parents have a duty to protect (16), also explains this embarrassment, given that uncut hair has become an indicator of moral conduct for many Sikhs. As Kulwinder explains, the ‘shame’ of having cut hair is often hidden in familial situations:

The funny thing is that everyone in your family knows that you cut your hair, but you still tie it up to make them feel better? [laughing] . . . All the girls in my family cut their hair and everyone ties it up and we all think it’s so silly. . . No one likes wearing their hair in a bun. Everyone is like, ‘yeah, it’s so ugly’. (Kulwinder)

Synnott observes that, with regard to hair, “women are more likely to use more styles, and change them more often, than men” (385). He observes that “norms for women emphasize multiple styles per cut and the possibility and advantages of constantly looking a different person” (385). It is clear, therefore, that many Sikh women cut their hair, given the limited number of hair styles available in keeping uncut hair:

I didn’t like having long hair; it wasn’t trendy . . . I didn’t want to keep the hair on my head tied up for the rest of my life . . . How many times can you keep tying your hair up . . . It’s not very pretty. It looks boring. You get dressed up and then you tie your hair up and everyday you look the same. Every day. (Kulwinder)

Facial Hair

In terms of facial hair, Synnott hypothesises that opposite sexes have opposite hair, i.e. head hair, facial hair, and body hair are of differing, almost contradictory importance to men and women (383). Many Sikh males pointed out that it is the beard, not just the uncut hair or turban, which indicates the religiosity of a Sikh male:

I think it's the uncut beard that differentiates between people... It depends on what you do with the *dhaari* [beard] as well as whether it's gelled or not... The long and ungelled looks more radical... The beard is used to decide whether someone is religious or not. (Balwant)

A clue to why a distinction is made between the various methods of grooming the beard can be found in Tirlochan's response to the question of what a Sikh should look like:

A real Sikh should look like a Guru... You know, a loose *dhaari* [beard]—no gelled *dhaaris*. A loose *dhaari* and a *Dastaar* [turban]. (Tirlochan)

The rise of the loose beard as an indicator of religiosity may be explained by the fact that many groups within Sikhism now emphasise the loose beard as the correct form for a Sikh male. For example, the code of conduct of *Damdami Taksal* states that "The complete form of man is with a beard, which is left untied".⁵ However, it is clear that not all Sikh men wish to wear a loose beard. Indeed, for Santokh, "gelling your *dhaari* [beard] makes you realise that you're doing something related to a Sikh artefact". The importance of ensuring that beard practices convey the 'correct' meanings was highlighted by Tirlochan, a male with cut hair, who was trying to grow his hair:

I wanted to have my head covered before I started growing my beard—just because it looks very Islamic... When I was keeping my hair and when my beard was quite long... my closest mates [would ask] 'what are you doing at Sikh soc, you should be at Islamic society'. (Tirlochan)

Balwant, a turban-wearing beard trimmer, also "felt uncomfortable with a long beard... [because it] looks more militant". He explained how societal influences had led to his decision to trim his beard:

... the way society's going... you don't see many people with beards these days... If you look at a random *gora* [white person] on the street and he's got a long *dhaari* [beard]—you think that guy's a bit weird, don't you? Whereas if you see a professional with a trimmed beard, it looks smart, it looks intelligent. (Balwant)

This highlights Synnott's observation that "the same bodily phenomenon (stubble)... may symbolise quite different values" (401)—although wider society regards beards as an anti-establishment symbol, within Sikh circles, the uncut beard indicates conformity to the values of the Sikh faith. However, although the beard holds a 'religious' status, it is clear that many Sikhs trim their beards, because they do not attribute the same spiritual meaning to facial hair which they attribute to head hair:

I would die before I cut my hair. I would seriously lose my life before I cut my hair. I really feel strong about that. Beard, I don't know why... but it just

doesn't feel as sacred to me as my hair. But I could never, never cut my hair.
(Mohinder)

The idea of the head hair being different and more symbolically important than other bodily hair was also highlighted by Sujaan, when asked which category she would place herself in:

It depends what your definition of uncut hair is... I would say Category E because I keep the hair on my head, but I don't know if others would agree with me... Technically, I suppose, I do my eyebrows and things like that, and I have issues with hair, but I try and keep as much as I can. (Sujaan)

Sujaan's response underlines that many Sikh women encounter issues with facial hair. For Sujaan, the removal of facial hair is "not a femininity issue, it's more of a social issue... you can't go to a workplace with a big flowing beard." Indeed, the management of facial hair appears to hinder some Sikh women on their spiritual journey as Sikhs:

the reason I haven't taken *Amrit* [the 'nectar of immortality' used for initiation], is because of the hair issue... I feel it's an issue for me, because I don't like it—I don't like having hair on my body. (Amandeep)

This statement emphasises the dilemma which many Sikh women face who wish to keep their hair for religious reasons, while at the same time wanting to remove facial hair for reasons of femininity. As Mahmood and Brady describe, "although many Sikh women feel proud to show to the world the hair that God gave them, others have gone through a long struggle to be accepting of it" (67). Questions about coping with facial hair are regularly posted on the Internet, with the majority of the responses usually arguing that Sikhism promotes a blanket ban on cutting any hair,⁶ a point of view echoed by Parmjot, a female turban wearer:

If you're cutting it from your upper lip, you may as well cut it from anywhere, then you might as well start cutting your hair. At the end of the day, if you're following what your Guru is saying, your Guru is saying you cannot cut your hair, which means any part of your body. (Parmjot)

Although Synnott argues that "facial hair, unlike leg and axillary hair, is always 'unwanted'—by women" (394), the statement above and the internet posts by other turbaned Sikh women⁷ suggest that Sikh women who wear turbans are generally less inclined to remove facial hair. Their wish not to remove any hair can be linked to feminist ideas that "beauty practices and beauty culture... [are] oppressive and degrading to women" (Thompson 221).

Body Hair

The fact that women are 'supposed' to look a certain way was not lost on Amandeep who observed that "it's what society makes us believe. What the media shows, women shouldn't be hairy." Similar to the issues regarding facial hair, many Sikh women face the dilemma of removing body hair and being judged as 'bad' Sikhs for doing so:

At one stage I stopped doing *paat* [prayers] because I thought, 'I'm cutting my hair and all these Sikhs are telling me that I'm going to hell anyway, so what's the point?' (Amandeep)

Table 2. Sikh Hair Practices.

	Male		Female	
	Turbaned	Non-turbaned	Turbaned	Non-Turbaned
Head Hair	usually uncut	cut short or kept in a ponytail	always uncut	uncut or if cut, often styled to appear uncut in family situations
Facial Hair	beard uncut or trimmed, rarely no beard at all	beard rarely kept to avoid looking like a Muslim	low percentage modify facial hair, eyebrows, etc.	higher percentage modify facial hair, eyebrows, etc.
Body Hair	uncut	uncut	low percentage modify axillary and leg hair	higher percentage modify axillary and leg hair

As Anand explains, measuring someone's 'Sikhness' by the way they treat their hair could actually discourage Sikh women from practising Sikhism:

You don't want to put people off their own spiritual journey with Sikhism by telling them that or imposing rules about hair ... you think there is no point in me doing any *paat* [prayers] or being good, having good actions or thoughts, because I'm going nowhere, because I am just a bad person purely because I shave my legs. (Anand)

It is clear that young British Sikhs deal with the importance which Sikhism places on 'uncut hair' in a number of different ways. Although the importance of hair varies from Sikh to Sikh, the data gathered show that there are particular combinations of head, facial, and body hair which carry more meaning than others. Based on the data, Sikh hair practices with regard to Synnott's three zones of social significance can be summarised by the categories in Table 2.

Sikhs and their Turbans

The influence of family on the external identities of young British Sikhs is also evident in their decision to wear turbans. Bhupinder wears the turban "because of parents and now it's habit". Santokh also described how the presence of family role models strongly influenced his decision to maintain a turban and uncut beard:

The fact that my Dad and brother hadn't cut their hair and kept a *dhaari* [beard] meant that in effect, that was default ... If you were in a family where you were the only *Pag* [turban] wearer and the rest were *mone* [haircuts], then it would be easier for you to cut your hair. (Santokh)

This supports Roach-Higgins et al.'s observation that "families play a major role in transmitting socio-cultural values ... [including] moral standards regarding rightness and wrongness and judgement of aesthetic desirability" ("Social Contexts" 156). In addition to family influences, Makhan highlighted the role of peer pressure, as he had initially cut his hair at the age of eleven because of his

friends, "because a lot of them had cut hair", and he now wears a turban, because at college he "had a mate who's a Sikh". The fact that many respondents had cut their hair just before or during their teenage years supports Simon's observation that "the body image and awareness of self are intensified in adolescence by the rapid physical changes attendant on puberty and acceleration of growth. The self-awareness, plus the increase in introspection and emphasis on physical appearance by the peer group, focuses the adolescent on his image." (46)

Makhan's story also follows Roach-Higgins et al.'s observation that the "self is the cumulative result of socialization, which includes adopting observed behaviour of those who serve as social referents (role models)" (*Dress* 5). This socialization is clearly evident, as a number of respondents stated that they wear the turban because they believe that it is what Sikhs do:

It's the way Sikhs are supposed to pronounce your identity, announce your identity, your religion, your faith. If you're a Sikh, you wear a turban; the two go hand in hand. (Mohinder)

According to Beant, an *Anritdhari* male, the need for Sikhs to be distinctive and to announce their identity to others is a religious requirement:

It's an order by Guru Gobind Singh Ji that Sikhs have to be distinctive... If a Sikh doesn't have the identity backing them up, then no-one will ever know who they actually are.

However, some Sikhs clearly only wear the turban as an item of clothing:

I was born into a Sikh family, but have no religious commitment. Like the necktie, which once represented the cross, but is now devoid of religious connotation, the turban is simply a part of my attire. (Swaran Singh)

It can thus be concluded, as Knott observes, that "a turban need not signal a religious identity... [and] is as likely to signal a caste or regional ethnic *habitus* as a religious one" (41).

However, the responses from Manjeet and Jagtinder make it clear that many young British Sikhs have found further justifications for wearing the turban, religious or otherwise:

For me the *Dastaar* [turban] has maybe one or two functions: the first is to keep the *Kesh* [uncut hair] clean, but I think that is a by-product of the biggest thing which is that it hides your *dasam duar* [tenth gate].⁸ (Manjeet)

The turban in yogic philosophy is a spiritual tool. It's a spiritual tool because it puts pressure on your pressure points and that sends the energy upwards towards your crown... I do feel that meditation is much more concentrated when you're wearing a turban. (Jagtinder)

Both explanations demonstrate Roach-Higgins et al.'s observation that the "meanings that a person attributes to various outward characteristics of dress are based on his/her socialization within a particular cultural context" (*Dress* 4). Although both Manjeet and Jagtinder are male turban wearers who keep uncut beards, they practise different types of Sikhism, with Manjeet belonging to the *Akhand Keertani Jatha* (AKJ)⁹ and Jagtinder appearing to be influenced by the type of Sikhism practised by the 3HO movement. This movement was founded in the United States in 1971 by Harbhajan Singh Puri (Yogi Bhajan); it claims several

thousand Western adherents (McLeod, *Dictionary*). McLeod (notes that “members are distinguished by their white apparel and by a rigorous discipline of meditation and kundalini yoga” (ibid 197). Indeed, the ‘pressure point’ explanation presented by Jagtinder highlights the growing importance of the Internet as a source of authority for many young Sikhs—full details can be found on the Sikhnet.com website:

The 10th Sikh Master, Guru Gobind Singh, taught his Sikhs to take the next step: Put a turban on the head covering the coiled, uncut hair. The pressure of the multiple wraps keeps the 26 bones of the skull in place. There are pressure points on the forehead that keep you calm and relaxed. Turbans cover the temples, which protects you from mental or psychic negativity of other people. The pressure of the turban also changes the pattern of blood flow to the brain.¹⁰

The need for ‘scientific’ explanations for wearing the turban is also found in Manjeet’s *Dasam Duar* explanation. Although McLeod argues that the Sikh Gurus use the term figuratively (*Dictionary* 67), it is clear that, for some members of the AKJ, the *Dasam Duar* is regarded as a physiological reality.

Unlike most Sikh women, initiated Sikh women who associate themselves with both these groups wear turbans, with “3HO women wear[ing] tall white turbans of the same style as their male counterparts, and *Akhand Kirtani Jatha* women wear[ing] the *keski*, which is a small turban, usually of black cloth” (Nesbitt, *Sikhism* 113). As Parmjot explains, the fact that the *Akhand Kirtani Jatha* (AKJ) regards the *keski* (small turban) as one of the 5Ks in place of the *Kesh* (ibid 84) presents its female members with a well-grounded justification for wearing the turban:

Sikhi says men and women are equal, so if men and women are equal, then a woman has just as much right to wear *Dastaar* [turban] as a male has . . . *Kesh* [uncut hair] was already part of the person and *keski* [small turban] was the external gift—it’s not something that is physically on you, it’s something he [Guru Gobind Singh] actually gave you. (Parmjot)

By presenting the *keski* as one of the 5Ks and thus as a mandatory symbol for *Khalsa* Sikhs, the AKJ resolve a key inconsistency in Sikh practice, whereby only Sikh males are generally encouraged to wear the turban, despite the Sikh Gurus promoting equality of the sexes. The idea that Guru Gobind Singh prescribed the same turban ‘rules’ for both genders is also promoted by the *Damdami Taksal* code of conduct, which, although disagreeing with the AKJ stance on the *keski*, also asserts that “the Guru’s command is for both men and women to wear turbans”.¹¹ As Mahmood and Brady explain, even though “it is difficult to find references to women being told how to keep their hair or wear their turban . . . in the eyes of contemporary Sikh women, this absence suggests that all Sikhs, men or women, were included in the Guru’s commandments” (53). Mahmood and Brady also note that, although the turban is a Sikh symbol, many of their turbaned Sikh female respondents “described being negatively stereotyped within their own communities as either religious zealots or radical feminists” (56). Parmjot confirms this:

I am wearing the *Dastaar* [turban] and people will think of me as a strict Sikh and will think ‘how come you don’t know everything about Sikhi?’ (Parmjot)

For Anand, this extra responsibility is a reason not to wear a turban, despite having taken *Amrit*:

I think it's an additional responsibility... I don't want to have to live up to someone else's ideals... It's what I think other members of the community would assume my behaviour to be, if I were wearing a *Dastaar* and the behaviour they expected of me would be over and above a male contemporary wearing the *Pag* [turban]. (Anand)

It is clear that the image which the Sikh community presents about women wearing the turban differs from that associated with male turban-wearing Sikhs.

Wearing the Turban

A number of respondents highlighted the additional 'responsibility' which wearing a turban entails:

You're almost carrying the mantle for Sikhism in a way, 'cos you're such a minority. But if you do the wrong thing, you can brand the whole community, so I think you've got a really, really big responsibility in this country. In India, a Sikh steals, fine—you've got another Sikh who's doing good. Here, I'm the only Sikh in my area. I do one bad thing, then that reflects badly on all other Sikhs. (Mohinder)

Given this responsibility, a number of respondents stated, Sikhs should only wear turbans, if they understand why they are doing so. It is clear therefore that for many Sikhs, the turban falls into Hamilton and Hawley's definition of 'sacred dress': what "serves as a constant symbolic reminder to the wearer of personal spiritual commitments he or she has made" (47), as confirmed by Santokh:

... by definition you've got to wash your *Baal* [hair], you've got to tie your *Pag* [turban], basically, your daily routine is affected by your religion. (Santokh)

Many respondents also raised specific issues related to being Sikh and wearing a turban in Britain. Some did not feel comfortable with British culture, which had "created more pressure to cut my hair" (Jagtinder). Others noted that the perception of turbaned Sikhs in Britain had changed significantly as a result of the events of 9/11:¹²

I do remember when I saw Bin Laden on telly, I thought, "Oh [expletive], here we go, everyone is going to think he's Sikh"... It was then [that] I realised how little people knew about Sikhism and how anyone with a turban was assumed to be a Taliban or Islamic militant. (Darshan)

It is clear from the numerous attacks on turbaned Sikhs in Britain that they are often mistaken for Muslims.¹³ Harsimran noted that her husband "was talking about it being so much harder to get a job now, because... now there is that underlying racism". Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents clearly regarded themselves as both British and Sikh. When asked how they would describe their identity, every respondent said 'Sikh', with 'British' being the second most popular choice.¹⁴ Although some identified themselves as Sikh to

distinguish themselves from Muslims, the majority appeared to want to identify themselves as Sikh because of the values and tenets of Sikhism:

Being a Sikh is an amazing thing you know... It's about loving, caring and being a good person, and that's what Sikhi is to me. Loving, caring and doing selfless *sewa* [service], you know. It's about putting others' needs in front of your own. (Amandeep)

How to Wear a Turban

In addition to the various meanings which are attached to the turban, it is also clear that male Sikhs have certain ways in which the turban must be worn. It appears that Synnott's observation that hairstyles "change in opposition and contrast to other styles" (410) also applies to turbans, with respondents generally rejecting the Indian-style turban in favour of either a variation of the East African-style turban or the *Dumalla*, a tall, tight, round turban. However, whereas styles of turban were previously 'fixed' and could identify a Sikh's caste and geographical background (Bhachu 51), some respondents indicated that they regularly vary the style and colour of their turbans, depending on the social situation in which they find themselves:

What I tend to have is a different *Dastaar*, for a different scenario... I don't want people to think that the *Pag* is rigid, as in 'it always has to be one particular way'. If it's a hot day, you can wear shorts. If it's a hot day, I can wear a different style of *Pag*. So I think the fact that you wear it is more important than the form that it takes. (Gurjeet)

Wearing different styles of turban at different times indicates an increased confidence among young British Sikhs to wear the turban as part of an outfit, in both smart and casual contexts. Nevertheless, for some Sikhs, the turban is clearly only a fashion item, as described by Tirlochan who knows "one guy who used to keep the *Pag*, but a fashionable *Pag* for him was a really small, tight *Pag*, so to make it small and tight, his hair would be shaved."

Although the turban is often regarded solely as a covering for the hair, it is also clear that only certain methods of covering the hair are acceptable in the Sikh community and that certain styles of turban are preferred to others:

My take is that the *Dastaar* can also give an idea of someone's personality. So if they wear a Blue Peter *Pag* [starched turban],¹⁵ they've usually got a big *tid* [stomach] and it symbolises laziness. (Gurjeet)

Clearly, many young British Sikhs reject the starched turban, primarily because it does not require a daily practice. For Mohinder, "It feels fresher to tie it every day—it doesn't feel old, like three-day old boxer shorts." The growing number of Sikh men wearing their uncut hair in a ponytail is also disapproved of, because, according to Santokh, "having a ponytail just says you have long hair. It doesn't give any indication to anyone else as to why you've got this long hair, because it doesn't symbolise anything."

These observations illustrate that, although keeping uncut hair is important for Sikhs, it is only acceptable to keep the uncut hair in certain ways. Whereas it is not 'right' for Sikh men to wear their unshorn hair down, this option is open to many Sikh women. Similarly, whereas a Sikh woman wearing a turban would

Table 3. The Sikh Turban Culture.

	Male	Female
Turban	symbolises religiosity with full beard and adherence to culture with trimmed beard the <i>Dumalla</i> increasingly symbolises a higher level of religiosity	always symbolises religiosity hair tied in a top-knot very few different styles
<i>Patka</i> (a piece of cloth measuring approximately two feet by two feet, worn by Sikh cricketers)	generally worn by children or by adults in informal situations frowned upon, if worn by adults, as seen as disrespectful to the turban	always symbolises religiosity hair usually tied in a bun, so not applicable for those who believe that the hair must be tied in a top-knot (e.g. AKJ)
Ponytail	frowned upon regarded as being disrespectful to the turban	symbolises religiosity, if hair is kept uncut and covered with <i>chunni</i> (a light-weight scarf usually worn with a Punjabi suit)
Haircut	wearer perceived to be non-religious	wearer perceived to be non-religious

be regarded as religious, the turban on its own does not indicate the religiosity of a Sikh man. It is thus clear that the turban has a number of meanings, depending on the gender of the wearer, the observer, the style of turban, and the context in which the turban is worn, and that there is a whole culture for Sikhs related to wearing the turban and covering the head, as summarised in Table 3.

Conclusion

Given the outcry following the alleged racist attack on the Sikh teenager in Edinburgh, the fact that he had fabricated the story in order to cut his hair came as a shock to many Sikhs and caused them to wonder what exactly had led him to take this course of action. That the Sikh teenager “had wanted to cut his hair for some time, but was afraid of the reaction of some members of his family and the Sikh community” (Martin) highlighted that this was not simply an issue regarding his beliefs, but an issue regarding the pressure he felt, given the importance which Sikhs attach to uncut hair and the turban.

As this study has shown, uncut hair has a particular meaning for Sikhs, clearly supporting Delaney’s observation that meanings attached to hair are specific to individual cultures. For Sikhs, the maintenance of the hair and turban symbolises a certain level of conformity, even though this does not automatically indicate adherence to the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. Clearly, many Sikh families regard the hair and turban as indicators of good parenting and as a means which ensures the continuation of the Sikh community as a distinct group. Further, this article has demonstrated the importance of role models and peers in influencing young British Sikhs whether they will wear the turban.

Whereas the turban is the only 'acceptable' method for Sikh males to control their uncut hair (Sale), Sikh women are presented with the choice of covering their heads with either a *chunni* [headscarf] or a turban. Although turban-wearing women are usually *Khalsa* and associated with groups which stipulate that all *Khalsa* should wear turbans, many turbaned women appear to use the turban to present themselves as equals in Sikh society, highlighting the Sikh Gurus' emphasis on equality. Therefore, it can be hypothesised that, although male Sikhs may wear the turban for cultural and family reasons or simply to identify themselves as Sikhs, Sikh women who wear turbans generally do so for religious reasons.

This study has also demonstrated that, although the majority of young British Sikhs are aware of the religious significance of the hair and turban, many choose not to keep their hair uncut and wear a turban, because of peer pressure, but also because doing so entails practical difficulties, is not fashionable, and portrays the image that the wearer is religious.¹⁶ The increase in the number of Sikh teenagers who are discarding the turban for these reasons (Page) has alarmed Sikhs across the world, causing many to present the turban as fashionable and trying, in the case of the founder of the 'Rate My Turban' web site, "to showcase turbans as an art form".¹⁷

However, whereas Sikhs all over the world have removed their turbans in order to disassociate themselves from the image of Osama Bin Laden (Grennan), none of the British Sikh respondents said that they had done or would do so, even though some had experienced increased racism after the events of 9/11. It can be assumed that young British Sikhs continue to wear the turban, primarily because they are confident to do so, given that the Sikh community in Britain is well established. In accordance with Olivelle's view that meanings attached to hair derive in opposition to other ritual functions of hair, which exist within the same society, British Sikhs may also use the turban to distinguish themselves from British Muslims, as the majority of the Muslim population in Britain do not wear turbans. It is also clear that the majority of the respondents feel both British and Sikh; having been born in Britain, they feel that they have an automatic right to wear the turban. Indeed, it appears that young British Sikhs are confidently integrating the turban in their daily dress, with a new trend of different turbans for different social contexts emerging, possibly in response to the smart/casual dress culture.

Further, this study has demonstrated that, although the turban and uncut hair have long been regarded as the most important aspects of Sikh identity, for many Sikhs, the beard and the way it is groomed are equally important indicators of religiosity. In addition, this study has highlighted the dilemma which many Sikh women face of keeping the hair for religious reasons and cutting it for reasons of femininity. Many believe that, because they are not conforming to the 'hair rules', there is little point in pursuing a deeper understanding of Sikhism. This could have a serious impact on the future of the Sikh community, as prospective mothers will feel ostracised from the Sikh faith for removing facial and bodily hair, thus affecting the transmission of Sikhism to next generations.

Although the turban is increasingly reported as being under threat, due to the effects of modernity (Page), this study has shown that its status, both as an item of religious dress and as an indicator of ethnic identity, means that many young

British Sikhs will not give it up easily. It is also clear that the turban carries additional meaning, if viewed in conjunction with the practices relating to head, facial, and body hair, and that, therefore, hair must be regarded as an equally important symbol for Sikhs. However, it is perhaps most significant that every young British Sikh respondent, regardless of his/her own hair and turban practices, stated that s/he would challenge any restrictions on the legality of wearing the turban in Britain. It can be concluded that the turban, like any item of religious dress which symbolises ethnic identity, is not just important for those who actually wear it, but highly significant for the majority of the community which it represents.

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NOTES

1. For example see the posting from 'killah' on <http://www.sikhsangat.com/index.php?showtopic=22464>, access date: 23 July 2007. For details of the incident in Canada, see CBC News.
2. In October 2006, the leader of the House of Commons, Jack Straw, sparked a public debate by describing the veil worn by Muslim women as a "visible statement of separation and of difference" (see BBC News, "Straw's Veil"). Ten days later, British Airways was at the centre of another row, having asked a Christian member of staff to conceal her crucifix necklace, despite the fact that the company's uniform policy permitted Muslim and Sikh employees to wear the *hijab* and turban, respectively (see BBC News, "Cross Row"). At the time of writing, a Sikh student has been allowed to wear the *Kara* in her school in Wales, having been previously excluded for doing so (see BBC News, "Sikh Girl").
3. This sample was chosen to obtain a variety of views on the hair and turban, not to ensure a representative cross-section of the Sikh community, as currently few empirical data exist on the percentage of the Sikh community who wear turbans or have haircuts.
4. For example, the word 'turban' was rarely used during the interviews; instead, the Punjabi words *Dastaar*, *Pag/Pagri* or *Dumalla* were used. Similarly, not one respondent referred to the 'top knot', preferring the Punjabi term *Jooda*.
5. The *Damdami Taksal*, a Sikh institution based in Amritsar, claims to have been founded by the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh (see *Damdami Taksal's* official website, <http://www.damdमितaksal.com>, access date: 11 December 2007; see also Pashaura Singh). The *Damdami Taksal* Code of Conduct can be found at, <http://www.ualberta.ca/~rvig/rehat.pdf>, access date: 11 December 2007.
6. Bharat V. Singh states, for example, that "If you really want to become Guru Gobind Singh Jee's proper *Singhnee* [female *Amritdhari*], then never cut or remove ANY hair from your body, esp after taking *Amrit* if you are planning to do so... That is the Sikh code of conduct or *Sikh Rehat Maryada* as I know it." (from <http://www.sikhnet.com/sikhnet/discussion.nsf/by±topic/194C53B73EEFF69E872573990030642D!OpenDocument>, access date: 24 November 2007, punctuation as in original)
7. For example, gupt_singhni states that "I am a *singhni* [female *Amritdhari*]. i have facial hair. i say *bibia* [Sikh women] need to toughen up! wats the big deal its hair! who cares, whats guru sahib thinks is alot more important ... we shuldnt care bout wat society thinks" (from <http://www.sikhsangat.com/index.php?showtopic=30695&hl=hair>, access date: 2 December 2007, punctuation as in original).

8. According to McLeod (*Dictionary* 67), the *Dasam Duar* refers to "The 'tenth door' of Nath physiological theory; the portion of the skull corresponding to the fontanelle through which the liberated spirit passes."
9. "The *Akhand Kirtani Jatha* observes *Khalsa* discipline strictly, and requires all members to be rigorously vegetarian." (Nesbitt, *Sikhism* 84)
10. "Why do Sikhs wear turbans?", available at <http://www.sikhnet.com/s/WhyTurbans>, access date: 14 August 2007.
11. The *Damdami Taksal* code of conduct clearly states that "*Keski* is not a *kakkar* (one of the five K's)" (see <http://www.ualberta.ca/~rvig/rehat.pdf>, access date: 11 December 2007).
12. Although Sikhs in Britain have been affected by the events of 9/11, Sikhs in the United States have borne the brunt of being mistaken as Muslims. For further details, see Sidhu and Singh Gohil.
13. For further details about attacks on turbaned Sikhs in Britain, see the articles by Biddulph and Clunis.
14. Respondents were asked to choose from the following: "European, British, Indian, Asian, Sikh, African, English", a list based on Nesbitt's Interview Guide (*Religious Lives* 267).
15. The 'Blue Peter *Pag*', to which Gurjeet refers, is a pre-starched turban which is tied round the head and left to dry. Once dry, the starched turban retains its shape and can be worn a number of times like a hat, so becomes 'one I prepared earlier'.
16. These are the very reasons which Yadav uses to explain why many young Sikhs worldwide are rejecting the turban.
17. For example, Sikhs in India have started modelling agencies for turban wearers (see MacKinnon). They are also organising a "Mr Singh International" beauty pageant (see Beale). On the 'Rate My Turban' web site (<http://www.ratemyturban.com>), users upload pictures of themselves in their turbans, which are then rated by other users (see Whitwell).

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