

## Fashion As Identity Architect: Sikhs In Perspective



### Fashion Design

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### ABSTRACT

*Sikhs were 'formed' as a clan of warriors in 16th century AD to stand up against the atrocities of the Mughal invaders. Today, India is a 67 year old democracy comprising 2% Sikhs in about a billion people (Singh, 1993). While there are no invaders or tyrants in contemporary times, a young Sikh boy is still brought up revering the Sikh philosophy and upholding high moral standards.*

*In olden days, Sikh warriors kept long uncut beards and wore turbans, allowing masses to easily identify them and call for help; to induce fear amongst the invaders. This visual identity, even today is the key tenet of Sikhism. A modern day Sikh continues to retain the same sentiments and principles of Sikhism. Young turban clad Sikh boys with beards often are a center of ridicule amongst their peer group. Too young to appreciate the moral profoundness of their roots, growing Sikh adherents struggle to manage the social, peer pressure of being visually different and co-exist with the 'metro sexual' code of conduct. The above presents a modern day challenge for this community.*

*Most of the conflict and tension that the Sikh youth face today is based around the difficulty of trying to 'fit in'. This concept of feeling wanted and secure in your own clique appeals to most.*

### Introduction

The current era of globalization on one hand is driving the world to a stateless economic system; on the other hand the world is facing contentions that challenge the persistence of unique formulations. Identities are 'en route' and constantly changing their nature under the influence of the global world system (Jan Aart, 1996, p. 50).

The research prospect is initiated with an understanding of the internal dynamic of fashion that has been put forward by Ana Marta Gonzalez: fashion is a principle of social distinction and assimilation. In other words, fashion is a certain way of defining social affinities and, simultaneously, a way of defining ourselves as distinct among our peers. Indeed, while the impulse to create fashion follows from a desire to distinguish oneself from others, the impulse to follow fashion derives from a desire for belonging and social recognition (Gonzalez, 2009). This perspective is critical to the study wherein fashion is thought of as a tool for emancipation of Sikh identity amongst youth.

Furthermore, the study is based on the Symbolic Interaction (SI) theory that asserts "self is established, maintained, and altered in and through communication" (Stone, 1962, p.216). Stone discusses appearance as a dimension of communication, usually as a precursor to verbal transactions. Appearance establishes identity by indicating to others what the individual projects as his or her "program" (one's social roles of gender, age, occupation, religion). In turn, these are "reviewed" by others, thereby validating or challenging the self (Stone, 1962, p. 222).

### Sikhism: The Origin

The origins of Sikhism lie in the teachings of Guru Nanak and his successors. Sikhism, a monotheistic religion was founded during the 16th century in the Punjab region of the Indian sub-continent, by Guru Nanak and continued to progress through the ten successive Sikh gurus (the eleventh and last guru being the holy scripture Guru Granth Sahib (Brar, 1998). The Guru Granth Sahib is a collection of the Sikh Gurus' writings that was compiled by the 5th Sikh Guru. (The Washington Post. Retrieved 13 December 2012).

### The Sikh

A Sikh is a follower of Sikhism, a monotheistic religion. The term "Sikh" means disciple, student, or (sīkṣa) (Singh, Khushwant, 2006, p. 15). A Sikh is a disciple/subject of the Guru (discussed previously).

According to Article I of the "RehatMaryada" (the Sikh code of conduct and conventions), a Sikh is defined as "any human being who faithfully believes in One Immortal Being; ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh; Guru Granth Sahib; the teachings of the ten Gurus and the baptism bequeathed by the tenth Guru" (ShiromaniGurdwaraParbandhak Committee. Retrieved 6 November 2008).

In accordance with the Delhi Gurdwara Act 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 (Kalsi, 2007).

### Sikh Identity

The Sikh identity is asserted by five articles (5 Ks) of faith that were commanded by Guru Gobind Singh at the time of initiation of KhalsaPanth. In accordance with BBC e-listing of religions (2009), for a Sikh the fact that the Guru has instructed the Sikhs to wear the 5 Ks is an entirely sufficient reason, and no more need be said. The five Ks (5 physical symbols) are:

- Kesh (uncut hair)
- Kara (a steel bracelet)
- Kanga (a wooden comb)
- Kaccha - also spelt, Kachh, Kachera (pair of breeches)
- Kirpan (steel sword)

*Sabatsuratdastarsira*(unshorn hair and with a turban on his head) is how a Sikh is recognised in the world. That is how he is spotted in a crowd and is therefore unable to hide, deny his Guru's teachings or shirk his responsibility. It is in that form that he is elevated and that is how the constitution of his mind

is altered. That is the distinctive appearance which "... has operated materially and given amplitude to their physical frames." (Cunningham J.D., p.66). Also, the Sikh turban has been interpreted as the badge of Sikh identity. (Tarlo, 1996, p.13). Thus, it is the turban that formulates the most integral & striking component of the Sikh identity.

Becoming westernized, Sikh youth find themselves "between two worlds"(Gill, 2005). In the Canadian context, Gill says that little is known about Sikh youth in academic institutions and how they manage demands from both worlds. Many of today's Sikhs adapt western cultural values, while assimilating, accommodating (adapting) and acculturatingbeliefs more consistent with their own socializing group.

Sikh youth, who are distinctly visible through their manner of dress, religious symbols, and/or the length of their hair, must juggle their cultural and religious identity in the face of conflicting expectations from parents and school. Many youth, especially those dealing with multiple oppressions, such as race, ethnicity, class, and gender, find it difficult to find a space for themselves in the context of their family, friends and the wider community, including competing expectations that are imposed on them. Sikh youth specifically must mediate conflicting demands from the mainstream culture, while navigating their own culture, ethnicity, religion and community influences (Gill, 2005).

Sikhs are more in the news today than perhaps ever before, but this does not mean that they are better understood as a religious community or as an ethnic group. In the minds of many people, the Sikhs, readily recognized by their un-shorn hair and usually colorful turbans, have come to be associated with militancy, if not terrorism. This is ironical and unfortunate because the Sikhs began their career as a religious community at the beginning of the sixteenth century on a note of pronounced piety and pacifism. In the eighteenth century, the Sikhs emerged as a warrior community. In the late nineteenth century they were acclaimed by the British as one of India's "martial" races. In the present century they have been honored as ardent nationalists. (T. N. Madan's (1991) review of W. H. McLeod, *Who Is a Sikh? The Problem of Sikh Identity*, p. 418). With regard to the Sikh identity, McLeod's book cites the lack of clarity and highlights "most of the time, the image remained "misty."

Sikh youth struggle to find their identity in the midst of competing expectations, they may face institutional and structural barriers that further complicate their identity (Gill, 2005).

#### Challenges to Sikh identity:

a) **Gurdwaras or Sikh temples:** In a study conducted by Jagjeet-Kaur Gill in 2005 in relation to Sikh youth in Canada, it emerged that many youth were considerably frustrated and disappointed with the lack of involvement and role that members of the Gurdwara committee had taken in educating their youth. Respondents reflected their disappointment in the programs and services offered.

b) **Native language retention:** Singh (1990) argues that "without an adequate knowledge of Punjabi, the language of the Guru Granth Sahib, the new generation of Sikhs are in danger of being theologically illiterate".

c) **Distance between the first and second generation Sikhs:** Singh (1994) points out that a constant struggle between younger and older generations is further perpetuated through a communication gap.

d) **Acceptance by the peer group:** The literature suggests (James, 1999 & Dhruvarajan, 2003) that many Sikh youth acculturate because of an overwhelming pressure to "fit in". Owing to their visual distinction, growing Sikh boys find themselves mediating dissonance caused between their self-identity and Eurocentric principles (norms of the mainstream culture).

e) **Mistaken identity:** Ten years after 9/11, the Sikh identity continues to be a case of mistaken identity. While discrimination against Sikhs with turbans in America is nothing new, problems with Sikh turbans in various contexts have escalated rapidly post September 11, 2001.

f) **Doubt is an integral part of each person's belief system:** Any contact with reality creates contact with doubtful ideas (Newbigin, 1995). Religious adherents embrace doubt. They regard it as a universal experience germinated from human finitude and a necessity for faith maturation and its transitional ex-

periences (Fowler, 1996; Halfaer, 1972; Parks, 2000; Tillich, 1957

The study progresses with Giddens (1990) theory of human existence defined the ontological security which is "person's fundamental sense of safety in the world and includes a basic trust of other people. Obtaining such trust becomes necessary in order for a person to maintain a sense of psychological well-being and avoid existential anxiety" (Giddens, 1991, p.38-39).

#### Fashion & Identity:

Bearing in mind that the understanding of fashion is central to the study, it is pertinent to define clothing at this juncture as fashion employs the concept of clothing. Clothing, as one of the most visible forms of consumption, performs a major role in the social construction of identity provides an excellent field for studying how people interpret a specific form of culture for their own purposes, one that includes strong norms about appropriate appearances at a particular point in time (otherwise known as fashion) as well as an extraordinarily rich variety of alternatives. (Crane, 2000, p.1)

Diana Crane defines fashion as four concepts that refer to various aspects of its manifestation:

- Fashion as bodily decoration
- Fashion as signifier
- Fashion as a system
- Fashion as identity architect

Furthermore, Davis (1992) talks of dress and its symbolic relationship to identity; but more specifically, he discusses his theories within the framework of fashion. Davis defines fashion by distinguishing it from style, custom, conventional or acceptable dress, or prevalent modes by stressing the importance of the element of change (Davis, 1992, p.14).

Stone describes identity as being established by two processes, apposition and opposition, a bringing together and setting apart. "To situate the person as a social object is to bring him together with other objects so situated, and, at the same time to set him apart from still other objects." Identity, to Stone, is intrinsically associated with all the joining and departures of social life. "To have an identity is to join with some and depart from others, to enter and leave social relations at once" (Stone, 1962, p. 223).

#### Main sources of identity (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy):

- a) Gender
- b) Age
- c) Social class
- d) Region
- e) Ethnicity
- f) Religiosity

Religious identity - Religious identity may be defined as "rooted in tradition whereby the emphasis is on community and its role in social control" (Nayar, 2004, p. 14). Following Tajfel's definition (1981), religious identity can also be conceptualized as an aspect of a minority person's social identity. While religious identity may be important to individuals regardless of their status as minority or majority, the religious affiliation of minority individuals may play a special psychological function in their lives.

The wearing of religious dress and symbols can be an important expression of an individual's religious identity. It may reflect the wearer's understanding of the requirements prescribed in their tradition or their belief that wearing this form of dress or these symbols marks their religious commitment. It may also reflect a

desire publicly to affirm the identity to which these are linked.

Using fashion as a tool, helps to evolve and shift the physical and emotional identities, and fuels human need to mask our true selves allowing to play “parts” in society (Diana Crane). Clothes draw boundaries that exclude those dressed differently, so they encompass and include those dressed in the same way. This is the process of identification. While individuals are not necessarily seeking to identify with others when they share the same dress, they are nonetheless interpreted as identifying with them. Hence, differentiation and identification are the unavoidable, though sometimes intended, consequences of the choices we make. (Tarlo, 1996, p. 318-319).

Breward and Evans have written that “fashion is a process in two senses: it is a market-driven cycle of consumer desire and demand; and it is a modern mechanism for the fabrication of the self”. It is in this respect that fashion operates as a fulcrum for negotiating the meeting of internal and external worlds (Breward and Evans 2005), a state-of-being for Sikh youth who find themselves ‘between two worlds.

Fashion is said to be formal because it has no particular content in itself. In principle, everything can become fashionable: tastes and clothing, words and books, places to go and hobbies to develop, even politics and religion can become fashionable – can be ‘in’ or ‘out’. (Gonzalez, p. 27).

Fashion is a tool used by the individual to drive the identity of every person.

#### 1469: A Case Study

The study focuses on 1469, which is a concept brand. The numeric relates with the year in which the Guru Nanak Dev was born. The brand was launched in the year 1996 by Mr. Harinder Singh, Creative Director. His wife Ms. KirandeepKaur is also deeply involved. The duo pitched the brand as one competing with all multinational labels in quality, precision & creativity. With the flagship store in Delhi, today the brand has 05 stores

across Amritsar, Chandigarh and Delhi. The brand has a highly trafficked online gallery-cum-store that caters to the Sikh diasporas.

The brand philosophy is oriented towards preserving heritage, culture and spreading knowledge and goodness with its products and ideas. As indicated in the visuals below, the brand celebrates Punjabi culture & Sikhism with a high style quotient. A new design is launched every fortnight.

The product range broadly includes tees, stoles & scarves, collectibles & memorabilia. 1469 disseminates its ‘knowledge initiative’ through the merchandise. The brand puts forth stylish takes on stories of valiant Sikh warriors; cultural narratives from Sikh homeland, Punjab; key symbols of Sikhism; accounts of iconic Sikh men & women; legends of Sikh *maharajas*; notable quotes from Guru Granth Sahib; illustrative & calligraphic renditions of *gurmukhi*. The range infuses a sense of awareness, which in turn instills pride in the wearer. This formulates a striking case study with reference to the research prospect.

#### Future Scope of Study:

The study will further look in to the data with actual respondents and would evaluate their perspectives, understandings and commitment towards the religious identity.

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