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

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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 into 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 the keeping of 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 in 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 16th 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" (English, "Sikh boy's hair"). This reported attack sparked widespread condemnation from 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" ("Sikh boy's hair").

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 five, 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." (39) Although the significance of the hair for a Sikh is clear, the situation with the turban is slightly more

complex. As Singh and Tatla note, although the turban is not one of the five Ks, it has become an inextricable part of Sikh identity (127). They explain how 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" (127).

Although many Sikhs were outraged by the attack in Edinburgh, some wondered whether this was simply a copycat of a case in Canada in which another Sikh teenager had fabricated the story of a similar attack. [1] On 24th 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 been experiencing "cultural identity issues brought about by differences between his Sikh upbringing and Western society." ("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) or on Sikh teenagers (Drury, Hall) this article focuses on the period between the late teens and the early thirties, that 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

Given that this study is focused on the symbolic behaviour of British Sikhs regarding their hair and turbans "as it is 'lived' or 'felt' or 'undergone'" (Blaxter, 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 derived, 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

From my experience as a Sikh, I reflected that any Sikh would fall into one and only one of these categories. 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 in itself was a challenging task given that 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 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 also assumed my knowledge of Punjabi cultural practices.[4] In total 25 respondents were interviewed (see Table I), and 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 Synott, 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 (6).

This view has been substantiated by the number of differing meanings attributed to hair in the anthropological studies of hair symbolism to date. In his analysis of hair symbolism in Punjabi culture, Hershman argues that "whatever the religious symbolism in the mind of Guru Gobend 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." (38)

Unlike that 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 emphasized in the seventeenth century rehatnamas, codes of conduct for the Khalsa (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 into 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 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)

This 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.
>
> (Mohinder)

The importance for parents to transmit ethnic identities on to their children has been highlighted by Dasgupta in her study of cultural continuity amongst Asian Indians in the United States. Dasgupta describes how the foremost challenge for those 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. (967)

Another of the reasons given to justify the keeping of uncut hair 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, the keeping of 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 Amritdharis respectively, did not recognise those with haircuts as Sikhs. As Hardeep indicates 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 the keeping of 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, this '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 regards 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 due to 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. Everyday.
>
> (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). With regards to Sikh males, many indicated 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 a question about 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 Sikhs 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 a hair cut, 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 also 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) as although within wider society beards are regarded as an anti-establishment symbol, within Sikh circles the uncut beard is an indicator of 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 as they do not apply the same spiritual meaning to facial hair as they do 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)

This 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 highlights 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, 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 faced by many Sikh women in wishing to keep their hair for religious reasons, whilst at the same time wanting to remove facial hair for reasons of femininity. As Mahmood describes "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 the cutting of 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), from the statement above, and from internet posts by other turbaned Sikh women,[7] it can be hypothesised 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." As with facial hair, many Sikh women face the same dilemma with removing bodily hair, often 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)

As Anand explains, this measuring of 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 therefore that the importance that Sikhism places on 'uncut hair' is being dealt with by young British Sikhs in a number of different ways. Although the importance of the hair varies from Sikh to Sikh, the data gathered has shown there are particular combinations of head / facial / body hair which carry more meaning than others. From the data gathered, Sikh hair practices with regards to Synnott's three zones of social significance can be summarised as per Table II.

## Sikhs and their Turbans

The influence of family on the external identities of young British Sikhs is also evident in the case of turbans. Bhupinder, wears the turban "because of parents and now it's habit". Santokh also described how the presence of familial 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 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" (156). In addition to familial 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 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 Bernard'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 and Identity", 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 Amritdhari male, this 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.
>
> (Beant)

Some Sikhs however clearly only wear the turban as a piece 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. (Singh "Failing" 31)

It can be concluded therefore, 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 from the responses of Manjeet and Jagtinder it is clear that many young British Sikhs have found further justifications for wearing the turban, religious or otherwise:

> For me the Dastaar has maybe one or two functions - the first is to keep the Kesh 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 of these 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 and Identity", 4) Although both Manjeet and Jagtinder are male turban wearers who keep uncut beards, they practice different types of Sikhism, with Manjeet belonging to the Akhand Keertani Jatha [9] and Jagtinder appearing to be influenced by the type of Sikhism practiced by the 3HO movement.[10] Interestingly, Sikh women belonging to both of 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, 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 (Nesbitt, 84) presents its female members with a firm 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 as a male has … Kesh was already part of the person and keski 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 therefore as a mandatory symbol for Khalsa Sikhs, the AKJ resolve a key inconsistency in Sikh practice in which, despite the Sikh Gurus promoting equality of the sexes, only Sikh males are generally encouraged to wear the turban. The belief that Guru Gobind Singh prescribed the same turban 'rules' for both genders is also promoted by other Sikh groups, including Damdami Taksal, which although disagreeing with the AKJ stance on the keski also assert that "the Guru's command is for both men and women to wear turbans."[11] As Mahmood explains, 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

also notes that although the turban is a Sikh symbol, many of her turbaned Sikh female respondents "described being negatively stereotyped within their own communities as either religious zealots or radical feminists" (56) as Parmjot confirms:

> I am wearing the Dastaar 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.
>
> (Anand)

## Wearing the turban

This additional 'responsibility' whilst wearing a turban was highlighted by a number of respondents:

> 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 brandish 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 that 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 et al's definition of 'sacred dress' as that which "serves as a constant symbolic reminder to the wearer of personal spiritual commitments he or she has made" (Hamilton 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 with 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). In addition, a number of respondents noted how 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 shit here we go everyone is going to think he's Sikh' … It was then 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 single respondent said 'Sikh', with 'British' being the second most popular choice.[14] Although some respondents identified themselves as Sikhs to distinguish themselves from Muslims, the majority appeared to want to identify themselves as Sikhs 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 [selfless 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 meaning attached to the turban, it is also clear that for male Sikhs, there are 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) can

also be applied to turbans, with the 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 previously, styles of turban were 'fixed' and could identify the caste and geographical background of a Sikh, (Bhachu, 51) a number of the respondents indicated that they regularly vary their style and colour of turban 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)

This wearing of different styles of turban at different times indicates an increased confidence amongst young British Sikhs, to wear the turban as part of a whole 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 over 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)

It is clear that the starched turban is being rejected by many young British Sikhs, 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 was 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 be regarded as religious, the turban on its own does not indicate the religiosity of a Sikh man. It is clear therefore 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 being worn, and that for Sikhs there is a whole culture to wearing the turban and covering the head, as summarised in Table III.

# Conclusion

Given the outcry which resulted from the alleged racist attack on the Sikh teenager in Edinburgh, the fact that he had fabricated the whole story in order to cut his hair came as a shock to many Sikhs, and caused them to wonder exactly what had led him to undertake this course of action. The very fact 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 with the pressure he felt due to 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 hair meanings are specific to individual cultures. For Sikhs, the keeping of the head, facial and bodily hair in particular ways symbolises conformity but does not automatically indicate adherence to the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. The hair and turban are clearly regarded by many Sikh families as indicators of good parenting, and as tools which ensure the continuation of the Sikh community as a distinct group. Furthermore, this article has demonstrated the importance of role models and peers in influencing whether or not young British Sikhs will wear the turban.

Whereas the turban is the only acceptable method for a Sikh male to control his uncut hair, ("Angry Sikhs") Sikh women have historically had a choice of either covering their heads with a chunni [headscarf] or with a turban. As this study has shown, many British Sikh female turban wearers are using the turban to highlight the Sikh Gurus' emphasis on equality to the wider Sikh community as they believe that the Gurus prescribed the same hair and turban practices for all Sikhs regardless of gender. Therefore it can be hypothesised that although male Sikhs may wear the turban for cultural and familial 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 them because of peer pressure, and also because keeping the hair and turban is practically difficult, is not fashionable, and portrays an image that the wearer is religious. [16] The increase in the number of Sikh teenagers discarding the turban for these reasons (Page) has alarmed Sikhs worldwide, causing many to try to present the turban as fashionable and appealing and in the case of the founder of the 'Rate My Turban' website, "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 so, or would do so, even though some had experienced increased racism post 9/11. It can be hypothesised that young British

Sikhs continue to wear the turban post 9/11 primarily because they have the confidence to do so as the Sikh community in Britain is well established. In accordance with Olivelle's view that meanings of hair are derived in opposition to other ritual functions of hair existing within the same society, the turban may also be being used by British Sikhs to distinguish themselves from British Muslims, given that 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, and having been born in Britain feel like they have an automatic right to wear the turban. Indeed, it appears that young British Sikhs are confidently integrating their turbans into their daily dress with the new trend of different turbans for different social contexts, possibly appearing in response to the smart/casual clothing culture.

This study has also demonstrated that although the turban and uncut hair have long been regarded as the most important aspects of the Sikh identity, for many Sikhs it is the beard and the way that it is groomed that is an equally important indicator of religiosity. In addition, this study has highlighted the dilemma faced by many Sikh women between 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 them pursuing a deeper understanding of Sikhism. This could have a serious impact on the Sikh community going forward, as future mothers feel ostracised from the Sikh faith for removing their facial and bodily hair, so affecting the transmission of Sikhism to future generations.

Although the turban is increasingly reported as being under threat due to the effects of modernity (Page) this study has demonstrated that its status, both as religious dress and as an indictor of ethnic identity, means that it will not being given up easily by many young British Sikhs. It is also clear that the turban carries additional meaning if viewed in conjunction with the practices relating to head, facial and bodily hair, and that hair therefore must be regarded as an equally important symbol for the Sikhs. Perhaps most significantly however is the fact that every single young British Sikh respondent, regardless of their own hair and turban practices, stated that they would challenge any restrictions on the legality of wearing the turban in Britain. It can be concluded that the turban, like any piece of religious dress which symbolises ethnic identity, is not just important for those who actually wear that dress, but is highly significant for the majority of the community which it represents.

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## NOTES

[1] For example see the posting from 'killah', http://www.sikhsangat.com/index.php?showtopic=22464 – accessed 23/07/2007. For details of the incident in Canada, see "Calls for charges against Sikh teen who alleged attack", CBC News, 6th June 2005, http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2005/06/06/sikh-teen-050606.html, access date: 23/07/2007

[2] In October 2006, the leader of the House of Commons, Jack Straw, sparked a huge public debate by describing the veil worn by Muslim women as a "visible statement of separation and of difference." (see "Straw's veil comments spark anger", BBC News, 5th October 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/5410472.stm, access date 23/07/2007). Ten days later, British Airways were 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 "Cross row stokes Christian anger", BBC News, 15th October 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6051486.stm, access date 23/07/2007). At the time of writing, a Sikh student has been allowed to wear her Kara in her school in Wales, having been previously excluded for doing so (see "Sikh girl wins bangle law battle", http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/7529694.stm, access date 30/07/2008)

[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 little empirical data exists 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 rather the Punjabi words Dastaar, Pag / Pagri or Dumalla were used in its place. Similarly not one respondent referred to the 'top knot' as such, preferring the Punjabi term Jooda.

[5] The Damdami Taksal, an 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.damdamitaksal.com). See also Singh Pashaura, "Observing the Khalsa Rahit in North America: Some Issues and Trends", in Singh, Pashaura and N. Gerald Barrier (eds.), The Transmission of Sikh Heritage in the Diaspora (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996). The Damdami Taksal Code of Conduct can be found at, http://www.ualberta.ca/~rvig/rehat.pdf, access date: 11/12/2007

[6] For example Bharat V Singh states 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 my advice and I believe that would also be the advice of Panj Pyare who give you Amrit. That is the Sikh code of conduct or Sikh Rehat Maryada as I know it" http://www.sikhnet.com/sikhnet/discussion.nsf/by+topic/194C53B73EEFF69E872573990030642D!OpenDocument, access date: 24/11/2007

[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", http://www.sikhsangat.com/index.php?showtopic=30695&hl=hair, access date: 02/12/2007

[8] McLeod describes the Dasam Duar as "The 'tenth door' of Nath physiological theory; the portion of the skull corresponding to the fontanelle through which the liberated spirit passes. The Sikh Gurus use the term figuratively." McLeod, W.H., Historical Dictionary of Sikhism. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995: 67

[9] "The Akhand Kirtani Jatha observes Khalsa discipline strictly, and requires all members to be rigorously vegetarian". For further details on the AKJ see Nesbitt, Eleanor, Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction: 84

[10] Nesbitt, Eleanor, Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction: 101. Jagtinder's pressure point explanation can be found virtually word for word at "Why do Sikhs wear turbans?", http://www.sikhnet.com/s/WhyTurbans - access date: 14/08/2007

[11] The Damdami Taksal Code of Conduct clearly states that "Keski is not a kakkar (one of the five K's)", http://www.ualberta.ca/~rvig/rehat.pdf - access date: 11/12/2007

[12] Although a number of Sikhs in Britain have been affected by 9/11, Sikhs in the United States have felt the brunt of being mistaken as Muslims. For further details see Sidhu, Dawinder S. and Neha Singh Gohil, "The Sikh Turban: Post-9/11 Challenges to this Article of Faith"

[13] For further details about attacks on turbaned Sikhs in Britain, see Biddulph, Maddy, "Sikh attacked", Oxford Mail, 31st May 2006, Clunis, Andrew, "Sikhs Suffer Terror Backlash", The Voice, 21 August 2006

[14] The respondents were asked to choose from the following: "European, British, Indian, Asian, Sikh, African, English", a list based on Nesbitt's Interview Guide, see Nesbitt, Eleanor, The Religious Lives of Sikh Children: 267

[15] The 'Blue Peter Pag' which Gurjeet refers to, is a turban which is pre-starched, 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 becoming 'one I prepared earlier.'

[16] These are the exact same reasons given by Yadav to explain why many young Sikhs worldwide are rejecting the turban. See Yadav, Priya, "Pagri not very attractive, out of tune with times", The Times of India, 30 October 2006

[17] For example Sikhs in India have started modelling agencies for turban wearers, see MacKinnon Ian, "Sikhs put macho image back in fashion", The Times, 11th August 2003. Sikhs in India are also running a "Mr Singh International" beauty pageant, see Beale, Jonathan, "Sikh men hit the catwalk", BBC News, 6th August 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/3127855.stm, access date: 27/11/2007. On the 'Rate my turban' website (http://www.ratemyturban.com) users upload pictures of themselves in their turbans, which are then rated by other users. See Whitwell, Tom, "Microtrends: Rate My Turban", The Times, 4th August 2007, http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/the_web/article2188176.ece - accessed 29/11/2007

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