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SIKHS IN AMERICA: STRESS AND SURVIVAL

by

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INTRODUCTION

Survival of a community consists of its continued ability to make a free public expression of its identity. For a small minority the fear that an affirmation of identity might invite hostility, in word, deed or attitude, from a relatively homogeneous and dominant majority, is the primary cause of stress. The prospects for survival depend upon numerical strength, existence of areas of minority concentration, and the will to survive. Creation of subsystems to promote survival is a function of the economic strength, the educational level and the organizational skills of the minority group.

The Sikh identity is proclaimed by the five k's, viz., "Kes" (unshorn hair), "Kangha" (a comb in the hair), "Kachh" (a special type of shorts), "Kara" (a steel bangle), and "Kirpaan" (a sword), every Sikh is required to have. Over their unshorn hair, Sikh men wear a turban. A Sikh man with his beard and turban stands out in a crowd. This high visibility makes the Sikhs a special minority.

The Sikh presence in America is relatively new and the composition of this community has changed considerably over the years. After a slow growth primarily through immigration, the size of the community has increased rapidly since the middle 1960's. The attitudes of the host society have also changed. Early immigrants (up to the Second World War) faced a hostile host society. Later immigrants (after the Second World War) constituted a highly educated group of professionals who arrived in the United States at a time when the world was "shrinking" and cultural diversity was finding increased acceptance in the host society. They were, therefore, able to break some barriers to economic and social success and, to a certain extent, influence the host community opinions regarding themselves and immigrants in general. They were able to ensure good education for their children and also set up mechanisms for elementary religious education. Recent immigration, of relatives of the previous immigrants, has been spurred by events in Punjab. Sikh young men, particularly those from Punjab villages, are "getting out" not only for economic reasons but also to escape arbitrary arrest, torture and possible death. This group, representative of the average village population in Punjab, includes a large proportion of non-professionals. However, their influx has contributed to growth in numbers and to the emergence of strong local communities centered round numerous Gurdwaras. In addition to immigrants, some Americans of European and African ancestry have converted to Sikhism giving the community a multi-racial character. The American converts have been quite assertive and have actively sought official recognition of the Sikh lifestyle.

In this paper we look at the nature and level of stress of being a Sikh in America and discuss the survival of the Sikh religion in America. We attempt to separate cultural survival from the religious. Inter-community as well as intra-community stresses are discussed. Survival mechanisms devised by the community are surveyed along with a look at the future.

SIKHS IN AMERICA

a. Classification

The Sikh minority in America has changed in respect of numbers, level of education, and strength of the bond with the parent country, Punjab, and its language and culture. In a chronological classification, we can identify three groups, viz., the early immigrants and their offspring; the primary immigrants of 1960 to 1984 and the American converts along with their children; and recent immigrants. These groups represent different educational and economic levels, different periods in time reflecting different host attitudes, different types of stress faced, and different means of survival adopted by individuals and the community with varying degree of success. We could also classify the minority experience in another way into two categories: immigrants and American converts to the Sikh faith in one group, and their children in the other. The immigrants and the converts comprise people who chose to be in a situation of stress and were prepared for the consequences of being "different" and, in the case of American converts, for the criticism and hostility of family and friends. Their children, on the other hand, are placed in a stressful situation involuntarily, have the responsibility of ensuring the survival of the community, and are in greater need for support mechanisms. Survival as a community is entirely dependent on the extent to which the new generation is interested in and successful at defining and preserving its distinct heritage.

b. Sikh Immigration to America

Sikh immigration to North America started around the turn of the century. However, restrictions were quickly placed on further immigration. Dusenbury [1] states: "By the late 1940's, Canada had fewer than two thousand Sikh residents, mostly Jats laboring in the wood industries of British Columbia. At the same time, there were fewer than 1500 South Asians in the United States, most of whom were Jat Sikhs working as agriculturists in rural areas of California." The early Sikh immigrants had to face legal, social, economic and even physical barriers to material success. Unable to bring their families from Punjab, or arrange for marriage to Punjabi women, they could not pass on their attachment to Punjab culture and the Sikh religion to the next generation. Most of them wished to, and many did, go back to Punjab to spend the later part of their life in surroundings they had fond memories of and a social environment in which they were respected. The roots of the community were shallow and in 1968, Chakravorti [2] concluded: "Sikh community in El Centro is "dying" in cultural sense since the hold of its ethnic subsystem is slipping from the second generation."

The end of the Second World War saw a lowering of barriers to Asian immigration to America. At the same time, India won freedom from British rule and was in desperate need of technical know-how for economic and industrial development. This was procured not only by hiring foreign specialists but, more significantly, by sending selected Indian scientists and engineers to Europe and America for training, by expanding facilities for higher education within India, and using these scientists trained abroad as teachers, to generate qualified manpower in the long term. Many scientists and engineers were sent by the Central and State Governments in India, some under United Nations auspices, for advanced study at American universities. Others came on their own. They all carried back stories which triggered a strong "pull" for the newly emerging class of educated young. Jawahar Lal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, gave the highest priority to education and in only a few years after independence, India was producing more professionals than it could provide satisfying employment for. The shortage of the early 1950's had turned to a surplus by the middle 1960's. For example, Punjab graduated less than 30 engineers in 1948 from a refugee college

located in Roorkee (in the neighboring state of Uttar Pradesh). By 1965, there were four engineering colleges in the state admitting over a thousand students a year. Almost guaranteed employment, quick promotions, and heavy responsibilities for large projects that excited the imagination and tested the talents of engineers and scientists recruited soon after freedom were replaced by uncertainty and frustration for graduates of two decades later. India's industrial development and the accompanying growth of employment opportunities had lagged behind growth in education. The coincidental fact of liberalization of immigration laws in the United States and Canada in the 1960's resulted in a large number of Sikh professionals coming over as immigrants. According to Nasser-Bush [3], 86 percent of Sikhs in a sample taken in 1972 had entered Canada in the four years since the 1967 Act. Of these, 84 percent indicated economic betterment as a motive of immigration. A better social environment for children to grow in was a reason indicated by all.

Recent Sikh immigration has largely been of dependents and relatives of the primary immigrants of earlier periods. The "push" created by large scale suppression of the Sikhs in Punjab since 1984 has contributed to the influx of young men who wish to get out of Punjab regardless of what the future may hold for them. They have depended upon the hospitality and assistance of relatives and friends in "settling down." True to the Sikh tradition, most of them quickly become self-supporting. The new immigrants own and drive taxis, work at and own gas stations, and work in factories and industrial establishments. Many have started businesses catering to the special needs of the growing community.

c. Sikhs Are a Special Minority

A minority may be a group whose members profess the same faith, have the same national origin, share an ethnic background, or belong to the same race different from that of the majority of the population. Many minority groups share more than one of these distinguishing features. Mexican, Italian, Irish, Polish, German communities in America consist of members with common ethnicity and national origin. Hindus have distinct religion and national origin. The black minority is racially distinct but in religion and culture has become quite close to the majority. The East Asian and Southeast Asian minorities are racially and culturally distinct. The Sikhs in America, at the present time, are primarily identified by congregational prayer in the Gurdwara, and by the external symbols of the Sikh faith. In addition, because a large majority consists of first generation immigrants, they are attached to Punjabi language, dress, and diet, and generally practice endogamy. Most regard Punjab as the "homeland". Being different in so many ways, sharing some of these distinguishing characteristics with other minority groups creates special problems for the Sikhs. The host society, in line with typical stereotyping trends, would like to bracket all dark-skinned people, including Sikhs, into a single unit. Yet, the distinctive beard and turban set the Sikh apart and often make him a special target for discrimination and mistrust. In discussing survival of Sikhs we must consider the cultural, regional and racial factors separately from the religious. Sikhs share their Punjab culture and ethnicity with other people from that region and racial distinction loses its importance when we include American Sikh converts in the Sikh religious community.

IMMIGRANTS IN AMERICA: Adaptation and Assimilation

Caucasian immigrants socially assimilate into the host community usually within a generation. Their communities are relatively large and non-visible i.e., not identifiable at sight. Their chief survival interest is in maintaining a link with the parent country's language and culture which, in general, is not difficult if the parent country is a free nation. The immigrants, and their children after them, can continue to define their cultural identity simply by reference to the "homeland." In some cases, the national origin may also define a

church affiliation. In these cases, the religious and the ethnic identities reinforce each other improving the chances of survival. South Asian and other non-white immigrants, the "visible" minorities, fall into two groups. Some assiduously seek assimilation and eventually acquire the culture, habits and even the prejudices of the host community giving up their native language, dress, and diet as well as the observance of religious customs. Most of those who were non-Christians at the time of their immigration do not adopt Christianity as their new religion and essentially become non-religious. However, because the host community continues to regard all persons of one skin color as a single distinct minority group, this group finds social assimilation to be elusive. Other South-Asians are willing to accommodate, adjust and adapt in respect of dress, diet and language and even acculturate but retain their links to the parent country and religion and attempt to pass these on to the next generation through the establishment of ethnic and religious subsystems. Many ethnic subsystems take the form of population concentrations.

STRESSES FACED BY SIKHS IN AMERICA

a. Interaction with the Host Community

Stress for a member of the minority community arises primarily from feeling of being treated as an outsider by the majority community. On occasions the majority has acted deliberately to exclude the immigrant and even the following generations from the mainstream. Active hostility against "Asians" and "Hindus" forced the early Sikh immigrants into low-paying jobs confining them, with some notable exceptions, to the lowest economic groups in society. They were not allowed to bring their spouses from Punjab and if they married an American citizen, she would lose her citizenship by such marriage. They had been declared ineligible to acquire citizenship and land laws provided that aliens ineligible for citizenship could not buy, own, or lease agricultural land. Many married catholic Mexican women and their children grew up as Catholics. Social interaction with the host community was limited by language. As far as the host society was concerned the only distinction they retained was the involuntary one of skin color they shared with all South-Asians. The host society treated them as members of this larger minority.

Later, highly educated immigrants too had to face difficulties in finding employment, accommodations, professional advancement and education of their children in spite of the existence of anti-discrimination laws and absence of restrictions on acquiring property. A common question at job interviews has been: "Are you prepared to adopt the American dress?" The real question is: "Are you willing to cut your hair?" Sikh employees who became citizens are asked by their supervisors and colleagues if they plan to cut their hair. Discouraged in their quest for suitable employment in their fields of specialization or having had unpleasant experience on the job with respect to advancement and recognition, many highly qualified Sikh engineers and scientists have found alternative careers in owner-operated businesses. There are cases of Sikhs with Master's degrees unable to find any employment primarily because of the reluctance of the employers in hiring "different looking guys." In looking for housing, this writer was once told by a landlady: "We do not rent apartments to people with whiskers." In 1978 an American Sikh citizen, accompanying his wife at her naturalization was ordered [4] by the U.S. District Judge to remove his turban or leave the court. In 1982 an American Sikh was told [5] by his employer to comply with a new safety policy that directed men to be clean-shaven. In 1984, a Deputy Registrar in Ohio refused [6] to renew the driving license because the American Sikh would not agree to have his picture taken without his turban. As recently as 1990, a Sikh child in Ohio was told that he could not play basketball in his middle school because of a rule forbidding headgear during play. There have been numerous such incidents. Dress codes for employees, membership of an association, laws requiring helmets and other safety headgear, etc. have continued to create stressful

situations for Sikhs. The immigrant or the convert Sikh understands the situation and may either succumb and cut his hair or insist on his right to practice his faith and fight, sometimes successfully, to get the rules changed. However, Sikh children do not understand why people won't let them be Sikhs and find such confrontations extremely troublesome.

Sikhs working as physicians, engineers, scientists, etc. led relatively sheltered lives with most of their interaction with the host society limited to educated and well-to-do Americans. However, occasionally they too had to run into other segments of the host population and their experience was far from pleasant. A surgeon working as a resident at a mid-western hospital would go to work before sunrise to avoid comments about his turban. Recent immigrants who drive taxis, work in factories, or run small businesses, have to constantly live with all levels of racial, ethnic and religious prejudices. Stories of attacks by hoodlums on Asian and particularly Sikh workers are common. During the Iran hostage crisis, many less educated Americans would take turbaned Sikhs to be Iranian followers of Ayatollah Khomeini. There were several incidents of violence against Sikhs.

The host society has changed since the days of the early immigrants. A large majority of people are enlightened enough to accept equality as a matter of principle. In each of the cases mentioned in an earlier paragraph, the problem was resolved. The judge responded to the press coverage of the incident by inviting the person concerned to his chambers and apologizing. The Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles was contacted by the State Representative for the area and the Deputy Registrar was duly instructed to accommodate the religious beliefs of citizens. However, the feelings of discouragement, harassment and having to fight to be accepted take their toll. A turbaned Sikh is still an unusual figure and children will ask: "Are you a genie?" People are asked by perhaps well-meaning strangers: "Do you plan to go back to your own country?" Being asked this question after having been in the United States as a naturalized citizen for over 20 years is disconcerting. However, it is even more stressful for Sikh children when they, born in America or brought here at a very young age by their parents and not knowing any other country as theirs, are asked the same question. It can only confuse them and make them feel rejected by the host community.

b. Stresses Within the Sikh Community

A basic dilemma for Sikhs in America is whether they would like to be recognized as a distinct religious community in the general population, or, as a religious subset within the larger group of Asian-Indians in America. In the former case, they would have to retain the five k's which distinguish them as Sikhs regardless of their national origin and skin color. There are intra-community stresses between people who have discarded or are willing to discard the external symbols of their faith and still like to be considered Sikhs and those who are opposed to this form of accommodation as being a repudiation of Sikh identity. The conflict is due to different beliefs as well as the desire for, and contrary to it the fear of, absorption in the larger Indian or South-Asian community with progressive loss of religious identity.

Persons who were originally Sikhs and chose to discard the principal outward symbol of their religion, the unshorn hair along with some of the other k's, can be placed in three groups. The classification is not exclusive and the same person might belong to one group at one stage in his life and switch to another later on. The first group consists of those who give up their religious beliefs altogether and essentially merge into the larger minority of South-Asian immigrants. This merger involves losing their identity as a Sikh. They do not maintain a connection with the rest of the community and indeed do not interact with it except on occasions when the community participates in the larger ethnic or regional festivals of the South-Asian

minority. The second group consists of those who succumb to pressures of obtaining a livelihood or advancement at work and pass the blame on to the host society as being intolerant. These include some of the earlier immigrants who felt coerced into cutting their hair in order to secure employment, lived with a feeling of guilt, and switched back in their old age or when they went back to India. Some who were not able to do so wished that at death their bodies be cremated. Their relatives would tie a turban around the head if the deceased happened to be a male. The Sikh prayer would be said at the occasion. These persons would generally insist on the "Bhai" (caretaker) in the Gurdwara being a "Kesdhari" (one who does not cut his hair) Sikh. They accept their inability to cope with the pressure to conform as a weakness and respect the Sikh tradition and those who are able to adhere to it in spite of the stressful situation they are placed in. Those in the third group do not believe "Amrit" ceremony (formal initiation as a Sikh by taking "Khande da Pahul") is necessary and dispute the necessity of keeping hair. They insist that the distinguishing Sikh symbols (the five k's) are anachronistic and that the faith does not require them. They are convinced that the majority community is racist and insist that a Sikh, whether a newcomer or a child of Sikh immigrants, will not be able to find employment or be accepted by the host society until he cuts his hair. They will make fun of a newcomer or even coerce him to make him succumb. Some are aggressive to the point of publicly ridiculing their own heritage. An "Amritdhari" Sikh immigrant was told by his clean-shaven brother that he would have to shave off before he could be allowed to venture out of the house. They believe that those who do not cut their hair are "Brahmins" of the Sikhs. Recently, an older Sikh immigrant taunted a young Sikh scientist sporting a flowing beard and working under his supervision: "Are you working as a scientist in a laboratory or as a priest in a Gurdwara?" Some among this group profess strong belief in the Sikh religion, claim that they say the daily Sikh prayer and regularly read Siri Guru Granth Sahib at home. They take active interest in the Gurdwara, insist on their eligibility to officiate at religious ceremonies and to serve on Gurdwara management committees. They do not believe their religion to be separate from Hinduism and perceive themselves as tolerant and moderate. This group is often in conflict with the Sikhs who maintain their religious symbols in matters of representing Sikh interests, managing Sikh Gurdwaras, etc. One might say that this group is seeking to redefine the Sikh faith to fit their new appearance.

Even among Sikhs who maintain the religious symbols there are some who consider it important that a Sikh take "Khande da Pahul" and observe the "Rehat", the prayer and preparedness regimen prescribed for the Sikh. Others, sporting the five k's do not go through the initiation but consider themselves to be religious moderates. Many of these moderates and those from the third group described previously point out that there are some among properly initiated Sikhs who do not observe the "Rehat". These differences are among the major causes of continuing squabbles in most Gurdwaras and Sikh religious organizations.

The Sikh religion teaches equality of all people regardless of caste, religious belief, racial origin, and sex. However, in most Sikh congregations, the members have different socio-economic, educational and ethnic background. Some who consider themselves to be intellectually or financially elite are unable or unwilling to interact with those who are not. There are cases where the educated elite of the 1960's built the Gurdwaras and now other, more recent immigrants, with less education, control them because of their numerical strength. The elite often resent this, stay away from the Gurdwaras, and gradually move away from the religious fold.

As the number of Gurdwaras has grown, a number of full-time caretakers (Bhais) have been hired to look after them and to provide leadership in religious ceremonies. The Sikh religion has no priests but many of these caretakers who have musical skills in singing verses from Siri Guru Granth Sahib have taken on and been granted the role of priests. Many Sikhs are impatient with this induction of priesthood into the faith and

would like to do away with the practice.

The religious services in various Gurdwaras do not follow any uniform pattern. Some Sikhs insist that the proceedings in the Gurdwaras should follow the patterns established by the Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee in Punjab but many of the "Bhais" follow whatever they learned from their own teachers. In some of the larger Gurdwaras, the "Bhais" are well-paid, have acquired wealth and property and, with little to do, tend to become indolent and have been known to interfere with the working of the religious subsystem in order to protect their turf.

Over the last several years, yet another intra-community stress has been due to the situation in Punjab, the Sikh homeland. Sikhs are alarmed at the Indian Government's persecution of members of their faith. They are concerned about the rampant human rights violations, including torture and extra-judicial killings, against the Sikhs and about the very survival of their faith in the country of its origin. They would like the situation in Punjab to be discussed openly in the Gurdwaras and for the Gurdwaras in America to assist the Punjab Sikhs in their struggle for survival. Many, convinced that the Indian Government is essentially a Hindu-dominated regime bent upon homogenization of the country by eliminating religious minorities, advocate the creation of Khalistan as an independent Sikh state. This goes against the wishes of the larger Indo-American community which is insensitive to Sikh concerns and, in line with Indian Government propaganda, believes the Sikh emphasis on religious identity to be separatism and a threat to the unity of the country. Identity with the Sikh concern for survival as an independent religious community and sympathy for the Sikhs in Punjab is in conflict with the Indo-American identity. Those who value their Indian identity over their religious identity oppose any discussion of the Punjab situation in the Gurdwaras, and insist that the Gurdwara is a place purely for worship with no discussion of the socio-political problems facing the community.

In India, concurrently with the Government's persecution of mainstream Sikhism, many cults led by individuals claiming to be the bearers of Siri Guru Nanak Dev Ji's divine message have emerged. They do not accept Siri Guru Granth Sahib as Guru and/or do not accept the authority of the traditional Sikh institutions like the Akal Takhat or the collective Sikh leadership represented by the Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee in Punjab. They do not respect and observe the tradition of "Khande da Pahul." They have set up branches in American cities adding to the conflicts. Some groups maintain a facade of Sikh piety and the outward Sikh appearance, are active in the affairs of the Gurdwaras, profess allegiance to Siri Guru Granth Sahib and even administer "Pahul". However, they encourage and cultivate attachment to some individual "Sant" or "Teacher" which is against Sikh principles.

c. Sikh Children

Sikh children are involuntary victims of stress. They are placed in a situation which is not of their making and which they often are unable to comprehend. The feeling of isolation, rejection and helplessness can play havoc with their self-esteem and personal well-being.

i. Interaction with host society

A young Sikh child finds it extremely disconcerting that his peers at school find him strange and are unfriendly. Being stared at while walking down the street is awkward enough for anyone but specially so for a little child or an adolescent. Older children will often pull at the Sikh child's hair or play with it. Sikh boys are often asked: "What is that on your head?" This stressful situation often makes the Sikh child withdrawn,

uncommunicative, and worried. Teachers not used to having identifiable minority students in their classes have on occasions interpreted this as evidence of a learning disability, further aggravating the problem. Some teachers advise Sikh parents to use English at home to accelerate the process of acculturation even though there is ample evidence that bilingual students are better learners. In fact, children of immigrant parents are known to be able to switch accent when talking to their parents or grandparents. Changing schools and "getting to know" a new set of peers all over again is a very trying experience for Sikh children. Young Sikh males find it extremely troublesome to be often the only students in their schools with a turban. They have to face official indifference to their concerns, social isolation and often hostility. They are not allowed to participate in certain sports. The teachers often are not sympathetic to a religious belief different from their own. Even when they excel academically, the "different" children are discouraged from representing their school or class. Many children as well as teachers have been known to refer to the lone Sikh child as "that Indian boy (girl)."

ii. Stresses at home

For many children the most stressful situation is their elders' adherence to a "foreign" culture. Brought up in America, they do not have an understanding or appreciation of the culture their parents grew up with and are so attached to. They are culturally American, because of the school education and the interaction with their peers, but are racially Asian. The host society insists on regarding them as foreigners. They feel that they belong neither to America nor to their parents' country of origin. They can identify with neither and feel isolated and rejected. Unable to escape their racial identity, many children would like to reinforce it with knowledge of their heritage and pride in their ancestry. However, the information they get about their religion is often contradictory. They wish to be able to proudly say where their parents or ancestors came from but there is no Sikh country anywhere in the world. Their "homeland" Punjab is part of India. It is difficult for them to identify with India as a whole and most Americans would not know where Punjab is. Many understand Punjabi when it is spoken at home and some have learnt to read it. Few know it well enough to read from Siri Guru Granth Sahib. Growing Sikh children are quite confused over the difficulty of finding marriage partners in the endogamous option preferred by their parents and of preserving their faith in an exogamous one for which greater choices might be available.

SURVIVAL

Typical interaction between immigrants and the host community consists of need-based adaptation (for example, change to the dress habits and learning to speak the language of the host community at work), adjustment involving learning a new language, form of entertainment and diet (for example, discarding the native language for the language of the host at home, interest in American sports like football and baseball, eating beef etc.) and acculturation. At the same time, the host society needing cheap labor, accommodates "foreign" employees when "natives" are not available to do certain jobs. In such situations, as the host society gets used to the presence of the foreigners, it develops a certain amount of tolerance, or reduction of resentment, towards them. In due course, as the "foreigners" prove themselves to be inoffensive and useful, the host society comes to accept the "different" persons and ceases being critical, hostile or coercive. As this process continues, the immigrant and the host eventually may reach a state of equilibrium based on coexistence with a certain level of acceptable and non-threatening expression of identity by the minority. If the immigrant group progresses to economic parity with the host, this equilibrium may include mutual socio-cultural enrichment. On the other hand, if the expression of identity by the minority is viewed as threatening the socio-cultural fabric or the political dominance of the majority, hostility against the minority may result.

In order to survive, that is, to have continued existence as a distinct group with an expressible identity, a minority has to create subsystems based on ethnicity, religion or national origin depending upon whichever of these is its distinguishing characteristic. For the Sikh minority, this subsystem has to provide an organizational structure which can provide support to its members in overcoming stress and ensuring acceptance by the host society without the necessity of assimilation or total integration. It is especially important for survival that the present generation be able to pass on, to the following generations, a pride and a sense of purpose in the maintenance of a visible Sikh identity.

For the early Sikh immigrants, survival as Sikhs was extremely difficult. Their interaction with the "host" society followed the traditional model of helpless and desperate immigrants trying to adapt, adjust, accommodate and assimilate into the host society on the terms set by the latter. Driven by necessity, these people adopted the English language, took to western dress, and modified their diet. From the point of view of religious identity, the most significant act was to discard the external symbols of their religion to avoid hostility and win acceptance as employees. This was not merely a change of dress which would essentially be a cultural matter but deprivation of symbols of their faith. They were emotionally attached to Punjab, their homeland of which they had happier memories. Within their homes and in their interaction within the community, they were still Punjabis. They developed subsystems around Gurdwaras. However, the Gurdwaras, religious institutions by definition, were few and were primarily places of social intercourse where the immigrants could speak Punjabi and reminisce about their youth in the land of their origin. This affinity with Punjab was difficult to pass on to the next generation which did not share their parents' nostalgia and had no practical use for the language of their elders.

These immigrants were, in general, not well educated. Chakravorti [2] reported that over 75 percent of his sample of Sikh immigrants in El Centro had less than a high school education. They did not know their own religion, did not know how to do "keertan" (congregational singing of verses from Siri Guru Granth Sahib) and were unable to read from Siri Guru Granth Sahib. Only 3 (including the "Bhai" at the Gurdwara) out of 22 wore the turban. Knowing very little about their religion, the immigrant fathers were unable to get their children interested in it. For these immigrants, religion, national origin, language and culture were inextricably mixed. Thus, weakening of the cultural subsystem in the next generation also implied their dwindling interest in religion. They were unable to create facilities for educating the children in the principles and the history of their faith. Exogamy also contributed to the children losing interest in the Gurdwara and the Sikh religion.

Their children were generally more educated than their parents but not well enough to move up from the lowest economic group. In spite of a high level of cultural assimilation, they continued, like their parents, to be victims of discrimination because of the color of their skin. Identity was a burden and not a matter of pride, particularly because they were identified not as visitors from another independent nation but fortune-seekers from a British colony. Their survival was essentially as part of the broader South-Asian community. Their background was apparent only to the other South-Asians. To the host community they had no separate identity.

Starting life in America as farm laborers, many of the early Sikh immigrants finally became landowners and successful farmers. In 1956, Dalip Singh Saund became the first Asian-born person to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Even though most of them were not well read, they recognized the benefits of education. It is well known that the farmers in Yuba City helped many students from Punjab by providing them summer employment. They contributed towards the education of numerous settlers of the 1960's and

after and indirectly helped set up strong subsystems for survival in the long run.

Immigrants, coming in the 1960's and after, were quite different from the early immigrants in their level of education. Many had come to the United States and Canada to pursue advanced study and research at universities and after completing their studies decided to stay on. Many succeeded very well in various spheres of academic and professional endeavor and had the will to survive as a distinct religious community. They could communicate effectively with each other and with the host community. They designed and implemented several survival mechanisms. One, of course, was to establish more Gurdwaras to serve groups of people scattered all over America. This provided more frequent, generally once a week, contact with the other Sikhs in the area. Another was to create national organizations to promote better communication between Gurdwaras. This would also be the mechanism for holding periodic Sikh Conferences bringing increased visibility to the Sikh identity. The U.S. based Sikh Council of North America (SCNA) was formed in 1978 with this objective as an association of Gurdwaras. Delegates from member Gurdwaras would meet annually at a Seminar and also use the occasion to elect new officials. The Federation of Sikh Societies was the Canadian counterpart of the SCNA. Mrs. Lillian Carter was the Chief Guest at the first annual meeting of the Sikh Council held in Berkeley, California. The SCNA went into decline after the June 1984 invasion of Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) by the Indian army. The Council leadership, perhaps not fully aware of the situation in Punjab, had honored Mrs. Indira Gandhi, during her visit to the United States of America in 1982, with a "Saropa." The Sikhs in America could not forget this. The World Sikh Organization (WSO) was set up in 1984. It had individual as well as institutional members. Individual members were organized into "chapters" for the purpose of sending delegates to the annual or special conferences. Several other groups, including organizations not connected with any Gurdwara, have also been set up from time to time to meet special needs of the community.

Several magazines and newsletters including, among others, "The Sikh Sansar" published quarterly by the Sikh Foundation of USA, "The American Sikh Review" published by the Sikh Cultural Society of New York, "The Sikh Samachar" published by the Guru Nanak Foundation of Washington, D.C., "The Sikh World" published by the International Sikh Youth Foundation in Detroit, Michigan, "The Spokesman Weekly" published from Toronto, Canada, "Sikh Thought" published by the Sikh Education and Research Center in St. Louis, were started. Most had to fold up because of economic problems. Perhaps they were before their time. However, the World Sikh News, which started publication in end of 1984 as a publication of the World Sikh Organization continues to operate as a privately owned newspaper. Several periodicals in Punjabi language were started and some of them are flourishing.

The most important development has been the introduction of one-week or two-week "camps" for Sikh children. Starting with a single such camp in the United States about fifteen years ago, currently hundreds of Sikh children are taught Punjabi, Sikh history, Keertan, and Sikh principles in numerous camps that run all summer. Most camps are designed for children below 18 years of age. However, in 1983 to 1985, camps and seminars for college-age Sikhs were also held. Regional and national Keertan competitions are now regularly organized. Scores of "jathas" (teams) of young Sikhs assemble at one place. The competition lasts several days. Sikh children are increasingly involved in doing "Keertan" in the Gurdwaras. There are many young Sikhs who have taken "Khande da Pahul." A Khalsa school has been started in Vancouver where Sikh children can study free of many stresses. The Sikhs have supported the creation of programs of Sikh Studies at several Universities. Chairs of Sikh Studies have already been set up at the University of British Columbia and the University of Toronto. A Chair at University of Michigan is in the process of being filled. Research into Sikh concerns has attracted the interest of several Western scholars. Several Sikh Studies Conferences

have been organized and supported by Sikhs. They have actively participated in conferences where their concerns may be discussed. Sikhs have increasingly participated in interfaith activities with the Guru Gobind Singh Foundation of Washington, D.C. taking a leadership role. Sikh students have set up a worldwide computer network for communication among themselves. Recently, Punjabi fonts have been developed for use with various commercially available word-processors.

THE FUTURE

It appears that, contrary to the outlook expressed by Chakravorti [2] two decades ago, the Sikh community in America has a reasonable chance of surviving as a distinct and visible religious entity instead of amalgamating into the larger racial group of South-Asians. There are two main reasons for this optimism. One is the acceptance of multiculturalism in America and the other is the ability of the Sikh minority to set up appropriate subsystems for its survival as a religious minority. Regarding a multicultural America, Bal [7] notes: "Mainstream America consists of Americans who maintain the fundamentals of their ethnicity while making judicious adjustments to the environment in which they live. The adjustments are made in order to participate effectively and fully in the social, economic and political activities in America as law-abiding individuals with awareness of the Bill of Rights and the essentials of the American Constitution. In view of the present-day ethnic egalitarianism, supported by the laws of the land, mainstream America is defined neither in terms of the standards of the Anglo-Saxon majority in America nor in terms of any other ethnic standards." He goes on to assert: "To suggest a future of the American society when Americans will be an ethnically faceless people is contrary to human nature, contrary to the power of ethnic heritage over people and contrary to the current trends in the American society." America of the future promises to be a beautiful fabric of different but complementary hues and shades.

Considering the subsystems for survival, one has to keep in mind several factors that would contribute to preservation of Sikh identity. These include definition of identity, pride in being a Sikh, and knowledge and practice of the essentials of the faith without conflict with other beliefs and faiths.

If Sikhism is to survive as a world religion, it must claim its distinct existence solely upon religious belief and religious observance. Religious identity has to be separated from identity of language, culture, national origin or race. It has to be an identity of all Sikhs including not only immigrants from Punjab and their children, who have a skin color different from that of the majority community, but also the "Gora Sikhs" (Caucasian Sikhs) and "Black Sikhs", present and future. Racial identity is shared with other groups from South Asia and is, therefore, not uniquely Sikh. Also, with persons of Caucasian as well as Afro-American origin embracing the Sikh faith, the racial identity becomes meaningless. With the younger generation exposed to contact with the host community and the latter becoming increasingly receptive to social diversity, endogamy is going to be difficult, if not impossible.

As stated earlier, the Sikh religious identity is proclaimed by the five k's - the most important being "kes" (unshorn hair). People who want to do away with this distinction would be recognized only as South-Asians by the majority community and their recognition as believers in the principles of Sikhism would be limited to other people of South-Asian or specifically Indian origin. It is clear that they will eventually lose their religious identity and be submerged in the dominant religions practiced by the larger minority. In the long run, mainstream America will only recognize as Sikhs only those who are strict in their observance of the five k's. This would, of course, include the American Sikh converts.

For the Sikh immigrant, affinity for Punjabi language and culture is natural. However, regional language and culture is not an essential part of religion and is difficult to transmit to the following generations. For the younger generation, not so intimately acquainted with Punjab, it is a heavy, perhaps, crippling, burden. Knowledge of Punjabi language is desirable for proper understanding of Siri Guru Granth Sahib but it should be possible to be a Sikh without having to be a linguist.

Punjab is the historical "homeland" for the Sikh religion. Undoubtedly, future generations of American Sikhs will evolve an American Sikh identity but Punjab, because of its intimate association with Sikh history, will always be an emotional focus for Sikhs everywhere. As the place where the Sikhs form a majority of the population, whatever happens in Punjab will continue to deeply influence Sikhs all over the world. Events of 1984 and after have had a profound effect on the Sikhs in America. Survival of Sikh religion and its institutions in Punjab, free of control and interference by a non-Sikh government, is of the greatest importance. A strong and independent Punjab will be a matter of reassurance and pride to all Sikhs. Considering the recent history of oppression in Punjab, it appears necessary for survival of the Sikh faith, not only in Punjab but all over the world, that Punjab should become an independent Sikh homeland in the community of nations. As stated by Khushwant Singh [8]: "The only chance of survival of the Sikhs as a separate community is to create a state in which they form a compact group, where the teaching of Gurmukhi and the Sikh religion is compulsory and where there is an atmosphere of respect for the traditions of their forefathers."

Sikh religion is not merely a set of beliefs, it is even more importantly a way of life, that of a "saint-soldier." Sikhs must live their faith in addition to simply being visible as different, i.e., they must live their lives in prayer and humble service of the people. In interacting with the host society, they must participate in interfaith activities, practice the Sikh concern for fellow-beings, institute free kitchens, set up hospitals, and provide services to the elderly, the disabled, and the homeless in line with the traditions of their faith. They should fight for freedom and equality for all people and resist oppression wherever it may exist.

There is not only lack of information but actually a great deal of disinformation regarding Sikh religion. It is up to the Sikhs to correct this by making correct information available. The Sikhs in America need to set up a central religious organization concerned with collection and dissemination of information, correction of erroneous propaganda, promotion of education of Sikhs and about Sikhs, and with ensuring fair treatment for Sikhs and acceptance of their lifestyle. This could be an association of Gurdwaras along with appropriate arrangements for participation by individuals and by small communities not centered round a Gurdwara.

To provide support to the younger generation of Sikhs, more Gurdwaras along with Sunday schools are needed as the immediate support system. The present subsystem of youth camps must be further strengthened. The different youth camps must establish a central organization to coordinate their work including standardization of the texts and the curriculum. The Sikh youth trained at these camps must be increasingly involved in conducting the religious as well as socio-cultural affairs of the Gurdwaras and the community. Newspapers and magazines in English, dealing with Sikh history, religion, and socio-political issues, are needed. There is a considerable body of Sikh literature which is available only in Punjabi. Effective translations into modern English need to be given high priority. More Khalsa schools must be started and eventually Sikh colleges and universities established. Here, in addition to a liberal arts education, principles of Sikh faith will be taught. Such schools are presently viable in some areas of concentration of Sikh population. To serve a scattered population, residential schools ought to be considered. Parents of Sikh children must take greater interest in and participate more fully in parent-teacher associations or school

parent groups. Their visibility at school functions and participation in school affairs will provide an increased measure of security to Sikh children. These are challenging tasks that need to be urgently addressed.

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