

## DEFINING A SIKH

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**THE CHALLENGE.** One of the first things a student of philosophy (or most social sciences, for that matter) discovers regarding definitions of concepts is that they are rarely, if ever, universally accepted (read perfect). The definition of a Sikh is no exception and should not be. Anyone who expects to crystallize, in a few universally acceptable statements called a definition - a spiritual process that took ten Gurus two and half centuries to construct - is bound to be disappointed. So staggering is the diversity of our most basic text – 1430 pages, 5,867 *shabads* by more than two dozen authors who lived over a period spanning half a century and come from different faiths – that defining *Sikhi* based on the *Guru Granth Sahib* alone is a daunting task. To some, it may seem that the nature of *Sikhi* and the *SGGS* and by extension that of a Sikh is so *spiritually* inclusive that it was *intended* to defy a universal definition. Yet none of these has stopped or should stop the attempt. After all, we live in a world where definitions matter.

**THE SCIENCE OF DEFINITIONS.** The science (and art) is complex, but it can be summarized as follows: perfect definitions are rare and should only be attempted by those oblivious to their certain designation to the rubbish bin. There are, however, good and bad definitions and those belonging to every category in between. Two important criteria in the formulation of any definition are its breadth and its exclusiveness. A good definition must be broad enough to include as much or as many that belongs, yet exclusive enough to exclude as much and as many that does not. The challenge lies in the fact that both criteria are in *contrast* to each other. The broader the definition, the less exclusive it becomes, and *vice versa*. A good definition is thus defined as one that can find the balance between these two contrasts.

The task of coming up with an acceptable definition of a Sikh is to find that balance. Make it too broad (by applying the principle that all humans are equal, *Sikhi* is universal etc), and Stalin, Mao, Osama, Obama and three fourths of the population of Alaska will get counted as Sikhs. Make it too exclusive (*gatra-dhari*, *pahul-dhari*, *gol-pagree dhari* and below the knee *kach-dhari*) and one is left with the pujarees of Patna and Hazoor Sahib as the only Sikhs in the universe.

**AGREEING ON BASIC ELEMENTS.** Before embarking on the language and structure of a definition, one has to agree on the basic elements of the definition. Language is the business of linguists and legal minds. It is the *content* of the definition that is our concern. What would it be based on? Where will it draw its basic idea from? What is the bottom-line criterion for being classified a Sikh?

Keeping in mind the issues raised in the part titled “Science of definitions” above, I would propose that the following **two basic elements** will suffice. **One, born to a Sikh parent, and two abiding by the teaching of the SGGS.**

I have deliberately chosen “Sikh parent” over Sikh family, or Sikh parents (in the plural). This is to overcome the following difficulties. First, if used, the term “Sikh family” would itself need defining. So we would eventually have a definition within a definition – not an attractive preposition. What if the family constitutes of a mix of Sikhs and non-sikhs? Is that still a Sikh family? What if one member of the Sikh family converts out - will that affect its entire status? If it does, then Sikhs will suddenly be classified as non-Sikhs because a sibling converted out or declared himself an atheist. To avoid these sorts of complications, the term family is thus avoided. Further the parent is in singular to allow for single parent families and for situations of separated or divorced couples and mixed marriages between a Sikh and a not, or not yet converted partner.

The second element – abiding by the *Guru Granth Sahib* is chosen for the following reasons. The SGGS is the universally agreed spiritual text for Sikhs and above controversy. It is further universally accepted by Sikhs to be our *Guru*. The SGGS, given its breadth, depth and scope, will allow for the definition to move and progress along a continuum from “basic” *Sikhi* to advance level. Sikhs at different levels of spirituality – beginner to advanced – in whatever name we want to call them *Sehejdhari* to *Shastardhari* for instance – would **all** be Sikhs. In the event of any dispute or disagreement over what attributes, values, beliefs etc a Sikh ought to possess, the SGGS would provide authoritative answers. If some belief is emanating from sources other than the SGGS, so long as it does not contradict the overall philosophy of the *Shabad*, it can be accepted. The SGGS would thus allow for the definition to be dynamic.

The usage of the full term “Guru Granth Sahib” rules out sects (breakaway or otherwise) that consider the SGGS either as just another text or a tool, but have, as an integral part of their beliefs, the notion of physical and human “guru.” A Sikh, by definition would accord the status of Guru to the

SGGS, to the *shabad*, and to the messages contained therein. The underlying principle of the SGGS is the cardinal rule that Sikhi has no physical guru. A Sikh therefore will by definition accept as Guru, solely and exclusively, the SGGS.

Both elements (birth to a Sikh parent & abiding the SGGS) must operate within an “and/or” combination. The “or” combination allows for very young children to be classified as Sikhs. A young child is not expected to know and hence abide by the SGGS, but will still be classified a Sikh in accordance with this definition. This means that for a child, only the first criterion would need to apply. There would be no need to define the word “child” since legal systems all over the civilized world already define this term. The definition of “child” would thus depend on the national jurisdiction within which the individual resided. A child who is legally adopted by a Sikh parent can, for all intents and purposes, be accorded the same status as a child born to a Sikh parent.

The “or” combination further allows for converted Sikhs to fall within the definition. Some one who is *not* born to a Sikh parent may wish to take up the Sikh faith. For such person then, only the second criterion would apply.

The “and” combination ensures that anyone classified as a Sikh has a philosophical/spiritual basis. In other words, one cannot be a Sikh (as a non-child, or adult) solely on the basis of being born to a Sikh parent. If this were to be the case, then the definition of a Sikh would be devoid of a spiritual foundation. Therefore, at this point in time (as an adult) the second criterion (abiding by the SGGS) comes into play. Again, the definition of an adult can also rely on the national jurisdictions within which the Sikh resides.

Further, the “and” combination will rule out someone who is born to a Sikh parent but chooses to adopt a different faith. One need not be forcibly classified as Sikh simply because he/she had a Sikh parent. As an adult, the choice to opt out must always remain. The “and” combination also makes the definition reasonably exclusive. Not all those born to Sikh parents remain Sikhs forever, but all who abide by the SGGS will forever remain Sikhs. This principle ensures that the definition is sufficiently exclusive. Finally, for the adult Sikh the “and” combination ensures that the “abides by the SGGS” criterion is superior in terms of importance to the “birth to a Sikh parent” criterion.

**SIFTING OUT THE IRRELEVANT.** A number of writers contributing to the debate have focused on “realities on the ground.” Dr Surjeet Singh Sidhu (Sikh Bulletin Vol 3&4 /09) points out that “majority of Sikh youth” are non-

*kesadhari*. To this one may add a list of other unflattering “realities.” Ninety percent of Sikhs consume alcohol regularly. There are more liquor outlets in Punjab’s villages than there are grocery stores. In Malaysia (the forum for Dr Sidhu’s observations), Sikhs are, in proportion to their national population, highest represented in the nation’s prisons as criminals and in drug rehabilitation centres as drug abusers. In the Punjab, Sikhs, while proclaiming most loudly about Guru Nanak’s contribution to gender equality, are guiltiest of female-infanticide. Punjab has the world’s highest distortion for male-female ratio and there is an entire generation of female missing – murdered to be more exact. Entire villages now exist without marriageable females due to the widespread practice of gender selection and selective abortions. The majority of Sikhs in UK and North America indulge in dowries, caste related beliefs, etc – all thrown out by our Gurus. Ninety percent of Sikhs have never read the SGGS. Ninety-five percent of Sikhs are not aware of the contents of the SGGS.

If the suggestion is that these realities *should* be factored into the definition of a Sikh, then my response is that we have not grasped what a definition is. It is not that these realities are of no consequence. Their consequence is elsewhere (in the realm of *parchar* or the *practice* of Sikhi for instance) But these realities are of no consequence to an acceptable definition which has to be anchored on some **fixed foundation** and not changing realities.

A good and acceptable definition of a Sikh (assuming we get one) will stand even if the reality on the ground is that Sikhs have become decadent or that there are no Sikhs left. Species and concepts can become extinct, but their definitions can continue to stand as valid. There exist valid definitions that are coined *after* things become extinct.

If, for instance, the definition of a Sikh is tied to Guru Nanak, then this definition will stand *even if* it comes to a point where 90 percent of Sikhs (for whatever reasons) do not know who Guru Nanak was. Are we going to take Guru Nanak out of *Sikhi* if a majority of Sikhs cannot recall his name? If Sikhs are defined in terms of some principles enshrined in the SGGS (male-female equality, no substance abuse, honest living etc), then this definition will stand even if the reality of the ground is that 90 percent of Sikhs have aborted female fetuses, are drug addicts or cheats. Similarly, are we going to take the SGGS out of *Sikhi* because a majority has not looked at this scripture?

This is not to deny the value of realities. Because realities are *subjective*, (definitions on the other hand must strive to be *objective*) they are more relevant

in the realm of *theories*. Take for instance the non-*kesadhari* reality. Based on such reality, one may theorize: *A majority of Sikhs have cut their hair, kesh is therefore no longer important to Sikhs*. This is a valid *theory*. It is derived by a researcher who talked to his respondents who told him hair was no longer important to them as Sikhs. But because the reality is subjective a second researcher may come up with a totally opposite and equally valid theory from the *same* reality: *A majority of Sikhs have cut their hair, despite the fact that kesh is important to Sikhs*. This theory is similarly derived by the second researcher whose respondents told him they *knew* hair was *important*, and that they recognized that what they did was *wrong* in *Sikhi*, but did it anyway because they hoped to be able to honor the *kesh* some day. A third researcher may come up with yet another theory: *A majority of Sikhs have cut their hair because they were led into thinking that kesh was only for Amritdhari Sikhs*. This researcher too talked to his respondents who told him they believed they will only need to honor their *kesh* if and when they decided to take the baptism. A fourth researcher has the following theory: *Simple convenience – avoiding the daily combing and tying – as well as social pressures from the mainstream culture to look like everyone else, and discrimination in employment has led to a majority of Sikhs to discard their kesh*. The respondents of this researcher admitted to two things simultaneously – the primacy of *kesh* in *Sikhi*, and their need to solve inconveniences and problems resulting from that. Notice that all the above theories originate from the *one* same reality.

Notice also that all four theories (and many more) operate on the basis of the one *single* definition which is “A Sikh is someone with unshorn hair...” This definition may be right or wrong, but that is not the issue at this point. The point is merely to show that **realities must not be confused with definitions**. The point is further to show that realities are subjective and hence produce a multitude of theories and explanations. Finally, the point is to show that **one** definition (a good one, that is) *can account for changed realities* and their explanations. If definitions are to be changed every time we perceive a changed reality, the SRM will become a periodical.

**SIFTING OUT THOSE WITH AGENDAS.** The debate on “Who is a Sikh” has caused a host of Sikh writers / commentators to jump in. Not all are interested in the issue at hand which I believe is this: contributing to the *panth’s* task of looking at where we lack in our existing ones and thus helping the process of coming up with a better definition. It is the nature of those with agendas to seize every opportunity to advance their scheme of things. It thus becomes the added task for those without agendas to expose those irrelevant agendas so as to not get distracted.

Since the debate this time around is initiated by a court case filed by one Gurleen Kaur against the SGPC in a Punjab court, it is perhaps necessary to briefly look at this case first. From published reports, it seems that a medical college at Amritsar, run by SGPC had a quota of reserved seats for Sikhs. Gurleen applied within this quota, and was rejected based on the observation that she was not a Sikh because she had dishonored her *kesh*. Her claim is that she is still a Sikh and wants the court to rule in her favor and allow her admission.

What the controversy is truly about is the question in the newspapers, internet etc. The answer depends on one's agenda. SGPC bashers say it is truly one more reason why it (SGPC) should be thrown into the dustbin of history. Shame on them because they cannot even decide who is a Sikh. Never mind the fact that the SGPC can only be as good or bad as we Sikhs would allow it to be. Sikhs, like everybody else, get the institutions they deserve. Never mind also that all these decades, Sikhs have not bothered to practice the SRM of the SGPC. It is only through its widespread practice that its defects and remedies could have emerged in a *timely* manner. How were we to know that it had errors if we put it on the shelves to gather dust? Others have joined the fray to bash *Kesadhari*, *Amritdharis*, *Khalsas*, and *Pagree-dharis*. Some others have said the case is about the rights of non-*kesadhari* Sikhs to be Gurdwaras *parbhandaks*.

Dr Sidhu (Sikh Bulletin Vol 3&4) in his portion titled "The Crux of the Crisis" says "(f)rom all that has been said and done by the SGPC, it is clear that it is really a matter of 'hair' and nothing else." He adds "do not exclude anyone who claims to be a Sikh simply because he 'cuts his/her hair'. Or the next step for the "trimmers" and such may well be a 'Protestant' move." Personal beliefs don't count, but I hold to one that says Sikhs may already have more "protestant" groups than those envisaged by Martin Luther in the 1500s. How else would one categorize the 9,000 *deras* in Punjab? Only difference is most of our protestant groups have no clue what they are protesting against.

To be able to make meaningful contribution from the *Sikhi* and *Gurmat* point of view, there is a need to take and keep the debate a notch or two higher in order to detach it from our agendas. From the *Sikhi* point of view, the actions of SGPC and the Medical College are clearly wrong. They are wrong, *not so much* because Gurleen was denied admission *per se*, but wrong because hundreds, perhaps thousands *other* qualified students may have been denied admission over the years – systematically and continually – in the name of *Sikhi*! It is also

wrong because many *unqualified* students may have got admitted simply on the basis that they *looked* Sikhs. Many qualified students possibly got excluded or didn't bother applying because they were *non-Sikhs*, or were Sikhs who did not have *kesh*. It is further wrong because the practice of reserving seats based on criteria such as race, religion etc is discrimination – plain and simple. Finally, it is wrong because *Sikhi, Gurmat* and the SGGS is **dead** against any form of discrimination. Line after line, verse after verse, and page after page – the SGGS condemns, critiques and rubbishes discrimination. And here we have a Sikh organization, a Sikh *religious* organization, a *Sikhi*-propagating institution blatantly institutionalizing discrimination. And Sikhs in Punjab (and elsewhere) have condoned it.

If we reduce this issue to “hair and nothing else” then we are effectively saying this: carry on with the discrimination, keep this nonsense thing called “quota for Sikhs,” keep denying *more* qualified persons places and keep taking *less* qualified but Sikh students. We are further saying: all you (SGPC) need to do is to tweak the definition of a Sikh. Matter resolved. We will not bother you anymore. It does not matter that the most basic principles of *Sikhi, Gurmat*, and the SGGS get trampled by a Sikh institution that hypocritically claims its objective is the betterment of Sikhs and *Sikhi*. All we want is our little agenda to come alive.

What happens when we are overly concerned with our agendas is the following. First the debate is debased. Second, the crux of the issue gets buried. Third we lose sense of priorities - shouldn't getting rid of discrimination in Sikh related institutions be of highest priority? Fourth the debate eventually turns into people with agendas against other people with other agendas. Fifth, nothing gets resolved, and we end up in square one, waiting for the next round. Spin this cycle long enough, and *Sikhi* and everything connected to it will be subject to our agenda wars - nothing more, nothing less.

The position of this article is that the heart of *Sikhi* is big enough to accommodate those with *all* the symbols, those with *some*, and those *without* any. There is room also for die-hard critics of these *kakars* as much as there is for Sikhs who chose to wear all these symbols all the time. Any Sikh who argues for non-accommodation of any group of humans as Sikhs is displaying his personal fallibilities. Sikhs can be narrow, but *Sikhi* is never such. If the compassion of the SGGS is spread wide enough to allow Muslim and Hindu *Bhagats* to reside within and share the throne of spirituality with our Gurus, why are we so bent on eliminating those who differ in terms of their *kesh* or any other symbol? By

this token then, *kakardharis* who insist that those without the *kakars* cannot be defined as Sikhs are as blinkered as those who want to take *amritdharis* out of the definition.

**THE SRM DEFINITION.** Despite the criticism, this definition suffers only *technical* difficulties – all of which are rectifiable. The major limitation may be that it has failed to include “a child born to a Sikh.” Given the prevalence of Hindu families bringing up the eldest male child as a Sikh, this limitation may not have been viewed as such then. There were clear cases of Sikhs who were born into non-Sikh families. The technical difficulties relate to the use of the term “*banee* of the *ten* Gurus.” The SGGS contains the compositions of *six* gurus. It can be argued that this is not a flaw because *philosophically* the *banee* of SGGS, once it has been given the position of a Guru, must represent all ten Gurus. Once the SGGS is considered a Guru, then no distinction need be made between the *banee* and teaching of Guru Nanak (a composing Guru), and Guru Har Rai (a non-composing Guru) or even that of Bhagat Kabeer (a composing non-Guru). So the SGGS as Guru is the Jot, the essence, the philosophy, the embodiment, the ideology and spirituality of all the Gurus. There would perhaps not even be the above mentioned technical difficulty if one reads the sentence as “*banee* of the ten Guru and their (*updesh*) messages. Read this way, the statement gains perfect accuracy. All then Gurus had provided messages - six Gurus included them into the SGGS and the remaining four did not – but still their messages are available from other external sources.

The fuss over *Khande da Pahul* is also misplaced. No where does it say one has to be *Amritdhari* to be defined as a Sikh. The definition uses the word *nischa rakhda* which translates as believes in, or has faith in. Given that the SRM definition sentence is rather complex, the word *nischa* is also applicable to the other tenets namely “One God,” “ten Gurus,” and *Banee*.”

One can safely conclude therefore that the SRM definition is acceptable. That should not however stop Sikhs from attempting to improve on it.

**ONE SIKH OR MANY.** Prof Devinder Singh Chahal (Sikh Bulletin Vol 3 & 4 /09) has, after examining the Sikh Gurdwara Act (SGA) 1925, *Mahan Kosh*, SRM, and the Delhi Gurdwara Constitution found the use of terms such as *Sehejdhari*, *Keshadhari*, *Amritdhari*, *Khalsa*, and *Singh*. To this one may add a plethora of other terms such as *Kirpandhari*, *Kharagdhari* and *Dastardhari*. Then there is the term ‘*patit*.’ Both Prof Chahal and Dr Sidhu have argued regarding

the lack of consistency and precision in the terms as well as some technical difficulties with the SRM definition.

If one examines these terms carefully one will inevitably see a common thread. They are all invented to circumvent the issue of the *kakars*. Some of the terms refer to those who have *all* the *kakars* (*amritdhari, khalsa,*) some to those who have *some* of the *kakars* (*kesadhari, kirpandhari, kharagdhari*) some to those who have *none* (*sehejdhari,*) and one to those who had them at some point of time (*patit*). It does not take much thought to figure out that some of these terms are descriptive and applied without much thought. Hence the absence of precision and considerable overlaps.

The most derisive of the terms are *sehejdhari* and *patit*. From existing definitions, the former is a euphemism for *sluggish* Sikhs and the latter for *sinner* Sikhs. In layman's language *sehej* means slow, while the antonym of *patit* is *paavan* or perfect to the point of purity. I would submit that based on our progress, we are all *sluggish* Sikhs. In 300 years Sikhs have not yet figured out where the *mool mantar* (the epilogue of paragraph one of page one of 1430 pages) ends! If this is not evidence of our slowness and sluggishness, what is? Given our fallibilities, we are also all *patits*. Amongst the many names of God in the SGGS, one of them is *patit-paavan* meaning God can turn a *patit* to a *pavan*. On page 93 of the SGGS, Bhagat Beni has this rhetorical question for a verse: *Jao Pey Hum Na Paap Karenta, Ahey Ananta. Patit Pavan Naam Kaisey Hunta*. Meaning: If I did *not* sin, O Limitless God, why the need to call You *Patit Pavan*? Putting my faith in Bhagat Beni, I am prepared for rebuke should anyone wish to take issue with my claim that *all* Sikhs are *sehejdhari* and *patit*. Let any Sikh who believes he/she is on fast track (meaning not *sehej*) and further believes he/she is perfect *paavan* (meaning not *patit*) cast the first stone.

In our fervor with such vague terms and in our struggle to prove one category is better than the other or that the other is less worthy, the root word "Sikh" has somewhat disappeared. That is why it is so much a struggle to get back to this one original term. Going back to the basics can be tough if one has gotten lost in the complexities for too long.

I argue therefore that these multitudes of terms are **artificial** and self-serving entities especially if we consider them as **different** types of Sikhs – which they are certainly not. They must be looked at as **adjectives** or different points on a spiritual journey – if one prefers. Even then, they have no real utility. The spiritual journey has no forward or backward positions. The journey is called

*Sikhi*. **Every individual on this journey is a Sikh.** Sikhs are free to walk on this journey – forwards, backwards, or keep standing in one place. Sit if you like and take a break. So long as they are on the journey, they are Sikhs. Judging other travelers is not the business of fellow travelers. What appears forward may actually be backward and what appears progress may actually be stagnation. So why bother even defining “finish line Sikhs,” “slowly getting there Sikhs,” “fast-track Sikhs” or “getting nowhere Sikhs.” Judging is the task for the Guru. So why get into that?

The concern should then be to define Sikh as precisely as possible and *accept* that the sub-categories (different points on the journey) will inevitably have overlap and lack of exclusivity. These should not be in the definition, but if they simply must be somewhere, then put them in the body proper of the *philosophy* of Sikhi.

**THE ISSUE OF KESH.** In my suggested definition, I have not included *kesh* as a **specific** criterion. The basis for my exclusion is that the argument for (or against) *kesh* ought to be seen from the perspective of it being a *Sikhi* trait (or otherwise). There are a multitude of *Sikhi* traits or values – honest living, service to humanity, remembrance etc. *All* these values cannot be included in the basic definition of a Sikh because they are too many. We would then have a definition running into hundreds of pages. To include *some* of these values in the definition would create a problem of selection – which to put in and which to take out – leading to endless debate. To include *one or two* very prominent ones would spark a debate over why a particular value or trait is more prominent than others. The compromise therefore would be to *not* specifically list out any of the *Sikhi* traits in the definition, but to **include the source** of all these traits – namely the SGGS and its abidance by an individual as prequalification to be defined a Sikh. In other words, once an individual abides by the SGGS, he/she is abiding by *all* the traits contained therein.

It must be pointed out that *not mentioning* one trait (even if considered critical or basic by some Sikhs) in the definition of a Sikh, does *not* mean I am suggesting it is not a trait of *Sikhi*, or not a critical trait. I am merely suggesting that these two issues (something *being* a trait, and the need to *mention* it in the definition) be viewed separately. This does not also mean that by adopting the definition I am proposing, the debate over *kesh* is anyway settled in one way or other. The debate can go on, will go and probably should go on – so long as everyone has a right to partake as Sikhs.

If one must set about establishing Sikh values and traits, then the SGGS must be the source. And if it gets established that x,y,z are the values and traits of *Sikhi*, then all of x,y,z go into the definition of a Sikh, *without* having anyone spell them out specifically in the language of the definition. This is so because the source of the traits (SGGS) is spelt out as an integral part of the definition. For those Sikhs who firmly believe that the *kesh*, *amrit* and *khalsa* is and ought to be the basis of *Sikhi* – then establish such through the SGGS, especially if we seek finality and consensus. The word *amrit* appears in some 5,000 verses throughout the 1430 pages. And for those Sikhs who feel that *kesh* is an artificial trait and or alien to *Sikhi*, then the criteria for establishing such is the same.

**CONCLUSION.** At first glance, the two-criteria (child of a Sikh parent & abiding by SGGS) definition suggested herein appears to be a relaxing or loosening of the definition. Indeed it is, and it is by design. Such relaxing and loosening is necessary to broaden the base for *Sikhi* and to eliminate the possibility of excluding those who desire to be Sikhs. It is thus an inclusive definition. On the other hand, the definition allows for the most stringent application of Sikh values and traits *provided* it can be established that they are indeed so as sanctioned by the SGGS. In this sense this definition allows for dynamic debate on what constitutes a Sikh *while keeping everybody in*. More importantly it provides every Sikh a fixed, permanent, authoritative and commonly agreed basis for the debate, namely the SGGS. End