Who is a Sikh?

State of the Panth, Report 1

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State of the Panth

The State of the Panth series is a report on Sikh matters presented by the Sikh Research Institute to the global Sikh community. The series reports on matters affecting either a large section of the Sikh Nation or a perspective on critical issues facing the human race at large. It surveys the self-identified Sikhs on their stances. It outlines a Sikh perspective based on Gurmat (the Guru's Way) traditions of Bani (wisdom), Tavarikh (history), and Rahit (lifestyle). It outlines recommendation for the individual Sikhs and Sikh institution in “best practices” approach to strengthen the bonds within the community.

Report prepared by
Harinder Singh, Senior Fellow, Research & Policy
Parveen Kaur, Research Assistant
Inni Kaur, Editor
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Skyrocket  We thank Skyrocket team for sharing their design expertise and making the report as beautiful as it is. The strength of our brand is supported by their knowledge.
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Summary

As the global Sikh population expands in size and complexion, the definition of a Sikh becomes increasingly important to support and shape the community. This study sets out to establish an understanding of how to conceptualize who is a Sikh.

Originally only two terms were used within the community: Sikh and Khalsa. From the original terms, some terms have been created for legal and social accountability while others reduce an individual’s sense of accountability or ownership. Various terminology used today has become intertwined with a sense of “hierarchy” or a scale of religiosity that was not always part of the tradition.

Overall, Gurmat (“The Guru’s Way” which forms the Sikh paradigm) paints a picture of an individual who accepts the path of the Guru with humility and a sense of passion, devotedly contemplates on and implements those teachings as well as remains in their natural state of physical appearance.

A survey of 938 individuals was conducted to summarize the 2017 Sikh population’s understanding of who a Sikh is. The survey results show significant differences between responses in comparison of age group and gender identity. The survey results mirror the concept of different groups within the Sikh community having varying understandings of how a Sikh should be defined. This study makes recommendations on a personal and institutional level that can be implemented within the community from a holistic understanding of who a Sikh is.

The evaluation of a Sikh’s identity must come on a circular spectrum which includes criteria outlined in Gurmat — Bani (wisdom), Tavarikh (history) and demonstrated throughout Rahit (lifestyle) — but also includes where the individual places themselves within those criteria.
Who is a Sikh?

The Sikh identity continues to be interpreted in many ways and each understanding is as unique as the individual making the interpretation. It is naive to think that any group of people hold only the practices and traditions that link them but it is equally misguided to say that those unifying linkers are not of great significance. From an outside perspective, it is commonly assumed that all Sikhs are the same but, from within the community like any other group, there is no one homogeneous identity. Within the Sikh community, there is a varying understanding of self-identity.

Self-identification is important as it allows for a more robust understanding of the people themselves rather than an insight into society’s perception of the group. However, the practice of defining a Sikh is more of a 19th century ideology than one inherent to the Sikh faith itself. From the very beginning with Guru Nanak Sahib, there has always been a unique Sikh way of thinking and identity — a “definition” has not always been so apparent.

Defining a Sikh has less to do with the religiosity of the individuals but rather the self and panthic (community) accountability. We aim to display the unique identity of who a Sikh is from the range of beliefs within the Sikh community as well as what is seen in the primary, Guru Granth Sahib, and secondary sources.

Many terms have arisen throughout history, originating from the Panth (the Sikh collective) as well as external groups, attempting to classify the Sikh population. Due to the origins of some of these terms as well as the blurred understanding of exactly what variations can or should be included under each of them, some of these descriptors themselves may have become flawed over time. Putting the weight of the modern-day interpretations of these umbrella terms aside, the identity of a Sikh can be inferred from other sources: Bani (wisdom), Tavarikh (history), and Rahit (lifestyle).
Where the idea of a definition is limiting, throughout Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh scriptural canon), a Sikh is described in a holistic sense including lifestyle, behavior and worldview. Guru Sahib refers to the lifestyle of a Sikh several times throughout Bani where those actions are guided by the way of the Guru:

**O’ Sibling! That Sikh is a friend and a relative who enters the Guru’s Way.**
— Guru Granth Sahib, 601 1*

**The Sikh ears listen to the Teachings imparted by the Eternal Guru.**
— Guru Granth Sahib, 314 2*

Guru Amardas Sahib specifically expresses that such individuals, the Sikh, merit praise for following that path:

**I forever salute that Sikh of the Guru, the Sikh of the Guru who walks on the Guru’s Way.**
— Guru Granth Sahib, 593 3*

**The Sikhs of the Guru contemplates on the Eternal Guru.**
— Guru Granth Sahib, 869 4*
This sentiment is expanded upon by Guru Arjan Sahib. Repeatedly the concepts of following the teachings of the Guru as well as a practice of reflection and recitation are highlighted.

The appearance of one who follows the Guru’s path is also illustrated throughout Bani where appearance is correlated with commitment. For example, Guru Ramdas Sahib writes of how a Guru-oriented individual focuses on meditating with each hair:

Through the Guru, with each and every hair, I contemplate on the Charmer-Divine, with each and every hair.
— Guru Granth Sahib, 443

However, there is an emphasis given to both the external physical appearance and the internal mindset of followers of the path. It is clear that it is through the combination of the external and internal components that create the Sikh. Guru Amardas Sahib speaks of how an intact physical appearance is aligned with devotion of the divine:

Kabir: Other duality departs by loving the One, not by growing hair long or shaving head bald.
— Guru Granth Sahib, 1365

Those who remain in Guru’s submission, their beards are truly respectful ...
Those who speak and earn Truth, their faces and beards are truly respectful.
— Guru Granth Sahib, 1419
Bani does not stop at the interplay between the physical external and internal Sikh but expands upon the importance of the actions or behavior of that Sikh. Having a humble, compassionate personality are highlighted several times as the follower of the path is described. The goal in life emphasized to be pursuit of divine realization such as Guru Arjan Sahib explains:

*My objective is to clean the feet of Your votaries with my hair.*
— Guru Granth Sahib, 500 8*

It is communicated that with humility and compassion one must combine discipline in the physical sense but also in routine practice. Guru Ramdas Sahib explains that:

One who calls herself a Sikh of the Guru, the Eternal Guru, rises at dawn to contemplate on the All-Pervasive Nam. Every day makes an effort at dawn: performs the cleansing, and bathes in the pool of Immortality. Follows the Guru’s Instructions, utters the utterance of All-Pervasive! All-Pervasive! Pains from all evilish transgressions vanish. Then, at day-break, sings Guru’s Teachings, contemplates on All-Pervasive Nam while sitting or standing. One who contemplates with every breath my All-Pervasive! All-Pervasive! That Sikh of the Guru pleases the Guru’s mind. Whosoever feels the Beloved Divine’s compassion, the Guru imparts instructions to that Sikh of the Guru. Servant Nanak asks for that Sikh of the Guru’s feet-dust who herself utters and inspires others to utter Nam.

— Guru Granth Sahib, 305 9*
This routine practice requires not only discipline but commitment. An explanation of this commitment is given by Bhagat Kabir:

Recognize the one as warrior who fights on behalf of downtrodden.
Embraces death, gets chopped limb by limb, never deserts the battlefield.
— Guru Granth Sahib, 1105

The specifics on lifestyle of a Sikh and the merits of such a lifestyle are expanded upon at great lengths throughout Bani. Overall a picture is painted of an individual who accepts the path of the Guru with humility and a sense of passion, devotedly contemplates on and implements those teachings as well as remains in their natural state of physical appearance.
The development of a unique Sikh identity begins from Guru Nanak Sahib who traveled great distances leaving a sangat (Sikh congregation) at many locations along the journey where a Sikh was personally appointed by Guru Nanak Sahib to be in charge of the sangat. At this time there were Sikhs who were followers of many different faiths that congregated with the Gurus, learners. There were also Sikhs who went through an initiation ceremony. Members of the sangat were initiated by the Guru with charanamrit (literally feet-nectar, feet implying utter humility in Sikhi). The context of charanamrit, Sikh initiation ceremony at the time of Guru Nanak Sahib, is as follows:

The lives of Guru-oriented are successful,  
they read, understand and share the Guru’s teachings.  
They please Gur-siblings (companions via the Guru),  
they drink charanamrit (inculcate humility) from their mouth.

According to Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Nanak Sahib established a Raj (a new egalitarian society):

Nanak established the Dominion by raising  
the fort of Truth on firm foundations …  
With might and bravery of One’s wisdom-sword,  
Perfection bestowed the gift of life …  
The Light and the method were same,  
the Sovereign only changed the body.  
Impeccable Divine canopy waves,  
the Throne of Guru-ship is occupied.
Every subsequent Guru built on this society with institutions to strengthen the people, maintaining sovereignty. These institutions included Gurmukhi script, literary work, musical compositions, arms trainings, town-planning and markets, *Miri-Piri* (political-spiritual sovereignty), Guru Granth Sahib, Harimandar Sahib and Akal Takht complex, forts and armies, to name a few.

By the time of Guru Gobind Singh Sahib, the Sikh appearance was merely formalized from what was already being practiced and written in Bani.

In areas of governance, Guru Amardas Sahib organized sangats into the formal *manji* (administrative unit) system where selected individuals were given the authority to promote the Sikh faith. At this time, a formal gathering of the Sikh panth as well as the manji leaders occurs at Goindwal on Vaisakhi which began to create a sense of collective among the community that was unique from the celebrations of other groups. In addition to this, Guru Amardas Sahib creates the composition of the Goindwal *Pothis* (early collection of Bani) as a means to explicitly promote the teachings of Sikhism.\(^4\) The Sikh identity continues to form as Guru Arjan Sahib creates Harimandar Sahib which becomes a central place for Sikhs and instilling the authoritative scripture for the Sikhs with the composition of Adi Granth. With a unique Sikh identity in place, Guru Hargobind Sahib established the institutions of *Miri-Piri*.\(^5\) In 1699 with Guru Gobind Singh Sahib, the inauguration of the *Khalsa*, a Sikh who has been initiated through the ceremony of *Amrit* (Immortal Nectar) via *khande-ki-pahul* (prepared via double-edged sword), essentially seals the forming of the Sikh identity. At this time Guru Gobind Singh Sahib makes it compulsory for Sikhs to wear the five articles of faith, the five 5 *Ks*, at all times.\(^6\) These 5 articles included *Kes* (unshorn hair), *Kangha* (comb), *Kara* (steel bracelet), *Kachihra* (under shorts) and *Kirpan* (traditional sword). Guru Gobind Singh Sahib also laid out four main injunctions to the Khalsa refraining them from:

1. Abstain from cutting any hair,
2. Not to smoke or take any intoxicants,
3. Refrain from eating halal meat and
4. Never partake in adultery, displaying a high morality at all times

The Sikh identity was developed by the Ten founder Gurus with an emphasis on spirituality and behavior.

Throughout the Bani of Guru Granth Sahib there are several references made to hair but it is from the time of Guru Nanak Sahib that the appearance of a Sikh has been highlighted.

Up until the 1960s, the groups known as the *Al Sabia, Sabian* or *Subi* people lived in Iraq and called themselves followers of Guru Nanak and were not considered Muslims by themselves or by others
in Iraq. This group kept unshorn hair and beards, also keeping a portrait of Guru Nanak Sahib around their necks.

The following inscription was found related to this group:

“Look! The great God filled the wish. A new building got erected for Baba Nanak. In the construction of this, seven godly people contributed. The date comes to 927 Hijri. The fortunate disciple started new supply of water from the earth.”

The date of 927 Hijri comes to the equivalent of 1520 A.D., correlating to the time of Guru Nanak Sahib.7

The Guru’s themselves exemplified the appearance outlined throughout Bani.

Once the aged ascetic son of Guru Nanak Sahib, Baba Sri Chand, came to visit Guru Ramdas Sahib, the Fourth Guru. Sri Chand asked the Guru why the Guru kept such a long beard? Guru Ramdas Sahib replied: “To wipe the dust off the feet of divine beings like you” and then proceeded to perform this supreme act of humility. Sri Chand embraced Guru Ramdas Sahib and said: “It’s enough. This is the kind of character by which you have deprived me of my ancestral heritage. Now, what more is left with me that I could offer you for your piety and goodness of heart?”.

Bhai Gurdas (1558-1637), contemporary of four Gurus, describes the Minas (followers of Prithi Chand, brother of Guru Arjan Sahib), pretending to look like the Gurus:

Wear similar five-piece dress and assume the manly bearing.
Mustaches and beards are handsome, body is much feeble.8

Though the aforesaid Var (ode or ballad) is condemnation of Minas for setting up parallel Guruship, it describes how they copied the Gurus in appearance.

These practices and physical appearance were trademark targets for Sikhs during the eighteenth century when Sikhs were persecuted for their faith by extremist ultra right-wing ideologies. Famously, Bhai Taru Singh is scalped while retaining his unshorn hair: “How do I fear for my life? Why must I become a Muslim? Don’t Muslims die? Why should I abandon my faith? May my faith endure until my last hair – until my last breath.”
The Sikh community has always been considered a community with a unique identity that may go against the grain of society even on a politically active level. The political activism of Guru Nanak Sahib resulted in a jail sentence. From Guru Arjan Sahib onwards, the Gurus and their Sikhs were imprisoned, tortured and assassinated. During the Lesser and Greater Ghallughara (genocidal campaigns in the 18th century), Sikhs were tortured and murdered for being Sikhs; they were identified by hair, turban, or other visible articles of faith like Kara or Kirpan. This political persecution of 18th century is etched in Ardas, Sikh collective prayer. This persecution of any individual deemed to be a Sikh by the persecutors occurs again during the 1984 Ghallughara and its aftermath throughout India.

When the Khalsa Raj was established by Banda Singh Bahadar in 1710 in the Panjab, “there was no noblemen daring enough to march from Delhi against them.”

“If Bahadur Shah had not quitted the Deccan, which he did in 1710, there is every reason to think that the whole of Hindustan would have been subdued by these Sikh Invaders.” The Mughals related Sikhs with long hair. On Sep 8th 1710, Emperor Bahadur Shah issued an order that “all Hindus employed in the imperial offices should get their beards shaved.”
Again on Dec 10th 1710, the Emperor issued an edict ordering a genocide of the Sikhs, the followers of Nanak, wherever found: “Nanak prastan ra harja kih ba-jaband ba-qatl rasanand.” This order was later repeated by Emperor Farukh Siyar in almost the same words.

The Sikh chronicles are clear that the ‘long haired’ Sikhs were on the hit lists of imperial armies:

“All those with long hair on their heads must not be allowed to live in my country.”
“Kill all on whose head you see long hair.”
“Do not spare anyone with long hair.”

Ardas, the concluding Sikh supplication, records it was acceptable to embrace torture and death in favour of Gurmat:

“Sikhi was practiced with hair intact to the last breath.” Sikhs ask for “the gift of Sikhi, hair, faith, lifestyle, analysis, trust, and the gift of all gifts Nam (culture of Oneness).”

During 1984 Sikh Genocide, Amritdhari (initiated, popularly “baptized”) Sikhs were particular targets as the following Indian Army publication illustrates. These instructions constituted unmistakably clear orders by the government of India for the targeting of all visible Sikhs.

“All those with long hair on their heads must not be allowed to live in my country.”
“Kill all on whose head you see long hair.”
“Do not spare anyone with long hair.”

“Any knowledge of the Amritdharis who are dangerous people and pledged to commit murders, arson and acts of terrorism should immediately be brought to the notice of the authorities. These people may appear harmless from outside but they are basically committed to terrorism. In the interest of all of us their identity and whereabouts must always be disclosed.”
Throughout historical persecutions, external institutions have forcefully created their own definitions of a Sikh which have become engraved into the collective memory and identity of the Sikh community moving forward. The physical appearance of the Sikhs has been made political.

Within the Sikh community, there are several terms used to understand who is a Sikh. These terms are and may not be limited to:

- A Sikh who has been initiated through the ceremony of *Amrit* (Immortal Nectar) via *Khande-ki-Pahul* (elixir prepared with double-edged sword); commonly *Amritdhari* or member of the Khalsa Order.
- A Sikh who keeps their long, unshorn hair but has not yet been initiated; traditionally Sikh, now *Kesdhari* (one who maintains unshorn hair).
- A Sikh who keeps their long, unshorn hair, who adopts Sikhi and is *Kesdhari* was historically known as *Sahajdhari* (literally graduate adopter), today this implies a non-*Kesdhari*.
- A Sikh who self-identifies as part of the community by accepting Guru Granth Sahib as their guiding light but, is not *Kesdhari*.
- An individual who does not self-identify as Sikh, but accepts the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib, performs Sikh ceremonies and traditions but, may or may not be *Kesdhari*.

These various descriptors for Sikhs arose differently throughout history. The definition of some of these “categories” have also been interpreted differently over time, but the primary source of the aforesaid is *Mahan Kosh*. In many small-scale census reports and then the first All-India census implemented in 1871, the British created a survey in order to better understand the people of colonial India. Though Sikhs are counted in numbers separately, they are lumped several times into the category of Hindu in descriptions. In an attempt to simplify the belief systems of colonial Indians into a category on a survey, the British created arbitrary divisions within which people had to claim an identity. When the next census was conducted in 1911, what it meant to be a Sikh did not mean the same thing as it did in 1871. *Sahajdharis*, people who identify with the Sikh faith but are not initiated members, were counted as Hindus. In the 1911 census, after protests by Sahajdhari Sikhs for being misrepresented, they were given a separate category that made up 15.63 percent of Sikhs. Misrepresentation of one’s self-identity creates an urgency to validate that identity,
to make one’s own perspective of oneself known, this becomes one of the motivations for the creation of the Singh Sabha movement, a 19th century Sikh revival movement. This movement was followed by a Rahit (code of conduct or lifestyle) drafted by Sikh scholars in 1925 for which a final version was completed in 1936. Finally in 1945, this Rahit became accepted and was printed by the Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee (SGPC) and other parties. It is important to acknowledge the purpose and circumstance associated with certain terms when accepting their place in an ever developing community.

Essentially all of these terms stem from the original terms Sikh and Khalsa. The word Sikh, originating from the Sanskrit siksa or sisya translates roughly to disciple or learner. In Pali, Sikh means pupil or one under training. Khalsa as described above refers to a Sikh who has been initiated by Amrit via khande-ki-pahul. Khalsa can be broken down into Singh and Kaur. According to Mahan Kosh, Kaur comes from kunvar, i.e., prince, but is a title for a female initiated Sikh. Other alternative understanding is that Kaur actually refers to the true female who belongs only to the Guru, not the father before marriage or the husband after marriage. In Pali, Singh means one who has achieved a milestone. In a sense, one could say a Sikh would be an individual who is working towards achieving the internal, external and behavioural components Guru Sahib has outlined in Bani and throughout Sikh history. A Khalsa may be an individual that has begun to demonstrate those internal, external and behavioural aspects. Many of the terms that are used to further break down Sikh or Khalsa into specific manifestations of progression and achievement were not distinctions that Guru Sahib made but rather a way for the panth to create self and community accountability. Over time terms such as Sahajdhari and Amritdhari have become intertwined with a sense of “hierarchy” or a scale of religiosity that was not always part of the tradition.

For example, in the 1695 Rahitnama (lifestyle code of conduct) of Bhai Nand Lal (also known as Prashan Uttar as it was a conversation between Bhai Nand Lal and Guru Gobind Singh Sahib) the terms of Sikh and Khalsa become intertwined.

“A term which has had parallel usage in the Sikh system is Sahajdhari. A sahajdhari is not a full Sikh, but one on his way to becoming one. He is in the Guru’s path, but has not yet adopted the full regalia of the faith. He fully subscribes to the philosophy of the Gurus; he does not own and believe in any other Guru or deity. His worship is the Sikh worship; only he has not yet adopted the full style of a Singh. Since he subscribed to no other form of worship or belief than the one prescribed for Sikhs, a concession was extended to him to call himself a Sikh - a sahajdhari Sikh a gradualist who would gradually tread the path and eventually become a full-grown Khalsa.”

Hierachy in other forms such as caste-identity was never part of the Sikh identity in the Gurmat tradition. It was never part of the identity formation which culminated in legal definitions in twentieth century. However in India’s legal context this caste-based Sikh identity is being invoked for reservation purposes. In practice, caste-based identities have been legally solidified globally in the last century.
Though some terms are used within the community for legal or social accountability, other terms have been created that actually reduce an individual’s sense of accountability or ownership. Commonly, Sikh females have been referred to by terms such as Singhni or Sikhni which inherently mean the female is of the Singh or Sikh respectively. Though Singhni or Sikhni have become widespread jargon, the term Kaur for females is the most apt traditional term which allows females to have ownership and accountability rather than being dismissive of their role in the community. This example of terms used specifically for females highlights how so many terms have arisen within the community that create abstract divisions and non-holistic understandings.
Kesadhari, a term defining a Sikh as one who carries on his head the full growth of his kes (hair) which he never trims or cuts for any reason. Anyone, Sikh or non-Sikh, may keep the hair unshorn, but for a Sikh kes, unshorn hair, is an article of faith and an inviolable vow. The Sikh Rahit Maryada published by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, statutory body for the control and management of Sikh shrines and by extension for laying down rules about Sikh belief and practice, issued in 1945, after long and minute deliberations among Sikh scholars and theologians, defines a Sikh thus:

Every Sikh who has been admitted to the rites of amrit, i.e., who has been initiated as a Sikh, must allow his hair to grow its full length. This also applies to those born of Sikh families but [who] have not yet received the rites of amrit of the tenth master, Guru Gobind Singh.

All codes and manuals defining Sikh conduct are unanimous in saying that uncut hair is obligatory for every Sikh. One of them, Bhai Chaupa Singh’s, records, “The Guru’s Sikh must protect the hair, comb it morning and evening and wash it with the curd. And he must not touch it with unclean hands.”
Bhai Nand Lal quotes Guru Gobind Singh:

My Sikh shall not use the razor. For him the use of razor or shaving the chin shall be as criminal as incest ... For the Khalsa such a symbol is prescribed so that a Sikh cannot remain undistinguishable from among a hundred thousand Hindus or Muslims; because how can one hide himself with hair and turban on his head and with a flowing beard?

Bhai Desa Singh, in his Rahitnama imparts a theological edge in his statement:

God created the whole universe and then he fashioned the human body. He gave men beard, moustaches and hair on the head. He who submits to His Will steadfastly adheres to them. They who deny His Will how will they find God in this world?

Trimming or shaving is forbidden for the Sikhs and constitutes for them the direst apostasy. The truest wish of a true Sikh is to be able “to preserve the hair on his head to his last breath.” This was the earnest prayer arising out of Sikh hearts in the days of cruel persecution in the eighteenth century when to be a Sikh meant to be under the penalty of death. The example is cited from those dark days of Bhai Taru Singh, the martyr, who disdainfully spurned all tempting offers of the Mughal persecutor if only he would convert to Islam:


The Nawab tried to tempt him with offers of lands and wealth. When he found Bhai Taru Singh inflexible, he decided to have his scalp scraped from his head. The barbers came with sharp lancets and slowly ripped Bhai Taru Singh’s skull. He rejoiced that the hair of his head was still intact.

The importance of kes (Sikhs’ unshorn hair) has been repeatedly demonstrated to them during their history. The hair has been their guarantee for self-preservation. Even more importantly, the prescription has a meaning for them far transcending the mundane frame of history.23
Sri Gur Sobha by Sainapati records the Tenth Guru’s injunctions as such:

“Friends, do not shave your head; renounce hukka [tobacco] and develop a good habit,
With love-affection in your mind, seek the company of the Inspired.
Realizing this life to be ephemeral, reflect upon this remedy in your mind,
Earn to become the Vahguru’s and the Guru’s Khalsa.”

Similar to the sentiments found within Bani there is a dual emphasis on the internal and external attributes of a Sikh.

In order to give clarity, Sikhs have attempted to come to a formal legal interpretation of the definition of a Sikh before. In the Sikh Rahit Maryada of 1945, a Sikh is outlined as:

1. One Immortal Being
2. Ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak Dev to Guru Gobind Singh
3. The Guru Granth Sahib
4. The utterance and teachings of the Ten Gurus and
5. The Baptism bequeathed by the Tenth Guru and who does not owe allegiance to an other religion, is a Sikh.

Other attempts by a Sikh collective to come up with a formal definition include the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Act of 1971 where “Sikh” means “a person.” The wording of The Delhi Sikh Gurdwaras Acts of 1971 insinuates that the Sahajdhari Sikh will be initiated and become an Amritdhari at some point in the future. This Sahajdhari Sikh is defined as a person:

1. Who professes Sikh religion, believes in one God, follows the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib and the Ten Gurus only;
2. Who performs all ceremonies according to Sikh rites;
3. Who does not smoke, use tobacco, kutha (Halal Meat) in any forms;
4. Who does not take alcoholic in any form drinks;
5. Who is born in a not Sikh family, but is not a Patit.
For the purposes of this Act, if any question arises as to whether any living person is or is not a Sikh, they shall be deemed respectively to be or not to be a Sikh according as they make or refuses to make in the manner prescribed by rules the following declaration: “I solemnly affirm that I am a Keshdhari Sikh, that I believe in and follow the teachings of Sri Guru Granth Sahib and the Ten Gurus only, and that I have no other religion.”

Many interpretations and motions to define a Sikh from the Sikh Panth took place in the late 1800s to mid 2010s. Attempts to further narrowly define a Sikh continue today. As mentioned, today a Sahajdhari Sikh generally refers to those who self-identify as part of the community by accepting Guru Granth Sahib as their guiding light but, is not Keshdhari. In the Sikh Gurdwaras (Amendment) Act 2016 Sahajdhari Sikhs are no longer able to register as electors to vote in the Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee (SGPC) elections - removing the ability of Sahajdhari Sikhs to participate in community based decision making, essentially removing them from central association.

As language changes, not only across time but also across diasporic populations, the interpretations of terms also continue to be molded. In effort to summarize the 2017 Sikh population’s understanding of who is a Sikh, a survey of 938 individuals was conducted.
Survey

An online social media survey was conducted to gain insight into how the 2017 Sikh community itself would define and identify a Sikh. A total of 938 voluntary respondents from 29 different countries participated in the survey. Of the total number of respondents, 879 self-identified as Sikh. For the purpose of this research into the Sikh community, only respondents who identified as a Sikh will be considered. The gender and age group breakdown of those Sikh respondents is as follows:
he main aspect of this survey was to check all that apply question that contained 4 options respondents could choose from in regards to how they define a Sikh. Table 1 shows the sum number of times respondents marked each statement as well as the percent rate each response was chosen.

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<th>Number</th>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>1</td>
<td>A descendent from a Sikh Family</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>40.73%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>An adherent of the Sikh faith</td>
<td>743</td>
<td>84.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>An initiated member of an independent faith, tradition and culture.</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>42.89%</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>An individual who identifies with the legacy of the Ghallugharas (genocidal campaigns since the 18th century).</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>25.14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Results of “check all that apply” question on Who is a Sikh. Frequencies for each available option.

The four options available to respondents cover a 1) biological association, 2) personal association, 3) formal association and 4) externally influenced association or political association. Only 43% of the time, respondents chose to include an initiated member of an independent faith, tradition or culture in their response to Who is a Sikh whereas 85% of responses included an adherent of the Sikh faith. Perhaps this is the result of the background of the respondents themselves but nonetheless this discrepancy shows how self-identifying Sikhs want to be seen.

In order to evaluate how different categorical demographic groups define a Sikh are statistically different from each other or if the differences between the sets arose by chance, a chi-squared test is used. Using a chi-squared test it is found that there is significant association between gender and option number 4 (p-value = 0.006788) as well as significant association between age and option
number 1 (p-value = 0.0002957). For all other combinations of associations between gender and options and age group and options, the chi-squared test showed no significant association. It seems that there is a discrepancy between Sikhs of different gender identities as to how they see a Sikh, particularly whether or not they include an individual who identifies with the legacy of the Ghallugharas. Similarly, there is a discrepancy between Sikhs of different age groups in whether or not they include a descendent from a Sikh family.

It cannot be said from this survey alone what the reasoning for these significant differences between gender or age group are with any certainty. It is possible that certain genders were more targeted by external influences or included in political movements such that those groups would be more inclined to include a political association in their definition. Similarly it is possible that across generations, a personal association has become less emphasized and faith has become solely a biological association. These possibilities do highlight issues in the community as we see them today. Women and other minority gender groups are largely excluded from political movements whether that be due to external groups perception of the community or from exclusion imposed within the community itself. It is commonly discussed how newer generations are disconnected from the faith due to lack of education or exposure for a variety of reasons from language barriers or lack of community organization which may leave them to solely identifying based on family lineage. The survey results mirror the concept of different groups within the Sikh community having varying understandings of how a Sikh should be defined.
Recommendations

It can be argued that the extent to which one chooses to practice with adopting the title of a Sikh is a very personal choice and what it means to be a Sikh as illustrated in Bani, Tavarikh and Rahit has been an unwavering explanation – these two can co-exist simultaneously. Throughout history there has been a progressing unique Sikh identity which Bani illuminates including the lifestyle, internal mindset and external appearance of a Sikh. Umbrella terms that exist today are helpful in order to better understand the range of practices. Various labels have been adopted in order to distinguish groups within the faith but these terms do not “define” who is a Sikh. The holistic understanding of an individual Sikh’s identity must come from an analysis of history and Bani in combination with how said individual defines themselves within the practice of a Sikh.

Rather than give a list of criteria, evaluating a Sikh may come on a circular spectrum which includes criteria outlined in Bani and Rahit or demonstrated throughout history but also includes where the individual places themselves within those criteria. With something as complex as one’s spiritual journey it would be misguided to place a judgement on “progress”. In a sense, a Sikh may be the individual who is working towards demonstrating the aspects Guru Sahib has outlined revolving around the internal mindset, physical/external and behavior/actions whereas a Khalsa may be that individual who has demonstrated aspects of these three areas – even this existing on a spectrum. The western influence and desire for limiting definitions has created a non-holistic interpretation and we must break away from the desire to pursue a black and white interpretation of something that is as unique as the individual.

From the survey results it is seen that in 2017, the Sikh population identifies in a variety of understandings and interpret how a Sikh should be defined in unique ways dependent on their own background and experience. These results are contrary to current legislation, such as The Sikh Gurdwaras (Amendment) Bill of 2016 which would exclude those who fall under responses
including an adherent of the Sikh faith. If a large number of the Sikh population show association to who is a Sikh in a certain way, perhaps the representation and community efforts should reflect and consider these groups.

With what has been discussed from the Gurmat perspective using Bani, Tavarikh and Rahit, the following recommendations are offered to grow the understanding amongst the Sikh community:

**At a personal level:**

- Recognize each Sikh’s journey is a unique complex process that cannot be under external judgement.
- Acknowledge all self-identifying Sikhs regardless of how they currently demonstrate their Sikhi.

**At an institutional level:**

- Serve all Sikhs in an inclusive manner on all fronts: gender, age, and diverse-identities.
- Develop Sikh representatives who are best suited for the criteria of prescribed roles, fostering everyone’s interest yet maintaining a sense of responsibility and integrity that is associated with given roles.

*A Sikh’s journey is to become the Sikh of the Guru and that is demonstrated with Gurmat approach of mindset, behavior, and appearance.*
References

We present the direct references from the Guru Granth Sahib and in original Gurmukhi as follows:


9. Iradat Khan, *Tawarakh-i-Iradat Khan* (1714), M.S., PUP, p.68


11. Ibid., p.79.


13. Iradat Khan, *Tawarakh-i-Iradat Khan* (1714), M.S., PUP, p.68


15. Department of Defence, Govt. of India,”Baat Cheet”, Serial No. 153 (July 1984)


27. Ibid., p. 6.
28. Ibid., p. 4.
SIKHRI

Sikh Research Institute

PO Box 6317
Bridgewater, NJ 08807 – 9999
908-947-0337
info@SikhRI.org
www.SikhRI.org