

Teasing of Sikhs in Singapore

Report by Task Force to Sikh Advisory Board

Background

1. The teasing against Sikhs about their distinctive appearance has been prevalent in Singapore for quite some time now. It now appears that the teasing has increased in intensity in recent times, with the Sikhs being subject to teasing in schools, work places, public places and even in the National Service.
2. A task force (refer to Annex A) under the auspices of the Sikh Advisory Board, was formed to ascertain the extent of the problem and propose possible recommendations, if need be, to address the issues.
3. The Task Force decided, in its first meeting, that to assess the severity of the issue and to trace its causes and effects, it was necessary to gather feedback from the Sikh community in Singapore. It felt that such an approach would help determine if the problem was indeed real and serious or only perceived. If it was the former, the Task Force wanted to understand the reasons for the occurrence of such incidents and the reaction of members of the community. The Task Force also deemed it necessary to evaluate if these incidents contributed to other social problems among Singapore Sikhs, such as apathy, trimming of hair and delinquency, among others.

Survey Approach

4. It was decided that a comprehensive survey would be the most effective and encompassing means of gathering feedback. The survey was to obtain a critical sample size through an online version, hard-copy surveys conducted via the Punjabi language centers and booths set-up at gurdwaras, besides tapping into respective networks.
5. The Task Force carried out a comprehensive survey of 534 Sikh respondents comprising a diverse group, including those from different backgrounds, professions, ages and gender.
6. Please find attached a copy of the survey at Annex B.

Survey Findings

7. Out of the 534 respondents, 252 (47 percent) indicated that they had experienced being teased before for their appearance by other communities. Out of these, 131 respondents (52 percent) indicated that they face such teasing at least a few times a month.

8. Most of those who faced such teasing reacted by ignoring and walking away (117 respondents or 46 percent) , while an alarmingly significant number of Sikhs indicated that they would react violently (85 respondents or 34 percent). Others reacted by asking the other party to stop the teasing (67 respondents or 27 percent) or by teasing them back (17 respondents or 7 percent).
9. A significant number of Sikhs (165 responses or 65 percent) showed that these taunts affected them personally, and they either felt sad (84 respondents or 33 percent) or angry and irritated (81 respondents or 32 percent). The emotional implications of these incidents are evident as most of these Sikhs felt that they did the right thing and would not react differently (103 respondents or 40 percent) when dealing with such taunts in the future. In fact, more Sikhs indicated that, if faced with such scenarios in the future, they would react more aggressively by either standing up for themselves or fighting back (52 respondents or 21 percent).
10. Most of the respondents stated that they faced such teasing at public places (223 respondents or 88 percent), while a worryingly high number of Sikhs indicate that they experience these incidents at schools (219 respondents or 87 percent). A smaller number of Sikhs stated that they even faced these taunts during their national service (42 respondents or 17 percent) and at work (26 respondents or 10 percent) and there were examples of Sikhs being asked to cut their hair as they did not keep unshorn hair. There was some evidence to support that such taunts are more exclusive to Singapore as only a small proportion indicated that they had come across such incidents overseas (26 respondents or 10 percent).
11. While most respondents feel that the underlying reason behind such teasing is the lack of respect (283 respondents or 53 percent) or ignorance (268 respondents or 50 percent), a significant number of Sikhs feel that it could be due to there being no fear of any repercussions (170 respondents or 32 percent) or because of easy targeting (165 respondents or 31 percent). A majority of respondents also feel that officers in schools and uniformed organizations do not adequately understand Sikhism and our values and tenets (303 respondents or 57 percent). They opined that the knowledge levels were poor
12. Most respondents feel that if they faced a problem such as the teasing issue, they are more likely to share it with their Sikh friends (50 percent). However, a significant number also indicate that they would prefer to share this with their friends from another community (43 percent), parents (41 percent) and siblings (37 percent). Only a very small segment indicated that they would be comfortable sharing this problem with the institutions in the Sikh community (8 percent). This could perhaps be attributed to the lack of an appropriate platform to address these issues within the community. In fact, 67 percent of respondents indicated that if there was a Sikh organization that was prepared to listen to their concerns in this regard, they would be ready to approach it. The rest of the respondent, however, stated that they would not approach such an organization, even if existed, due mainly to the following reasons:

- Discomfort in approaching fellow Sikhs about problems;
 - Lack of trust and confidence in the Sikh institutions, processes and leadership;
 - The government, and not the Sikh institutions, is more appropriate; and
 - Do not feel the problem can be solved adequately by the Sikh organisations
13. The Task Force also took this opportunity to obtain other key and relevant information from the survey that may not be directly related to the context of teasing, but provided a glimpse of key trends within the community that could likely be contributing factors for the problem of teasing and other social problems among Sikhs in Singapore.

Punjabi Language Aptitude

14. On linguistic aptitude, 61 percent of respondents indicated that they understood Punjabi fluently while 38 percent said they only understood a basic level of the language. Half or 50 percent of the respondents indicated that they spoke Punjabi fluently while 47 percent described their spoken Punjabi as basic. Only 39 percent stated that they were fluent in written Punjabi while the majority, 46 percent, stated that they only had basic written knowledge of the language. 54 percent of the respondents indicated that they only occasionally spoke Punjabi at home while only 29 percent indicated that they spoke the language at home (17 percent of the respondents) stated that their preferred mode of communication at home was in the English language.

Importance of Sikh Religion

15. 49 percent of the respondents indicated that they visited the Gurdwara only occasionally while 33 percent said that they did this at least once a week.
16. A worrying 43 percent of respondents felt that keeping unshorn/uncut hair is unimportant while 34 percent of respondents said they understood the importance of only some of the 5 kakars. 12 percent said that they did not understand the importance of any of the 5 kakars.

Circle of Friends

17. 41 percent of respondents indicated that more than half of their circles of friends are non-Sikhs, while 20 percent stated that all, or almost all, their friends were non-Sikhs. However, 35 percent of respondents indicated that their non-Sikh

friends and them hardly visited each other's homes, while 32 percent indicated that they did so only on festivals and occasions.

Data Analysis

18. An examination of the data provides the following observations and assessments:

- a) Prevalence of the Problem - At least almost half of the respondents stating that they have experienced it before with more than half of these indicating that they faced these incidents at least a few times a week if not more. This reflects the point that this problem is a serious one.
- b) Potential for Volatility - The problem could potentially be volatile as a significant number of respondents indicated that they have chose to take the matter in their own hands when being subject to these taunts and have reacted violently. Others have confronted the other parties to ask them to stop teasing or even tease them back. In fact, more Sikh respondents felt that they should adopt this approach if put in such situations again in the future. The volatility of the situation is further fueled by the finding that most respondents are either angered or saddened by such incidents.
- c) Understanding of Sikhism - There appears to be a relatively low regard in religious fundamentals based on the survey findings. Almost half felt that keeping their hair is unimportant and a similar proportion does not adequately understand the importance of the five kakars and only visit the Gurdwara only occasionally. This may also be linked with the findings that a relatively high percentage of the respondents do not understand the Punjabi language nor possess a fluent knowledge of it. The decline could be due to the external social influences on the Sikhs as a very high number of respondents also indicated that, at least half, of not all, of the circle of friends are non-Sikhs.
- d) Greater Outreach and Education - In view of the aforementioned, there is a need for greater outreach and public education. This is in view of the fact that most of the respondents faced teasing in public places and schools. More than half of them felt that this teasing happens due to a lack of respect and ignorance while a similar percentage felt that officers in schools and uniform organizations do not understand Sikhism and our values and tenets. Even though a high percentage of the respondents indicate having non-Sikhs as a major element of their network of friends, this may not be at deep or significant, as evident by the fact remarkably high number state that they do not visit each others' homes or only do so on occasions, and vice-versa.
- e) Necessity for Appropriate Platform - There is an urgent need for a platform to address not only such concerns but other related and relevant issues facing the Sikh community. The survey indicated that the youth Sikhs want some guidance and/or advice from the elders and/or professionals.

Proposed Recommendations

19. The Task Force recommends that the approach to address this issue should be at two broad areas – internal and external. The problem of teasing is as much an issue of addressing fundamental gaps within the community as in dealing with the external environment.

Internal Responses

20. Greater Resources - There needs to be a channel more resources and provide more platforms and opportunities for the community to learn and better understand Sikhism and its fundamentals. A lack of these, as is the case at present, results in a failure to appreciate and be proud of our religious and social identity. This hampers our ability to project a collective and accurate representation to others around us. Efforts should be made to reach out to members of the community, particularly the younger generation, through the use of more innovative strategies to ensure that learning the religion is simple, fun and appealing. Efforts should also be made at Gurdwaras and other Sikh organizations to have more interest-based and hands-on activities so as to provide the impetus for social networks to develop. There should also be efforts to enhance the confidence among members of the community to carry themselves as Sikhs for example through highlighting more Sikh role-models.
21. Dedicated Organizations - There also needs to be a dedicated platform to deal with the issue of teasing among other pertinent social issues facing the Sikhs. Among its functions, this organization should educate the community on dealing with and responding to such circumstances so as to mitigate the risk of any potentially volatile incident.. It is imperative that this organization must win the confidence and the trust of the Sikhs at large and be seen as the key organization in assisting the Sikhs to address the issue of teasing and other related issues.

External Efforts

22. Greater Outreach Efforts - There needs to be a concerted effort to enhance the outreach efforts to ensure that there is a greater, regular and proper projection of the Sikh community. This should be done at two levels. Firstly, there needs to a high-level engagement of the middle and senior level management of schools and uniform organizations so that they are aware of the religious needs of the Sikhs. The targeted outreach should also be extended to the youth, particularly among students, who may be ignorant or have less religious appreciation and tolerance. On the other level, there needs to be general education of the community and this could be achieved by carefully articulated and implemented public communication programs.

Conclusion

24. The Task Force spent a considerable amount of time and energy in its efforts to

examine and assess an issue that has fast becoming a challenge for the Sikh community. Teasing is perhaps just a tip of the iceberg: there are likely to be other social issues in the Sikh community vis-à-vis the larger society. It is therefore, necessary for the Sikh community to devise a relevant platforms and initiatives to address these issues. The Task Force has proposed several important platforms and initiatives in this regard for the consideration of the Sikh community.

Prepared By : Task Force
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