

## Understanding Indian Religious Practice in Malaysia

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**ABSTRACT** Religion is a binding factor for People of Indian Origin (PIO) residing in Malaysia and may well be so for Indians in other parts of the world. There is a ferociously upheld perception within the Malaysian Indian community that switching religions is tantamount to discarding one's identity, the ultimate betrayal of the ancestral lineage. One ceases to be Indian once one embraces Islam. One ceases to be Punjabi once one practices Buddhism or Christianity. Switching religions is taboo amongst the PIO and is a cause for expulsion from the basic family unit and ultimately, the cultural group altogether. Generation after generation of PIOs guard the religions they were born into., to maintain first and foremost, as they believe, the religion itself, second, family ties; third, the gene pool of a particular Indian sub-group and fourth, the larger identity which is linked to survival as a cultural group in a predominantly Muslim country. This inherent fear so ingrained in Indian families is explored in this paper through the analysis of perceptions and personal histories of selected PIO's born and bred in Muslim dominated Malaysia. A persistent trend is observed of PIOs, stifled by the Indian community's iron-like grip on its members, whereby they tend to shed their Indian identity once the birth religion is abandoned. Reasons for such changes in cultural behaviour and its impacts on the individual as well as the Malaysian Indian community are a core focus. This paper is about identity maintenance among Punjab Sikhs living in Malaysia.

### INTRODUCTION

Religion is a binding factor for Indians and switching religions is viewed as the ultimate betrayal of culture or religion. In Malaysia, Indians practice Hinduism, Sikhism, Christianity, Islam and other minority religions. The focus of this paper is on the Maintenance of identity among Punjabi Sikhs living in Malaysia. These sensitivities so ingrained in Indian families, with particular emphasis on the Punjabi Sikhs will be explored in this paper by tracing the history of religious culture in India as well as in Malaysia since there is a general concern among older Indians that the younger generation, unschooled in Hindu teachings, will lose touch with its cultural heritage (Raymond 1988). It is also widely known that the Sikh separatist movement in India has contributed to a rising religious consciousness among many Sikh youths in Malaysia today (Raymond 1988). Raymond further argues that the growing tension between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia is not an isolated religious factor, but is linked to the broader problem of race relations at the national level.

Religious sensitivities amongst People of Indian Origin (PIO) in Malaysia has its roots in the mother country, India. The expansion of the Mughal Empire (1556-1707) in North India along with almost two centuries (1757-1947) of British rule brought about major changes in religious

institutions in India. Imposition of Islam by the Mughal emperors on Hindus and Sikhs between the 16-18<sup>th</sup> century and the advent of Christian missionary activities in the early nineteenth century planted the seed of fear of religious conversion in the mindstream of the predominantly Hindu population of India. Heightened consciousness of the threat to Hinduism and minority faiths such as Jainism and Sikhism prompted reactions from the Hindus to safeguard their religion from forced conversions. The Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayananda in 1875 attempted to 'purge Hinduism of more recent accretions that had no basis in the scriptures [Vedas].'<sup>1</sup> Other responses to the threat of religious conversion amongst Hindus were the Ramakrishna Order of renunciates established by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). A succession of other organizations aimed at protecting Hinduism followed, namely, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS—National Volunteer Organisation), founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar. The RSS was a more militant response to threats to Hinduism than the preceding organizations. Another activist organization is the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP—World Hindu Council), founded in 1964, an organization which was to play a leading role in the extensive agitation for the demolition of a mosque in Ayodhya, leading to the destruction of the structure during a huge demonstration in 1992.

The rise of Hindu religious sentiments sparked fundamentalist ideologies amongst the religious minorities of India, especially the Sikhs and Muslims. Religious chauvinism amongst these three groups heightened at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reaching its peak during the partition of India in 1947. Since then, occasional bouts of communal violence in urban areas manifest till this day. Muslim-Hindu tensions in the early 1990s and the widespread attacks against -Sikhs after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 has left a gaping wound in the hearts and minds on the Indian populace. The widely publicized mass conversion of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his followers to Buddhism in 1956 also adds to the religious trajectory in India and its influence in uniting the people of India, albeit for reasons of securing better human rights and equality for the Dalits of Maharashtra. Differences in religion continue to fester in the present day in the population of India today as well as in the descendants of migrants from India. Furlow (1997, 197) suggests that Malaysia was a country whose population was comprised of Hindus. With the arrival of Islamic traders and travellers, many of whom set up religious schools and married into Hindu families. Over time nearly all Malays converted to Muslim. However within present day Malaysia where Islamic rule and law govern and where being Muslim is considered as being Malay, non-Malays (Chinese and Indians) are excluded from policies and opportunities such as access to land which raises a dissenting debate as to whether Malaysia is indeed 'a melting pot of religions'. This has resulted in religious tensions as for example the "legal issue of condemning land for new uses, which in any society would be filled with conflict, takes on a religious dimension in this context" (Hunt 2009: 590).

There is strong imprint in the mindstream of PIO's in Malaysia that one's religion is in constant danger. This perception is shaped by the history of religious feuds in India as well as contemporary concerns of growing missionary activity in Malaysia. This ingrained fear receives periodic reinforcement from the mass media on missionary activities by Christians and Muslims and government sanctioned conflict (sometimes violent) towards PIO's, especially Hindus and Sikhs. More recently there have been problems around the building of shrines by Hindu and other non-Malay groups, this increased action by government against various Chinese and Indian shrines

and store-front churches in Klang and Petaling Jaya, two major urban centers with large non-Muslim populations. Christian groups are also under attack for use of language which Islamic Malays find offensive in the Bible such as the word 'Allah'. "...conflicts over land and language have intensified non-Muslims' sense of religious persecution and increased their awareness that they should stand together to protect their rights" (Raymond 1988: 411).

### RELIGION AS SEEN THROUGH A MALAYSIAN LENS

Although Malaysia prides itself as a multi-racial country, of native and migrant communities professing various faiths living in harmony with one another anecdotal evidence demonstrates otherwise. Malaysia is considered and portrays itself as being "a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and religiously plural state in Southeast Asia" (Stark 2006: 243). Although there is religious stability in Malaysia, religious freedom, as far as minority religions are concerned is not guaranteed, although enshrined in Article 11 of the Constitution of Malaysia. Islam is the official religion of Malaysia although the government is cautious about labeling Malaysia an 'Islamic' country. The Government actively promotes the spread of Islam in the country and its friendship with other Muslim countries. The Malays, the majority people of the country are required to be Muslim according to the Constitution of Malaysia. Although people of Chinese or Indian origin may not necessarily be Muslim they are required to become so if they marry a Muslim. Indian Malays constitute a minority within the Islam Malay communities, and still find it difficult to be incorporated into the faith (Stark 2006). Although conflicts in the country are generally based on religious denominations (the May 13<sup>th</sup> racial riots in 1969) religion is fast becoming a bone of contention which could further cause disunity amongst the people of Malaysia. The relationship between ethnicity and religion lies in the notion that Malays believe that Islam is the religion of true Malay people. 'Malay' is an exclusive, ethnic-based term which is contrary to the philosophical spirit and universal and non-ethnic foundation of Islam, hence the Islam-Malay ethnicity dialectic. Individuals may employ their ethnic or religious identities in their efforts to respond, pragmatically and rationally, to the environment. It is through ethnic

and religious identities which people pursue their interests relating to economic and political advantage in the context of modernity (Frith 2000).

“Article 160 of the Malaysian Constitution defines “Malay” as “a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom” and was either born or resided in Malaysia or Singapore before or on Merdeka Day (Malaysia’s Independence Day) (or the issue of such a person). Of the approximately 27million Malaysians, 53 percent are ethnically Malays, 26 percent are Chinese, 8 percent are Indian, 12 percent are non-Malay (*bumiputras*), and other ethnicities comprise the final 1 percent. In terms of religious affiliation, 60.4 percent are Muslim, 19.2 percent are Buddhist, 9.1 percent are Christian, 6.3 percent are Hindu, 2.6 percent practice traditional Chinese religion, and 2.4 percent either practice another religion or no religion” (Frith 2000: 243)<sup>2</sup>.

#### **VIEWS ON RELIGION BY PEOPLE OF INDIAN ORIGIN IN MALAYSIA**

After 52 years of independence from British Rule, People of Indian Origin in Malaysia feel shortchanged about their status as equal citizens of Malaysia. The dissatisfaction with the social and economic conditions of the PIO sparked a mass demonstration on 25 November 2007, headed by the Hindu Rights Action Force or commonly known as HINDRAF. According to the 2009 HINDRAF report:

“While overseas Indians continue to prosper and grow everywhere else in the world, because they are able to avail themselves of the opportunities around them, Indians in Malaysia who have lived in Malaysia for up to five generations in many cases, find ourselves hemmed in and blocked by a racist and religious extremist Malaysian Government. This Government has robbed us of our fundamental rights and continues to deny us equal opportunities in every facet of our lives. Complete neglect of the conditions of the vast majority of the Indian Malaysians both by the Malaysian Government and the elite of the Indian Malaysian community has resulted in large scale dispossession and marginalization of the vast majority of the Indians in Malaysia”<sup>3</sup> (Ponnusamy 2010: 8).

About seventy percent of Malaysian Indians (Musa 2007) are classified as hardcore poor, excluded from economic and social development.

Apart from the struggle for economic survival, Malaysian Indians also struggle to maintain their culture and religion. There are a growing number of incidents such as demolition of Hindu temples and Hindu burial grounds. Tamil schools, a right which is enshrined in the constitution is denied state land, forcing schools to operate from shop houses in certain areas. The HINDRAF compiled 15 categories of Minorities and Human Rights violations (2009) against PIO’s in Malaysia by the ruling government which are: Education, Land issues for Public Purposes, Basic Citizen Rights of Birth Certificates and National Identity, Documents and Citizenship, Poverty, Housing, Suicides, Involvement in Crime and extra-judicial killings of Indian suspected criminals, Federal Government Poverty Eradication and Social Development Programs and Schemes, Licenses and Permits for Trades and Regulated occupations, Government Contracts and Entrepreneur Development Programs, Law Justice and the Federal Constitution, Government Fund allocations in the Federal Government Budget, State Sponsorship of Racism, Forced Religious conversion and Opposition Political Parties.<sup>4</sup>

These violations were reported to the Global Organisation for People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) and Pravasi Divas International Conference in January 2010 with the expectation that the Conference will, in recognition of the serious nature of the violation of the rights of people of Indian origin living in Malaysia.

#### **FEAR OF RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION BY (MALAYSIAN) PEOPLE OF INDIAN ORIGIN**

The growing Islamic conservatism in Malaysia has heightened the sense of insecurity among minority religions in the country. Several cases specifically related to religious intolerance have occurred in the last five years in Malaysia. Several Hindu temples were demolished by city hall authorities in the country beginning with the centuries old Malaimel Sri Selva Kaliyamman Temple in Kuala Lumpur on 21 April 2006, which was reduced to rubble on orders by the Kuala Lumpur City Hall because of a violation of construction laws<sup>5</sup>

. On 11 May 2006, part of a 90-year-old suburban Hindu temple was forcefully demolished by armed city hall officers in Kuala Lumpur on grounds that the temple was built illegally. Despite appeals by the Malaysian Indian Congress

President, Samy Vellu (who was also Works Minister in the Malaysian Cabinet then) to various state chief ministers on the rising incidence of temple demolitions, the Malaysian authorities demolished the 100-year-old Maha Mariamman Temple in Padang Jawa on 30 October 2007. One non-government religious organization made the following appeal to the Malaysian Government on behalf of the Hindus: "*These state atrocities are committed against the most underprivileged and powerless sector of the Hindu society in Malaysia. We appeal that this Hindu temple and all other Hindu temples in Malaysia are not indiscriminately and unlawfully demolished*"<sup>6</sup>.

In what is viewed by many Hindu advocacy groups and the general non-Muslim population as 'systemic temple cleansing', the temple demolitions only serve to water the seeds of fear of religious intolerance amongst adherents of minority religions in the country, especially PIO's who are the main targets of religious persecution.

Temple demolitions are only a precursor to other forms of religious persecutions amongst PIO's in Malaysia. The issue of forced religious conversion is also high on the list of religious concerns, an eerie 'evidence of creeping Islamization of Malaysia'.<sup>7</sup> There are several cases of non-Muslim Malaysian Indians finding themselves or their children forcibly converted to Islam are unable to reverse the process. There is a tendency for the Islamic perspective to dominate regardless of the merits of the case.<sup>8</sup> For example, in February 2008, a Malaysian teenager of Indian origin was converted to Islam (without his parents' knowledge) by school friends who took him to the religious department where he recited the *syahada* (proclamation of faith) and received a conversion certificate. He was subsequently given a Malaysian identity card (MyKad) which stated "Islam" as his religion. The teenager, now 19, still practices Hinduism and wants to leave Islam but cannot revert to the religion of choice as he faces a tough legal battle in the Syariah Courts which are not in favour of Islam renunciates.

Another case of forced conversion is that of S. Banggarma, a Hindu mother of two who claims that she was unwittingly converted to Islam by state religious authorities when she was seven years old while at a welfare home. Banggarma, a practicing Hindu, only discovered her religious status when seeking to register her marriage in 2000. Since she is legally a Muslim, she is unable

to register her marriage to a Hindu, although her marriage was conducted according to Hindu rites. Moreover, her legal status as a Muslim further complicates matters as she is unable to register her husband's name as the father in her children's birth certificates.<sup>9</sup>

Non-Muslims, married to non-Muslim partners who later converted to Islam also face child custody battles for the same reason. Indira Gandhi, a Hindu woman had her baby girl snatched away from her by her husband who because of marital problems, purposely converted to Islam in order to spite her. Despite a High Court Order in favour of the mother, the Islamic authorities and police refused to hand the baby girl over to her mother. A similar case of marital malice happened to T. Tharmakanoo whose two children were converted to Islam by his estranged wife.<sup>10</sup> Such conversions without the legal consent of both parents are rife in Malaysia among non-Muslims but remain unresolved due to apparent biasness of the Islamic authorities who turn a deaf ear to civil court decisions. When cases are heard in Islamic Syariah Courts, the verdicts are almost always in favour of Islam. Those who want to challenge the validity of conversions become embroiled in the jurisdictional tussle between civil and Syariah courts. Moreover, non-Muslims have difficulties in finding *syariah* lawyers to represent them. According to lawyer A. Sivanesan, "*Civil lawyers can't represent such clients in the syariah court where only Syariah-compliant lawyers may appear. There are few Syariah lawyers who are sympathetic as most feel they would be going against Islam if they were to take up conversion cases*".<sup>11</sup>

There has been a shift in government policy that has affected the MyKad registration of illegitimate children after a landmark Federal Court (The Lina Joy case) decision involving apostasy in May 2007. In the past, children born out of wedlock to a non-Muslim mother and a Muslim father were issued identity cards that did not state their religion as Islam, enabling them to change their Muslim names and their status as Muslims in their identity cards. However, according to lawyer K. Shanmuga, "*But now the government is insisting that the children have to go to the Syariah court if they want to remove their classification as Muslim*".<sup>12</sup>

There are many such cases of conversion to Islam, either voluntary or involuntary amongst Malaysian Indian youth which has caused

dissension among the Indian Community.. A case involving a Hindu who had converted to Islam without the family's knowledge demonstrates some insight into the religious sensitivities amongst Muslims and non-Muslims. The family of Moorthy, who died in December 2005, became embroiled in a legal battle with the Islamic Affairs Council over burial rights. Since he died as a Muslim, the Syariah High Court ruled that he should be buried according to Islamic rites. This is an excerpt from a journal article on the issue:

"The tussle began when Moorthy's family filed an application at the High Court to declare him a Hindu. After eight days of impasse over his religious status, the High Court ruled that he was a Muslim. The controversy did not end with the burial, but instead continued with an inter-faith group, the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism urging the government to amend Article 121(1) (A) of the Constitution which states that all matters pertaining to Islam should be handled by the Syariah Court. The matters became more controversial when nine non-Malay Cabinet ministers sent a memorandum to the Prime Minister calling for a review of laws affecting the rights of non-Malays. The case became controversial because of two factors: a) the family could not accept the court ruling that Moorthy had converted as he apparently lived as a Hindu throughout his life (in fact, a local television station had interviewed him during a Diwali celebration), and b) the family felt betrayed by the High Court ruling that it could not review the decision of the Syariah Court and it has no power to intervene. The Syariah Court had earlier ruled that Moorthy was a Muslim."<sup>13</sup> (Halimahton et al. 2006:188-189)

Such cases are not limited to Hindus only. A similar case involving a Malaysian Punjabi Sikh occurred in 2009 which reignited fresh controversy over Islamic conversion cases. On 4 June 2009, the Syariah High Court of Shah Alam ruled that Mohan Singh was a Muslim at the time of his death and should be buried according to Muslim rites. However, Mohan's family claimed that he had neither converted nor practised Islam. Moreover, the deceased had practised Sikhism and had performed the last rites for his late mother three years ago. The Sungai Buloh Hospital refused to release the body to the family who wanted to cremate Mohan according to Sikh rites. Mohan's remains were instead taken to the family home for last viewing before it was sent to a local

mosque for dressing and burial in a Muslim cemetery.<sup>14</sup>

Although such cases of forced religious intolerance is not confined to the Indian Hindu population, numerous cases involving Malaysian Indians is enough to create a high level of uneasiness and lasting impressions which continue to mould the Indian psyche on inter-racial and inter-religious affairs. The fear arising from accumulated race-religion-related events of the recent and distant past (previous generations from India) could turn into festering wounds which the Indians fear will leave a deep dent in their culture and religion. Therefore, to protect their culture and religion from external forces which are constantly impinging on the sovereignty of their respective religions, Malaysian Indians have become more introverted and to some extent, paranoid about race-religious relations, especially amongst the younger generation.

#### SIKHISM—AN ETHNORELIGIOUS INSTITUTION

To understand the Sikh attitude towards religious conversion and the reasons behind conversion from Sikhism to other faiths, it is necessary to first explore the basic tenets of Sikhism and some of its core qualities. Sikhism, the 5th largest religion in the world was founded by Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539) in Punjab in the 16th century.<sup>15</sup> There are 23 million Sikhs worldwide, with 19 million living in India. The largest Sikh populations outside India are found in the United Kingdom, Canada, United States with significant minority in Malaysia and Singapore.<sup>16</sup> Sikhism emerged in a conflict-ridden environment between Hindus and Muslims as a response to religious intolerance, caste system, mistreatment of women and other forms of injustice inflicted over the people of Punjab at that time by the rulers and Brahmins. Guru Nanak "*sought to establish harmony between diverse traditions and to make people aware that it was not traditions but "Truth" which should be followed in mind, action and speech. He was a pioneer sage, who revered the fundamentals of all great religions, established a middle path, and rejected the non-essentials, embracing the path of love in a practical way*"<sup>17</sup>(Duggal 1993a: 16).

Contrary to common misperception about the status of Sikhism as a fusion between Islam and Hinduism, Sikhs regards their faith as an

authentic new divine revelation.<sup>18</sup> However, Sikhism does contain the philosophical underpinnings of Sufi Aslam, Bhakti monism, Vedic metaphysical, guru devotion and bhajans.

The Sikh Code of Conduct and Conventions (Rehat Maryada) defines a Sikh as “any human being who faithfully believes in One Immortal Being; ten Gurus, from Guru Nanak Dev to Sri Guru Gobind Singh; the Sri Guru Granth Sahib; the utterances and teachings of the ten Gurus and the baptism [Amrit] bequeathed by the tenth Guru; and who does not owe allegiance to any other religion”.<sup>19</sup> The most common symbol of all Sikhs is uncut hair (including beards for men) and turbans and the Five emblems or the 5Ks (*kakkar*):

“Firstly, to wear their hair and beards unshorn (*kesh*). Hair is not only regarded as a symbol of saintliness or holiness, but also as a proof of living in harmony with the Will of God. Secondly, *kangha* or the comb is a necessary adjunct for the hair. It should be on hand to keep the hair neat and tidy. It is therefore, fixed in their hair knot. Thirdly, to wear a steel bracelet (*kara*) on their right wrist as a symbol of poverty and pledge to their Gurus. Next, to wear *kachha* or *kachhahra*, the knee-length breeches meant to cover the private parts of the body. It is a symbol of moral restraint and conjugal fidelity. It keeps the wearer covered all the time and makes them move with briskness and agility. Lastly, to always carry the *kirpan* or sword to defend and protect the dignity or honor of others”<sup>20</sup> (Mansukhani 1997: 316-319).

Apart from the 5Ks, Sikhs are forbidden from using tobacco, or consuming alcoholic drinks or other intoxicants, forbidden from eating the flesh of animals slaughtered by several blows as is done by the Muslims and forbidden from committing adultery.

Sikhs are expected to pray regularly and meditate (*simran*) by repeating God’s name (*nam japna*), earn an honest living (*kirt karni*) and share their earnings (*wand shakna*) with those who are less fortunate.<sup>21</sup> Sikhism rejects the Hindu notion of the four stages of life, which includes renunciation of the householder life or asceticism and instead advocates the virtue of the householder (*grahst*) ideal, balancing work, worship and charity.<sup>22</sup> The community is emphasized, and the Sikh temple (*gurdwara*) is the center of Sikh communal life. The last Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh handed over the stewardship of Sikhdom to the ‘living guru’, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, the Sikh holy scripture which serves as

a ‘symbolic representation of the Gurus’, considered as only one Personality of Guru Nanak, the light of whose soul passed on to each of his successors. Till today, the Word of the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji* is the eternal Guru of the Sikhs.

Sikhism is an ethnoreligious religion, i.e. its religion is specific to a particular ethnic/cultural group. Jats are much less restricted and will not use a turban and cut their hair. *Khatri*s and *Aroras* who are more strict, *Khalsa* Sikhs whom undergo the *pahul* ceremony and are referred to as the *amrit-dhari*, the *Kes-dhari* Sikhs (who do not cut their hair at all), and *ramgharias* Sikhs (McLeod 2008). According to Parry (2010) Malaysian Sikhs have become the latest group to be dragged into a violent controversy about the use of the word Allah by non-muslims, with the stoning of Sikh temples following a series of arson attacks on Christian churches.

The word has been used for centuries in Malaysia, as well as by Christians in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Indonesia, as the equivalent of the English word God. But many Malaysian Muslims, who make up 60 per cent of the population, say that Allah should be reserved exclusively for Muslims, and that use of it in a Biblical context encourages conversion to Christianity, a crime under the country’s sharia laws.

Sikhism’s art and culture is synonymous with that of the Punjab region. Punjabi culture in turn is a synthesis of Greek, Mughal and Persian cultures due to the confluence of these invading cultures. A striking example of its adaptation to foreign cultures is the architecture of the *Gurdwara*, which displays Islamic, Sufi and Hindu influences. Characteristics of Sikh architecture are gilded fluted domes, cupolas, kiosks and many others. Sikh practices seemingly overlap or, dominate Punjabi practices in many ways. For example, *bhangra* and *gidha*, two forms of indigenous Punjabi folk dancing have been appropriated, adapted and pioneered by Punjabi Sikhs such that *bhangra* is now synonymous with Sikh culture even though “*Bhangra* is not a Sikh institution but a Punjabi one.”<sup>23</sup> Although most Sikhs tend to be Punjabi, Punjab itself is a combination of people of different religious backgrounds, notably Hindu and Muslim (especially true in pre-partition days).

#### SIKHISM’S STRUGGLE FOR SELF-PRESERVATION

Since the 11th century, North India was

subject to invasions from the Afghans and Turks. Punjab, the gateway into India since ancient times, bore the brunt of the Islamic onslaught. The new rulers not only conquered the land, but also conquered the faith of the people, forcibly converting them to Islam. Prominent Sikh Gurus and family members were martyred by Mughals for protecting the religious freedom of minority religious communities, most of whom were Hindus. As a response to forced religious conversion by the Mughal rulers (1556-1707), the Sikhs militized under their last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji.

The resentment towards Islam is not only traceable to the time of the Mughal emperors, but also in the recent past, during the partition of India in 1947. The threat to the Sikh identity became more acute during the partition. This period saw a massive transmigration of Punjabi Sikhs and Hindus from West Punjab and similar migration of Punjabi Muslims from East Punjab.<sup>24</sup> The Sikh homeland, Punjab and the Sikhs suffered great losses. Sikh shrines such as Nankana Sahib, Panja Sahib and many more along with the capital city of Lahore was given to Pakistan, over 75% of the most fertile land owned by Sikhs was taken by Pakistan and over 500,000 men, women and children lost their lives during the partition.

The Sikhs felt shortchanged by what they viewed as empty promises by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru who made the following assurances to Sikh leaders in 1931:

“Let God be the witness of the bond that binds me and the Congress to you. Our Sikh friends have no reason to fear that it would betray them. For, the moment it does so, the Congress would not only thereby seal its own doom but that of the country too. Moreover, the Sikhs are brave people. They know how to safeguard their rights, by the exercise of arms, with perfect justification before God and man, if it should ever come to that” (Young India 19 March 1931).

“No Constitution would be acceptable to the Congress which did not satisfy the Sikhs.” (Collected works of M K Gandhi Vol.58. p. 192)

“The brave Sikhs of Panjab are entitled to special consideration. I see nothing wrong in an area and a set up in the North wherein the Sikhs can also experience the glow of freedom. (Jawaharlal Nehru, Congress meeting: Calcutta – July, 1944).”

The Sikh gurdwaras were controlled by the British who appointed Hindu Mahants (priests).<sup>25</sup>

In resistance to total assimilation with Hinduism, new Sikh organisations (Akali Dal) were formed to return autonomy of Sikh holy places to the Sikhs. These Mahants were mostly Sahejdhari Sikhs who had refused to conform to the five outward symbols prescribed by Guru Gobind Singh Ji. The Sahejdhari Mahants, were not only indistinguishable from the Hindus, they had a natural affinity to Hinduism which led them to introduce elements of Hindu rituals and even image worship in the Gurudwaras where the Sahejdhari Sikhs and Keshadharis (Sikhs who conform to the 5Ks. worshipped together. After wresting control of the gurdwaras, the Akali Dal agitationists, threw out the images of Hindu deities, replaced the rituals and ceremonies of the Mahants with those they considered were in accordance with Sikh scriptures and Rehat Maryada (Code of Conduct). The Akali Dal revivalist movement reinforced the wedge between the Keshadharis and the Sahejdharis whose line of demarcation was blurred.

In the 1960s, the Punjabi Sikhs (Keshadharis) agitated for the creation of a separate Punjabi Sikh state, as a follow-up to the promises made to Master Tara Singh by Nehru in return for Sikh political support during the Indian Independence movement.<sup>26</sup> The Sikhs were successful in securing a Sikh majority state of Punjab on 1 November 1966.

Sikhs (Keshadharis) and Hindus continued hostilities in the late 1970s as Sikhs claimed that Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India adopted dictatorial tactics which resulted in the discrimination and marginalisation of the Sikhs. The danger of assimilation into the larger Indian Hindu population was utmost on the minds of Sikh leaders. In response to the perceived discrimination and marginalisation, a new movement aimed at preserving the Sikh identity was subsequently born. Sikh leader Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale agitated for a separate Sikh homeland, Khalistan, mobilising a militant Sikh movement in India and overseas. In 1984, Indira Gandhi ordered Indian troops to storm the Golden Temple in Amritsar in Operation Bluestar to flush out the Sikh militants taking refuge in the temple. The desecration of the Sikhs' holiest shrine, was the straw that broke the camel's back, which ultimately led to Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards. Punjab became a state riddled with communal violence which spread to Delhi.

Thousands of Sikhs died in repercussion violence by Hindus who saw it as a religious issue

Keshadhari Sikhism has still not been able to completely purge itself of its Hindu heritage as is evident from repeated pronouncements in shrill tones that the Sikhs are not Hindus. The anti-Hindu slant by the Keshadharis is of recent origin although they have since the birth of the Khalsa (the baptized Sikhs of Guru Gobind Singh Ji) in 1699, always tried to ensure their status as an independent religious community. Hence, the Keshadharis have until recently considered Hinduism as an enemy faith.

Still reeling from the communal tensions and near assimilation with the Hindus during Indira Gandhi's rule, Sikhism in India is now being confronted with another 'missionary faith', i.e. Christianity. Christian missionaries have for decades considered Sikhs as "off-limits" who hold fierce pride in their identity. Nonetheless, evangelism has begun to take root in Punjab. Punjabi television stations have been deluged by Christian programs although the Christian population is less than 1%. Missionary activities target Sikh youth through free distribution of animated films and children's books on Christianity. Christianity is repackaging itself to suit the Punjabi Sikh context. Jesus is called "*Satguru*", church is referred to as "*Satsang*" and choir singing is called "*Kirtan*". In an attempt to minimize variation between Sikhism and Christianity, choir boys in Punjabi churches wear turbans.

Sikhs have once again begun to resist such provocative evangelism in the latest attempt at self-preservation. Sikhs are beginning to stage demonstrations to protest against aggressive evangelism which the Sikhs feel is aimed at destroying Sikhism. One such protest was against The Open Door Church run by Pastor Harbhajan Singh, a landlord who converted to Christianity from Sikhism, who not only aggressively converted over 2,800 members of the Khojewala village community, but made derogatory remarks against several Sikh gurus including the Sikh holy book, Guru Granth Sahib in February 2004. Police intervened and the conflict was resolved with an unconditional apology by Harbhajan Singh. Each year, about 800,000 people are converted to Christianity in India. Fearing continued aggressive evangelism in Punjab, the Sikhs in India continue their struggle to preserve their faith by holding an even tighter grip on its members.<sup>27</sup>

## SIKHISM'S RESISTANCE TO CONVERSION

The process of migration of the Sikhs in Malaysia began in 1800s and again from 1865 until Malaysia enforced tight immigration laws after Independence in 1957. The majority of Sikhs in Malaysia still have close ties with family members in Punjab. Many of them continue to forge new family ties through marriage with Punjabi Sikhs from India to preserve the Sikh identity. Therefore, Sikhs in Malaysia are influenced events in India, especially the Khalistan movement which trickled down to Malaysia. There were incidents of violence between Sikhs and Hindus after the desecration of the Golden Temple in June 1984. A small percentage of Sikhs turned on the Hindus in Malaysia to vent their frustration against the desecration. Close to five months later, small groups of Hindus retorted with repercussion violence upon the death of Indira Gandhi, who was a Hindu. As demonstrated through the Khalistan experience, any event which is deemed as a threat to Sikh identity is followed with great scrutiny by the Sikhs in Malaysia. It is therefore, not surprising that the Sikhs are heavily influenced by happenings in India. The Sikh response to threats from other faiths is not entirely different since the Sikhs not only in Malaysia, but globally, adhere to the Rehat Maryada (The Code of Conduct).

According to the Rehat Maryada, "a Sikh should marry only a Sikh".<sup>28</sup> According to the Rehatnama, a true Sikh (Khalsa) must maintain his tradition:

*"So long as the Khalsa remains distinct, His glory and lustre will grow,*

Once he adopts Brahmanical ways It will not be possible to trust him."

In recent years, Gurdwaras in Malaysia and across the world relaxed the rule, allowing interfaith marriages (between a Sikh and non-Sikh) to be conducted in the Gurdwaras. Seeing this as a gross violation of the Sikh Rehat Maryada, the Sri Akaal Takht Sahib the Supreme seat of authority of the Sikhs, issued a *Hukumnama* (decree) on 16 August 2007 against allowing interfaith marriages to take place in Gurdwaras.<sup>29</sup> *If a Sikh wishes to marry a non-Sikh, (a person who does not believe in the ten Gurus and their teachings, Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji or in the Amrit given by Guru Gobind Singh), the non-Sikh must first become a Sikh, i.e. change his/her name legally and pledge sole*



*allegiance of faith to Sikhism and none other. The strong impositions placed by the Sikh religion for a non-Sikh to convert to Sikhism is a protective mechanism aimed at preserving the Sikh faith. Sikhism is based on preserving the gene pool and cultural/religious identity. The new convert must subsequently use the name "Singh" or "Kaur" with their name. Their offspring should also be baptized (take Amrit) and use the Singh and Kaur as part of their names.*

### UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS CONVERSIONS IN MALAYSIA

It is difficult to arrange the reasons for conversion in hierarchical order since the reasons are often linked to one another. Nonetheless, a primary reason for conversion out of the Sikh faith is the persistent demands from family and religious authorities, i.e. the Granthis (priests) in Gurdwaras to observe the 5Ks, i.e. to be Keshadhari Sikhs.

*Once a Keshadhari cuts his hair, he is no longer called a Sikh and is subsequently boycotted from his religion, society, and family.<sup>30</sup> This prompts the question: should one adopt the culture of Punjab to be able to practice Sikhism? This is a sure way to lose young Sikhs who find solace in other religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Baha'i, and even Islam which are not tied to a particular culture and do not demand strict adherence to overt displays of faith.*

Sikhs born outside of the motherland, Punjab, have begun questioning the appropriateness in the context of the modern world to wear a turban and carry a knife around. Sikhs are sometimes ridiculed for their distinctive appearance.<sup>31</sup> With the rising incidents of violence against Sikhs mistaken for Islamic terrorists, many young

Sikhs are doubtful if this religious imposition is in any way connected to achieving liberation from the cycle of births and deaths. Many Sikhs of today believe that the external display of faith is not as important as internalizing the faith in one's mindstream. After all, according to the the Guru Granth Sahib:

"Of all religions, the best religion is to chant the Name of the Lord and maintain pure conduct.

Of all religious rituals, the most sublime ritual is to erase the filth of the dirty mind in the Company of the Holy. Of all efforts, the best effort is to chant the Name of the Lord in the heart, forever."(Ang 266).

The so-called Sahejdhari Sikhs who have cut their hair and are clean shaven face pressure from the Gurdwara authorities to comply. The emphasis on Sikhs being a separate community distinct from the Hindus is expressed in terms of the 5 distinguishing symbols the Keshadhari. Effectively this suggests that the Sahejdhari Sikhs are not true Sikhs. Young Sikhs argue that the Sikh religion should adapt with changing times or else the religion may become obsolete. Dismayed with the incessant preaching of traditional cultural values with no ability to explain reasons or necessity, the young generation is looking beyond Sikhism to find spiritual solace. Sikhism is in real danger of being annihilated. Sikhs are losing the next generation.<sup>32</sup>

Sikh children, like any other, want to be included as equal members of the community. Instead, many are constantly made to feel isolated from a community that refuses to recognize the reality of the modern world that they live in.

Indoctrination of young Sikhs, especially boys to become Keshadhari Sikhs is not uncommon in Punjabi schools throughout Malaysia. In fact, indoctrination in various forms has been occurring in Punjabi schools in Malaysia since the advent of migration of Sikhs from India. Indoctrination may not be entirely negative. However, some forms of indoctrination sow the seeds of hatred against other religions, as experienced by a young Punjabi Sikh girl in a small town in Malaysia during the height of the Khalistan agitation in 1984. The young lady now recalls:

"My elder brother and I studied at a Punjabi Sunday School at a local temple in my hometown. I loved to study the language and I was particularly good at reading and writing in Gurumukhi (the Punjabi script). However, my stint at the school did not last long. Hardly a year after I was enrolled at the Sunday school, my teachers changed. Instead of the usual Malaysian Punjabi lady who used to teach us every Sunday, the school replaced her with a Punjabi man from India, dressed in white kurta pajama (the traditional Punjabi male attire) and black turban. To my dismay, he did not teach us the language anymore, but started to talk to us about the struggle of the Sikhs in India and badmouthing the Hindus. I lost interest in class. My parents eventually found out what was happening in class and stopped sending me to class for fear of my brother and I being brainwashed with Khalistani ideas".

Other reasons for conversion are generally

interfaith marriages. Usually, Sikh women are at a greater disadvantage with respect to securing acceptance from the community. Sikhs generally frown upon interfaith marriages, especially Islam, as Islam demands conversion to its faith. Many Sikhs who have converted to Islam because of marriage with Muslims have faced the wrath of their families. The self-preservation mechanism is very strong even within the basic family unit. Moreover, as discussed in the preceding section, a Sikh is to marry a Sikh only. Many Sikhs who intermarry have been disowned by their families as they are deemed to have shamed the family. Sikhs are generally more accepting of Chinese Buddhists, Taoists or Westerners but are wary of Muslims and Christians. Sikh families are generally reluctant to accept Tamil Hindus but are more accepting of North Indian Hindus, especially Hindus from Punjab, although very reluctantly. Therefore, Sikhs, especially women who intermarry with non-Sikhs, choose to leave the Sikh tradition to follow their husbands because of severe impositions placed on non-Sikhs to convert to Sikhism.

Sikhism advocates a casteless, egalitarian society which guarantees equal rights to women. At a time when women were regarded inferior to men, Guru Nanak placed woman on a high pedestal: "Why call her inferior, who gives birth to kings?"<sup>33</sup> However, egalitarianism is somewhat missing in the context of Malaysian Sikhism. *Sikhs in general pay only lip service to Guru Nanak's teaching on egalitarianism for example, men and women sit separately in Gurdwaras. The contention is that the Sikh religion is the religion of the householder, yet families are unable to sit together in prayer. Ironically, the Gurus insisted that men and women sit together in the community kitchen (langgar). This disparity is mind-boggling to many Sikh women. The lip service to the so-called gender equality in the present-day Sikhism is further illustrated by preferences for the male child over the female child. When a daughter is born, "congratulatory notes often sound like condolences". Daughters-in-law are still made to feel inferior when they give birth to a female child, especially if it is the first born. Selective abortions on gender basis are practiced in some cases.*

Sikhs in Malaysia also indulge in caste discrimination. The jats (high caste) still prefer to matchmake their children to jats and not to lower caste Sikhs, forgetting the Gurus' teaching on

equality. Guru Gobind Singh Ji made the following declaration about caste discrimination:

"My dear sons, I have not involved you in mere pantomime, as in the case of the donkey. I have freed you wholly and completely from the bondage of caste . . . Do not follow the foolish example of the donkey and return to your old caste allegiance. If, forgetting my words and abandoning the sacred faith, you return to your various castes your fate will be that of the donkey. Your courage will desert you, and you will have lived your lives in vain."

*Other contributing factors to Sikhs losing interest in their birth faith is the corruption of the Gurdwara institution which has become a political platform for Sikhs, closely connected to the general Malaysian politics (Sarjit and Charanjit, 2008: 250).<sup>34</sup>*

*Sikhs who have attended Annual General Meetings (AGM) held in the Malaysian Sikh Gurdwaras or Sikh organizations would bear witness to persistent arguments and misunderstandings condemning their fellow Sikh brothers and sisters which are quite "UnSikhly", as one young Sikh woman observes. There are numerous instances whereby Sikhs would fight tooth and nail and even resort to vote-buying to hold key positions in the Gurdwaras in order to work their way up the political scene. Many younger generation Sikhs in Malaysia are disillusioned with Gurdwara administration as key office bearers seem the least bit interested in promoting community development. Moreover, only a handful of young people are selected to contribute in Gurdwara committees. Some prominent Gurdwara leaders also do not measure up to Sikh ideals, "The purpose of Sikh worship is to praise God and develop the spirituality of the individual and the community, but in real life it is a different story" (Sarjit and Charanjit, 2008: 252).<sup>35</sup> Domination of Gurdwara politics by males leave the women to be confined in the community kitchen to cook and prepare meals.*

## CONCLUSION

The paper has analysed the underlying reasons why the birth religion of a Sikh in particular, and in the larger context, the PIO of Malaysia is guarded so ferociously. This is a natural response to perceived or actual religious persecution which has its roots in the mother country, India. Tracing the history of religious

tensions in India and in Malaysia, the primary reasons for preserving the birth religion are to maintain first and foremost, the religion itself, second, family ties; and third, to safeguard the larger identity which is linked to survival as a cultural group in a predominantly Muslim country.

The need for self-preservation among the PIO's in Malaysia can be historically justified. Forced conversions from the time of the Mughal rule in India and threats from missionary activities in India planted the seeds of fear in the minds of Indians. Indians, both Hindus and Sikhs who migrated to Malaysia carried that fear in their mindstream across the Indian Ocean. Once in an alien and sometimes hostile land, the need for self-preservation is further heightened. They encountered a multitude of religions such as Islam and Christianity and unfamiliar religions such as Taoism, Buddhism and animism practiced by the indigenous peoples of Malaysia. Recent events of religious intolerance by Islamic fundamentalists in Malaysia has only helped to water the seeds of fear of assimilation causing the Indian community to hold a tighter grip on its people which has resulted in religious/cultural discrimination amongst the PIO.

The self-preservation mechanism employed by the PIO, such as by the Punjabi Sikhs is to form a homogeneous group, a totally opposite response to the open tolerance preached by the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Guru Nanak founded Sikhism as a movement to overcome the fragmentation which different religions had brought about. This self-preservation mechanism has been relatively effective in the first few generations of Sikhs in Malaysia. The stifling religious environment which many Sikhs believe is not in tandem with the spirit of free inquiry nor equality has resulted in Sikhs becoming less and less interested in their birth religion. Sikhism, which began as a universal religion is transformed to a culture specific one. This is why Sikhs who embrace other religions tend to shed their Punjabi identity.

Guru Nanak's newly founded tradition survived the death of the founder mainly because it grounded itself in universal values which appealed to both Muslims and Hindus. Guru Nanak did not present himself as belonging to any particular religion and his message was directed towards all. In the course of time, the noble humanist traditions of the original Sikh faith

have itself acquired the status of a separate religion. This phenomenon has become acute especially in the last few decades. Ironically, Guru Nanak Dev Ji stressed time and again that the most important thing was not which faith one followed or religious labels but living life in the remembrance of God whilst upholding an honourable, humanitarian and spiritual lifestyle. Guru Nanak, who preached extensively to Hindus and Muslims regretted the antagonism between Hindus and Muslims. Guru Nanak aptly summarized his teaching in his famous saying:

“There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim, so whose path shall I follow? I shall follow the path of God.”

## NOTES

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