

The Case for Keeping Kesh

Most young Sikhs with even a cursory understanding of their religion know that keeping hair is a requirement of their faith. So why is it that such a small percentage of self-identified Sikhs actually keep their hair? As is the case when answering a complex question such as this one, there are many true answers and each of them is compelling in their own way.

The first answer lies in 'hukam' which can be translated as an order from the Guru. Some dispute whether the Guru actually issued any such 'hukam'. Those who dispute the existence of such a 'hukam' do so because, often due to no fault of their own, they lack even a basic knowledge of what being a Sikh is. Many such people are insistent on calling themselves Sikhs, yet they are unwilling to look into history to see what the Guru asked of their Sikhs. They bow to Guru Granth Sahib and do not seem to want to recognize that Guru Gobind Singh, who gave the Guruship to Guru Granth Sahib, specifically ordered all Sikhs to keep their hair. Some Sikhs claim that Gurbani does not explicitly state "Sikhs must keep their hair", yet these people do not recognize that Guru Granth Sahib is not a rule book by any means. Dictating well-established rules would not fit into the deeply spiritual and moral message that emanates from every word of the Guru.

Some of course recognize that such a 'hukam' exists, and choose not to follow it for several reasons. Bad or immoral Sikhs who keep their hair are looked at and the point is raised: Such and such person is bad for such and such reasons and obviously a) their hair isn't helping them become a good person and b) this proves that keeping hair is not necessary to be a good Sikh. Firstly, this type of thinking ignores that keeping one's hair is still a hukam from the Guru. Those who follow the Guru's 'hukams', especially if they do so from a position of having previously not followed those 'hukams', do so from a position of humility. Being humble is the quality of a good person, perhaps the greatest quality one can have. Secondly, even though there can be no doubt that many good people do not keep their hair, being a good Sikh and being a good person are not the same thing. All good Sikhs are good people but not all good people are good Sikhs. Good Sikhs are different from the general good people population in that they submit to a Guru and that Guru has in turn given them the gifts they need to progress spiritually and in this world. How can a good Sikh of the Guru be a good Sikh when they explicitly go against what the Guru asks of them?

Others who recognize the existence of the 'hukam' to keep one's hair fail to do so because of their need to succeed or to fit in to this world. To start with, such a world view comes from an inherent position of weakness. Why is the need to succeed and the need to fit in paramount to being a good Sikh? Not only that, but it has been proven time and time again that keeping one's hair constitutes no actual barrier to progress in this world. Even though those with Turbans form a very small minority of the Sikh population, they have reached positions in society equal to if not higher than those Sikhs that cut their hair. In every society that has a significant Sikh population, those with Turbans have risen to the top of their fields. Of course, no one can deny that prejudice and discrimination still exist in many ways. However, it is also impossible to deny that the types of discrimination encountered by Sikhs today pale in comparison to the slaughter and extermination that Sikhs have been subjected to throughout their history. When did the Sikhs of the Guru ever ignore or outright reject a 'hukam' from their Guru because it turned out to be slightly inconvenient? They actually died so they could be faithful to their Guru. We should honour their memory by obeying the Guru's hukams in a much less threatening world. How can we be proud of our history, proud to be Sikhs if we fail to recognize the crucial need to keep our hair?

Most Sikhs recognize that the 'Sikh Panth' is going through some dark times, especially in Punjab.

Drug and alcohol abuse are at astronomical levels, and yet, the Sikh youth are abandoning their hair in droves. Even those who cut their hair cannot reject this reality: the extent of hair cutting in Punjab has weakened the collective 'Sikh Panth', most critically because it almost always robs the future generations from the choice of being a faithful Sikh. Many Sikhs, even those who cut their hair, hurt when they see the sad state of the panth, where barber and alcohol shops in Punjab are doing record business. Guru Gobind Singh wrote that the 'Sikh Panth' will only thrive when Sikhs live in the image of the Guru. How are we being like the Guru when we cut our hair? How can we honestly think, except if we live in deep ignorance, that the Guru is not upset by our actions? All Sikhs want to see our panth thrive and yet, the most obvious answer to reversing the current trend of decline, the need to strengthen our identity, is not being contemplated. Long hair, along with being a spiritual boost, is what gives Sikhs their identity. How will Sikhi survive if there is no identity carrying it forward?

Many Sikhs who have cut their hair have at some point contemplated keeping their hair and it is undoubtedly a big jump to make in one's life. However, if we have true faith in the greatness of our Guru, the decision to keep our hair becomes remarkably straightforward. We as Sikhs must seriously contemplate our faith in our everyday actions. We are only in this world for a set period of time. Will keeping our hair and thus obeying the Guru hurt us in any way? How can we assume that we will be punished for obeying a direct 'hukam' of the Guru? We cannot and we should not. As is often sung in the Gurdvara, Churn Shurn Gur Ek Pehnda Jaiay Chul, Satgur Kot Pehnda Aagay Hoay Laith Heh, meaning, With our feet, if we take even one step, our Guru will take thousands of steps towards us. By accepting the Guru's hukam and keeping our kesh, the Guru will be more than willing to help us further along in our spiritual journey. Once and for all, we must overcome our ego, our vanity and our self-delusion and truly ask ourselves how we can live our lives in harmony with the Guru's teachings.