

## Assessment Piece: A new wave of Sikh radicalism?

In a modern world of technology and multiculturalism, is practising a puritanical faith a top priority? For some Sikhs, yes.

“Viva La Khalistan”, the words that echo in the minds of many young Sikh people. Referring to a nationalist movement in India that aimed to create a separate independent state for Sikhs, radical Sikh youths are emerging in a new extremist wave. Their aim: an uncorrupted religion.

What does it mean to be a Sikh in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain? Nowadays, there is an apparent clash between religion and modern life. We are meant to assimilate: go to nightclubs and enjoy Friday nights at the Student Union. However, there is a need to be true to our roots and follow the religious teachings in some form. Over the course of the last five years, this clash has come to a head. It has directly resulted in the creation of a group of fundamentalist Sikhs, who have taken it upon themselves to maintain the purity of the faith, protecting it from outsiders. Nevertheless, at the same time, it has created wider divisions in the religious community. So, the question arises: what has created this new wave of Sikh extremism within Britain?

In the *BBC* Documentary, *Young, Sikh and Proud*, journalist Sunny Hundal attempts to answer this question. He contrasts his background and less conservative views with the legacy of his brother, Jagraj Singh. Singh rose to fame in the religious community as a source of guidance and the founder of *YouTube* channel, *Basics of Sikhi*. This fundamental division between the two brothers hits home for many Sikhs, as we often have to maintain a balance between the lives of both men. Singh highlights the need to reprogram ourselves, using only History and Gurbani (Guru’s teachings) to guide our actions and thinking. This is how an increasing number of youths take responsibility for their flourishing religion. After watching a few videos on the channel that has over 145,000 subscribers and witnessing Singh’s skills as an orator, it isn’t difficult to understand why many youths engage with his ideals.

One of the central issues that Sikhs face in the religious community is that of inter-faith marriages. It’s a theme that has divided friends, families and brothers. Some Sikhs would argue that weddings in the Gurdwara (the Sikh temple) between a Sikh and a person of another faith isn’t staying true to the

religion; it's a corrupting influence. However, more moderate Sikhs argue that the Gurdwara accepts all people as its own, as emphasised by the holy book, *The Guru Granth Sahib*. To get a further understanding of the issues at hand, I spoke to Ranjit Singh. Singh became a devout Sikh after attending Khalsa Camp, a 'retreat' that aims to educate children and teens about the religion. He knew Jagraj Singh through their frequent meetings at the local Gurdwara. When I asked him about what motivates some religious people to adopt extreme ideologies, he stated:

"I think many Sikhs nowadays want to gain a historical understanding of the religion. This is why I went to Khalsa Camp. I enjoy living my life according to religious ideals; it guides me and gives me inner peace. Even so, I want my daughters to be able to speak both English and Punjabi (Indian language), to accept that they are British but also Sikh. The problem originates when radicals create an "us vs them" mentality. Sikhism isn't about creating an enemy in British culture and more moderate Sikhs. It's about accepting all cultures and different perspectives. This is what is taught in Khalsa Camps. It's the extreme few that take it too far and ruin it for everyone. Essentially, they're insecure within themselves and project this elsewhere. But religion isn't a get-out-of-jail-free card for unnecessary and dangerous acts of violence."

Similarly, this issue notably arises in relation to the caste system. The caste system in India was a hierarchical social structure that dictated the prestige and value of a family, based on their occupation. Many religious families believe that it's imperative that their son or daughter only marry a member of the same caste. I spoke to a panel of 10 Sikh students at Royal Holloway to get a better understanding of the importance placed on the caste system in our local religious community. Is it essential for them? Is it something that they consider when choosing a potential partner? 7 out of 10 participants stated that their grandparents or parents would not accept their choice of a partner from a different caste. Nonetheless, 9 out of 10 highlighted that they would happily choose a life partner of a different religion or caste. Thus as time goes on, some younger Sikhs continue to live by more open-ended standards.

Furthermore, these figures evidence that there is a clear divide between the older and younger generation, in which the radicals fill the gap. This is explicitly depicted in a sort of territorialism in Gurdwaras. In 2004, a play called *Behzti* (Punjabi word for dishonour) was commissioned. Written by British Sikh playwright, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, it controversially depicted and publicised the immoral actions within Gurdwaras from a female perspective. These actions include riots during the

rituals of multi-faith marriages. Mass protests forced the cancellation of the play's opening night - exemplifying the type of extremist action that Ranjit highlights. This illustrates that *under-representation* and *honour* remain firmly integrated into the radical Sikh mindset. These two strands of thought act as powerful motivating factors for modern religious radicalism among youths.

The problem of under-representation for religious communities isn't one that only affects Sikhs. It's a sentiment commonly felt by many faiths in the UK. So too is the worry that the purity of the religion, as practised by our ancestors, is being diluted by Western society and modern ways of life. As Amrita\*, one of the panellists emphasised:

"This country is very modern, but I do feel under-represented. I make an effort to respect and understand all religions. I don't feel that this is reciprocated on a large scale. I know many students who go to University and the vast majority have no understanding of Sikhism at all. Often, religious groups tend to be separated from the rest." Therefore, while many UK universities and the broader education system boast diversity through statistics, there is still some way to go in terms of representing different faiths and ensuring the inclusion of religion-based societies. This catalyses radicalism - but it's still felt by moderates.

It's clear that the extremes of a faith that originated as socially reformative, peaceful and based on inclusion, has split a religious community. As modernisation continues to co-exist alongside the pastoral teachings of religion, these 'battles' remain firmly at the core of religious identity and wider society. Possibly a testament to the strength of religion as a guiding ideology, it isn't likely that these divisions will disappear anytime soon. There is no clear-cut solution. Yet looking ahead, drawing attention to and understanding the causes of these divisions seems like a good place to start, in order to alleviate them.

\*Name changed to uphold interviewee's right to anonymity.