

WORLD SIKH NEWS

because the truth needs to be told

Vaisakhi in Surrey

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With the barrage of reference to the depictions of pictures of Sikh militants and of T-shirts bearing slogans promoting Khalistan, there is no doubt that the influence of the media with its "selective" information can impact on people's perceptions and the current social and political conflict.

It is incumbent on the media to present the other side of the picture while not justifying any illegal activity or promoting violence. For this reason I wish to expose the voices of the youth who wore T-shirts with the words "While we live, we shall live with dignity; when we die shall be for our faith" on the front and "Long live the Republic of Khalistan" on the back at this year's Vaisakhi parade in Surrey which I attended.

Wanting to know the purpose behind these shirts from the perspective of the youth, I questioned some of them. At first, they were very apprehensive, but within a few minutes, one of them, Gary, 26, spoke up: "The reason why we are wearing these shirts is not that we are supporting terrorism - it is the fact that we are supporting the people that have died for our faith, our culture and our religion who are misrepresented."

Unfortunately, we were interrupted by media camerapersons coming our way and the youth were clearly uncomfortable with that.

"Wow this is like media all over us!" said Gary as he and others quickly walked away. This reaction showed a loss of faith in the media to cover their perspectives without distorting them. It is the media's objective to show both sides of this issue which is what prompted me to find more youth wearing the T-shirts to expose their voices.

I did encounter another group of youth with the T-shirts and lucked out, as one of them recognized me and was in fact a friend of a former student of mine who had once contacted me for my views about the CBC's "Samosa Politics" documentary. The group, consisting of some five youth, shared their thoughts for quite some time. (Although the youth permitted me to take their pictures with their faces, and use their full names for this piece, out of discretion, I decided to only use first names and use pictures only revealing the T-shirt logos). Here is what they had to say.

I first asked them why they were wearing these T-shirts. One former Kwantlen student, Talwinder,

responded: "The reason for wearing T-shirts is to show we have the right to express our freedoms - what we have been demanding for the past 25 years like even since Operation Bluestar (when the Indian Army stormed the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India, in 1984) happened, more than that, since 1947, when India first got its independence. We think that all human kind has the right to have aspirations for their freedoms. Just by wearing T-shirts, maybe it's not moving a cause forward, but it is actually showing the world we still remember what happened to us. We want to speak out but we are being silenced by the media which is also responsible for creating divisions between us and our community."

For some these T-shirts are controversial I pointed out, to which Talwinder responded: "According to the media and RCMP you can wear anything that does not go against Canadian law. So, this year, there were T-shirts made. Last year there were shirts that had slogans with ISYF (International Sikh Youth Federation) which is a banned organization or quote unquote "a terrorist organization." By law there is nothing wrong with these T-shirts. Yes, they have guns on them, but the thing that people need to understand is our Guru Gobind Singh told us keep weapons ... it was not meant to harm people it was to defend our rights. That's the reason why we wear the Kirpan. Four hundred to 500 years ago when no one owned a gun, a knife was the equivalent of a gun then."

I asked if their T-shirts were affiliated with any organization. "I give you my word," said Talwinder, "this is not connected to any group, any temple, nothing. The only person that it is connected with is the person wearing the T-shirt." At that point, Paul, a 21-year-old former BCIT student, added his views: "It's a personal opinion about how I feel about it and these T-shirts are reflecting it."

When I pointed out again that the shirts were connected to banned organizations last year and asked them what they had to say about that, Talwinder looked straight at me and said: "Babbar Khalsa was an organization that was founded on the basis of Sikhism and human rights. It is sad to hear that it was branded a terrorist organization. When you look at the roots of Babbar Khalsa and how it originally started, whenever there is a large group of good people there is the odd couple that get played by the government ... money can do wonders. They caused the Babbar Khalsa to look bad. They say that Talwinder Parmar blew up Air India and so forth, but when you accuse a dead person it's a lot easier."

(EDITOR'S NOTE: While some accuse Parmar of being the brain behind the Air India bombing, others actually accuse him of being used by the Indian intelligence at some stage or the other. Unfortunately, dead men don't speak and everyone knows that the Indian police caught Parmar, tortured and interrogated him and then murdered him in a so-called encounter. This begs the question: What was the Indian government trying to hide?).

I asked them if there were any links or ideas about the T-shirts drawn from the Babbar Khalsa? Talwinder replied: "As far as these shirts being related to Babbar Khalsa (is concerned), there is no relationship. Babbar Khalsa was an organization founded by Talwinder Parmar and others ... these shirts maybe had a primary goal which was to unify for freedom. The move was the same. Babbar Khalsa was probably created to show people we are going to speak out we are going to fight for our rights. These shirts show we are speaking out as well. That is the only relationship I can find with them."

I asked him: "How do you feel as youth, when efforts are being made to expose your history and in doing so you are perceived by some, to be promoters of terrorism?"

Talwinder responded: "It motivates us. The more stuff they throw at us the stronger it makes us. They have been calling us terrorists since the time of Guru Nanak. When Guru Nanak first started he was jailed. ... It's been going on since the beginning of Sikhi and if they have been calling us terrorist from the beginning, they are not going to stop now. The way we look at it, we have re-invented what the word terrorist means. A person who teaches Kirtan or Gurbani teaches people to express their freedoms and fight for their freedoms. There was a human rights activist who was

also branded a terrorist, he was murdered by the Indian (government) agents."

I next asked him: "How do we move forward peacefully here in BC, what do youth with your vision want?"

Talwinder said: "There are a lot of youth that want to speak out, (but) the hard part is to get people to speak out. These T-shirts ... they were kids in high school that got together and said, 'this is our cause. Do you support it?' We got them made. When it comes to bigger issues, even the parents don't understand. There are 75-80 kids that are wearing the T-shirts right now (at the parade) but their parents don't know anything about the rights and freedoms; the younger generation knows. As an example, there is a kid, his parents don't support any of this, they are completely against it, but the kid chose to wear the shirt. That is a huge decision especially in our culture - the way it is, we usually do what our parents tell us to do."

Apart from barriers to speak out, Paul added that what youth want is proper representation about who they are as Sikhs and the Vaisakhi parade: "The (Indo-Canadian) community is one of the most successful communities, but yet we get (portrayed) as terrorists - not as the successful people. The media interview some MLA's who keep saying this is a political thing. Well people have to understand that our religion is a political religion. We are taught to learn about other people's cultures and religions, and learn about their and our politics. What we want to tell these guys is that, hey, we are a political group of people. Sikhism is not just a religion we are a nation on our own. Just because we don't have a piece of land to call our own does not mean that we are not independent. We are still independent people."

So I asked them what they thought ought to be the solution and Kwantlen student Swaroop responded: "In schools we need political awareness classes, have debates and more discussion of what's going on in the world. It's easy for a country to go to war on the basis of anyone calling it terrorist, because the meaning itself is not defined. I can say anyone is committing an unlawful act, that act that is against the mainstream can be considered terrorist. So you need to give voice and opinion to the other side. As long as people are talking about it is fine and as long as people are not picking up a gun and shooting someone that is fine. The weapon does not kill somebody; it's the person that's using it. For example someone is not allowed to wear this T-shirt. What is wrong with wearing this shirt? What I am saying is there needs to be open discussion in classes so others can get a broader picture overall."

In closing, if we wish to work towards solidarity and equality we must begin to see the essential historic ties which have been ignored and have therefore been an essential part of the "controversy" swirling around the Vaisakhi parade. World peace depends on resolving tensions that fuel "militarism," that is, a failure to respond and listen to OTHER voices and perspectives.

Canada does not support achieving political goals through violent means, however, expressions of Khalistan that do not advocate violence must not be nullified and generalizing ideals of Khalistan only in the context of violence is an injustice itself and part of the problem that is stirring up tension right here in BC and among our youth today.

I end with these words: The golden rule of conduct is mutual tolerance, seeing that we will never all think alike and we shall always see truth in fragment and from different angles of vision."
Mahatma Gandhi.

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