

Sikhism's Identity and Challenges in Malaysia: A Literature Review

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i7/4525>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i7/4525

Published Date: 02 July 2018

Abstract

The question of Sikhism's identity and its challenges in the context of a multi-racial society in Malaysia is worthy of discussion because it involves the majority-minority relationship between ethnicity and religion. In addition, the Sikh community in Malaysia is generally local born or a generation that was born here. They identify themselves with Malaysia as their birth place and not Punjab in India, which is their place of origin. As an ethnic minority, the Sikh community has its own identity, which is different from the identity of other ethnic groups. This study discussed the question of the Sikh identity and its challenges in Malaysia by using the content analysis method based on previous studies dating from 1999 to 2015. This study found that the Sikh identity was something that was difficult to determine as it was presumed to a personal issue and did not warrant further discussion. Hence, discussions on this issue did not garner the necessary cooperation from the Sikhs themselves. Therefore, this study discussed several issues such as the concept of identity, religion as an identity, identity forming process, the history of Sikhism's identity formation and challenges faced by the contemporary Sikh community in Malaysia.

Keywords: Sikh, Identity, Community, Malaysia

Introduction

In the context of Malaysia, studies about the Sikh community have not been encouraging and very minimal (Azharudin 2002). The limited number of studies could be due to the absence of a department of ethnic studies specifically for the Sikhs, such as the Malays, Indians and Chinese who have their Academy of Malay Studies, Department of Indian Studies and the Department of Chinese Studies in Universiti Malaya (Sarjit S. Gill 2002). Studies about the Sikh community in Malaysia were mostly undertaken by Sikh researchers such as Charanjit K. (2002 & 2003), Sarjeet S. Sidhu (2005), Sarjit S. (1999), Sarjit S. Gill (1999, 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005, 2007a, 2007b & 2008) and Savinder K. Gill & Nirmala (2010). Besides that, there were studies by non-Sikh researchers as well, such as Zain (2001, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2016 & 2017), Azharuddin (2002), Khoo Kay Kim (2002) and Razaleigh (1998 & 2004). Among all the

studies, studies with a theme on Sikh identity and challenges faced by the Sikh community had attracted a lot of attention from researchers, especially in the field of comparative religion and social science compared other themes.

The Sikhism Identity Concept

The word 'identity' originated from the word 'idem' meaning 'similarity' or 'continuity' (Lee 2009a). From a definition aspect, identity means unique and special characteristics (from the customs, language, culture, religious etc. aspects) that form the thrusts and symbols of the individual's personality and race or otherwise referred to as identity (Kamus Dewan, 2010). It is closely associated with the meaning and symbol belonging to an element, such as that found in an individual, thing or behaviour (Shamsul & Fauzi, 2007).

The concept of identity can be seen from two different angles. From one angle, identity is seen as a phenomenon that is 'natural', 'rigid', and needing no debate. This is because each individual possesses characteristics or nature that are similar, so much so that they possess symbols or an 'identity' of a member of a certain group in society. Meanwhile, from another angle, it is seen as a phenomenon that is 'fluid' in nature, changeable and debatable (Fauzi, 2004; Shamsul, 1996; Strath, 2002). This means that 'identity' is something that is formed and not something occurs naturally. It is also not subjected to time or space and it can be formed in a social context (Fauzi, 2004). 'Identity' can even be substantiated, manipulated or changed from one situation to another through personal experience and an over-powering social change (Jehom, 1999; Lee, 2009b; Faridah, 2015).

From a social reality context, the formation of an identity can be based on two forms of realities. First, everyday-defined, which refers to a reality experienced by the individual in everyday life and is different from the identity of other individuals. This difference is usually inherent in an individual and formed due to surrounding developments. This identity can also change according to social changes occurring around the individual through interactions with others. This means that the source that forms the identity could be something that is inherited or obtained naturally, such as skin colour, gender, physical body shape, ethnicity and culture. In addition, the process that forms an individual's identity depends on the individual's desire to make a choice (Lee 2004; Faridah 2015).

Second, authority-defined, which refers to reality that is defined by an authority that presides in a dominant power structure, such as a political or religious entity that determines the identity of a group or a collective (Gutwirth, 2008; Hunter, 2003; Fauzi, 2004; Gill, 2008; Shamsul, 1996). The authority-defined identity is divided into three categories, namely social, cultural and ethnic identities. All three identities emphasise on similar and common characteristics in a group, such as language, religion, culture etc. Hence, the group's identity needs a network that is interconnected with the individual and the group by highlighting the uniformity in them, either through internal or external characteristics (Fauzi, 2004; Faridah, 2015).

In everyday life, both these realities are interrelated and influence one another. Therefore, both realities might have similarities or dissimilarities. This is because the everyday-defined social reality refers to something that is experienced, whereas the authority-defined social reality is only due to observations and interpretations. Hence, it is possible for a person to

have two identities, which is one from authority-defined and one obtained through daily experiences or everyday-defined (Fauzi, 2004). In this case, the dominant social power or social institution always plays a role when implementing the authority-defined identity in order to continue its dominance as well as to create a form of integration in society. However, this authority-defined identity would be accepted as the individual's identity or everyday-defined identity if it changes to the daily identity through the person's everyday life experience (Korff 1999).

In the context of Sikhism, both the authority-defined (collective) and everyday-defined (individual) identities are practiced by the followers. One of the Sikh identities that is collective in nature is Sikh Rehat Maryada, which is the Code of Behaviour that acts as a guideline for Sikhs when carrying out life as a Sikh, during Vaishkhi celebrations, using the Punjabi language, Gurmukhi writing, traditional clothing, staple foods and gender equality. Whereas, individual identity is built from social interactions and influence by various local cultures, such as mix marriages, divorce, using a foreign language, fashion cloths, type of dining, gender inequality and the influence of Hinduism (Gill 2005). However, between the two identities, the authority-defined (collective) identity is preferred when determining the actual Sikh identity because this type of identity emphasises on a collective identity centred on the Sikh's house of worship (Gurdwara) when building a Sikh identity. In other words, the Gurdwara is the entity responsible and authority for building the Sikh identity compared to the everyday-defined identity, which is beyond the control of the Gurdwara.

Hence, the authority-defined identity is closely related to the role of the Gurdwara as the centre for building Sikhism's identity. Elements such as religious and social education found in the Gurdwara, for example the granthi sahib (Sikh religious expert), Guru Granth Sahib scripture, Punjabi education classes and music education, are presumed to be important examples that collectively form the Sikh community's identity. However, these educational elements are insufficient to relate the Sikh community with the authority-defined identity, which is Gurdwara centric in form, as long as it is formally associated and valid according to Sikhism. Here emerges the role of amrit sanskar (baptism ceremony), which officially certifies that a person is a member of the Khalsa.

The validity of the status of a Khalsa is very important because it provides a Sikh with confidence and a feeling of responsibility in order to defend the authority-defined identity centred on the Gurdwara. This is because a Sikh who is a member of the Khalsa must adhere to four prohibitions (char kurahit), which are prohibitions from cutting the hair, smoking (cigarettes, cigar etc.), consuming alcohol, consuming meat slaughtered by Muslims and illicit sex, as obligations that must be observed. Transgressing any one of the four char kurahit would affect the identity that they have built through the amrit sanskar ceremony, in which case they would cease to be a member of the Khalsa, and instead be a 'patit' or one who has disobeyed. Consequently, they would be forced to repeat the ceremony for the second time to validate their identity. Therefore, the Sikh identity, Khalsa and the amrit sanskar ceremony are three elements that cannot be separated because they mutually depend on one another.

In order to become a member of the Khalsa with an identity according to the actual teachings of Sikhism in a multi-racial context in Malaysia, is not an easy feat. There are numerous obstacles and challenges that they must overcome to perpetuate their identity as a member

of the Khalsa. Hence, several elements such as the type of religion as well as local and western cultures that champion different lifestyles, values and philosophies of life have become obstacles in maintaining an authentic Sikh culture for the past 40 years. The clash of cultures causes a lack of practice in the basic teachings of Sikhism (Khoo, 2002).

Methodology of the Study

Methodology is related to procedures and methods of data collection for solving research questions. Whereas research is a systematic process that involves the process of planning a method, instrument, sample, collecting and interpreting data as well as reporting the information (Azizi et al. 2006; Chua 2011). This study was qualitative in nature and used the content analysis method for data collection. Data were collected from academic literature, books, articles and other written documents sourced from the library. The documents that were analysed were chosen due to their relations with the two themes, namely Sikh identity and its challenges in Malaysia. Several libraries were involved in the data collection process, such as Tun Sri Lanang Library UKM, Main Library Utama Universiti Malaya, Main Library Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), The Malaysian Sikh Youth Organization Library (PBSM), Public Library, Kelantan and Public Library, Terengganu. The data were then analysed using the content analysis method.

Literature Review

One easy way to identify problems in a study is to refer to the related literature. Thus, from the findings discussed in the literature, it would be possible to determine developments of certain issues as well as the weaknesses and gaps that should be overcome in future studies (Othman 2017). Hence, as a religion and a minority community in multi-racial Malaysia, literature related to the Sikh community had helped the researcher to determine the extent of the Sikh identity issue and its challenges in the Sikh community in Malaysia today.

Literature Regarding Sikh Identity

The identity theme has become the favourite among many researchers compared to other themes because the question of identity is closely related to the existence of a community. Among the pertinent literature was a study by Zain (2001), which discussed the symbols in Sikhism that have become the identity of the Sikh community. These symbols are known as panch kekaar or 5K, which comprises Kesh (keeping long hair), Kara (metal bracelet), Kirpan (small sword), Kachera (short pants) and Kangha (comb). Discussions about these five symbols covered the definition and philosophy as introduced in Sikhism as well as its relations with the history of forming the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh. The most important matter discussed was the understanding and practice of 5K among the Sikh community in Kelantan. This study found that not all in the Sikh community in Kelantan understood and practiced the 5K well in their lives. This is related to the existence of feelings of shyness to practice it in their daily lives and also the fact that the majority of the local community are Muslim Malays. This also shows that the understanding and practice are two different things because sometimes understanding alone does not lead to someone practicing what they understand.

Gill (2004) had discussed the building of the Sikh identity in North Borneo through the involvement of Sikhs in the security forces. Although at the beginning their involvement in the forces was to expand power and influence of the British, but lastly it helped build a Sikh identity by itself. This is evident in building the Gurdwara, creation of a Punjabi descendent

community (Peranakan Punjabi) in Sabah and familial relations with Punjab. Hence, this identity had faded when the functions of the Gurdwara itself were neglected by the Sikhs. In addition, Gill (2007a) also discussed how the involvement of Sikhs in the security forces had affected their identity. This effect was brought about by the formation of the Gurdwara as a centre for building the Sikh identity leading to the formation of a new Sikh community known as the Peranakan Punjabi (those with a Punjabi descent) due to the mix marriages between Sikhs and local people.

Next, Singh (2005) discussed the role of the Gurdwara in building the Sikh identity in two different locations, namely in Kuala Lumpur and Kota Kinabalu. The study involved 30 informants who were interviewed to determine the extent of the role played by the Gurdwara in building the Sikh identity. The findings showed that building the Sikh identity faced internal obstacles such as the failure of granthi sahib in carrying out its duty as experts in Sikhism as well as the weakness of the Gurdwara Management Committee (JPG) to attract the attention of the younger generation to jointly perpetuate their identity.

Tan (2006) had examined the building of the Sikh identity in Singapore and Malaysia via the migration of Sikhs to Malaysia in the 19th and early 20th century. Due to the high demand for manpower in the colonial military and police force, security guard services, labour sector and farming sector, the Sikhs had made Malaysia their favorite location for migration. Hence, when immigration laws were tightened by the government in 1953 and 1959, they had decided to live in post-colonial Malaya. This study had discussed the role played by Sikh community organisations, Sikh community leaders, Sants Sikh and Sikh reformists in building the Sikh identity in Malaya and Singapore, especially two of Sikhism's religious figures, Bhai Maharaj Singh and Sant Mohan Singh. In the Malaysian context, Sant Mohan Singh was responsible for forming the Sikh Naujawan Sabha, which is the Sikh youth organization today.

Meanwhile, Zain (2012) made a comparison between two identities synonymous with Sikhism and Islam, which is the dastar and the turban. This study affirmed that wearing the dastar is compulsory for a Sikh, whereas the turban in Islam was worn by the Prophet SAW and Muslims are encouraged to wear it too. It was also found that the turban and dastar have their differences, especially how it is worn, its shape, measurement and colour. Another finding was that the understanding about the dastar and turban could lead to an understanding between races as well as to overcome prejudice against the religion and culture of other races.

Pue & Charanjit (2014) had singled out two cases concerning the identity of ethnic minorities in Malaysia, namely the Chinese Peranakan in Kelantan and Punjabi Sikhs in Kuala Lumpur. This study intended to examine the effects of social stereotyping on the interactions of minority ethnic groups with the general society. The findings showed that the Chinese Peranakan in Kelantan were easily mistaken for Malays due to the strong similarities in physical appearance and extrinsic culture, such as fluent command Malay as well as food preferences and consumption practices. Although the Sikh Punjabi community was different from the ethnic Indians, the general public did not understand the significance of using the 5K symbols, which was the main trademark of Sikh Punjabi identity. Inadvertently, these symbols were mistaken as a type of fashion, with its use being flexible and bearing no significance.

The second problem was the use of ethnonyms or name callings, such as 'China kampung' and 'Benggali', which had a negative effect on the Sikhs. The negative effects culminated in physical form, such as been detained for not fasting during the month of Ramadan for the Chinese Peranakan community or being forced to cut the hair and beard for the Sikh Punjabi community. In this regard, the author suggested that emphasises should be on a balanced approach to define what is authority (authority-defined) and daily (everyday-defined). The approach to define 'daily' cannot be neglected in order to glorify the richness and dynamism of ethnic variety in society. At the same time, the approach to define authority present today should be used prudently and more responsibly.

Gill (2007b) had also discussed the effectiveness of the samelan program (youth camp) and Punjabi education organised by the Kinabalu Singh Sabha Association (KSSA) in upholding the identity of Peranakan Punjabi. Among the effectiveness of the samelan program was the emergence of two Khalsa from among the Peranakan Punjabi after they had successfully completed the amrit sanskar ceremony, which was a first in the history of the program. On the other hand, the Punjabi education program did not have much of an effect on the Peranakan Punjabi in regards to building an identity because it was not received well by the parents and also the Gurdwara Management Committee (JPG). Therefore, it is a challenge for the Peranakan Punjabi to perpetuate their identity and at the same time explore the teachings of Sikhism.

Challenges Faced by the Sikh Community

Literature related to the challenges faced by the Sikh community in Malaysia is also important because reflects the actual situation faced by them today. Gill (1999) had discussed the migration of Sikhs from India to other countries, including Malaysia. However, their migration had also posed challenges to them in their efforts to perpetuate the Sikh identity. This identity crisis emerges during a Sikh's adjustment process with the local community in terms of the economy, social, cultural and political aspects. Among the challenges were mix marriages between Sikhs and other races as well as the influence of enculturation that resulted in the exposure of the 5K symbols to influences by the local ethnic culture. The effect of this saw some of the Sikhs, especially the younger generation, beginning to renounce or forego several aspects of Sikh identity, such as food and traditional dressing, the Punjabi language as well as a religious life and forming new symbols of identity.

Gill (2001) discussed the challenges faced by the Peranakan Punjabi culminating from the marriage of Sikh men with ethnic pribumi Sabahans, such as the Kadazan-Dusun, Murut, Bisara and Chinese. The main challenge faced by the Peranakan Punjabi is that the mix marriages in the community were looked down upon by the Sikhs themselves because they were not accepted as original Sikhs. This has caused them to be side-lined by the Sikhs in Peninsula Malaysia. The fact is that this presumption is inaccurate because according to the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), which is the highest body in Sikhism, in order to become a Sikh it is not necessary for one to be a Punjabi. Anyone can become a Sikh as long as they believe in the teachings of Sikhism. In other words, they have to embrace Sikhism and undergo the amrit sanskar (baptism) ceremony to become a Khalsa. Hence, the challenge faced by the Peranakan Punjabi can be overcome if they are guided by the Sikh community from Peninsula Malaysia on how to develop their community, especially the enhancement of Punjabi speaking skills among the younger generation.

Another study by Gill (2003) explored the challenge of gender issues occurring in the Sikh community because Sikhism emphasises on gender equality in every aspect of social life. Hence, this study showed that practically the position of Sikh women in Malaysia is low compared to men. This gender inequality occurs due to the influence of the majority in the Sikh community, which in this case comprises men. Since the Sikh men are unwilling to relinquish their dominant role, the women would continue to experience this prejudice. As time went on as well as due to social pressure and several other factors, Sikh women became increasingly isolated compared to men. Hence, this study suggested that the granthi sahib (experts in Sikhism) and the Gurdwara Management Committee (JPG) play a role in providing information regarding gender equality to the Sikh community.

Sidhu (2004) had discussed the challenges to uphold the identity faced by Sikh children and adolescents, especially in Malaysia's multi-racial context. The problems discussed in the study involved internal and external problems. Among the internal problems were the weakness of the Sikh leadership in managing the Gurdwara and Sikh organizations, weakness in the command of Punjabi among the youth, mix marriages between Sikhs and non-Sikhs as well as the weakness in rent (sewa) among the Sikh community. Meanwhile, the external problems were related to the influence of local culture, which was dominated by the pre-dominantly Muslim Malays. Although Malaysia practices the freedom of religion concept, however, they are exposed to the influence of Islam and the Malay culture, either directly or indirectly.

Next, Gill & Kaur (2008) had discussed two internal conflicts faced by the Gurdwara Management Committee (JPA). First, the political interference by local Sikh politicians who influence the role of the Gurdwara in efforts to form the Sikh identity, especially among the younger generation. Second, the lack of cooperation between the Granthi Sahib and the Gurdwara Management Committee (JPA) in maximising the role of the Gurdwara in efforts to develop and form a Sikh identity. This study emphasised that the building of a Sikh identity would materialise if there are no conflicts within the Gurdwara Management Committee (JPA). At the same time, the Malaysian Gurdwara Committee should take steps to ensure all Sikhs adhere to the code and behaviour iterated in the Sikh Rehat Maryada.

Savinder & Nirmala (2010) examined the sensitivity of the Sikh community when facing challenges to perpetuate their identity. One of the main challenges is the issue of changing one's religion in the case of a Sikh who marries a non-Sikh. This issue arises when the Gurdwara allows these kinds of marriages in the Sikh community but at the same time lays down a condition whereby the non-Sikh partner has to become a Khalsa before marrying a Sikh. And if they refused, they would be disowned or forsaken by the family. Although the purpose is to ensure that the Sikh identity is perpetuated by that individual, however, this action has received some opposition from the younger generation. This is because the younger generation feels that the condition is not suitable to be implemented in today's Sikh community, instead Sikhism should adjust with changing times and place. Hence, this issue about marriage portrays the weakness of the Gurdwara in handling the Sikh identity crises in Malaysia.

Meanwhile, Zain & Jaffary (2013) had discussed the challenges of the Sikh community in Malaysia pertaining to perpetuating the 5K identity, which comprises the five symbols of Kesh (long hair), Kara (metal bracelet), Kirpan (small sword), Kachera (short pants) and Kangha

(comb). These five symbols are introduced through the amrit sanskar ceremony and Sikhs who undergo this ceremony are accepted as members of the Khalsa. However, to implement the amrit sanskar ceremony and form this identity, the Sikh community in Malaysia is faced with three challenges, which are the weakness of the Granthi Sahib, weakness of the Gurdwara Management Committee (JPG) and clash with local culture. The glaring weakness of the Granthi Sahib is that most of them are from Punjab and do not accommodate well with the the Sikh community in Malaysia. They are only presumed to be caretakers of the Gurdwara, while their role is to empower the Sikh identity. Whereas the JPG is faced with an issue whereby the management was found to be not too friendly with the local Sikh community. This causes disruptions in activities that empower the Sikh identity in the community. Similarly, the clash between the local culture dominated by the Malay community and the Western culture has caused a dilemma within the Sikh community in their process of perpetuating a Sikh identity. Hence, the contemporary Sikh community in Malaysia needs to exercise greater efforts to empower their identity and prepare a young generation specifically to carry out the amrit sanskar ceremony as one of Sikhism's religious demands.

Lastly, Gill et al. (2015) had discussed the three problems concerning the identity of contemporary Sikh community in Malaysia through Focus Group Discussions. The first issue was the Punjabi language that is declining in use because it is dominated by other dominant languages, such as Malay and English. Second, the problem with Sikh youths in Malaysia who dislike wearing the turban, which is one of their main identities. While the third was the issue of mix marriages that has a negative effect on the family institution and the future generation of Sikhs.

Conclusion

Based on the literature from 1999 to 2015, this study found that Sikhism's identity was related to four elements. First, the 5K symbol and wearing of the turban, which is an external identity for the followers of Sikhism. Second, this identity is also associated with the amrit sanskar ceremony that enables a person to become a Khalsa. Third, this identity is strongly related with the forming of the Gurdwara as a centre for building the identity due to the migration of Sikhs to Malaya at that time. Fourth, separating the identity of Sikhism into authority defined and everyday defined as well as the need for society in general to use these identities cautiously when dealing with the Sikh community. All the four elements are elements pertaining to the identity of Sikhs that should be practiced by the community, especially the Khalsa in Malaysia.

Meanwhile, literature on the challenges faced by the Sikh community show that the challenges faced when maintaining their identity are still there and have not changed over the years. Among these challenges are mix marriages, influence of local culture, gender inequality, weakness of the Gurdwara and JPG, weakness in commanding the Punjabi language by Sikh youths, wearing the turban and those of mix-Punjabi descendants. Since these challenges are contemporary in nature, it involves all members of the Sikh community, including the Khalsa, who are presumed to be the actual Sikhs. Therefore, the Sikh community in Malaysia should endeavour to perpetuate their identity and find ways to encounter these challenges in order to build a multi-racial community that could forge a cooperative relationship.

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Acknowledgments

We thank to all people involved in making this research successful especially to Research Management, Innovation & Commercialization Centre (RIMC), Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin in Terengganu, Malaysia for supporting the research.

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