

Identity and belonging among young Sikhs

A research report

Sikh Human Rights Group (SHRG)

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To cite this report write:

SHRG (2008) *Identity and belonging among young Sikhs – A research report*
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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank British Organisation of Sikh Students (BOSS) for their contribution to the development of this research project. We would like to thank the four Research Assistants who undertook fieldwork. We are enormously grateful to the respondents who participated in this research. Finally, we would like to thank the Home Office for funding the research.

SHRG
2008

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This aim of this research was to explore issues of identity and belonging among young Sikhs, to examine views on common security and community cohesion, on opportunities and challenges to participate in economic, social and political life, and to highlight their recommendations to government. A total of 87 respondents took part in a questionnaire and in focus groups across five geographical areas with large Sikh population: East London, West London, Birmingham, Leeds and Glasgow.

Key findings

- Young Sikh respondents identified as both Sikhs and British. In their opinion, identity is shaped by a number of internal and external factors, is flexible, negotiable and constantly evolving and changing.
- In respondents' view, the many advantages and disadvantages of being a British citizen and the rights and responsibilities associated with British citizenship were considered compatible with Sikh values. However some felt that they were not treated as inclusive citizens due to their visibly distinct identity.
- Since the 9/11 and 7/7 events, many respondents reported that concerns about their personal safety have heightened, with some experiencing verbal abuse and a few being subjected to physical abuse. They were of the opinion that it was due mainly to the wider society wrongly associating them with Muslim terrorists.
- Respondents believed that misconceptions about them hindered community cohesion and they expressed the need to raise awareness about Sikhs in the wider society.
- There was disappointment among many respondents at the lack of adequate representation of Sikhs in the media, sport and politics. These were seen to be influential mediums to change perceptions and beliefs in the wider society about Sikhs.
- Sikhs were perceived to be doing well in selective professions, and not so well in a range of employment sectors. The disadvantages and discrimination faced were partly attributed to perceived negative views about Sikhs held by employers, leading to lack of opportunities in a variety of industries. Lack of adequate monitoring of Sikhs in social statistics was cited as masking the extent of the disadvantage.
- It was reported by some respondents that these experiences had led some to follow the advice of their parents to choose a safe career, that is, a profession where Sikhs were already perceived to be doing well.
- Despite some knock backs, most respondents were positive and optimistic about the future. They strongly believed that through hard work and some help from the government to change perceptions in the wider society, they

would fulfil their potential and contribute effectively to society as active citizens.

- Some respondents opined that Sikh Gurudwaras (places of worship) could also help young Sikhs by supporting them in improving their opportunities to do well in life and by making appropriate interventions to influence government policy. They also believed that a single voice from an established and reputable Sikh organisation was needed to highlight their concerns.

- The government was asked to help in four different ways:
 - by using its influence to raise awareness about Sikhs in the wider society;
 - by actively promoting equal opportunities for Sikhs in all areas, including employment, and tackling the distinct discrimination against Sikhs;
 - by providing appropriate funding to Sikh organisations to empower young Sikh people to realise their potential and be active citizens.
 - by adding a separate category of 'Sikh' in the official social statistics monitoring systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Government

1. Improve understanding about young Sikhs by consulting with them and through a programme of systematic research.
2. Assist and empower young Sikhs to successfully negotiate the challenges they experience by providing mentoring, character building and increasing skills programmes through relevant organisations.
3. Address and reduce the specific disadvantages experienced by young Sikhs in employment due to their distinct visible identity and improve equal opportunities for them in all employment sectors.
4. Agree and find means of implementing a separate ethnic monitoring category for Sikhs in official social statistics data gathering and trend analysis to highlight the many disadvantages experienced by young Sikhs which are otherwise masked under the other Asian ethnic monitoring categories.
5. Fund the development of a range of awareness raising material about Sikhs which are based on correct facts and disseminate these widely through a range of mediums (e.g. radio, documentaries, the web, conferences).
6. Raise the profile of young Sikhs among their peers from other communities through a range of exchange programmes in schools, higher education and social environments to improve community cohesion.
7. Promote the representation of young Sikhs in media, sport and politics by actively removing barriers that discourage their participation.

For Local Authorities

8. Develop effective engagement with young Sikhs at the local level and involve them in local decision making processes and in citizenship activities.

For Gurudwaras (Sikh places of worship)

9. Improve understanding about issues of concern to young Sikhs by effectively engaging with them and involving them in decision making processes.
10. Provide meaningful opportunities in Gurudwaras for young Sikhs to improve their well being.
11. Represent issues affecting young Sikhs to appropriate bodies with a view to seeking successful resolutions.

General

12. Support the development of a national body of Sikhs to co-ordinate and represent Sikhs.
13. Develop effective networking among young Sikhs to facilitate discussions of issues affecting them and highlighting them through appropriate mediums.

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity and belonging have become topical issues in recent times. Young people from many ethnic minority communities find themselves questioning and being questioned by others on these issues. Young Sikhs are no exception to this phenomenon. In fact, as a visible minority, they have to negotiate through many prisms in their desire to be effective citizens of the country. Unlike their parents and grandparents, who as first generation settlers had to concentrate on establishing themselves economically, young Sikhs are vibrant, dynamic and forward looking. They want to participate fully in the economic, social, cultural and political spheres. However, they find many challenges along the way.

The Sikh Human Rights Group (SHRG) and the British Organisation of Sikh Students (BOSS) work closely with young Sikh people. Over time, discussions with young people have highlighted various issues regarding what being a young Sikh means in this country. These have been about their personal ambitions and concerns about equal opportunities in the employment market, their experiences of engaging with the wider society, their views on representations of Sikhs generally and the impact, and their aspirations for the future.

The events of 9/11 and 7/7 have been important markers in recent history as a result of which some ethnic minority communities have found themselves subjected to being questioned about their 'allegiance' to the country¹. Young Sikh people talked about experiencing some of this in their everyday life and they began to re-visit what it means to be British and to be an acceptable citizen of the country.

It thus seemed timely to undertake research on these issues and draw out policy implications at the national and local level. In light of the government's agenda on community cohesion², the findings of the research are extremely important. The recommendations will make constructive contributions to the government's work on promoting community cohesion across the country.

¹ 9/11 refers to the attack on the twin towers in New York in 2001. 7/7 refers to the bombings in London in 2005.

² <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/racecohesionfaith/communitycohesion/>

Aims and objectives of the research

The research was set up with the following aims and objectives:

- to explore issues of identity and belonging among young Sikh people, and their notions of being British and British citizenship;
- to examine issues of common security and community cohesion;
- to find out views on opportunities and challenges for young Sikhs to participate in economic, social and political life;
- to highlight respondents' recommendations to government and local bodies to support young Sikh people to be fully inclusive citizens.

Methodology

The methodology for the research comprised a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. A large part of the research was carried out using qualitative methods, principally focus groups, to understand issues in depth from respondents' worldview. Focus groups are an effective method of facilitating discussion to explore respondents' values and beliefs in a safe and confidential environment.

The methodology consisted of:

- a questionnaire for completion prior to participation in focus groups to find out views on identity and belonging, fair treatment and discrimination, and community cohesion.
- focus groups with respondents as an integral part of the research sessions. Five research sessions were held across the country: West London (Southall), East London (Chigwell), Birmingham, Leeds and Glasgow. Each session lasted three and half-hours. The sessions were divided into two parts. The first part comprised an introduction to the purpose of the research and exploration of identity, belonging and citizenship. The second session started with explaining the context for discussions on participation in cultural, social and economic life and making recommendations to government. Both sessions lasted 45 minutes each and discussion took place in small groups of 4 – 6 participants.

A total of 87 men and women took part. They were aged between 16 and 30 years, from a mix of social class backgrounds, educational qualifications and employment status from five different geographical areas across the country described above.

All group discussions were tape recorded and the tapes were transcribed. Transcripts were analysed thematically using the 'framework' analytical method for qualitative data analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994)³. This method involves thematic charting of the verbatim transcripts. One set of charts was completed for each group discussion. A synthesis of the material from the thematic charts and analyses of quantitative data form the basis of this report. There were very few differences by age, gender and geography, and where there were, they are reported accordingly.

The Report

The rest of the report is divided into the following sections:

Section 2 describes respondents' notions of identity and belonging. It explores their views on British citizenship, its advantages and disadvantages.

Section 3 is concerned with respondents' perceptions of common security and fears of safety. The section also discusses their contributions to improving community cohesion and the barriers they experienced.

Section 4 reports on respondents' views on images and representations of Sikhs in the cultural, social and political spheres. It highlights the generally held views among respondents that Sikhs tend to be seen negatively in the media which has implications in the day to day relationships with people from different communities.

Section 5 examines respondents' experiences and decisions about their careers, and their perceptions of employment opportunities and barriers for Sikhs generally. It then reports on respondents' views on the government's lack of consideration for specific circumstances of Sikhs and how the absence of monitoring statistics on Sikhs neglects their concerns.

³ Ritchie, J. and Spencer, L. 1994 *Qualitative Data analysis for applied policy research* in Bryman, A., and Burgess, R.G. (1994) *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, London: Routledge.

The final **Section 6** provides conclusions and recommendations, which are of particular note for central and local government.

2. IDENTITY AND BELONGING

This section explores how respondents described their identity, what it meant to them and how they owned it. It then looks at the relationship between identity and belonging. Respondents' notions of Britishness and British citizenship, and their views on the advantages and disadvantages as well as on issues of rights and responsibilities are examined.

Notions of identity

Respondents' idea of identity was firmly associated with 'who you are'. Identity was described as having many characteristics, rooted in background, values, and personality. These characteristics can be categorised as internal and external as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Characteristics of Identity described by respondents

Identity			
Internal characteristics		External characteristics	
Background	Values and beliefs	Personality	Physical attributes and appearance
Family Culture Religion Origins Place of birth Language Heritage	Moral Spiritual Religious How interact with others Respect and tolerance for others Pride as a Sikh Own ideology	Behaviour How relate to others Sense of self Cognition Interests How perceived by others Own style (e.g. of fashion)	Skin colour Wearing of turban Having a beard Wearing of kara*

*kara is a bangle of religious significance worn by Sikhs

Internal characteristics

The internal characteristics mainly fall into two categories – background, and values and beliefs. Background was described as constituting the family context and the

environment in which a person is born into. The family context was described as comprising the particular ethnic and cultural heritage of the family, as well as that of the wider community with which the family associates and relates. This was felt to encompass and transmit cultural values which became the cultural context for the respondents from their particular heritage. The place and the environment in which respondents were born and lived provided further cultural frameworks from which selective values were adopted. These values tended to complement the values with which respondents had grown up in their families.

“If you’re born into a Sikh family, you have that around you from an early age, and you start to realise it and you start to consider yourself to be part of that as well. You learn things. It is a cultural thing also. Sikhs have specific cultural practices that are quite unique to their community. Then we became part of a wider community, and then you are British as well. You grow up in the North, so there’s a bit of me that when I moved to London identifies as a northerner so there’s various elements that come into it and now we are in East London so you would say you are closer to East London than say West London. So I think all the time there’s a constant filtering and I think that identity is made up by lots of things.”

(Respondent)

“I’m a Yorkshirer and I’m a Sikh and can mix those kinds of things. I may have influences from the subcontinent but I’m British.”

(Respondent)

Many respondents highly valued their background in the construct of their formative identity. Some respondents felt that it was important to maintain this identity, as otherwise there would be ‘distillation’. The fear of distillation was related to a lack of belonging to their own heritage. However it was also generally agreed that identity is not fixed, and that it changes over time and in different circumstances. It was a matter of negotiating their identity in the environments in which respondents found themselves. Identity was thus fluid, changeable and changing, from a base that had been formed within the family and community contexts (see external characteristics below).

“Internally, as you’re growing up, your parents define your identity. It sets how you fit in. Also things like which school you go to, to the friends you have, TV you watch, radio you listen to. All these different things have a big impact on me growing up.”

(Respondent)

Respondents discussed their base identity as reflective of Sikh values and beliefs. They frequently cited examples of Sikh values such as tolerance of others, treating others with respect and equality regardless of class, caste, religious or any other differences. Some also mentioned that to be a Sikh means to be a learner or student of life, facilitating opportunities to learn about other people's values. Many said that they were proud to be Sikhs, as the Sikh religion gave them a framework of moral values, a belief in faith and spirituality, which shapes how they led their everyday lives. Respondents stated that these values and beliefs were compatible with being British.

"Sikhism teaches one to be part of a community, to treat all human beings with respect, to be tolerant of others, and to be just. Even though Sikhism is a religion, it is more like a way of life, so you've got your guidelines."

(Respondent)

"I'm basically British. I appreciate England because the system that we have here, the welfare system, everyone is looked after, and seeing that, I think of Sikhism, helping everyone, all the things Sikhs stand for."

(Respondent)

External characteristics

Identity was also discussed in terms of how others see a person. A person's physical appearance, their skin colour or racial background, artefacts that they regularly wear [e.g, kara (Sikh bangle), turban] were integral to their identity. Of the 62% of respondents who said they wore a turban, 81% reported they wore it for religious reasons and 56% said also because of their cultural identity. The company that a person keeps and is seen with was also said to influence others' perceptions.

"Identity to me is who I am and who I'm around and how people perceive me."

(Respondent)

"Our physical appearance, our turban and the beard are the most distinctive."

(Respondent)

"It's the way you dress, the way you act."

(Respondent)

"It depends on the people you hang around with. If you hang around with a bad lot of people, you tend to drift towards that way."

(Respondent)

Respondents viewed having an identity as critical to their self being, that it is what defines a person in a society and gives them a place in society. Identity was also said to give a person a sense of belonging and a capacity to be part of the wider society.

“I think identity is important in everyday life, like in your work place, at school, in places like that because you need your identity to actually work. It is quite important because it makes you individual to everyone else otherwise you won't have an individual identity. We'd all be the same.”

(Respondent)

“Psychologically, it is very important. I mean, without your identity you are lost and if you don't know where you are coming from, you don't know where you are going to. It's something that guides you in your everyday life, it's because you feel part of something, part of the wider society.”

(Respondent)

The majority of respondents (59%) said that they felt a sense of belonging to their neighbourhood, 38% said to their local authority area and 48% to the UK. Many (67%) also reported that they felt a sense of belonging to Punjab, India. Only 24% said that they did not feel a sense of belonging to any other country.

Flexible and multiple identities

Respondents generally agreed that identity is context specific, that is, it is flexible and negotiable according to the situation. Some referred to this as multiple identities. While the majority of respondents (84%) described themselves as Sikhs, 66% also said that they can have more than one identity at the same time. They said they could be British, or British Sikh, or Sikh, or Punjabi, depending on the situation. If respondents were in the company of other Sikhs then they would see themselves as Punjabis or Sikhs. However, in the company of non-Sikhs, they would see themselves as British Sikhs or British. Additionally, they said they could be identified by their profession (e.g. doctor, car mechanic), by their familial relationship (e.g. son, mother, daughter) and by their social relationships (e.g. friend).

“I'm here (at the group discussion) so I say Sikh. But if I was at a football match then I would say Liverpool supporter. If I was somewhere else I would say 'Asian'. So it depends what group you are with. One minute you can be a Liverpool supporter, then British, then Sikh.”

(Respondent)

"I class myself as Sikh first. So when I go to the gurudwara, I see all my friends, I'm part of that group. When I play hockey, we play together, are together, we have an identity as hockey players".

(Respondent)

It was felt that identity is not static, but that it changes over time as a person grows or moves into different environments.

"You try and fit lots of different identities at the same time and in a way to find a kind of fit into society for where you are. I mean you obviously adapt yourselves to how you are in the workplace, to how you are at home and to how you are with friends, for example. So because of that, your identity is kind of a fluid thing. It's constantly changing and moving around."

(Respondent)

However, views were mixed on whether negotiating of identity in different situations means that it is subject to being compromised. Views ranged from compromising identity to fit into a situation to negotiating identity in a situation without compromising. The latter was discussed as adaptability in this country due to compatibility of Sikh values with the democratic framework of this country.

"I remember back in the days when our fathers and grandfathers came to this country. They had turbans on their head but couldn't get a job so they had to take off their turbans. I think you still find that today. Even if a lot of people have their turbans and their beards. I still think they have to compromise to fit into society and therefore you are giving up your identify just to fit in society."

(Respondent)

"Negotiating and compromising aren't the same thing. It's possible to negotiate without compromising and I think the fact that we're here and the way we are is unique, the way that we have grown up in this country from a very particular background and that merged to this country's environment has created something very unique and that is a negotiated identity in a sense as Sikhs. It is compatible because a lot of the way this country is certainly, the way legal rights of the country, etc are very compatible to Sikhism, it is the rights of religious freedom, democracy, these kinds of things that are very compatible with Sikh ethos, it is not a conflict."

(Respondent)

Meaning of 'British' identity and citizenship

All respondents identified themselves as British and described British identity in various ways. This ranged from identification with culturally iconic items that depicted

images of ‘Britishness’ (e.g. fish and chips) to rights and responsibilities that they felt went with British citizenship. Table 2 describes how the meanings of British identity were discussed.

Table 2 Meanings of British identity by respondents

<i>British identity</i>	<i>Description</i>
Cultural signifiers	fish and chips, pubs, English language, British values
People	multicultural, tolerant, class conscious, respecting others’ beliefs, feeling part of society
Place	living and working in Britain, abiding by the laws of the country

Respondents added that they identified themselves as British Sikhs, which meant maintaining Sikh values as well as living with British values. The majority (99%) reported that they were British citizens and 57% said that they had a strong sense of belonging to the country. Most emphasised feeling comfortable being Sikh and British due to their belief that the values of both were compatible.

“When we talk about being a British citizen, people have this idea that the two things are mutually exclusively, that you can’t be religious or from a particular religious group especially one that hasn’t been founded or doesn’t have deep roots in this country and being a British citizen as well. But that’s wrong, because being British is something that is organic anyway and being British now isn’t what being British was of 10 or 20 years ago and that will still be the case in 20 years from now. We are here and we are changing what British identity is again. Being a Sikh isn’t a mutually exclusive thing. It can be completely compatible to have your faith and to be an equally good citizen as anybody else who considers themselves to be of Church of England.”

(Respondent)

“We are British at the end of the day. We’re all sitting here and all agreeing that we’re comfortable in this country and with most of the values. We’ve not got a problem with anything, because Sikh values are similar.”

(Respondent)

The meaning of British citizenship was associated with having a passport, being born in the country, living in a democratic society and having rights and responsibilities. Many examples of rights and responsibilities were given which are summarised below in Table 3.

Table 3 Respondents' notions of rights and responsibilities

Rights	freedom of speech, freedom of fair trials, free of torture, free from degrading treatment, freedom of expression, right to express opinions without fear of intimidation, right to work, right to vote.
Responsibilities	live peacefully in a multi-cultural society, respect and live by the law of the land, integrate and contribute positively to society, pay taxes, respect neighbours and everyone in society, represent own people (e.g. Sikhs) correctly, not abuse rights.

There was a strong feeling among respondents that while citizens enjoy certain rights, they also have responsibilities to be part of the society. Some respondents felt that the concept of rights and responsibilities was integral to Sikhism, and they fully supported it. They appreciated the need to adapt to societal expectations, but also to act responsibly and to contribute positively to the wider society. Some reported that even though they had opportunities which they appreciated, they had also experienced discrimination, but that it was less severe than in other European countries.

"We should follow the rules of this country. All of us here are probably born in this country anyway. But let's say for example if you came over here, if you come to another country you have to live by their rules. You can't just say we're going to live in your country, take all our rights and do our own thing. Obviously you can't sponge off the state you have to be part of society, a fair society, you've got to learn to live your life and let others live as well. You've got to work. These are values of the Sikh faith anyway. That's easy for Sikhs to do. I think that's why Sikhs find it easy. It's the Sikh culture anyway, you have to follow the rules but Sikhs do that anyway."

(Respondent)

"We've got a responsibility to society as in to contribute to society and be a part of society so like integrate as far as we can on every level of society and get involved as much as we can."

(Respondent)

"Being British is living in a society which is multicultural, where there is freedom of speech up to the point where you are not offending anyone's beliefs, where there is acceptance and tolerance as well as living in a peaceful way."

(Respondent)

“I enjoy a lot of rights living in this country, lot of freedom and have received a lot of help along the way and opportunities, like getting educated and access to health. Even though I have experienced discrimination, I think being part of Britain compared to the rest of Europe in terms of racism I don’t think it is that bad as I’ve spoken to friends in Italy, Austria and Germany.”

(Respondent)

Advantages and disadvantages of British citizenship

Respondents discussed various advantages and disadvantages of British citizenship. Advantages included free health service (NHS), free school education, access to employment opportunities, access to state benefits, and good access to media reporting on what is going on in the world due to UK’s perceived positive status and positioning in the world. Some respondents also mentioned that with the UK passport, travel around the world tended to be hassle free. The right to practice one’s own religion was also appreciated.

“Britain is a country which is well respected globally and you can associate yourself with that identity that this country has achieved a lot in all areas, you know in schools, politics and stuff like that and you’re part of that culture and you’re part of that environment and when you go abroad you know you belong to that country. It’s like the American people say – we’re proud to be American.”

(Respondent)

“I think it is all right to live in this country. I’m allowed to do what I want to do. Gurudwara is open, we are not stopped from coming and praying there. We are not stopped from practicing. We are allowed to wear a kirpan.”

(Respondent)

However, various disadvantages of UK citizenship were mentioned. Some negative aspects on being associated with UK citizens were discussed, especially when abroad (e.g. football hooliganism and excessive drinking). Some difficulties were highlighted when values and views conflicted with the government or with that of the majority of citizens (e.g. going to war with Iraq; and not supported when Sikhs are under attack in different parts of the world).

“We Sikhs have been hard done by less down here and more back home. I think we’re so well integrated in society that we expect something back and we’ve not had that. Like Punjab was under attack and there’s no way this country can say that they weren’t aware of it. The whole world was aware of it. This country did not support Sikhs enough. The way I see is that I put a lot

into this community as British Sikh, and if any Sikh across the world or anyone is being hard done by I'd want to stand up for them because I think that's what this country says. It's good when they go out and help poor kids in Africa, homeless people and animals. But at the same time they can't have double standards."

(Respondent)

There was a strong feeling among some respondents that despite being British citizens, they were not fully accepted in this country. This was explained in terms of their experiences of racism, from being subjected to verbal abuse such as being called names and told 'to go back to your own country' to being physically attacked.

"Whatever you do you belong to Britain, but sometimes I'm not able to feel a part of Britain because of the discrimination. Sometimes you feel that's the way they treat you subconsciously. You don't look the same. I can't really commit to the country, that's the problem."

(Respondent)

"Even being British, even if you're born in Britain, you have certain advantages and disadvantages being whatever ethnic group you're. There are more opportunities than in other places, but it's still less for certain groups of people, like ethnic groups and people coming from different countries, basically."

(Respondent)

Other disadvantages related to being surrounded in an environment where it was difficult to retain the 'Punjabi' language, as respondents generally tended to converse in English. A few mentioned having a feeling of being an 'in-between' citizen – a citizen who is not fully accepted and yet is also unable to retain their specific identity. Although respondents themselves had a strong sense of belonging to the country, their experiences of not being fully accepted led to some feeling that they were outsiders. Yet they had the same experience when in India, the country many also felt they belonged to.

"The thing is here you are not seen as British, and when you go to India you're not an Indian."

(Respondent)

The disadvantages also surfaced when their physical appearances were incorrectly associated with perpetrators of acts that threatened common security. Most of the

respondents reported experiences of forms of negative attitudes directed towards them since the 9/11 and 7/7 events. A few respondents said they felt alienated from the wider society given these experiences. They reported that the 9/11 and 7/7 events had been a 'wake up' call for them. Prior to these events they had considered themselves to be British but experiences of negative attitudes and attacks towards them had led them to re-examine their views. A few respondents on the other hand had not had any negative experiences. They said that they felt British, and those who wore turbans reported that they felt comfortable wearing their turbans and feeling British.

"Since then (9/11 and 7/7), we have been looked up a bit more. Because I wear a turban, people look at me more. When I went to the football match with my cousins, all big lads, turban and beards, we were called Bin Laden. I had people looking at me. People label you, they don't have the understanding."

(Respondent)

"I live in an area where the majority is White people. As soon as 9/11 happened, when I was walking down the street, words of abuse were thrown at me. People at school were trying to pick fights. The majority of my friends understood as I explained it to them. But the average person walking down the street just doesn't know who is a Sikh, who is a Hindu and who is Muslim."

(Respondent)

Conclusion

Young Sikhs generally identified themselves as British and had a strong sense of belonging to the country. Their identity was formulated from a range of sources, including their family and community values, their cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds, the environment in which they lived and their interactions with people from different backgrounds. They described their identity as fluid and negotiable according to the situation. As British citizens, they valued the many advantages conferred on citizens of the country. They firmly believed in rights and responsibilities that came with the citizenship, and viewed these synonymously with their Sikh values. Many however were disappointed that they were not accepted as full citizens of the country.

Since the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, most respondents had experienced some form of negative behaviour towards them from the wider society. A few who had experienced severe forms including physical attacks had reviewed their identification with being British, as they felt alienated. A minority of respondents however reported that they had not experienced any form of negative behaviour towards them and were comfortable with being identified as British.

3. COMMON SECURITY AND COMMUNITY COHESION

Safety and security are among the most concerning factors for citizens of a country. This section examines how young Sikhs felt about their personal safety and their concerns about their treatment from others. It reports on their views on how others perceive them and the possible causes. Respondents' opinions on the importance of community cohesion are also discussed.

Safety and security

The majority of respondents reported (70%) reported that they had experienced verbal or physical abuse because of their identity sometimes or rarely. Only 15% said a lot of the time whereas 15% said never.

Most respondents described their sense of feeling unsafe heighten immediately after the events of 9/11 and 7/7. They emphasised that they had felt unsafe even before these two events, however their fear of safety had increased since then. These events had become the loci of re-framed safety concerns. Respondents reported that the reaction from the wider society ranged from prejudicial behaviour to serious attacks.

“On the second day after the July bombings, my cousin was on the bus and there’s this space right next to her but no one would sit next to her and these two guys they got on the bus and they were like - all these Pakis, they’ve taken up all the jobs and that’s why the police is gone and there’s no security and these bombs are happening, you don’t know what’s going to happen next, and things like that.”

(Respondent)

“After 7/7, I was getting on the train and everybody went quiet and they were looking at my briefcase. I use laptops sometimes, I opened the bag and some wires came out. I showed them that it was a laptop.”

(Respondent)

“We’re not saying we felt safe to begin with. Because you’re different, walking down a street in a White area you’re not going to feel safe...Now we feel that everybody is looking twice at us for the wrong reason and we’re also going to be a bit more alerted. Walking down the road we’re going to be more likely to be attacked or abused than before so the stakes have increased for us.”

(Respondent)

While these types of incidents were not uncommon and had been experienced before 9/11 and 7/7, their nature was reported to have changed from mainly 'racial' to mainly 'religious'. Respondents described how they were wrongly perceived as Muslims and bombers, and subjected to terrorist slanders during these abuses. Being called 'Taliban', 'Osama bin Laden' and 'terrorist', were common epithets. Ironically, these had replaced being called 'Pakis' in the past. The change of name calling from derogatory terms to those that implied causing of ruthless violence was considered offensive. A young Sikh teacher wearing a turban described how he had been nicknamed 'turbanator' by his primary school pupils, which he found distressing.

"I would say that there's a lot more religious intolerance after the bombings, because I did not experience anything before of a religious nature but there's been more anti-religious behaviour towards my friends too. It has certainly been since 9/11."

(Respondent)

"My dad got a lot of abuse. He drives taxis in Birmingham. It got to the extent where they were actually throwing stones at his window screen."

(Respondent)

Some respondents talked about feeling vulnerable in public areas and on public transport (e.g. on the buses or trains). Some said that travelling late in the evening felt unsafe. However, they felt most vulnerable at the thought of another attack like 7/7, as they feared perceptions of and reactions to Sikhs could get worse than they were currently. It reminded some of the security concerns of immediately after the 7/7 attack, and how they had avoided going out for a short period of time for fear of being attacked.

The abuse was not only directed at individuals, but also on the whole Sikh community through attacks on gurudwaras (Sikhs' places of worship) according to some respondents. They described how since the 9/11 and 7/7 events, some gurudwaras had been damaged through arson attacks, abusive graffiti had been written on the walls, and pork left on the premises (mistaking the offensive act for Muslims). It was mentioned that as a result some Sikh temples had had to make the premises more secure.

“A Sikh temple in Leeds was set on fire after 7/7. Police went to the temples and said you’d better be careful. Sikh temples had to pay more money for security and to security companies to watch the temple at night and the money could have been spent on positive things. It was nothing to do with Sikhs.”

(Respondent)

Responding to safety concerns

Many respondents had adopted a range of strategies in response to safety concerns discussed above. Avoidance tactics, defensive reaction and proportional challenge were commonly practised by those who experienced incidents. Some respondents had constructed mental maps of routes and areas, and situations, to be avoided. These also included the times of the day for avoiding them. Others mentioned that they avoided being in close proximity of groups of White people displaying threatening behaviour. If this encounter took place on a street, the response was to cross the road. Female respondents were more likely to avoid these types of situations. A few respondents said that they also challenged the abuse directed at them and that it sometimes worked to their benefit. It depended on how they found the situation and how they felt at the time, including making a proportionate response.

“There is nothing wrong with standing up for yourself. Don’t get me wrong. You should but you should do it in a polite and respectful manner for a start yeah? What I am trying to say is that our Sikhism and Britishness tells us that we should really treat everyone equally.”

(Respondent)

Some respondents reported they were now more vigilant about their surroundings. They described being more observant about the space they were in, of the people around them and that they tried to read any signs of potential abuse towards them. They reported that they were constantly prepared to protect themselves in these situations. There was a general view that attacks on Sikhs had increased since 7/7.

“I do feel if you’re on the bus or on the underground you don’t know what’s going to happen. They may not say anything but it’s always in the back of your mind that something may happen even during the day.”

(Respondent)

“You do feel less safe because if the Sikh temple you go to could be attacked, you could be attacked at any time on the street.”

(Respondent)

Respondents did however discuss feeling safe in areas where people knew them, and in areas where there was a substantial Sikh and or Asian population. Those who commuted to or lived in these areas felt relatively safe.

“Southall is a little Sikh community and nobody really says anything to you because it’s mainly Sikhs living around you anyway. But if you step outside of Southall and go to different places like London you might find it is not the same there.”

(Respondent)

Community Cohesion

Respondents were asked how they got on with people from different backgrounds. Most believed that it was important to mix with other communities and social groups for making societies cohesive and that integration makes people broad minded. Only 42% reported that they were somewhat familiar with the government’s agenda on community cohesion, with 35% stating they were not at all familiar. Many respondents felt that they got on well with other groups and that it was not because they had to but because they wanted to. Many pointed out that this was merely living by their Sikh values, for example, getting on well with people from different backgrounds, being tolerant to others, being righteous and just towards others. Some concern was expressed though that some Sikhs, including young Sikhs, do not integrate well with others. It was felt that they should make an effort to do so as this is their country. Equally, it was felt that young Sikhs who withdraw from integrating with the Sikh community should make an effort to participate in the wider Sikh community, as otherwise they were likely to be disadvantaged.

“You have nothing to gain if you keep yourself to yourself, you just stay with your own community and you all know you don’t liaise with anyone else and you become narrow-minded because you all know it is your beliefs and people in your groups’ beliefs. But integrating with other people, your mind broadens not always in a negative way, but you start to understand people’s perceptions from a different attitude.”

(Respondent)

“There are some Sikh teenagers out there and they are not integrating into Sikh community at all because they think they are British and that’s all. But I don’t think it works out for them. It’s going to be harder in the long run.”

(Respondent)

A major barrier to cohesion was described as other people's perceptions of and attitudes towards Sikhs which threatened better integration between Sikhs and other communities. Only 2% thought that others perceived them as British, though 30% felt they were perceived as British Asians or British Sikhs. Nearly one in seven (13%) however felt that they were perceived as foreigners, 10% said as immigrants and 7% as refugees/asylum seekers. Some respondents believed that lack of knowledge about Sikhs led to misconceptions among the wider society (e.g. that Sikhs are extremists and terrorists). This concerned many respondents as in their view, instead of there being opportunities to integrate, the effect was the opposite.

Some respondents felt that the treatment of Sikhs as outsiders or 'others' was said to lead to missed opportunities to integrate with the wider society. This, it was felt, was also due to racism. Examples were given of neighbours who had not welcomed Sikhs when they had moved into areas predominantly occupied by White people. A respondent shared the experience of his family moving into an area of mainly White residents and said that none of the neighbours spoke to them. However, he reported that when a White family moved into a nearby property, they were welcomed by the neighbours who accepted them in the local community.

It was believed by many respondents that Sikhs, particularly young Sikhs, on the other hand, had a different attitude, and that they proactively mixed well with people from different backgrounds. Many respondents were of the view that Sikhs generally did not create any barriers to mix and did not discriminate against others. They accepted that in the past this may not have been the case with some older people, who may not have mixed well due to their limited ability to speaking the English language, and lack of time due to their concentration on establishing themselves economically. However, it was believed that Sikhs now took proactive actions to integrate. It was reported that in their settling patterns, Sikhs may initially live in an area with a high proportion of Sikhs, which tended to be deprived areas. However when their economic circumstances improved, they often moved into areas which were less deprived and had lower proportions of ethnic minority communities. However, this did not always result in the desired effect of integrating on an equal basis.

Respondents were extremely concerned that misconceptions about Sikhs were prevalent. They emphasised the need to build knowledge about Sikhs in the wider society through dissemination of appropriate information. It was felt that this was important to build a cohesive society. Perceptions about Sikhs are discussed more in Section 4.

Conclusion

The key markers of a different form of negative attitude towards Sikhs that affected their safety and security in recent times were the 9/11 and 7/7 events, compared to negative attitudes before then. Respondents gave many examples of attacks on individuals and on their community through gurdwaras (Sikhs' places of worship). These attacks were believed to be mainly due to misconceptions about Sikhs who were perceived to be Muslims. The association of Muslims with terrorism and extremism was extended to Sikhs by the wider society. The impact had been of increased fear of safety among young Sikhs who had developed various strategies in response. They were a mix of 'avoidance' and incident-challenging nature.

Many respondents however felt that misconceptions about Sikhs threaten the formation of a cohesive society. They themselves believed that they were tolerant of others and proactive in their approach to integrate. But the negative reaction towards them was perceived to be unhelpful in building cohesive communities. It was believed that there was a need to build knowledge about Sikhs in the wider society to improve community cohesion. Many respondents were positive about the proactive contribution from Sikhs to promote community cohesion.

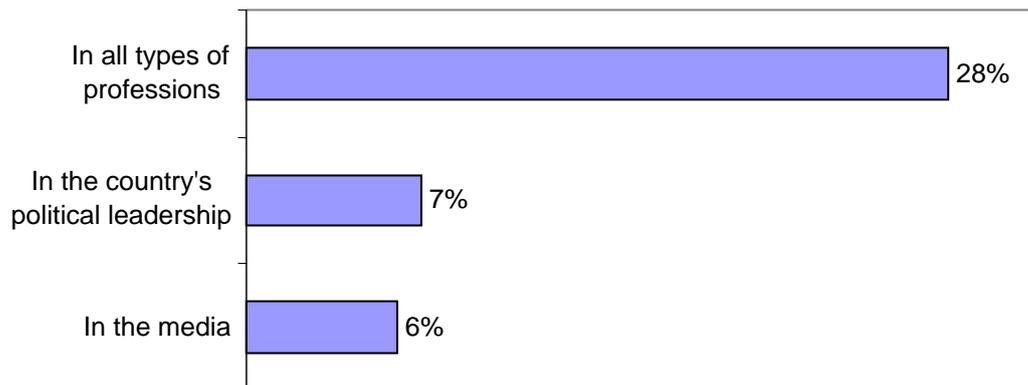
4. IMAGE AND REPRESENTATION

The representation of Sikhs in the media, public and political life are explored in this section. Young Sikhs' opinions on whether there are appropriate and adequate representations of Sikhs, and whether the portrayals of Sikhs are helpful or not, are examined. Their views on the benefits of promoting better representation of Sikhs are also discussed.

Representation of Sikhs

There was a consensus among most respondents that there is very low representation of Sikhs generally in employment, media and politics.

Fig 1 Respondents' level of agreement about how well Sikhs are represented



Base 87

Representations in the media

There was much concern about representation of Sikhs and Asians in the media, which was often perceived to be negative. It was felt that Sikhs were depicted as fundamentalists, extremists and 'Talibans'.

"There is not much knowledge about different cultures within the country. We are constantly being called Bin Laden, Taliban, even if it is a female wearing a turban. And it is common for people not knowing about Sikhs. It's not their fault, It's the schools, the media, the government – there is no information given about Sikhs."

(Respondent)

Many respondents felt that the representation of the cultural values of Sikhs in the media tended to be negative. For example, some mentioned that Sikh parents were portrayed as pushy and status conscious, shaping the lives of their children through their controlling behaviour. Also, the media was perceived to give the message that Sikh parents influenced their children to pursue a narrow range of professions like medicine, law, pharmacy or accountancy. Many respondents said that through these representations, the suggestion was that Sikh and Asian parents dissuaded their children from entering a wider range of employment sectors, for example, the performing arts and sales and marketing. Respondents felt that this was a simplistic and an unrealistic reflection of Sikh parents who wanted their children to do well in life and make rational career choices that would facilitate their long term economic stability.

“Asian and Sikh parents are shown as wanting their children to be doctors and accountants, or something similar. Most parents want their children to do well in life - they rightly say you will have economic stability if you are in a professional career, for example, if you are a doctor or an accountant.”
(Respondent)

There was a general feeling that there had been very few, if any, programmes that included Sikhs or programmes about Sikhs on television. Concern was expressed that a lack of television programmes about Sikhs made it harder for a better and improved understanding about them in the wider society. Television was seen as a powerful medium of communication of information. Some respondents gave the example of good coverage of Christians and Muslims on television, which in their view had helped to inform the wider society about their backgrounds, cultural and religious life.

Due to limited information about Sikhs in the wider society, many respondents felt that it led to confusion about their background and general inaccurate identification with Muslims. This was partly explained by the fact that some Muslims wear turbans as do some Sikhs. Although the styles of turbans differ, and would be known among those who are aware of their backgrounds, the wider society was believed to be generally unaware. The consequence was a lack of knowledge resulting in a negative impact, for example, in the form of abuse.

“I think it’s all about understanding what Sikhism is about and what Sikh people are about. If you understand, you can appreciate, because people get scared about a turban and a beard. They feel intimidated, I think. We’re not saying ‘be a Sikh’. We’re not trying to convert you or anything like that. Just raising awareness.”

(Respondent)

“Twenty years ago, British people, the older generation, generally knew who Sikhs were because of World Wars I and II in which Sikhs fought for the British. Today’s generation has absolutely no idea who Sikhs are, what their contribution is. It is absolutely disrespectful.”

(Respondent)

Respondents wanted to make it clear that they were highlighting these concerns not because they felt that abuse should be directed at Muslims, on the contrary, they did not want any abuse directed at the majority of Muslims who in their view were law abiding citizens. Respondents wanted the wider society to recognise them as Sikhs, and be informed about who they are so that they could be enabled to participate fully in society with other communities.

When there had been opportunities to show Sikhs in the media, respondents opined that the media instead tended to portray negative images. Only 2% believed that the portrayal of Sikhs was accurately represented in the media. An example was given of the negative and disproportionate media reporting of Sikhs objecting to the performance of a play in Birmingham, which in some respondents’ view contained offensive references to their religion. They said that the media had only reported about the breakout of a small scuffle on the last night, suggesting it was an act from Sikh extremists, when there had been the week-long peaceful demonstrations by Sikhs outside the theatre which went unreported.

“If someone takes a mick out of my guru or of a gurudwara, it is offensive to me because I’m a practicing Sikh. But to someone who is less practicing, they may not see that as offensive because they don’t really know where I’m coming from. Just because I feel strongly does not mean I am extremist. The Muslims are seen as terrorists and fundamentalists, because they’ve got strong feelings they’re not always extremists, they’ve just got strong feelings.”

(Respondent)

There was a strong view among respondents that it was important to represent Sikhs with turbans in the media and in the public life. They could only think of one turban wearing Sikh on television who appeared in various roles: as a presenter, a comedian, or a discussant on programmes about arts.

“The Sikh with the turban, the Scottish geezer on TV is actually good. He’s a comedian but strikes the balance.”

(Respondent)

It was felt that if any serious issues about Sikhs were reported in programmes, the views of Sikhs were generally not sought like they were from Muslims in similar situations. A few respondents said that they had resorted to writing to TV channels asking them to show programmes about Sikhs.

“We sent e-mails to TV channels asking them to show programmes about Sikhs. Just representing Sikhs and showing what Sikhs are about and showing differences between religions. From TV you may get to know that people are different. Sikhs are not Muslims. I wear a turban and it doesn’t mean I am a Muslim.”

(Respondent)

Representation of Sikhs in sports

The visibility of a Sikh, Monty Panesar, in the national cricket team was viewed positively and with pride by most respondents. They considered him to be a role model and a testimony of the competency of Sikhs to be able to play sport at the national level and represent this country. Representations of other Asians were also viewed positively, for example, of the boxer Amir Khan. Respondents wanted to see more national representations of Sikhs in a wider range of sports to inform young Sikhs of the opportunities and possibilities and encourage their participation. At this point in time, it was felt that there were not enough Sikhs represented in national sports and in sporting events.

“The cricket sport has a Sikh. All the papers every time are reporting about him and he’s got praised and he’s got a lot of attention. And he’s good. He’s a Sikh. He’s got the beard and the turban as well. He’s a good representation.”

(Respondent)

“It’s not enough we have one Sikh cricketer.”

(Respondent)

Representation of Sikhs in public and political life

Respondents expressed disappointment that there were no visible Sikh MPs or other prominent Sikhs in public life. Only 7% believed that Sikhs were well represented in the country's political life.. The lack of a turban wearing Sikh MP was not only viewed as a missed opportunity to raise awareness about Sikhs in the country but also in national politics. It was felt that this representation would also contribute to demonstrating that Sikhs are an inclusive part of the wider society.

“I think places where we should be represented and we are not is in government mainly. I mean we’ve got doctors, lawyers and professionals like that but we haven’t got enough MPs”

(Respondent)

By being in the public life, it was believed that the media would report about their achievements, which in turn would generate interest among the general public about them and their backgrounds. It was felt that this would also provide a great boost to young Sikhs who would view them as role models, and aspire to achieve to their level if not higher. The presence of Sikh women in public life was also considered important for their role model attributes and for challenging assumptions that Sikh women's upbringing is culturally constrained and inhibits them from participating in economic and public life.

The lack of adequate representation of Sikhs in the media, sports, political and public life was not only perceived to contribute to misconceptions about Sikhs in the wider public but that it also burdened individual Sikhs to constantly explain who they are. Some respondents cited an additional consequence. They discussed how they constantly had to explain about their Sikh background, cultural and religious values and their way of life to non-Sikhs in work and social environments. They complained how they had to constantly correct misconceptions and that it not only became a tiring exercise but also increasingly instilled in them feelings of being alienated and excluded from the wider society.

“I find myself explaining over and over again to my colleagues and other people what being a Sikh means. They still ask my views specifically after nearly every reporting of terrorists activities related to Muslims. I just find it very tiring having to do that again and again.”

(Respondent)

Some respondents discussed other negative views held about Sikhs in the British society. For example, that the cultural practice of arranged marriages was perceived as oppressive, particularly for women. A few respondents also reported that Sikhs were perceived to have a high proportion of alcohol abusers, but that the circumstances were not contextualised.

“There is so much hype about arranged marriages in the media. Just because you hear about a couple of arranged marriages going a bit sour, everyone, or let’s say, White people think that arranged marriage is a bad thing. They forget that most of them are a success.”

(Respondent)

“The alcoholic image of Sikhs has always been there, the idea of the working men type club thing where a lot of young Sikhs like our fathers came here without their families first. And I suppose their only social outlet was to go out and have a few pints.”

(Respondent)

Some respondents were concerned that Sikhs were perceived as an inward looking people who did not mix with the wider society. It was felt that this was less the case now as young Sikhs mixed well with all groups in the British society. It was explained that in the past it had been difficult for older people to mix as they tended to have low English language speaking skills. Many respondents felt that the older generation had also experienced a more ‘tough’ time as they often had to make many compromises to ‘fit in’, for example by changing their appearances just to get a job.

A few respondents mentioned that some representations of Sikhs were positive - of peaceful, sociable, hardworking people who resisted claiming benefits, and who participated in civic life and led their lives as responsible citizens. But it was felt that such views among non-Sikhs were rare and generally found amongst those who had got to know Sikhs. Some respondents lamented the fact that about twenty years or so ago, there was a better understanding about Sikhs generally which was not found in the younger population. This was attributed to there being more awareness about how Sikhs had fought in the British army in the two world wars and had gained a reputation for being fearsome warriors.

“Twenty years ago, British people, the older generation, generally knew who Sikhs were because of World Wars I and II. Today’s generation has

absolutely no idea who Sikhs are, what their contribution is. It is absolutely disrespectful.”

(Respondent)

Some respondents stated that they had noticed differential treatment towards them compared to their peers since primary school. They described experiences of racism, feeling as outsiders and being excluded from activities despite making concerted efforts to mix and belong. Again, the lack of awareness about Sikhs in the wider society and there being very few, if any, positive images of Sikhs in the social, public and political life and in national sports were explained as contributing factors to these experiences. While respondents recognised the specificity of racism in the country towards people of colour, they also believed that better information about them would alleviate some experiences of racism. Respondents felt that the average person on the street does not understand what being a Sikh means, and why some Sikhs wear a turban.

Some respondents were disturbed by various misconceptions about Sikhs. They reported being perceived as ‘illegal immigrants’ or ‘immigrants who are only here to claim benefits’, accused of not speaking English, being a burden on services, and labelled as terrorists or extremists. In respondents’ view, these misconceptions fuelled unfair and abusive acts towards them. Generally respondents felt that since 9/11 there was less tolerance towards Sikhs.

Attitudes towards Sikhs have changed. People think we are Muslims and immigrants. For example, when we had the June event in Hyde Park to commemorate June 84 massacres in Punjab, a cabbie shouted, ‘I wonder how many of them are on social’. My point is that basically if we’re not looked at as Muslims then they think we’re immigrants trying to claim social. I went up to him and said, ‘Do you know what mate, if you don’t know what we are or who we are or what we stand for then you shouldn’t be saying something like that, because we Sikhs are hard working yeah’.”

(Respondent)

Many respondents stated from their experiences that once people from other communities got to know them and about them, by understanding their religion, their background, their culture and their way of life, then relationships improved. They wanted this evidence to be used effectively by the government. Many called on the government to do more to promote Sikhs as an inclusive community in the wider

society. More representation in the public and political spheres, more and appropriate representation in the media, in sport, cultural and social fabric of the society was seen as progress in the right direction. It was also felt that it would also contribute to promoting cohesive communities.

Conclusion

There was overwhelming agreement and disappointment that Sikhs are greatly under-represented in the media, sport, public and political spheres. Lack of representation in national politics and public life was viewed as disadvantageous both to the Sikh community and to the wider society. Sikhs did not have role models to aspire to, they felt alienated and excluded from the wider society. The wider society lacked awareness about Sikhs and exercised unfairness and racism towards them, based on misconceptions about them.

The misconceptions were mainly seen as the result of a lack of information about Sikhs in the wider society. It was felt that the media had a key role to play in promoting more and appropriate representations of Sikhs, particularly about turban wearing Sikhs and Sikh women. The few positive representations of Sikhs in the media were greatly appreciated as were their value to the Sikh community and to the wider society in terms of raising awareness and dispelling misconceptions.

Respondents also believed that the government had a key role to play in enabling and promoting representations of Sikhs in the national and public spheres. It was felt that the government could do a lot more in promoting awareness about Sikhs through appropriate information dissemination and of enabling facilitation to exchange information with other communities.

5. OPPORTUNITIES, BARRIERS AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

This section examines respondents' views on employment opportunities available to Sikhs, and their decisions on career choices. It describes the challenges they face in the employment sector and how they respond to them. It then reports on respondents' views on how the government could help to improve awareness about and opportunities for Sikhs.

Employment areas in which Sikhs are perceived to be doing well

Respondents cited a narrow range of employment areas in which they said Sikhs are doing well. Their perceptions were based on knowledge about their friends and relatives, and from other acquaintances in the community. The areas in which Sikhs were perceived to do well included: in own business (including corner shops), Information Technology, and in professional occupations (e.g. lawyers, medical doctors, pharmacists, dentists, opticians, accountants, engineers). It was stated that some also enter the teaching profession and work in the public sector. There was a general view that Sikhs tend to choose professional careers instead of taking generalist opportunities in which they mostly progress to operational management levels only. Many respondents believed that those who go on to undertake further studies tend to choose professional careers, or set up their business (including corner shops).

Employment areas in which Sikhs are perceived to be not doing well

Public sector employment was perceived to be an area where Sikhs are not doing well. For example, it was stated that in the public sector, Sikhs and Asians tend to be employed at the lower levels and may progress up to middle management level but rarely into strategic management positions (e.g. heads of service or in higher positions of Directors and Chief Executives).

"The local council I work for, I think 16% of their employees are from ethnic minorities. I'd say 50% are cleaners. When you go to senior management, you have influence. I see the odd Asian and no-one with turban."

(Respondent)

It was reported that not many Sikhs are employed in the sales and marketing sector. Other areas where Sikhs are not doing well were described as arts, media, sport, politics and academia.

Many respondents stated that Sikhs and Asians often set up their own businesses due to limited opportunities in other employment sectors. However despite the wide retail experience among Sikhs and Asians, opportunities with big retailers were found to be limited.

“In London 76% of all independent retailers are non-Whites. Yet we have no Asian people working in big retail companies at senior management level. I work in one and I am the only one, having started at the bottom and now I am a manager.”

(Respondent)

Reasons for choice of careers

Many respondents cited parental encouragement and guidance in their choice of careers. They discussed being advised to get a stable job. They were appreciative of the support they got from their parents.

“I’m an optician because it’s a stable occupation with a half decent salary and a lot of opportunities in the field. My dad just said do a decent degree where you’re guaranteed a job.”

(Respondent)

A few also mentioned that work style preferences influenced their choice of careers (e.g. choosing to be a pharmacist as that did not involve a 9 to 5 office job). Whereas for some, it was a visible lack of Sikhs in specific jobs that prompted them to seek employment in that area as one respondent said that as there weren’t enough Asians in the police force, he chose to become a police officer. He saw advantages for the Sikh community too.

Some just followed the footsteps of their fathers, for example, one respondent studied for a degree in business economics to go into business. Another cited that her father is a medical doctor and she just followed into that profession.

There was also realism among respondents about the opportunities in the employment sector. For example, some reported selecting those areas where it was perceived that there would be possibilities of successful outcomes.

“You choose what is easier to get into. Sometimes careers like in the media, or TV or something like that is extremely hard and nearly impossible for say a person with a beard or a turban. So most people would say let’s not even go along that path. Let’s choose something where they don’t need to look at you.”

(Respondent)

Where respondents had not been able to get the job of their choice, they had taken up other forms of employment until they got the opportunity to get into their preferred professional sector. For example, a respondent with a degree in computer engineering was working as a customer services advisor and was hopeful for an opportunity in the studied subject.

Barriers

A key barrier was cited as discrimination in the work place. Nearly six in ten (59%) said that young Sikhs are most disadvantaged in employment opportunities. Many respondents felt that generally there were limited opportunities in the employment market for ethnic minority people.

In some areas, it was felt that Sikhs are not given opportunities despite them having the relevant skills. For example, it was mentioned that Sikhs choosing to go into sales and marketing would have as good skills as non-Sikhs, but were perceived to rarely get jobs in that sector. A few respondents gave examples of not succeeding in securing promotions and being pre-informed by colleagues that they would not be successful in their attempts due to discrimination in the workplace.

Some respondents strongly felt that Sikhs’ experience latent or hidden form of discrimination in work places. Nearly a third (31%) reported that they had experienced discrimination or unfair treatment at work. It was felt that White people sometimes see Sikhs to be less able than them and that this was reflected in the seniority of jobs occupied by Sikhs. They also felt that their visibly distinct

appearance affected their employment opportunities, for example, it was believed by some that they would not get a job in the media (because of wearing a turban). A few cited other employment areas which would pose restrictions for them, for example, in the fire services, because as far as they knew, fire services did not have appropriate fire helmets for turban wearing Sikhs.

Some respondents believed that perceptions about their behaviour also contributed to experiences of disappointment in securing employment. For example, some respondents reported that in their experience, some organisations wrongly believed that Sikhs do not participate in work-related social events which is perceived as a disadvantage for the company as social events are seen as important contributors to improving working relationships and leading to better performance. Respondents felt such misperceptions about Sikhs contributed to their being discriminated against in employment opportunities.

In some industries for example, construction, it was reported that it is a White dominated industry in which Sikhs or even Asians '*stick out*', and that impacts negatively on their chances of promotions. It was felt that these employers were generally not willing to take on the challenge of employing and supporting Sikhs in higher positions.

"Often employers don't want to take a chance, like in the construction industry. They are reluctant to give you management jobs because you stick out like a sore thumb among all the White managers and it is not seen to be a good thing for clients."

(Respondent)

Some respondents also discussed how future professional opportunities can be curtailed in early life. A respondent who had wanted to become a professional hockey player gave another dimension of '*not fitting in*'. He explained that he was not selected in the school hockey team because he was told that he did not 'fit in' and that mapped the end of his ambition to become a professional hockey player. He was not given reasons for why he did not 'fit in' and he interpreted it that it was due to him

being from a different ethnic background when compared with the rest of the team members who were all White.

But despite these experiences, there was optimism.

“There is obviously discrimination at work but I think we should be even stronger than that. I think we should have the strength in ourselves to make a change in the world.

(Respondent)

Many respondents did not let the disappointments deter them from pursuing their ambitions. They were determined to overcome these obstacles by working hard and finding ways of pushing forward with confidence and with a positive attitude.

Does the government help?

There was general agreement that the government can do more to promote awareness about and opportunities for Sikhs. Only 9% believed that the government understands social issues affecting Sikhs, and slightly less (8%) felt that the government understands the social disadvantages experienced by Sikhs in this country. While some respondents were aware of the government's initiatives to encourage inter-faith teaching in schools, it was believed that the effort was far from sufficient to make an impact.

There was a strong feeling among respondents that if the government promoted equality for all, where all people were recognised as equals, then there was less likelihood of problems discussed in this report. For example, it was believed that the barriers that existed between the government and some communities (e.g. between the government and Muslims) had led to a few Muslims attacking their own country (e.g. 7/7 bombings).

Many respondents opined that the government did not acknowledge Sikhs as an integral part of the British society, and some believed that it actively set out to treat them differently. For example, a few respondents mentioned that the police in this country was asking the Punjab police in India to show them how to deal with Sikhs in the UK. There was a strong view among these respondents that Punjab police uses excessive brutality, and there were fears that this kind of approach would be used

against Sikhs in this country. Respondents cited this as an example of making communities feel alienated and treated as outsiders to the country's systems.

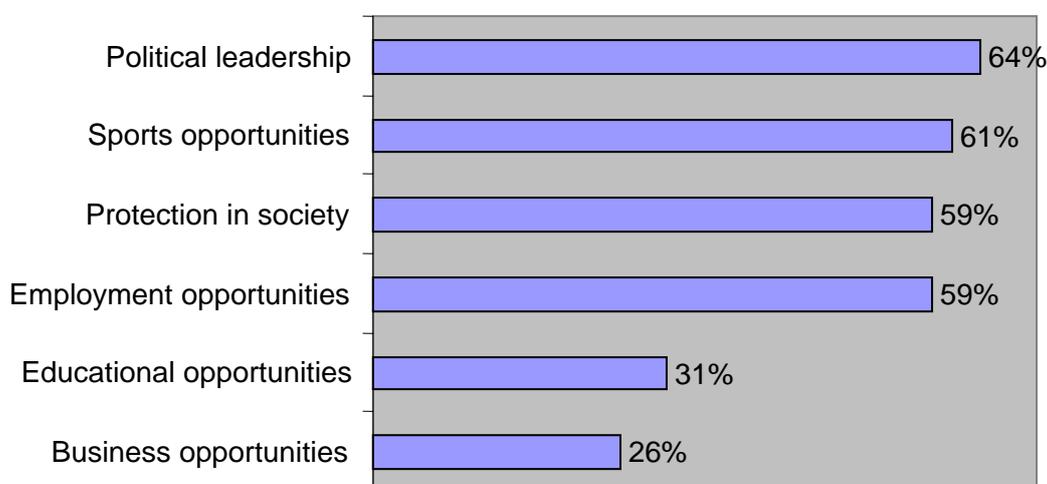
“The things like the government has done, like the Home secretary having gone to Punjab Police Academy to give a speech about anti-terrorism and to learn how the police should deal with Sikhs here. It is totally the wrong place to go because the Punjab police force is known by human rights organisations around the world for the excesses of brutality and force against people.... I just think the British government should not do that.”

(Respondent)

It was strongly believed that the government does not sufficiently support tackling of discrimination in the employment market, disadvantaging many Sikhs in their to gain employment matched to their skills and potential. The government was also perceived not to do enough to enable adequate representation of Sikhs generally and particularly in politics. It was felt that there was a need to have more politicians from different ethnic minority communities, including Sikhs, and that they need to be nominated not only from areas with large ethnic minority populations, but across the country.

There was a strong perception among respondents that the Sikh community does not get enough government funding compared to other communities. It was believed that this disadvantages the Sikh community in its ability to raise awareness about Sikhs generally and to support the community to improve their social and economic conditions. However respondents also were of the view that Sikh gurdwaras can also do more.

Fig 2 Areas in which Sikhs are perceived to be disadvantaged by percentage of respondents.



Base 87

Fig 2 shows that the majority of respondents felt that Sikhs were disadvantaged in political leadership, followed by sports opportunities, protection in society and employment opportunities

What should the Sikh gurudwaras do?

Respondents felt that Sikh gurudwaras could do more to support and empower young Sikhs to participate more fully in society. Criticism was levelled at the limited scope of the gurudwaras when potentially they could have constructive influence externally to improve the well being of Sikhs, which was opined to be within Sikh gurudwaras' remit.

"I think a lot of work needs to be done in the infrastructure of the Sikh community. If that work was done, then it could have a big impact externally, whether it be on government policy or service providers. Look how much finance the Sikh community has got in the gurudwaras, but there is no backing or promoting to build the infrastructure."

(Respondent)

"Older people don't want to do that. They'd rather spend on building new gurudwaras. Young people want to get involved but don't know how to. Then there's the odd group like SHRG (Sikh Human Rights Group) who do centralised community things but don't have the facilities they need."

(Respondent)

Some respondents offered practical suggestions on how the gurudwaras could help young people, for example to break into the media industry for appropriate reporting of Sikh community and for adequate representation in the media. Examples were given of how the Muslim community had been successful in managing the media.

“The Sikh community has a part to play to increase its own representation and could achieve a lot. If you put the money into it then you could have a small academy on media training for young Sikhs. That’s how Sikhs can get into this industry. Then once you break down barriers you can get into mainstream industry.”

(Respondent)

“After 9/11 and the London bombings, the Muslim council was quick to say Islam is a peaceful religion, we condemn this and they had a couple of church leaders too supporting them. But there were no Sikhs...quite a few Sikhs have been beat up and called ‘Paki’ or ‘Bin Laden’ for it yet we did not take the opportunity to condemn it or say in public that we’re not for it either. There are half a million of us here and I don’t see why we have so little voice.”

(Respondent)

“I think the fact that we haven’t got that representation is a downfall in our community. If you look at the Muslim community they stand united. I mean they might have divides in their community but when it comes to representing themselves they all unite together. Whereas in our community, our weakness is we don’t stand together united, so it is hard to represent us.”

(Respondent)

Many respondents felt that there was not sufficient engagement by the gurudwaras with young people, which disadvantaged them as their views were not formally considered. They also seemed disenchanted by the current operational infrastructures in gurudwaras.

“The thing is with gurudwaras, they don’t have facilities for young people.”

(Respondent)

“It’s the politics within the gurudwaras and committees. I’m not involved in that environment.”

(Respondent)

However, there was optimism that as in the past Sikhs had successfully challenged issues affecting them, there could be opportunities for gurudwaras and young Sikhs to work together more constructively.

“Sikhs have done quite well to have the right to wear a turban and kirpan⁴ whereas in other European countries you don’t have the same rights.”
(Respondents)

Respondents firmly believed that there was a need for a reputable Sikh organisation to represent the views of Sikhs to the government and others.

What should the government do?

Respondents opined that the government could do a lot more to facilitate fuller participation of Sikhs in the wider society (e.g. politically and economically). Four key areas were identified by respondents where the government was asked to do more to support young Sikhs:

- a) by adding a separate category of ‘Sikh’ in the official social statistics monitoring systems;
- b) by using its influence to raise awareness about Sikhs in the wider society;
- c) by actively promoting equal opportunities for Sikhs in all areas, including employment, and tackling the distinct discrimination against them;
- d) by providing appropriate funding to Sikh organisations to empower young Sikh people to realise their potential and be active citizens

The four areas are discussed in more detail below.

a) Add a separate category of ‘Sikh’ in the official social statistics monitoring

Many respondents strongly believed that the government should monitor Sikhs as a separate ethnic category, as they have been recognised as such by the law of this land. It was felt that by being counted under the category Asian or Indian, the distinct discrimination experienced by Sikhs because of their visibly different identity (e.g. wearing of turban) gets hidden within the overall statistics. Due to a lack of adequate social statistics on Sikhs, respondents believed that it was difficult to map the scale of disadvantage experienced by Sikhs highlighted in this report. It was felt that they get masked under the experiences of British Asian Indian or Asian Indian or Indian. For example, respondents said that in some organisations, ethnic monitoring statistics

⁴ Kirpan is a religious symbol in the form of dagger usually worn by baptised Sikhs.

might show that Asian Indians were well represented, but the organisation could be discriminating against Sikhs which would not show up in the statistics

In the absence of a specific category for Sikhs, 60% of respondents said that they ticked themselves as British Asian Indian in ethnic monitoring forms which mostly use the current census categories. Just under four in ten (38%) said that they ticked other Asian and 2% said they ticked 'Other' and wrote Sikh. This shows inconsistencies and difficulties in adequately monitoring the progress Sikhs were making.

"The government doesn't acknowledge who we are so how can they give us opportunities?"

(Respondent)

"I used to tick Indian then I thought I had nothing to do with India. I consider myself Sikh and there is no box there."

(Respondent)

"It's a start, isn't it? If you start monitoring, you can see where the shortfalls are. If we are doing brilliantly in every single area, then the government doesn't have to do anything. But until you have the facts and figures, you can't really make decisions. You need to monitor Sikhs separately and then see how it goes."

(Respondent)

.b) Influence to raise awareness about Sikhs in the wider society

Many respondents believed that the government had a critical role to play in raising awareness about Sikhs, to show who Sikhs are and to promote them among the wider society. It was suggested this could be done in three ways, by directly funding initiatives that help to raise awareness, for example, in educational establishments, community facilities and in work places by providing information about Sikhs and encouraging discussion. Secondly, by supporting and influencing initiatives to produce documentaries about Sikhs (e.g. for showing on TV). It was felt that this would not only raise awareness about Sikhs among the general population, but that it would also help to challenge negative images about Sikhs. Respondents felt that there tend to be many media programmes about Christians and Muslims, which was noted to be a good thing. However there were hardly any programmes about Sikhs.

“I think there should be some sort of media campaign, funded by the government to promote Sikh community and explain our way of life, like documentaries.”

(Respondent)

Thirdly, by increasing representation of Sikhs in all areas, particularly in areas of high visibility (e.g. in political representation). A partnership approach was thought to be a way forward whereby Sikhs are encouraged to put themselves forward.

“The government should encourage Sikhs to go into politics. Sikhs should also try.”

(Respondent)

c) Actively promoting equal opportunities for Sikhs in all areas and tackling the distinct discrimination against them

Many respondents felt that the government should give assurances that discrimination against Sikhs would be tackled, including in employment. The majority (59%) asked the government to prioritise action on employment opportunities for Sikhs. It was stated that a separate ethnic category for monitoring is important (see (a) above) to understand the patterns of discrimination against Sikhs and address them appropriately.

It was felt that there should be checks and procedures in place so that discrimination is tackled and Sikhs are treated fairly. For example, it was felt that organisations that discriminate against Sikhs should be held to account and penalised, and that employers should take responsibility and exercise disciplinary action against employees who discriminate.

Some respondents felt that job opportunities since 7/7 bombings had become more scarce for Sikhs, particularly in the private sector due to misconceptions about them. Although some respondents with turbans reported that it is easier now to get a job than it was during their parents' time, nonetheless it was felt that there is still discrimination against those who are visibly different, e.g. those who wear a turban.

A respondent who had started wearing a turban recently reported that he experienced a more negative response to him now than when he was clean shaven. He also felt his job opportunities had become limited as a result.

d) Provide appropriate funding to Sikh organisations to empower young Sikh people to realise their potential and be active citizens

Many respondents believed that the government should provide assistance to Sikhs, as they do to other communities, to deal with specific social issues affecting them. The government was encouraged to liaise and work with gurudwaras and forge improved links with the community. The government was asked to actively inform gurudwaras and other appropriate organisations what it could do for Sikhs and to find out from Sikhs what they needed.

A few respondents mentioned that the Local Authority (LA) of the locality where they attended the gurudwara had visited them to find out what the LA could do for them. This was seen to be a positive step in the right direction.

“A few weeks ago a couple of representatives from Greenwich council came to one of the youth seminars in Erith Gurudwara and they asked, ‘What can we do for you?’. We need more of that.”

(Respondent)

Many respondents were of the view that that there should be more appropriate funding made available to Sikh organisations to empower young Sikhs to realise their potential and to participate fully in society. Some respondents opined that Sikhs get less funding compared to other communities, but felt the community also had to ask.

“I don’t think we are getting our slice of the pie in anything and that may be because we have not demanded enough or maybe it’s even due to our success? We are not being helped or awarded funding like other communities are getting a lot of help. We are not getting anything because we stay quiet.”

(Respondent)

“I’d like to say to the government that we’ve done well and we’re law abiding citizens. I think we have definitely made a positive contribution to society and I don’t think we’ve caused too many problems in comparison to a number of other groups in a number of ways...I’m not saying give us a reward. I’m saying don’t knock us for it, give us a helping hand so that we can improve in areas we may be lacking.”

(Respondent)

Conclusion

Many respondents reported that their choice of careers had been shaped by their realistic expectations of the employment market. Some reported advice from their parents had helped them to choose 'safe careers' in which Sikhs were known to do well and which were believed to help to sustain their economic well-being.

Experiences of and views about discrimination in the employment market were disappointing for some, for example, in the public sector (e.g. lack of opportunities in senior management jobs in Local Authorities) and in some private sector industries (e.g. construction). The disadvantages of the particular forms of discrimination against some Sikhs because of their visible difference (e.g. wearing a turban) were felt to be strong contributory factors in the limited opportunities in the employment sector but this information was not easily available due to the way ethnic monitoring statistical are currently collected (i.e. no distinctive category for Sikhs). Despite these knock backs, many respondents wanted to fulfil their ambitions by trying harder and continuing to have a positive outlook for the future.

Many respondents believed that lack of awareness about Sikhs and misconceptions about their behaviour in the labour market contributed to prejudicial treatment against them. Respondents believed that the government could do a lot more to assist young Sikhs to be fully active citizens in society in various ways: by adding a separate category of 'Sikh' in the official social statistics monitoring systems; by using its influence to raise awareness about Sikhs in the wider society; by actively promoting equal opportunities for Sikhs in all areas, including employment, and tackling the distinct discrimination against them; and by providing appropriate funding to Sikh organisations to empower young Sikh people to realise their potential and be active citizens

The role of the gurudwaras was also criticised for not promoting the well being of young Sikhs. Some respondents proposed that gurudwaras need to widen their involvement in supporting young people to do well in the wider society and to influence relevant government policy. There were also suggestions for having a co-ordinated intervention and response from Sikhs to challenge misconceptions about Sikhs in the wider society, including in the media.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Young Sikhs are vibrant, dynamic, forward looking and eagerly seeking to become active citizens in the country. They want to participate fully and inclusively in the country's economic, cultural, social and political spheres. Despite various experiences of disappointment and perceived disadvantage due to who they are (i.e. of a visible minority group), respondents in this research displayed a positive outlook and were proud to be British and Sikhs.

Identity and belonging are important to young Sikhs. Respondents described how identity is shaped by many factors, internal and external, is flexible in different circumstances, and constantly evolving and changing. Respondents felt comfortable being Sikh and British, asserting that Sikh values are compatible with rights and responsibilities that go with being a British citizen. They strongly believed in fulfilling their responsibilities to access their rights, and participating fully in the wider society. They had a strong sense of belonging to this country, as well as having some connections with Punjab in India (the country of origin of their parents or grandparents). However, some respondents felt that they were not accepted as full citizens in the wider society because of their distinct visible identity.

Since the 9/11 and 7/7 events, security issues had become concerning factors for many respondents. They reported that their fear of personal safety had heightened which was based on their being treated differently and being subjected to verbal abuse with a few reporting experiencing physical abuse. It was explained in terms of lack of awareness about Sikhs in the wider society, misinterpreting them as Muslim terrorists or supportive of Muslim terrorists, and racism in the wider society against people of colour. Respondents strongly felt that there should be more opportunities to raise awareness in the wider society about who Sikhs are. Many believed that more debates and discussions in the media would be helpful as well as well researched and unbiased documentaries. It was strongly believed that it is important to promote community cohesion in the country which would be assisted by the exchange of information and awareness raising about Sikhs with other communities and groups. Most respondents described Sikh values to be compatible with the concept of

community cohesion and many felt that they proactively sought to meet and get to know people from diverse communities.

Many respondents were disappointed by the lack of adequate representations of Sikhs in media, sport and politics, which are among the most influential mediums. They could only cite about two prominent Sikhs in the media and sport. It was believed that lack of presence in these fields disadvantaged Sikhs in that there were next to no opportunities to raise awareness about their community, particularly to highlight the positive contributions that they feel the Sikh community is making in society and to dispel myths and misconceptions about Sikhs.

Opportunities in the employment sector were found to be limiting for some respondents who discussed discrimination and disadvantage that they had experienced while others perceived these to exist. There were mixed responses to these experiences and perceptions. Some had chosen to go into 'safer' employment sectors where they felt they could get jobs and which were perceived to sustain employability and provide economic stability. Others were proactively strategising for opportunities to enter a wider range of employment sectors. Most respondents however had a positive outlook for the future, with many believing that through hard work and with some assistance from the government, they would be able to fulfil their ambitions.

Respondents opined that the government could do much more to help young Sikhs become more inclusive citizens in society as could Sikh gurdwaras (religious institutions). Gurdwaras were called upon to widen their vision to support young Sikhs to participate more fully in the wider society and to make appropriate interventions to influence government policy to benefit young Sikhs. Many respondents also believed that a single authoritative voice representing Sikhs was important which could be facilitated through an established and reputable Sikh organisation.

The government was asked to support young Sikhs in a variety of ways to enable them to become active citizens and to help them fulfil their potential. Respondents believed that the government could do a lot more to assist young Sikhs to be fully

active citizens in society: by adding a separate category of 'Sikh' in the official social statistics monitoring systems to ensure that the distinct disadvantages faced by Sikhs are not masked under the Asian or Asian/Indian categories; by using its influence to raise awareness about Sikhs in the wider society through education, debates and programmes; by actively promoting equal opportunities for Sikhs in all areas, including in employment, and tackling the distinct discrimination against them by ensuring appropriate challenges are instigated and supported; and by providing appropriate funding to Sikh organisations to empower young Sikh people to realise their potential and be active citizens.

This research has provided a valuable insight into how some young Sikhs identify themselves and about their experiences and aspirations. Ambitious, forward looking and eager to fully participate in society as inclusive citizens, young Sikh respondents in this research have highlighted the enormous potential among them and the great opportunity for the Sikh gurdwaras, and for national and local government, to tap into this resource and support it effectively.