

NEWS AND VIEWS

SIKH MATRIMONIAL CIRCUMAMBULATIONS (*LAAVAN*)

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As Sikhs, we must question the purpose and benefits of our traditions. Do they reflect the tenets of *Sikhi* (Sikhism) as prescribed by our Gurus in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS)? If they do not, then it is time to discard those traditions. This is something that has to be done at the grass-roots level. We must each do our part to breakaway from the traditions that are contrary to basic tenets of Sikhism.

In his article, *Changing Perceptions About Rituals & Conventions*, Bhupinder Singh Mahal writes: “*And there are those who wonder why bigots pick and choose what they consider backsliding while all the time ignoring an obvious gender discriminatory practice inherent in Anand Karaj, the Sikh wedding ceremony. For example, during laavan [four wedding hymns] it is the bride who is made to walk behind the groom while circling around the Sri Guru Granth Sahib.*”

As a little girl, I never understood why, if Sikh men and women are supposed to be equal, does a Sikh bride walk behind the groom during matrimonial circumambulations (*laavan*). And sometimes the bride even covers her face. It just looked wrong. The standard answer I usually got was, “*That is how it has always been done.*”

But when it came time for my own wedding, something wonderful happened.

I did not cover my face. I was happy and everyone could see it. Some elderly ladies fussed at me and tried to lower my scarf (*chunni*) over my face, but I managed to get away from them. As my soon-to-be husband and I were sitting in front of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS), ready for the first *laav*, he leaned over to me and suddenly said “*we are going to walk side-by-side.*” I could not believe it. We had not talked about it before. Yet, that was what I had always dreamed of, but had been hiding it away in the back of my mind.

To my surprise and delight that is exactly what we did. The *sangat* (congregation) laughed, thinking that we made a mistake. Then we did it again for the second *laav*. Everyone realized that we were doing this on pur-

pose. As we were walking for the third *laav*, the *Granthi* (care-taker of the AGGS and ceremonies) grabbed my husband's leg and told him to walk in front. My husband yanked his leg free and we continued to walk side-by-side. During the fourth *Laav*, the *Granthi* tried to reach out again, so my husband pulled me in front of him and we finished the last *Laav* with me leading the way.

So that was our eventful wedding.

Later, the *Granthi* and *Raagis* told us that what we did was wrong because by having the bride walk on the outside, she walked a larger circle. This, of course, was a ludicrous answer because *Sikhi* teaches us that God is everywhere. They did not understand that the purpose was to show our commitment to a marriage of equality before God. And we were not the first ones to do so. My parents-in-law did their *laavan* side-by-side when they were married almost 50 years ago in India. My brother-in-law did the same before us, then, my brother did the same after us.

Some of the young women in the *sangat* came up to us to express their thankfulness for taking such a step to break this wrong tradition. I bet that every little Sikh girl has asked the same question as I did. But when these same women themselves got married, not one did their *laavan* any other way than by following behind their grooms. Even the non-Sikhs in the *sangat* question why the bride walks behind the groom?

People have said that how one does the *laavan*, it does not matter because the Aad Guru Granth Sahib guarantees equality. But it does matter. If image is not important and faith is only internal, then why did Guru Gobind Singh Ji give us our external appearance? If we believe in what the Guru says, we must live what the Guru says, and we must reflect what the Guru says.

Sikhi teaches us rationalism so we must examine our old traditions and those which cannot pass the test of *Gurbani*, science, and logic, the touchstones of truth, should be changed accordingly.