

## Youth Violence in the Punjabi Community – A Perspective

March 4, 2000

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The youth violence is on the rise. All we have to do is look around us – the shootings in schools in States and the gang fights in Greater Toronto Area. The fistfights have been replaced with 'fly by shootings' and the youth are getting younger and younger. Recently, a six year old boy shot a six year old girl.

Often people ask us, why are youth violent now? The youth were always violent but perhaps not to this extent. What are the contributing factors?

I have been able to point out to these factors:

### 1. **Portrayal of violence in the Media**

There is more violence portrayed on television than anywhere else. The children are exposed to more 'murders', accidents, and war scenes by age 12 than an individual would be exposed to in an entire life 40 years ago.

The movies are also getting more grotesque and violent in both visual graphics and in vocabulary. Some one ones said that the movie 'Boyz in the Hood' used the word 'mother fucker' over 150 times.

The Bollywood movies aren't any better. They also show romance, rape scenes, fights, and death. So, the Punjabi youth are bombarded by both the western culture and also the eastern culture.

Watching violence leads one to be desensitized. This is the first step to being violent. Or at least, there is enhanced chance that the portrayal of violence on the screen may be acted out in real life by 'immature' youth.

### 2. **Video games**

The next step to being violent maybe the video games. The games are becoming more and more violent. Although, the games are rated for age appropriateness, many parents and youth ignore the rating. Interacting with the video games also increases the desensitizing process. Playing over and over again would actually 'retard' the ability of oneself to get in touch with one's spirituality. We human beings are social animals and often feel the pain of others. It is the spirituality that connects us to help the poor and the needy. This spirituality is the

one that allows us to donate money and other resources to those whom we don't even know. The interacting with violent video games, I believe, suppresses the spirituality and surfaces the urge to be violent towards others. The compassion and forgiveness is forsaken for violence. This is the second tragedy.

### **3. Freedom versus Responsibility**

Some time around the 60's, the modern thinkers believed that children have rights and are little people. Because these are little people we need to use 'logic' and 'reasoning' with them to turn them into 'decent' human beings.

The society emphasized the rights of the children in virtually all segments of the culture. The students had rights and children could no longer be 'strapped' in the schools. The 'abused' children could be taken away by the Children Aid Society and put up for either adoption or with foster parents.

The western society was becoming more and more 'rights' oriented. Along with rights also came freedom to choose. The children were sort of 'free' to decide what clothes to wear and when to show up at school or not. Remember, the school uniform had been done away with. Then came the 'young offenders' act. The youth had special court system to be dealt with.

Rights and freedoms became deeply entrenched in youth. But, the society had forgotten about the 'responsibility'. The youth had responsibility to behave properly towards themselves, parents, elders, the authority and the education system. But, parents thought that school will teach responsibility to children and the schools thought, the parents are primarily responsible for imparting 'responsible' values in their children. But, both never really solved the problem of who has the primary responsibility to teaching 'responsibility' to youth.

The youth are knowledgeable about their rights and freedoms. But, they lack the knowledge about what their responsibilities are. The youth have diminished responsibility to self, family and the society. This is another reason, which leads to violence.

### **4. The acceptability of violence in the Culture**

To what extent is violence accepted in the culture will also have significant influence in youth accepting violence. Is Punjabi culture violent? Let's examine it.

### **Religion:**

Sikh religion is portrayed as violent. The visual images in Gurdwaras (Pictures depicting martyred Sikhs) are also violent. The portrayal of weapons of in front of Guru Granth Sahib (the holy book) is also depicting violence. In fact, at one of the Gurdwaras in the Region of Peel, a gun is placed in front of Guru Granth Sahib. What image does this portray?

The tragedy is further compounded when violence erupts at the Gurdwaras and often results in serious injuries and deaths. In United States, an elected official of a Gurudwara was 'gunned down' by another Sikh who had some difference of opinion with him. In addition, violence is often accompanied at the election of the Gurudwara Committees.

Does this mean that Punjabi or Sikh culture has no peaceful ways of resolving conflicts? It has but the violence ways of resolving disputes are a preferred way to settle 'scores'.

What would youth learn from our religion? Currently, the Gurdwaras are a bad example for our youth. Youth don't want to go to the Gurdwaras because:

- The language in which ceremonies are conducted is Punjabi and youth don't understand it;
- The example that 'elders' are setting for the youth is that disputes cannot be resolved and fight is the inevitable outcome of disputes;
- The rote memorization of historical events of Sikh religion are not satisfying the spiritual needs of Sikh youth.

### **Culture:**

Let's look at the culture. The violence against Sikh women by their husbands is horrendous. Many Sikh women have been killed. In fact, many families were 'wiped out' in the process of seeking 'revenge' (see my paper on Violence, 1999).

How about violence against unborn female children? It is a fact that in the Punjabi community many female children are aborted during pregnancy.

How about excessive alcohol use? It is violence against self and often against others as well. The research study concluded that Punjabis drink and rive twice the Ontario's average.

We also need to consider another aspect of youth problems. The suicides by male youth within the Sikh community are alarming. This is violence targeted inwards. After all, the community expresses its

concern to outward expressions of violence but I have yet to hear the community concerned about male youth suicides.

The sad aspect of glorifying violence is the 'reactionary feudal folklore'. The songs depict and glorify violence and degrade women. Using alcohol and glorifying 'casteism' is the central theme of 'reactionary songs'.

With this kind of culture, it is no wonder that youth are becoming violent. The youth are involved in gangs, drugs and other forms of deviant behaviour.

## 5. Solutions

These are suggested steps the community can take to rectify the situation. The steps are:

1. Accept that it is the parent's responsibility to raise children with proper values. The parents must impart religious, cultural and familial values to their offspring.
2. Accept that the acquisition of Punjabi language by youth is the responsibility of parents and not of 'institutions'. The institutions may become a means to an end to deliver Punjabi language to youth but cannot become an end in itself.
3. Accept that parents must become one part of the equation between schools and the community to help youth accept their responsibility to self, family and the society.
4. Accept the fact that religious facts alone will not satisfy the spiritual needs of youth. The teaching modules must include the knowledge of what spirituality is and how must it be imparted to the youth.
5. Accept that the Punjabi culture is violent and the community needs to take steps to acknowledge, understand and work towards promoting peaceful solutions to disputes in the religious, cultural and familial areas.
6. Accept that parents need to find time to attend parenting sessions and the community needs to put efforts into holding parenting sessions in different areas of Region of Peel.
7. Accept that the community must promote the following:
  - Intellectuals, poets and writers
  - Media (freedom of speech must be guaranteed)
  - Community activists
  - Women's struggle be acknowledged
  - Elder Persons acknowledged and respected

**Summary:**

The Youth are more violent today because of a number of factors. The visual media projects violent images, the interactive videogames, and the confusion of whose responsibility is it to impart values. The Punjabi culture is violent and needs a series steps to create peaceful alternatives to disputes.