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SIKHISM : A SACRAMENT OF THE STEEL

1. God and Sword¹

Guru Gobind Singh, the last of the ten Sikh Gurus, in his autobiographical *Bachitra Nātak* used sword (Sarbha = All steel) to symbolize the Transcendent (or God). He sings:

I bow with love and devotion to the Holy Sword,
Assist me that I may be able to complete this work.

In the special historical circumstances which gave rise to Sikhism, God and sword became interchangeable terms. Guru Govind Singh composed several ringing invocations to the sword.

Thou art the subduer of kingdoms, the destroyer of the armies of the wicked, in the battlefield Thou adornest the brave . . . Hail! Hail to the creator of the world, The saviour of creation, my cherisher Hail to thee, O sword! (*Bachitra Natak*).

He begins his *Ardas* with the words: "Having first remembered the sword, meditate on Guru Nanak." God is presented as the punisher of the evil and the Destroyer of the tyrant. But his benevolent aspect is also simultaneously and forcefully emphasized.

I bow to Thee, Lord who art the wielder of the Sword!
I bow to thee, Lord, who art the possessor of arms!
I bow to Thee, Lord, who lovest the world like a mother!
(Jāp Sāhib)

In a hymn to God, Guru Gobind Singh supplicates for the boon for the courage to die in the battlefield:

I should have no fear of the enemy when I go to battle,
And turn victory decidedly to my side.

1. Cfr. Harbans Singh, *The Heritage of the Sikhs*, (New Delhi: Manohar Pub., 1983) p. 88-91.

In my mind there is but one desire
 That I may ever be singing Thy praises.
 And, when the time comes, I should die
 Fighting in the thick of action.

About the religious conviction of Guru Gobind Singh and his teaching about the use of the sword Harbans Singh writes: "He preached the worship of the One Supreme Being, deprecating idolatry and superstitious beliefs and observances. *The glorification of the sword itself was to secure fulfilment of God's justice.* The sword was never a symbol for self-aggrandizement. It stood for righteous and brave action for the protection of truth and virtue. It was the emblem of manliness and self-respect and was to be used only in self-defence, as a last resort . . . "When all other means have failed, it is but righteous to take to the sword."²

2. The Order of Khalsa

i) *The Origin:* It is said that the order of the Khalsa had been created under the direct command of *Akal* (God). On the occasion of the joyous celebration of Baisakhi at Anandpur in 1699 (March 30), Guru Gobind Singh, after a long rapturous meditation called out for the head of a true Sikh. "My sword wants today a head. Let any one of my true Sikhs come forward. Isn't there a Sikh of mine who would sacrifice his life for his Guru and the *dharma*." One after the other, five Sikhs – three of them the so-called low castes, a Kshatriya and a Jat – came forward to be beheaded, without knowing what happened to the life of the earlier volunteers. Gobind Singh was thus, in fact, forming a small assembly of his true companions and he then introduced them to the audience as the five beloved spirits (*panj piare*). He made them the nucleus of the order of Khalsa (God's own) with elaborate ritual ceremonies of baptism. They were given the surname of Singh, meaning lion. Besides, they had ever to wear the five emblems of the Khalsa – the *Kesha* (long hair and beard) *Kangha* (a comb) in the *Kesha* to keep it neat and tidy as against the Hindu sannyasis who kept it matted as a mark of their renunciation, *kara*, a steel bracelet, *kachh* (short breeches worn by soldiers of that time) and *kripan*, a sword to succour the helpless and to fight the oppressor. After having created the Khalsa, the Guru asked his disciples to baptize him into their brotherhood, for he taught that there should be no

2. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

difference between him and the Khalsa. According to a report "though several refused to accept the Guru's religion, about twenty thousand men stood up and promised to obey him, as they had fullest faith in his divine message." Baptismal ceremonies continued at Anandpur for several days and thousands of Sikhs entered the fold of Khalsa.

ii) *Code of Conduct*

Some of the important injunctions laid down for the Sikhs were the following. "They must never cut or trim their hair and beards, nor smoke tobacco. A Sikh must not have sexual relations outside the marital bond, nor eat the flesh of an animal killed slowly in the Muslim way. Violation of any of these rules led to excommunication of the member from the Khalsa. To return to the fold, he must be rebaptized. The Sikhs were forebidden to have anything to do with those who worshipped images, killed their daughters or counterence *sati*. They were asked to eat regardless of caste with those who had been baptized . . . never begging for charity, and to contribute one-tenth of their earnings for the common purposes of the community. They were not to covet property or money offered in the name of religion."³

The goal of the new movement was to bring about a revolutionary change in the minds of men and arouse their dormant energies for positive and altruistic action. In his time the people of Punjab were made conscious of the disabilities of their state and the Guru taught them to stand up on their feet and work ceaselessly and courageously to redeem their self respect. "Even the castaways of Indian society - sweepers, barbers, weavers and others - long suppressed and ostracized, who had never touched a sword and would have cowered at the sight of blood, were turned into stout-hearted warriors. Thus did Guru Gobind Singh transfuse life into the languid and inert body of India."⁴

iii) *Guru Granth and the Personal Gurus*

Guru Gobind Singh sealed the line of personal Gurus and passed on the succession to the Holy Book, the *Guru Granth* on the previous day of his death which occurred in the early hours of October 7, 1708. In an account of this event we read: Guru Gobind Singh . . . asked Bhai Daya

3. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

Singh, on Wednesday, October 6, 1708, to fetch *Sri Granth Sahib*. The Guru placed before it five pice and a coconut and bowed his head before it. He said to the *sangat*, "It is my commandment: Own *Sri Granthji* in my place. He who is so acknowledges it will obtain his reward. The Guru will rescue him. Know this as the truth."⁵ In another authoritative document we read: There have been only Ten masters in human form, to believe in the eleventh and twelfth etc. is a mortal sin. Every other sin can be cancelled by repeating the Guru's name, but this sin of believing (in the Gurus) in human forms will not be remitted.⁶ This institution helped the Sikhs to preserve a sense of indwelling presence of the Guru with them through the *Guru Granth* and panth, the collective body of the Khalsa.

3. Guru Nanak and his mission of Resistance

The Sikh faith and way of life was initiated in India by Guru Nanak (1469-1539). The term Sikh, in the Punjab, came to be used for the disciples of Guru Nanak and his nine spiritual successors. The Guru is so central to the Sikh way of life that the tradition itself has been called the path of discipleship. Most of the followers, a community of more than ten million, live in the state of Punjab, the place of its birth. Wherever they may live, Sikhs are easily recognized by their beard and turbans. They are widely known as good soldiers and farmers. In this paper the main concern is to trace out the source of Sikh's soldierly character in their religious faith.

The Sikh Scripture (Adi-Granth) compiled by the fifth Guru Arjun contained, besides his own hymns, devotional songs composed by Hindus, Muslims as well as the outcaste Shudras. A policy of affirmation and integration of all that is positive in the warring cultural forms represented by Hinduism and Islam was the need of the time and Guru Nanak's teaching came as a response to this situation. The chief doctrines preached by him were the unity of God, brotherhood of man, rejection of caste and the futility of idol worship and the repudiation of the author of ancient texts and the Sanskrit language. The teaching of Nanak's spiritual inheritors stressed a particular lesson, a new trait under the stress of changing times. Seeing how peaceful resistance to oppression had proved abortive, Guru Hargobind Singh taught the

5. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

use of arms and he recognized recourse to the sword as a lawful alternative and he introduced the baptism of the sword.

Guru Arjun was the first martyr in Sikh faith. When Jahangir succeeded Akbar his father, on the throne of Delhi in 1606, he followed a policy of hostility. A Hindu official of the Mughal viceroy of Lahore started a campaign of slander against the Guru Arjun and the emperor ordered to arrest him. He was tortured to death on September 25, 1606. Guru Arjun's martyrdom marked a turning point in the history of the Sikh faith.⁷ His son Guru Hargobind put on two swords in the place of the rosary and other saintly emblems for the ceremonies of succession, declaring one to be the symbol of his spiritual and the other that of his temporal investiture. This was a significant act crucial to the future evolution of the Sikh community.

Because of the growing oppression of the Mughal rulers Guru Hargobind adopted sterner methods of resistance and the life style of a soldier. He created a war-like spirit among people weakened by prolonged subjugation. As a symbol of temporal authority Guru Hargobind constructed Akal Takat, in front of the Harimandir in 1606. By virtue of being the seat of the Guru, Amritsar had developed the characteristics of a state capital. Sikhs kept coming throughout the year to Amritsar to render honour to their Guru. They brought with them presents of weapons and horses. When the Maratha Saint Samartha Ramdas (1608-1681), found Hargobind fully armed and riding a horse, he asked "what sort of a Sadhu are you? He replied "I internally a hermit and externally a prince. Arms means protection to the poor and destruction to the tyrants." The Sikh faith, slowly turned militant under Mughal persecution, had challenged the authority of the rulers. For Sikhs, the role of saint and soldier had become mutually complementary. Guru Hargobind took up arms to uphold the values established by his predecessors. The inner principle, it is said, of Sikhism as determined by Guru Nanak was fully worked out during the lives of the nine succeeding Gurus. At the time of Guru Tegh Bahadur, emperor Aurangzib adopted the harshest measures he could devise against the non-Muslim population. In 1669 he issued a repressive edict prohibiting all Hindus, with the exception of Rajputs, from riding palkis, elephants or through bred horses and from carrying arms. The emperor's aim was to suppress

7. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

all faiths other than Islam. He even launched a programme of forcible conversions. Guru Tegh Bahadur prepared himself for martyrdom and so nominated his son Gobind Das as his spiritual successor and conferred on him the marks of Guruship. He became the last of the ten personal Gurus in Sikhism. Guru Tegh Bahadur was beheaded on November 11, 1675. He voluntarily courted suffering and martyrdom, to defend the religious values of the persecuted believers. Sacrificing his own life was his prescription for remedying the malaise then prevalent in the society.

4. Spirit of Protest and Guru Nanak

The martyrdom of Tegh Bahadur, father of Guru Gobind Singh, under the orders of Auragazeb led Guru Gobind to rise in revolt against the Moghul power. The immediate inspiration for launching out a political protest-might have been the righteous indignation at the cowardly and dastardly excusion of his father. But it was in fact the culmination of the spirit of an overall protest voiced and championed by Kabir, Guru Nanak and his successors.

i) Socio-Religious Protest

Protest against unjust institutions and all forms of injustices in the society is the most powerful way of taking up the cause of justice and truth. While Gandhi developed the technique of non-violent protest known as Satyagraha, the modern pacifist Bertrand Russel advocated the mass civil disobedience. There was no dearth of prophets or rebels, who spearheaded the revolutionary movements in history, who refused to be cowed down by the tyrants of the day. Beginning with Guru Nanak, the Sikh Gurus have manifested and cultivated a spirit of protest against all kinds of evils or oppressions in the society.

a) Crime against humanity⁸

Kabir's first protest is against the Almighty Lord himself: "I can't keep on meditating on a hungry stomach. Here, have thy rosary back, My Lord! (Kabir p. 656). Guru Nanak also remonstrates against the Lord. "If the might molest the mighty. No feeling of protest rises

8. Cfr. Wazir Singh, *Philosophy of Sikh Religion*, (New Delhi: Ess Ess Publications, 1981) p. 89-99.

in my mind, But should a ferocious tiger attack the feeble herd, I would question even my Lord" (Nanak, p.360). Of course the protest is not only against God, but it is also raised against a multitude of objects and situations in life. The protests in the hymns of Nanak can be conveniently put under three main categories: "first, against several forms of human folly; second against the established social and political authority of an oppressive nature, third, against the, seeming indifference to the human predicament on the part of the Almighty." The folly that evokes Nanak's protest includes, among other things, ritualism, idolatry, vices of egoism, lack of faith and above all ignorance. "Countless are the fools, utterly stupid and senseless, countless are the thieves partaking the stolen wealth." (*Japuji*, Stanza 18). "Without Divine truth all ritual is a husk deluding man like the juggler's tricks" (Nanak, p. 1343). Namdev forbids idolatry: "we bow our head before one piece of stone, that is idol, but just trample over another stone. If the one is God, is not the other one God as well." Against pilgrims who fondly believe in visiting the holy banks and taking bath in the sacred pools Nanak raised the rebuke: "A good man is good even without wash, a thief is but a thief, how-soever soaked." He cautions men: Let none feel proud about his caste. Is the Brahmin really born of Brahma? Don't entertain pride of caste, o simpleton fool; lest a host of evils should flow from it." (p. 1128). Kabir also confronts Brahmins and caste-pride with equal vehemence.

If you are a brahmin born of Brahma,
 Why are you not born differently?
 How can you claim to be Brahma-born?
 And how am I a low-caste?
 If it is blood that runs in my veins,
 Is it milk running in yours? (p. 324)

b) *Social and political evils*

Kabir and Nanak and his followers protested against all forms of social evils and the corrupt practices of the rulers. A few illustrations can be given.

Babar has descended upon India with wedding-party of lust and forcibly demands surrender of the bride. Decency and law have hidden themselves; the evil is strutting about in triumph.

Mohammadan and Hindu priests are discarded, and Satan is solemnizing the marriage (p. 722).

The kings are tigers, the headmen are dogs. They go and awaken those sleeping in peace. (p. 1288)

Siddhas (holymen) and yogis (ascetics) and the temple administrators also come handy for criticism for their conduct.

Disgraceful is the life of those who sell the name of God.

Kabirs sarcasm is sharp and blunt,

No one reveres the elders during their life time.

But people observe *sraddhs* when the elders pass away.

The poor dead ones are not recipients of food,

The crows and dogs consume it instead (p. 332).

5. Armed Action of Guru Gobind Singh

Guru Gobind Singh departed from the general line of passive protest against the Moghul empire and the pacifism adopted by his own predecessors. The immediate cause of this change in the method of resistance could be traced to the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur, father of Guru Gobind Singh. It does not mean that the spirit of armed resistance arose in Gobind Singh from a feeling of vengeance against the cowardly and dastardly execution of his father. As Wazir Singh puts it, "It was (thus) not a question of personal feelings alone; motivation for military preparedness and armed operation must have come from the totality of conditions coupled with foresight." (p. 102): With a view to create a generation of morally fortified individuals out of the freedom-fighters he established the brotherhood of Khalsa with a re-cast ritual of baptism, vows of personal discipline and certain forms of self-denial. The philosophy that worked behind his programmes of protest was that a prophet or a religious or a political leader must place man in the centre of human endeavours and use his good office to bring him solace and salvation. He has taken upon the cause of man on himself without the distinction between the East and the West, and between religions. His belief has a humanistic overtone:

Temple and Mosque are not distinct,

Puja and Nimaz mean the same.

'Homo sapiens' I recognize as one single race. If the desires of human mind are needlessly and unjustly suppressed, it cannot even respond to the Divine within him. "Let the mind be appeased" says Kabir, "with the fulfilment of the mind, comes cognition of the Divine." Hence Guru Gobind Singh saw even the military action as a means for furthering one's religious experience.

6. Symbolic Meaning of the Sword

The symbolic meaning of the five K's (Kesha, Kangha, Kara, Kripan Kachh), seems to lie in the ritual conjunction of two opposed forces or aspects, namely, the aspect of assertion indicated by the unshorn hair, the sword and the unstated or implicit uncircumcised male organ and the aspect of constraint expressed by the comb, the steel bracelet and the loin and thigh breeches.⁹ The combination of the two aspects is elaborated in the form of three pairs of polar opposites (Kangha/Kesha; Kara/Kripan: Kachh/unstated uncircumcised male organ) invested on a Sikh at the time of initiation rite. They contain a marked theme of inversion in relation to the rites of social renunciation established by the medieval mendicant orders that preceded Sikhism. Whereas the former had sought to obtain emancipation and deliverance through individual renunciation of the normal social ties, the Sikh Khalsa was called to stand firm in the battlefield of social life to fight out its freedom. The battle was with all the forces of evil and so it is natural that *Kripan* (sword) has become a sacrament of steel in the Sikh community.

9. Fanja Singh, et. al. *Sikhism* (Patiala, Punjabi University, 1969) p. 132.