

Martial Traditions of the Sikhs

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The Muslim historian, Tahmasp Khan Miskin records an incident during one of the Ahmed Shah Abdali's invasion of the Punjab: "The Afghans had subdued the province and punished the Sikhs by blowing up their Hari mandir and desecrating its pool by filling it with dead cows. One Deep Singh proclaimed that he would rebuild the temple or die in the attempt. As he left his village for Amritsar, many villagers joined him. They knew what fate had in store for them, because Abdali's General, Jahan Khan, had been sent out against them. Deep Singh tried to fight his way through the Afghan barricade. He was severely wounded; his neck was almost severed. Nevertheless he kept his promise and collapsed only after he had reached the steps of the shrine. The Afghans who were pursuing him were surprised to see the sight that met their eyes". At the gates of the Hari Mandir, writes Miskin, "we saw five Sikhs standing guard. Our troops rushed up and killed them."

One Deep Singh against a legion! Five Sikhs against five thousand! Who had fired these people with this species of desperate courage?

The Father of the valiant Khalsa was their last Guru, Gobind Singh. He infused the timorous tradesmen and the downtrodden peasant with an indomitable will to fight tyranny and never lose faith that victory would ultimately be theirs. "I will train the sparrow to hunt the hawk. I will teach one man to fight a legion," said Gobind. And so he did. Along-side prowess in the use of weapons, Guru Gobind founded a tradition that fleeing from the field of battle was the most shameful of conduct, while death in combat was the most glorious end.

The Redeemed Forty:

When forty of his soldiers deserted him, their womenfolk refused to receive them. These men returned to the Guru's camp and redeemed themselves by laying down their lives. Their memory is cherished by Sikh congregations in the *ardas* repeated after every religious function. And when the Guru lost all his four sons - two were killed fighting, two aged nine and seven were executed - he did not lament their loss. He consoled his wife with the words, "What if four be dead - a thousand live, to continue the fight." Guru Gobind Singh's prayer sums up his attitude to life and death:

O Lord, these boons of Thee I ask,

Let me never shun a righteous task,

Let me be fearless when I go to battle,

Give me faith that victory will be mine,

Give me power to sing Thy praise,

And when comes the time to end my life,

Let me fall in mighty strife.

The seeds of valour sown by Guru Gobind Singh took firm root amongst his followers. Within a generation the Sikhs began to display an utter contempt for danger and death. They fought against heavy odds; they were taken captive, tortured and executed. But they refused to give up the emblems of their faith which brought the persecution on their heads. There were countless numbers of such martyrs.

One example will suffice - again told by a Muslim chronicler who was an eye-witness. Khafi Khan, author of *Muntakhib-ul-lubab* writes about a batch of Sikh followers of Banda Bahadur brought for execution to Delhi. One of them was a young boy, the only son of a widow. His mother pleaded for mercy and obtained an order of release from the emperor. She reached the place of execution just as her son was being taken to be beheaded. The boy refused to barter his life for his faith. "My mother is a liar," he told the executioner. "I devote my heart and soul to my Gurus. Let me join my companions." The boy joined his companions and, writes Khafi Khan, "**was enrolled among the truest martyrs produced by the Sikh religion.**"

The determination to die for their faith soon changed to a positive creed of a determination to fight and live for it. Sikh women played their role in this crusade. The Irish adventurer, George Thomas, who fought the Sikhs on many occasions, wrote in his *memoirs*: "Instances indeed have not infrequently occurred, in which they (Sikh women) have actually taken up arms to defend their habitations from the desultory attacks of the enemy, and throughout the contest behaved themselves with an intrepidity of spirit, highly praiseworthy."

Code of Honour:

Bravery demands observance of a code of honour. This the old Sikh warriors observed as had been ordained by Guru Gobind Singh. Qazi Nur Mohammed, a diarist who wrote of the Sikhs in the most abusive terms, paid them ungrudging tribute. In his *Jang Nama* he recorded: "In no case would they slay a coward, nor would they put an obstacle in the way of a fugitive. They do not plunder the wealth and ornaments of a woman, be she a well-to-do lady or a maidservant. There is no adultery among these 'dogs', nor are these mischievous people given to thieving. Whether a woman is young, or old, they call her a *budiya* and ask her to get out of the way. The word *budiya* in the Indian language means 'an old lady'. There is no thief at all among these 'dogs', nor is there a housebreaker born among these miscreants. They do not make friends with adulterers and housebreakers, though their behaviour on the whole is not commendable."

While the Sikh soldier fighting a losing battle won admiration for his reckless disregard for life, his progeny in the ascendant became brigands who struck terror wherever they went. Such were the marauding *misdars* of the late 18th century. Forster gives a vivid account of Sikh horsemen operating in the Indo-Gangatic Doab. "The region lay wholly at the mercy of the Sicques, who are, I think, the plainest dealers in the world. The Fort of Sebah, standing pleasantly on the brink of a rivulet, lay on our road, and in passing it, I saw two Sicque cavaliers strike terror into the chief and all his people, though shut up within their fort. They had been sent to collect the tribute which the Sicques have imposed on all the mountain chiefs from the Ganges to the Jumna."

Awe and Respect:

Forster writes of the awe and respect with which the populace treated the Sikhs: "I saw two Sicque horsemen, who had been sent from their country to receive the Siringnaghur tribute which is collected from the revenues of certain custom-houses. From the manner in which these men were treated, or rather treated themselves, I frequently wished for the power of migrating into the body of a Sicque for a few weeks - so well did these cavaliers fare. No sooner had they alighted, than beds were prepared for their repose, and their horses were supplied with green barely pulled out of the field. The *Kafilah* travellers were contented to lodge on the ground, and expressed their thanks for permission to purchase what they required; such is the difference between those who were in, and those who were out of power."

A Swiss soldier of fortune, Colonel Polier, paid a similar compliment to the Sikh cavalier: "They are indefatigable' mounted on the best horses that India can afford... Fifty of them are enough to keep at bay a whole battalion of the King's forces".

Incredible Nihangs:

Sikh soldiery were organised into a regular, disciplined force by Maharajah Ranjit Singh. Discipline did not take away any of the devil-may-care daring that Guru Gobind Singh had bequeathed to this fraternity. Many of Ranjit Singh's most crucial battles were won by his intrepid band of Nihangs led by Akali Phoola Singh, whose name has become a legend in the annals of Sikh heroism. Nihangs stormed and captured the Fort of Multan. They were Ranjit Singh's answer to the *Ghazi* and were the spearhead of the Sikh victories over the Pathans of the North-West Frontier.

The most revered names in the list of Sikh heroes are those of Hari Singh Nalwa and Sham Singh Attariwala. Nalwa was Ranjit Singh's most distinguished commander. He ruled the frontier territories with an iron hand, which made him the most feared and hated man amongst the Pathan tribes. They revolted against his authority when he was reported to be sick. Nalwa ignored his physicians and led his soldiers in battle. The Pathans made a concerted attack and poured their bullets into Nalwa's *howdah*. Although mortally wounded, Nalwa ordered that the news of his death be kept secret till victory had been won. Victory was indeed won, with the Sikhs driving the Pathans into the defiles of Khyber.

Heroism Legends:

Sham Singh Attariwala was also a General of Ranjit Singh's army. His hour of glory however came after the Maharajah had died and the Sikhs were fighting to preserve their kingdom from the rapacious *ferringhee*. When all was lost in the battle of Sabroan, Attariwala rallied his men and led them in the last desperate do-or-die charge on the British guns. "It is due to the Sikhs to say that they fought bravely," wrote General Sir Joseph Thackwell, who was present at the battle, "for though defeated and broken, they never ran, but fought with their *talwars* to the last and I witnessed several acts of great bravery in some of their *Sardars* and men." Lord Gough, the British Commander, paid tribute to the Sikhs: "Policy precluded me from publicly recording my sentiments on the splendid gallantry of our fallen foe, or to record the acts of heroism displayed, not only individually, but almost collectively, by the Sikh *Sardars* and the army; and I declare, were it not from a deep conviction that my country's good required the sacrifice, I could have wept to have witnessed the fearful slaughter of so devoted a body of men."

Rare Species of Courage:

Sikh defiance in defeat was perhaps more moving than their valour in victory. In the second Anglo-Sikh War they again covered themselves with glory. General Thackwell recorded. "The fidelity displayed by the Sikh gunners is worthy of record: the devotion with which they remained at their posts, when the atmosphere around them was absolutely fired by the British guns, does not admit description... In this action, as well as at Chillianwala, Sikhs caught hold of the bayonets of their assailants with their left hands and closing with their adversaries dealt furious sword blows with their right... This circumstance alone will suffice to demonstrate the rare species of courage possessed by these men."

Saga of Saragrahi:

The British were quick to recognise the martial qualities of the Sikh soldiery and recruited them in large numbers. The policy paid handsome dividends. There are many tales of Sikh heroism in the service of the British, but none has stirred the imagination as much as the stand of a small band of 21 Sikh sepoy against a *lashkar* of over 10,000 Pathan tribesmen at Saragarhi. The Colonel's order was "fight to the last". They did. When all save one were dead, flashed the one survivor's heliograph signal with the sunbeams: "Brothers, we have shown how we have fulfilled the soldier's oath. We have served the True Guru and now we take leave of you for ever."

The Sikhs displayed as much valour in fighting *for* the British as they did later in fighting *against* them. In proportion to their numbers we may say that preponderance of Sikhs suffered imprisonment in the freedom struggle, their role in the *Ghadar* movement being as distinguished as that of their Maharashtrian and Bengali compatriots. Hundreds went to the gallows; never was one known to appeal for mercy. Some, like Sardar Bhagat Singh, became household names all over India. Others died with equal courage but in obscurity.

Few people know of the deeds of the Sikh *Ghadrites* in distant countries and of the Babbar Akalis in their own homeland. Let me cite two examples: On August 31, 1923, four Babbars led by one Karam Singh were surrounded in the village of Babeli by a large force of police and armed constabulary. The Babbars refused to surrender and when the hut in which they were hiding was set on fire, they emerged with drawn *kirpans* (they had no fire-arms) and fell under hail of rifle shots while charging the police.

Even more dramatic was the conduct of Dhanna Singh of Behbalpur. He was betrayed by one of his comrades and captured at night while asleep. With his manacled hands he was able to explode a hand-grenade under his armpit. The blast killed Dhanna Singh, nine policemen and a buffalo.

And again, in 1965 and 1971, as the battledrums echoed in the plains of the Punjab, the Sikh soldiers went into battle in defence of their motherland, invoking the memory of their great Guru, Gobind Singh.

