

Guru Gobind Singh's Ideal of Khalsa Commonwealth*

A continuum of basic Philosophy

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Guru Gobind Singh crammed the 42 short years of his life with much activity. He was a prolific writer - he wrote in many languages - Persian, Hindi and Panjabi. It is said that a 14-*maund* load of manuscripts was lost in Sirsa when the Guru was being pursued from Anandpur to Chamkaur. Fortunately some of his works survived and from this we get a pretty clear picture of his aims and ideals.

First and foremost, we must never forget that Guru Gobind Singh did *not* change the religion preached by the preceding nine Gurus. On the contrary, his faith was in every way the logical development of the teachings and the traditions initiated by his predecessors. In Guru Gobind Singh's teaching is found Guru Nanak's fervent belief in the One God, who though beyond human comprehension can be experienced through love and practice of *naam* - the Name. In Guru's teaching is also the second Guru, Angad's exhortation to *seva*, the service of mankind; the third Guru Amar Das's emphasis on mental and physical health. In Guru Gobind Singh we have the fourth Guru Ram Das's creative ability. In him too we have the fifth Guru Arjun's gentleness, his love of the Hindus and the Mussalman, his literary genius and his spirit of martyrdom. We also have (quite obviously) the sixth Guru Hargobind's spirit of valour. And in Guru Gobind Singh's writing there is his father Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru's conviction that 'once you extend a helping hand to raise the down-trodden, you must never let go that hand even though it cost you your life.' Guru Gobind Singh had all that his predecessors Gurus had and something more - the power to change mice into men, to mould those men into a *nation* and then fire that *nation* with an ideal, the ideal of the Khalsa Commonwealth.

In the minds of most people the image of Guru Gobind Singh is that of a warrior Guru. He said himself: "*avar vashna nahi mohey Dharm yudh ko chao*" "I have no other ambition than to wage the war of righteousness." It is not often realised what mental anguish the Guru went through before he finally accepted the principle of the use of force to right a wrong. The problem had faced many thinkers before the Guru. We Indians are familiar with the dialogue between Krishna and Arjun on the battle-field of Kurukshetra. Arjun knew his cause was just. But he also knew that in enforcing what was his by right he would have to spill the blood of his kinsmen who had wronged him. How, then, is a person to decide whether he should turn the other cheek, submit to oppression and tyranny in the hope that the gesture will bring a change of heart in the oppressor or the tyrant - or that he should resist tyranny, strike the tyrant and so ensure the prevalence of justice and goodness?

Guru Gobind Singh faced the dilemma. His father Guru Tegh Bahadur had been executed for no other offence than championing the cause of the Hindus. And before Guru Tegh Bahadur, Guru Arjun had also been convicted on a trumped up charge and executed. He must have asked himself, should the entire Sikh movement be allowed to die because it did not please the ruler to see it grow? It was no longer a cause of turning the other cheek - fortunately there are two cheeks to take punishment, but there was only one neck. Guru Gobind Singh pondered over this problem. He retired to the seclusion of a cave on Mount Naina Devi, above Anandpur, and spent forty long days and nights meditating and seeking Divine guidance. It was after this prolonged meditation that he found the answer. His answer was the famous baptismal ceremony of the 1st of Vaisakh 1699 when he raised the Khalsa.

Our Guru Gobind Singh may be rightly considered our philosopher of the theory of the just war - the *Dharma Yudha*. He laid down five very stringent conditions before a war could be described as just:

First - that it should be waged after all other means have been explored and have failed. In his famous *Zafarnama* - Epistle of Victory addressed to the Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb in Persian, he wrote:

"ba lâchârgi darmian amdam

ba tadbirey teer-o-tufang amdam

chu kar az hamah heeltey dar guzasht

halal ast burdan ba shamsheer dast"

"When no other way was left to me, I took the path of war and put my arrow on my bow. When all other means have failed, it is righteous to draw the sword."

He explained his mission in life: "I come into the world charged with the duty to uphold the right in every place, to destroy sin and evil. O ye holy men, know it well in your hearts that the only reason I took birth was to see that righteousness may flourish: that the good may live and tyrants be torn out by their roots."

"My sword strikes tyrants, not men. A weapon is to protect the weak and destroy the wicked," he wrote.

Second - it was to be without hatred or desire for revenge. It is to be remembered that though the Guru's own father and his two younger sons were executed by the Mughals, though his own mother died of grief at these losses, though his two elder sons and many (if not most) of his closest followers fell in battle, not once did he talk of avenging these murders or settling scores, not once did a word of hatred against Islam, the religion of the Mughals, escape his lips or his pen. On the contrary, many Pathans

fought on his side as his comrades-in-arms; and more than once his life was saved by his Muslim admirers who, in so doing, imperilled their own. The Sikhs will recall the incident in one of the battles against the Mughals when the Sikh water-carrier Bhai Kanahya was pulled up by the Sikhs for serving water to the enemy. When produced before the Guru he said, "I saw neither Muslim nor Sikh; wherever I heard the cry of pain, I saw my Guru and it was to my Guru I gave the water."

Third - A *Dharma Yudha*, or a righteous war, must be fought without desire for gain. It is to be remembered that although the Guru won a number of battles at Bhangani, Nadaun, and in other Himalayan regions - he never bothered to acquire even a square inch of territory nor allowed any of his followers to take any loot.

Fourth - A just war can only be waged by a people fired by one ideal, by crusaders and not by mercenaries. The Guru felt that these conditions could only be fulfilled by a warring people if they willingly bound themselves by a code of ethics. It is seldom realized that the only reason the Guru made the wearing of the hair and beard unshorn was to revive the ancient ascetic tradition of India in the hope his new Sikhs would, like ascetics of old, be rigidly puritanical - he believed that the *Keshas* - unshorn hair and beard - were a symbol of saintly purity, and only the pure of heart had a right to wield arms:

binâ shastra kesang narang bhêd jâno

gahey kân tâko kitney ley sidhâno

lhee mor âgyâ suno morey pyârey

bina shastra kesang devo na didârey.

"Arms without the sacred *Kesha* - and you will be like a flock of sheep led wherever anyone cares to lead you by the ear. This is my command to you, my beloved comrades; if you do not wear *Keshas* as well as your arms, do not appear in my presence."

He bound his followers by a strict code of conduct - the *Rahatnamas* - do not drink or smoke: do not molest the womenfolk of your adversaries - and so on. That is why he named his new Sikhs *Khalsa* or the pure. He meant to raise an army of soldier-saints, *sant-sipahis*.

It is also to be remembered that this code of conduct was not meant to be a list of rules on paper. Anyone who did not observe them had no right to call himself a Sikh -

rahani rahey soi sikh mera

O sahib mai us ka chera

"Only he who lives by the rules is my Sikh - he will be my Guru, I his follower."

He bound himself to the very rules he prescribed for his Khalsa followers because, despite being their Guru, he considered himself a mortal and an equal.

'For though my thoughts were lost in prayer
At the feet of Almighty God,
I was ordained to establish a faith and lay down its rules.
But whosoever regards me as Lord
Shall be damned and destroyed,
I am but the slave of God, as other men are,
A beholder of the wonders of creation.

Armed with this code of morality, the Sikh warrior became the Knight of the Order of Sir Galahad:

My brave sword carves the casques of men
My tough lance thrusteth sure
My strength is as the strength of ten
Because my heart is pure.

Armed with this code of morality, the Guru could rightly invoke the aid of the Lord God of Hosts:

Eternal God, Thou art our shield
The dagger, knife, the sword we wield
To us Protector there is given
The timeless, deathless, Lord of Heaven,
To us All-steel's unvanquished might
To us All-time's resistless flight

But chiefly Thou. Protector brave

All-steel, wilt Thine own servants save.

Fifthly - and finally, said Guru Gobind Singh - a crusader thus armed must go into battle without fear, without counting the odds against him, without ever doubting that he will win and without any concern with the consequences. The Guru himself set the example when he hurled a timid and untrained community of rustics and shop-keepers against one of the most powerful armies of the world at that time. He himself said, "I will train the sparrow to hunt the hawk, I will teach one man to fight a legion."

chidion tey main baj tudâon

tabhe Gobind Singh nam kahâon

sava lakh sey ek ladâon

tabhe Gobind Singh nam kahâon.

And when news was brought to him that his infant sons, aged 9 and 7, had been executed - the elder two having only a few weeks earlier fallen in battle - he said with stoic calm:

char muey to kya hua

jeevat kai hazar

"What if four be dead, many thousands still live to carry on the crusade."

It was this spirit with which he animated his following.

Once these conditions for the *Dharma Yudha* were fulfilled, the warrior could go to battle convinced that for a crusader there could be no nobler end than to fall in battle - *jhoojh maron ran main tab hi.*

Is it then a great wonder that we Sikhs have, for the last three centuries, as we do today, honour the memory of Guru Gobind Singh as the paradigm of greatness, goodness, heroism and godliness? For we believe that God himself -

Filled him with valour

Slung him with a sword

Bade him go on till the tribes round him

Mingled his name with the naming of the Lord.

Is it, then, very surprising that within a few days of the Guru's death one of the Guru's disciples, Banda, unfurled the Sikh flag within bowshot of the Mughal capital, Delhi, and within six years virtually destroyed the Mughal hegemony in Punjab?

Is it, then, very surprising that the peasant fraternity of the Khalsa *Misls* was able to harass the greatest conquerors of the time, the Persian Nadir Shah, and the Afghan, Ahmed Shah Durrani, even check the northward upsurge of the Marathas and extend the sway of their arms from the Indus in the North-west to the Ganga in the East, from Himalayas in the North to the deserts of Sindh in the South?

Is it, then, surprising that, for the first time in the history of India, it was the armies of the Sikh ruler, Ranjit Singh - and let me make it clear for the benefit of those constantly harp on the hatred between the Sikh and the Muslim - these were Muslim armies carrying a Sikh flag, that swept the tide of invasion back into the home-lands of the invaders - the Pathans, Bilochis and Afghans. And across the Himalayas into Tibet and China. Indeed is it very surprising?

And, let it never be forgotten that these were the achievement of a people who formed less than one percent of the population of the country - a people who numbered less than one in one hundred - moulded the destinies of our vast sub-continent!

What happened to us? Where did that breed of crusaders vanish? Why today have we fallen so low? What happened to us was that we let the spartan traditions of Guru Gobind Singh decay. We became rich and decadent and corrupt. We chose as leaders men who were rich and decadent and corrupt - men like Raja Lal Singh and Raja Tej Singh. These Brahmin Rajas sold us to our enemies.

We should have learnt this lesson in 1849 when we lost our kingdom. We should have learnt all that we had - our valour in battle, our spirit of enterprise, our lust for living - we owed to this one man - Guru Gobind Singh. Drunk with power, we Sikhs abandoned the purity implicit in the Khalsa tradition. From crusaders we became mercenaries.

We now face the same dilemma our forefathers did a hundred and fifty years ago. We have gone further away from the traditions of Guru Gobind Singh. And we have been betrayed by our leaders. Must we continue to sit back and suffer the process of dissolution to go on under our very noses?

These are some of the questions that we may, with profit, ponder on the birth anniversary of the man we call our Guru, our Teacher.

