

Guru Gobind Singh: A Soldier of the Spirit

Sadhu T. L. Vaswani

I regard Guru Gobind Singh as an immortal of history. Why? Money is dust: earth's honours are fleeting : knowledge is power. But yet a greater power is sacrifice.

Guru Gobind Singh's name is radiant in history: Why? He sacrificed his all in the struggle for freedom. His four sons were ordered to execution by Aurangzeb and died heroically. The Guru's wife could not save her children nor her husband, and she sacrificed her life by suspending her breath. The Guru himself, returning from the last battle he had fought, with his wounds half-healed, took up his bow to fight again, when his blood burst out and, with his last breath, he bowed to Guru Granth Sahib, saying:- "So doth the *Akala Purukha* ordain! The Song of *Naam* is the Master now!"

In the silence of the mountain he heard the call – "Gobind! Great is India's agony. Life is given to be shared. Blessed are they who would offer God the noblest worship - which is sacrifice!"

Gobind leaves the silence and solitude of the mountain: Gobind comes down to the plains to serve the people. His life becomes an offering of sacrifice.

The Guru's life may be reviewed under these three aspects: (1) the Guru as a Poet; (2) the Guru as a Saint; and (3) the Guru as an Organiser. The one central idea and aspiration of the Guru's triple life is summed up in this one word: "Sacrifice".

Aurangzeb is the Emperor of India. Great is his power and he is strong in his resolve to convert the Hindu nation to Islam. The Hindus tremble before the might of the Moghul emperor. But this one man, Gobind, - young in years but strong in his faith in the *Akala Purukha*, the Deathless Spirit, - is fearless. The Guru says:

The Beloved hath sent me down!

I come singing His Name :

I go sowing the seed of the Eternal!

My refuge is in Him

Who is the Steel of the Blood of Centuries,

Who is the Heart of all the Ages!

To understand the inner purpose of the Guru's great struggle, it is necessary to understand the inner purpose of the long reign of the Moghul emperor, Aurangzeb. It was a despotic and disruptive reign: and chaos followed it as soon as Aurangzeb died. Some Muslims, it is true,

worshipped him as a saint: they did not understand that his intolerance undid the work of Akbar, the Great. Aurangzeb failed to win India to Islam: he failed in his efforts to eradicate from India all religions except Islam. His "successes" were superficial. All Hindu temples were razed to the ground: all Hindu schools were closed: all public Hindu worship was prohibited. Aurangzeb did but succeed in ruining his dynasty and his country. His death-bed letters are his "confessions" and may still be read as a tragic commentary on the life and policy of a sovereign who failed because he was a fanatic. Aurangzeb wrote:-

"I know not who I am, where I shall go, or what will happen to this sinner full of sins. My years have gone by thoughtless. God has been in my heart, but my darkened eyes have not recognized His Light. I have greatly sinned!"

The great Guru invoked the "Hidden Life" as the "Great Fire", and its "secret", he declared, was "sacrifice". "Hold it in your soul," he said to the Khalsa Brotherhood that he built for the service of India, the service of Man. "As long as this flame of sacrifice," he said to them, "burns unflickering in you, you are the real kings, - of human hearts, - true "sons of the Khalsa". In a song, which stirs me to the soul whenever I read it, the great Guru said:

Man is One!

God is One!

Love is One!

One with the Light that shines within:

One with Truth :

One with Love !

All else is passing,

In unsteady, fleeting!

He lives who loves!

Love flowed out of the great Guru to all, - not to Hindus alone, but also to Muslims. For he saw, as the great seers and masters have ever seen, that "we are all the fruits of One tree and the leaves of One branch".

Being a "helpmate" to all, Guru Gobind Singh became a "sanctuary" to all. How pilgrims came to him from different parts and received his blessing at Anandpur! Revering him as their "Guru", they regarded him as "their way to Heaven".



A Glimpse of Sri Dasmesh

*Mahindar Singh, MA (NY)**

** S-314, Panch Shila Park, New Delhi. 110 017*

The foundation of Sikhism was laid by Guru Nanak, born in 1469 AD in Nankana, Sahib now in Pakistan. Nanak was a precocious child as at the age of five years he started asking questions about the purpose of life. At seven he was sent to a Pandit to learn the alphabet and numerals, and two years later to a Muslim mullah to learn Persian and Arabic. At the age of nine Brahmin priests sought to invest him with the sacred thread (*janeu*) but he protested the formality of the ceremony with the following words:

"Make mercy thy cotton, contentment thy thread, continence its knot, truth its twist. That would make it a '*janeu*' for the soul, if thou have it, O Brahmin, then put it on me. It will not break or become soiled or be burnt or lost. Bless the man, O Nanak, who goes with such a threat around the neck".

The ninth successor of Guru Nanak was Guru Tegh Bahadur who traveled widely in India to spread the teachings of Guru Nanak. He with his mother and wife travelled through Agra, Allahabad, Varanasi, Gaya, and arrived at Patna. Guru Tegh Bahadur's wife, being in an advanced stage of pregnancy, could not go any further. So Guru Tegh Bahadur after making arrangements for her confinement left her and his mother at Patna where his son Gobind Rai was born on 26th December 1666 AD. Gobind Rai with his mother, grandmother and the entourage were able to go to Anandpur Sahib, in Punjab, five years later.

From Patna Guru Tegh Bahadur crossed the Brahmaputra and visited Sikh centres in Sylhet, Chittagong and Sondip. He was in Dacca when the news of the birth of his son at Patna reached him. From Bengal Guru Tegh Bahadur went on to Assam. He spent nearly three years there before returning to Patna to join his family. But Guru Tegh Bahadur did not spend much time with his infant son Gobind Rai as he received urgent messages asking him to return to Punjab. He left his family at Patna and returned to Anandpur Sahib in Punjab, the place he had already bought before. Guru Tegh Bahadur found Hindus and Sikhs in Punjab in a state of great nervous agitation as the then Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb had embarked on a policy of religious persecution. Hindu temples were being demolished and reports reached Guru Tegh Bahadur that Hindus in Kashmir were being forcibly converted to Islam. The '*janeus*' (sacred thread) were being forcibly removed. Taxes (*jazia*) were imposed on Hindus for visiting their places of pilgrimage.

The Kashmiri Pandits, groaning under the oppression of the Muslim Governor of Kashmir, approached Guru Tegh Bahadur at Anandpur Sahib for getting their grievances redressed. Guru Tegh Bahadur on hearing the most pathetic happenings meted out to Hindus was lost in thought. He said that time had come when the sacrifice of a noble soul was needed to salvage the situation. On hearing this young Gobind Rai who was then just nine years old told his father, "who is holier than thou". These words greatly encouraged Guru Tegh Bahadur and he told the visiting Hindu delegation from Kashmir to tell the Mughal Governor that if Tegh Bahadur would

accept conversion to Islam they would follow suit. When this was conveyed to Aurangzeb he was very happy at the possibility of mass conversion of Hindus to Islam. Guru Tegh Bahadur arrived in Delhi voluntarily and was arraigned before the Kazi court. He was ordered either to convert to Islam or exhibit some of the miraculous powers he was supposed to possess. Guru Tegh Bahadur rejected both, and wrote something on a piece of paper and tied it with a string round his neck. He was executed on that day of 11th November 1675 AD in Chandni Chowk, Delhi, the place where now magnificent Gurdwara Sis Ganj stands. When the Guru's head was severed the piece of paper was opened which read "*sis diya par sirr na diya*" meaning "I gave my head but not my faith" Guru Gobind Singh wrote the following in *Bachitar Natak* on his father's martyrdom:

"To protect their right to wear their caste-marks and sacred threads, did he, in the dark age, perform the supreme sacrifice. To help the saintly he went to the utmost limit, he gave his head but never cried in pain. He disdained to perform miracles or juggler's tricks for such fill men of God with shame. He burnt the bounds of mortal clay and went to the abode of God. No one hath ever performed an act as noble as his. Tegh Bahadur passed, the world was with sorrow stricken. A wail of horror rent the earth. A victor's welcome given by the hosts of heaven".

Before Guru Tegh Bahadur's body could be quartered and exposed to public view as Aurangzeb wanted, it was taken away by Guru's devotees under cover of darkness as a severe dust storm then raged in Chandni Chowk and it was cremated at Raisina, New Delhi, where now stands Gurdwara Rakab Ganj next to Parliament House, The severed head was taken to Anandpur Sahib by a devotee and was cremated there by young Gobind Rai.

The martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur, and, previously, of his grandfather Guru Arjun Dev had a great effect on the Sikh community and the pacifist Sikh had necessarily to turn to the militant Khalsa as Guru Gobind Singh rightly perceived. Guru Gobind Singh, in his autobiography '*Bichitra Natak*' (Apni Katha) had written the following as his mission in life :

"I came 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". In an epistle later which Guru Gobind Singh wrote to Aurangzeb, when his four sons had also been sacrificed for the cause of righteousness, two elder sons died while fighting the battle at Chamkour in Punjab against stupendous Mughal army, and Guru's two younger sons, aged seven and nine, were bricked alive at Sirhind by the cruel Mughal governor, Guru justified the method he adopted to fulfil the end "when all other means have failed it is permissible to draw the sword". To proclaim his mission, and to give practical shape to it, Guru Gobind Singh created the Khalsa as a Salvation army of saints and soldiers at Anandpur Sahib in a most dramatic manner. Early in 1699 the Guru had sent messages inviting his followers to make a special effort to come to Anandpur Sahib for the festival of Vaisakhi. He specifically exhorted the Sikhs to come with their hair and beards unshorn. A gathering of hundred thousands Sikhs had gathered at Anandpur Sahib on that day. After the morning service the Guru appeared before the congregation, drew his sword out of its scabbard, and demanded five men for sacrifice. After some trepidation one Daya Ram a Khatri of Lahore offered himself. The Guru

escorted him to the tent pitched behind. After a few moments Guru re-appeared again with his sword blood smeared and asked for another head and one Dharam Das of Hastinapur, Delhi, offered himself, he was a Jat, and then next three more devotees named Mokham Chand of Dwarka, Gujarat, a washerman, and then Himmat Rai of Jagannath Puri, Orissa a water-carrier by birth and last Sahib Chand of Bidar, Karnataka, born in a barber family offered themselves to the Guru. All these were taken for a "sacrifice" into the tent. Then the Guru came out with the five "victims" dressed like the Guru and announced that the '*Panch Piyare*' (five beloved ones) were to be the nucleus of the new community, dedicated Sikhs, the Khalsa, the Pure. The Guru baptized the five men in a new manner. He mixed sugar in plain water and churned it with a double-edged dagger, called *Khanda*, to the recitation of hymns, including some of his own composition, The five who had until then belonged to different Hindu castes, one a Brahmin, the other a Kshatriya Jat, and remaining three of lesser castes, were made to drink out of one bowl to signify their initiation into the casteless fraternity of the Khalsa. Their Hindu names were changed and they were given one family name "Singh" for thenceforth their father was Gobind Singh (so named after his own baptism in the similar manner by *Panch Piyare*) and their mother Sahib Devan, who was honoured by being made the mother of the Khalsa. Five emblems, unshorn hair and beard (*kes*), comb (*Kangha*) to keep the hair tidy, knee-length breeches (*Kach*) worn by soldiers of the time, a steel bracelet (*Kara*) to be put on the right wrist and a sabre (Kirpan) for self-defence were prescribed for the new Brotherhood who were yoked to the service of the mankind.

So this was the Creation of Khalsa – ideal human being – which Guru Gobind Singh described in Dasam Granth "*Khalsa mero roop hai khas, khalsai mehn hoan karo nivas*" "Khalsa is an embodiment of my personality and I exist with my abode amongst the Khalsa" The creation of Khalsa was the culmination of Guru Nanak's goal in preparing man for the final mission in life. Guru Gobind Singh has exhorted us to take up arms against oppression and protection of the weak, by waging a holy war against the oppressors, and sought the benedictions of the Lord "*Deh siva bar mohai ehai subh karman to kabhun na tarou/ Jab aav ki andh midhan banai at hi runn mein tab jhoojh maron*", which means: "Let the Lord bestow on me the strength so as never to falter from the path of righteousness or noble deeds; let there be no fear complex of the enemy and when I enter the battle field, 'victory will be mine' with full confidence. Then as a true Sikh let there be only one prayer for gaining Lord's blessings so that when my life's end comes, I may die fighting for the righteous cause, in the battle field".

Saint – Soldiers of the Tenth Master

*Onkar Singh**

** Formerly of diplomatic service, Sr Onkar Singh is an occasional writer and lives at 181 Mt. Kailash, East of Kailash, New Delhi. 110065.*

The emergence of Guru Gobind Singh's saint-soldiers was a landmark in the 500 year-old glorious history of the young Sikh faith. Their emergence laid the foundation of a fight against religious intolerance and human oppression. It opened the way to resist subjugation and to stand up for values of freedom and human dignity. Today their supreme sacrifices, heroism, fearlessness, patriotism, loyalty and faith are recalled with pride.

The saint soldiers emerged from the socio-religious-cum-political upheaval of medieval India when religious intolerance became a menace under some Mughal rulers. The Sikhs had to defend themselves against religious persecution. Guru Gobind Singh, the Tenth and the last Apostle, organised his followers into a military Khalsa Order on the Vaisakhi of 1699 at Anandpur Sahib.

The word Khalsa actually means "pure". It was a fraternity of the pure in spirit, unalloyed with any false pretensions of class or caste. It was dedicated to peace, harmony and the service to humanity. Yet the Khalsa was willing to dare and ready to die fighting for a righteous cause. By so doing Guru Gobind Singh skillfully fused the peaceful and saintly heritage of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh Faith, with martial spirit. He propounded the right use of the arms, which he regarded as sacred, for the protection of the faith. He made it clear that his struggle was against evil and not against any religion. His call to arms was not to establish any kingdom but to fight against religious intolerance, fanaticism, tyranny and oppression.

He defined the Khalsa as one who helped every human being irrespective of the religion he professed. Himself a man of piety, he enjoined upon the Khalsa to devote themselves to a life of piety, prayer and truthfulness. He exhorted them to consider all human beings as equal and to treat women at par with men. Legend has it that when a Sikh, Bhai Kanhiya gave water to the wounded Mughal soldiers on the battlefield, the Guru was much pleased. He gave ointments also to him and asked to apply them to fallen friend and foe equally.

The creation of Khalsa brought about a revolutionary change in the minds of men given to docility and submission. It sharpened the socio-religious character of the Sikh brotherhood and rekindled the spirit to live with dignity and to rise against social injustice. They were to do this with faith as their sheet anchor courting death where necessary.

The Sikhs flocked to Guru Gobind Singh with weapons and horses and formed the first Sikh army to meet the Mughal challenge. It was called *Akal Sena* (Lord's army). An elite army corps then was formed by the Akalis and Nihangs who had come into being with the founding of the Akal Takht (eternal throne) in front of the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) in Amritsar in the time of the Sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind.

Inspired by his integrity, high ideals and an exemplary life of passionate commitment as saint-soldier to rid the society of sin and evil and destroy the tyrants, the Sikhs determinedly fought the Mughals, the Hill Rajas who supported them as well as the new invaders like Ahmed Shah Abdali. Although outnumbered by well-trained and better equipped Mughal army, the Sikh forces were victorious in a number of mighty battles. The victories were due mainly to the tactics used and meticulous defensive strategy and the all pervading leadership of the peerless saint-soldier, Guru Gobind Singh.

Ultimately, this led to the establishment of the Sikh secular kingdom in northern India under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The Maharaja kept the British at bay for nearly forty years of his rule though having gained control of a large part of India, they had been making unsuccessful forays into Punjab to extend their suzerainty. It was only after his death in 1839 that the British went back to their strategy, resulting in the first Anglo-Sikh war in 1845.

Though the Sikhs were defeated, the British suffered heavy losses. The Sikhs fought with fierce determination. The British called them a "formidable, gigantic and valouress army".

The Sikhs were recruited in large numbers into the British Indian army and Sikh regiments were set up. Having supplied large contingents of combatant troops to fight for the British abroad, the Sikh contribution to both the First and the Second World Wars was impressive. They won the highest military honours for conspicuous gallantry.

The Sikh soldiers returning from the battlefronts fo the First World War (1914-18) were roused to disaffection from British rule over the cruel treatment meted to the hundreds of Sikhs who had sought emigration to Canada. The savage Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Amritsar in 1919 fuelled the Sikh revolt. The Sikhs joined with a new fervour in a campaign for freedom. The Indian nationalist movement had taken a strong hold in Punjab.

The 1930s saw the patriot, Sardar Bhagat Singh, make the supreme sacrifice of his life at the altar of freedom. He hurled bombs in the Central Legislature. He was hanged in 1931 for shooting police officer, Saunders who was responsible for the death of Lala Lajpat Rai due to a lathi charge. Many years later, Udham Singh was hanged in London for shooting Sir Michael O'Dyer, the Punjab Governor, who had allowed the perpetration of the barbaric massacre by Brig-Gen. Reginald Dyer.

Undoubtedly, the Sikhs made unprecedented sacrifices in the country's freedom struggle. They represented a disproportionately high number of those who were sent to the gallows or suffered life imprisonment. They also signed up with the Indian National Army raised by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and Gen. Mohan Singh during the Second World War (1939-45) to fight the British rule in India.

In Independent India, the Sikh saint-soldiers spearheaded the defence against the Pakistani raid on Kashmir soon after Independence. It was the Sikh regiment that stumped the tide of the invaders. Their contribution to winning the 1965 and 1971 wars with Pakistan was meritorious. In overseas deployment, the Sikh soldiers have been regularly deployed in the peace keeping operations in several parts of the world.

Apart from the meritorious military life, the Sikh community has played a significant role in India's agriculture, business and various professions. The Sikh farmers led the green revolution that helped increase the country's food production. Their impact on Indian life during the last three centuries of their 500 year old history is out of all proportion to their numbers.

They have played a vital role not only in India, their country of origin, but also in countries which they have made their home and brought credit to themselves and their country, India.

The ideal of the true Sikh became the saint-soldier of the Khasla. Their three centuries of military tradition, their bravery, their high discipline, heroism in battle and an abiding faith in their religion combined with the virtues taught by Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh have made them exactly the sort of heroes the nation needs both in times of war and peace.

