

The Matter of Kirpan: In Faith & Reason

I.J. SINGH*

* I.J. Singh, Professor Emeritus, Anatomical Sciences at New York University, is Editor, SR (Overseas). He is also the author of four collections of essays on his experiences as a Sikh in North America. Email: ijsingh99@gmail.com

SINCE VAISAKHI 1699, when Guru Gobind Singh, the Tenth Master mandated it, a Kirpan (sword) has been one of the **'five articles of faith'** for a practicing Sikh who has been initiated into the Khalsa discipline. Its size often varies from a minimal three inches, or less, to one that may be as much as three ft. long. And it often has a sharp blade as any sword would.

We know that many types of *kirpans* exist in the marketplace — from those with diamond studded hilts - but incredibly dull blades - that may not kill a cockroach - to others that are razor-sharp.

We have heard good scholars assert that a *kirpan* is not really a weapon, although it can be one. In history it has been a dependable weapon in many battles. The word “kirpan” they tell us comes from the juxtaposition of two ideas – “kirpa” meaning benevolence, kindness and grace with “aan” that translates into honor and dignity. Kirpan then becomes the ‘sword of mercy’.

So, to wear a kirpan means standing up for what is right and for impartiality; somewhat like being prepared for war if you want peace. The sharp blade that is useful in war also signifies the sharp edge of the intellect that cleaves knowledge from ignorance, justice from injustice.

A historical parallel comes to mind: The sword – Curtana — of the English King, Edward the Confessor who ruled in early 11th century, lacked a sharp point. It was known as the Sword of Mercy.

So when is a “kirpan” acting true to the derivation of its name? When does it morph into a weapon to fight in the cause of defense and justice? Can it become an agent of offence? What if a Sikh carrying one misuses it? What is our responsibility when, (as any other weapon might), it falls into the hands of a person who should not have it, or a child who is not mature enough to understand the discipline associated with significance?

There are also others – equally credible and responsible scholars – who assert that *kirpan* is undoubtedly a weapon. But now, over three centuries later, times have changed. A *kirpan*, they claim, is an anachronism in this day and age.

It is also undeniably true that if a kirpan were simply to be *only* a weapon (and if the intent was to always be armed) then the kirpan would be better replaced by a *Kalashnikov*, or one of the many lesser known but more powerful and destructive weapons!

Even though the Second Amendment – in the US Constitution - speaks of the rights of a free citizenry to bear arms, many assert that the needs of the nation are now not what they once were. We have a standing army and police. The average citizen would be better off with either no access to arms, or restricted very strongly in the right to weapons. Minimally, the purchase or possessions of arms by the citizenry – in USA - needs to be strictly regulated.

So when we hand a sharp kirpan to a school-going child, are we not aiding and abetting irresponsible, conduct? Don't forget that school-age kids get into disciplinary pranks and problems, some turn bullies, or have to confront them. **Kirpan is not the way to deal with disputes on the playground or in the classroom, but would a young child understand that?**

This, then, begs the question: At what age should a young Sikh become *amritdhari* and be bestowed with the right to wear a kirpan — an article of faith for Sikhs? Obviously, not before adult-hood.

If, on the other hand, *kirpan* is not a *weapon* but is *only* the *symbol* of a shared heritage, then where is the need for the sharp edge? Could it then be modified so that it is no longer a functional weapon and, like Edward the Confessor's sword, have its point and edge dulled and blunted? Then it would become strictly a sword of mercy dedicated to the ideas of justice, dignity, strength and assertiveness, but not aggression.

But would that not change the *kirpan* in a way that runs contrary to its history and role in Sikh psyche? It would then no longer remain what it was when it became an article of faith.

Let's not forget that, through our young history, kirpan has been both a weapon and a symbol of strength and dignity — a true sword of mercy. These are truths that must not be swept aside.

These days kirpan is often seen as posing a security problem and then it comes up against the might of the law at airports. Amritdhari Sikhs then acquiesce to these concerns by removing it for the flight - or wherever else the needs of security trump religious freedom! Many of us then take comfort in the small, less than an inch long, replica of a kirpan embedded in our *kangha*.

Occasionally the kirpan has attracted critical and negative attention both within our Sikh community and outside of it particularly for its inappropriate use in Gurdwaras — in election disputes and other controversies.

It is possible that some Sikh-baiter – and we know they exist – could, without much trouble, pose as a Sikh and wreak havoc with his kirpan. All he needs to do is to grow out his hair and get a turban for the day.

Such abuse of a revered article of faith then sets up calls and clamor that kirpans be legally banned. We cannot support such a blanket indictment of a respected faith tradition.

But the Sikhs, individually and collectively, do need to aggressively and unequivocally assert that the misuse of kirpan would find absolutely no defense by hiding behind religious teaching, or the sanctity of the symbol. This is gross and inappropriate misuse of a kirpan that must be treated as the crime that is condemned - and tried according to the law.

Surely, the Sikhs need to develop a system of justice for resolution of internal conflicts that are seen in every living tradition. The Gurus gave us one to nurture and develop. We seem to have driven it down into a dysfunctional state and an untimely coma.

And finally what we achieve by our intemperate behavior with kirpan is to put in doubt our maturity, with a 'black mark' against an article of our faith. If we continue to misuse it, the *kirpan* will no longer remain a repository of the values of justice and resolve, but come to represent injustice – if not aggression, something that needs to be prevented.

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