

The Khalsa Panth

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Guru Gobind Singh's declaration of the Sikhs to constitute the Khalsa Panth (Vahiguru/God's people) on Visakhi is the single most significant event in Sikh history after **Baba Nanak's founding of the community at Kartarpur** around 1520. Inspired by the new self-understanding of being the Khalsa Panth, the Sikhs began a process of religio-political assertion that reached its climax in the form of the Khalsa Raj under the leadership of Ranjit Singh (1780-1839). The belief that the Khalsa shall rule (*raj karega Khalsa*) remains a permanent part of the daily Sikh prayer.

The word Khalsa is a derivation from the Arabic *khalis*, which means "pure." The "*nirmal*" is an important epithet for Vahiguru in Sikh scripture, and the purity of the Khalsa thus has strong religious connotations of being purified by Vahiguru (*ham mele tum ujal karte*, M5, Guru Granth, 613). In addition, the word *khalsa* was a common revenue term to denote territories directly under royal control. The people working on these lands were not obliged to accept the authority of any linking official, but owed their allegiance directly to the crown.

The declaration of the Sikhs to be the Khalsa Panth at Anandpur on the Visakhi day fits with the Sikh calendar. At this time of year with the harvest over, the distant Sikhs (*sangats*) visited the Sikh court (*darbar*), brought their tithe (*dasvandh*) had an audience with the Guru, and met with the fellow Sikhs (*gurubhais*). Sainapati's *Sri Gur Sobha*, a contemporary account, offers us the outline of this eventful Visakhi. According to this text, a large assembly of Sikhs had gathered in Anandpur on the banks of the river Satluj, and here Guru Gobind Singh revealed (*pargat*) the Khalsa Panth and introduced a ceremony of the nectar of the double-edged sword (*khande ki pahul*).

What exactly was involved in *khande ki pahul*? We are told that according to the

instructions of Guru Gobind Singh, water was brought in an iron bowl, a set of sacred Sikh verses were recited, while it was stirred with a double-edged sword. The nectar (*amrit*) thus prepared was administered by the Guru to the Sikhs, the title “Singh” (lion) was appended to their names; and a new salutation, *Vahiguru ji ka Khalsa, Vahiguru ji ki fateh* (The Khalsa belongs to Vahiguru; the victory belongs to Vahiguru), marked the completion of the ceremony. The Guru is then said to have undergone the ceremony himself before announcing the vision of future for the Khalsa Panth and the precise role of the “Singh” in this.

This ceremony was a profound innovation of Guru Gobind Singh. While keeping the significance of the sacred verses and then message enshrined there fully intact, it brought to focus the symbolism of the sword in Sikh thinking. This process has evolved over time. According to Bhai Gurdas, an early seventeenth century Sikh savant, the sword and the militancy associated with it received doctrinal sanction during the time of Guru Hargobind (Guru 1606-1644). What could be a better indication of this acceptance than the Guru's naming his son, who was to become the major Sikh figure in the later years, Tegh Bahadur (the great swordsman [Guru 1664-1675])? Recent evidence helps us trace this element of Sikh thinking even to the last quarter of the sixth century.



Theologically, the sword, as used by the Sikhs, is rooted in the understanding of divine justice and retribution. Guru Gobind Singh in his *Zafarnamah* (The Letter of Victory) writes to Aurangzeb: *majan teḡ bara khuna kasa be dreḡ, tura nij khun charakh rezada baha teḡ* (Do not murder the innocent, the sword [of God] in the Sky will avenge this violence). The sword here symbolizes divine power, and is simultaneously the instrument of justice, which falls on the high and mighty when they lose their divinely assigned responsibility. Taking this nectar prepared and becoming a Singh implied that a Sikh should not bend his knee to anyone, however high and mighty.

The militant character of the sword symbolism was an important extension of the earlier Sikh ethical values as propounded in their sacred literature. The names of the first five Sikhs (*panj piaras*) who underwent this ceremony confirm this contention. Their names--**Daya Singh, Dharam Singh, Mohkam Singh, Himmat Singh, and Sahib Singh**--are not accidental but stand for values celebrated in the Guru Granth. These five names mean compassion, duty, firmness, effort, and honor, respectively.

The earlier ethical vision thus reached its fruition in the declaration of the Sikhs to constitute the Khalsa Panth, and this in turn gave rise to a new theological identity manifested in the words of new salutation: *Vahiguru ji ka Khalsa, Vahiguru ji ki fateh*. The Khalsa Panth belongs to Vahiguru, and Vahiguru becomes the Sikhs' only patron; they do not accept any temporal authority whatsoever. In symbolic terms, this is extended to the Guru himself, who is now part of the Khalsa Panth. By virtue of this relationship Sikhs become Vahiguru's chosen people, Vahiguru's very own.

While the first part of the salutation explains the nature of the Khalsa Panth, the next part defines their role in human history. The victory belongs to Vahiguru, and the Khalsa in this self-perception is the chosen instrument for that victory. Rooted in this is the belief that the struggle of the Khalsa does not simply enjoy divine approval; rather, the Khalsa Panth itself is divine in nature, as it is executing Vahiguru's justice on earth.

In the performance of this newly defined role the Khalsa Panth has the theological sanction to use the sword if all other means to obtain justice fail. The best-known couplet in the *Zafarnamah* goes, *chun kar az hamah hilate dar gujhashat, hama ast burdam bashamshir dast* (If all means for procuring justice fail, it is rightful to use the sword). This is part of the perception that force is sometimes necessary to achieve Vahiguru's victory on earth, and Guru Gobind Singh's claim of the moral bankruptcy of the Mughal Empire proved to be the foundation of the Khalsa Panth's struggle to end it.

This takes us to the expanded *rahit* of the Khalsa Panth. According to Sainapati, this came from the *hadis* (sayings) of Guru Gobind Singh. The core of the personal Sikh

rahit meant wearing the five ks: *kes* (uncut hair, symbolizing the divine sanctity of the human body), *kangha* (comb, implying its use in keeping the hair clean with no provision for getting it matted), *kaccha* (short breeches, marking the dress of a warrior), *karha* (steel bracelet, to protect the right wrist), and *kirpan* (sword).

The Khalsa Panth was also commanded to sever all relationship with "the five" (*panch ki kusangati taji, Sri Gur Sobha*). On the personal level, this command implied overcoming the five moral lapses: *kam* (lust), *krodh* (anger), *lobh* (greed), *moh* (attachment), and *hankar* (pride). On the social level, this injunction seemingly implied a rejection of interaction with "the five": *mine*, *dhirmalie*, *ramraie*, (the three dissidents from within the family of the Gurus), *masand* (the representative of the Guru in early Sikh history, whose authority was neutralized in the very making of the Khalsa Panth), and *kurhimar* (daughter murderer; this practice seems to have been common among Rajputs of the hills). The use of tobacco was completely banned (*hukka na pive, Sri Gur Sobha*).

These explanations lead us to the central question: why was the Sikh community needed the new name of the Khalsa Panth? The answer lies in understanding the mission of Guru Gobind Singh's life. The most authoritative statement about this comes in the *Bachitar Natak* (written in the 1690s), and later writers by and large retold this story. According to this text, the mission of Guru Gobind Singh's life was to propagate the *panth* that was founded by Baba Nanak. The implication of propagation was that wherever this *panth* is spread, people would abstain from immoral deeds.

This mission of propagating the Sikh community required a radical reordering, both within and without, at the time Guru Gobind Singh arrived on the scene. The name of the Khalsa Panth was an outstanding attempt to overcome the problems he faced by restructuring the community from within, and simultaneously provide it with a powerful theological framework to resist the onslaughts of outside forces. Later Sikh history confirms the genius of the tenth Guru's vision for the future of the Sikhs.

With the declaration of the Khalsa Panth the *masands* had the option of either

becoming part of the community, on equal footing with other members, or of folding up and quitting. The *rahit*, with its emphasis on a complete social boycott of any dissidents within the community, completed this process: no other authority than that of the Vahiguru's was possible. Guru Gobind Singh himself took *amrit* from the *panj piaras*, symbolizing their authority of ultimate order, the Vahiguru. This foundational principle of permanent authority of the Khalsa Panth paved the way for the **elevation of the Granth, Sikh scripture, to the position of the Guru Granth**. Building on the belief that in the presence of the Guru Granth, the Khalsa Panth spoke on behalf of the Vahiguru, the community created the idea of the *guru panth* and effectively addressed problems it faced without permitting ancillary zones of personal authority.

Concerning the working strategy to deal with outside forces, the self-perception of Guru Gobind Singh was that he was assigned the role of punishing the enemy of the Sikhs, who by implication stood for evil (*asurs, durjans*). The Khalsa Panth was created to accomplish this task quickly and effectively. Morally bankrupt political powers of the region, both the Mughals, and the Rajputs, were marked as the enemy.

For Guru Gobind Singh, this opposition from outside had to be destroyed by using physical force, if necessary. This was a battle to the finish, and the Khalsa Panth was participating in it with divine approval—to create a world free of evil. The Khalsa Panth was an instrument of Vahiguru's will, a weapon to be used in the battle for *deg* (food for all), *teḡ* (justice for all), *fateh* (divine victory). The Khalsa Panth was not simply to establish the "Creator's town," with which their history had started at Kartarpur, but to create *Khalsa raj*. And they worked with the conviction that no one ever gives away a kingdom; whoever takes it takes it by force. Later Sikh history has been a concerted struggle to translate these ideals into reality.

