

The Sikhs (ਸਿਖ) in History

During the *Misal* (ਮਿਸਲ) period and the monarchy of Raṇjīt Singh (ਰਣਜੀਤ ਸਿੰਘ), no concerted effort was made to instil the teachings of the Gurūs (ਗੁਰੂ) in the people's mind or take care to keep those teachings in their pristine purity. After Navāb Kapūr Singh's (ਨਵਾਬ ਕਪੂਰ ਸਿੰਘ) death especially, the Brahminical subvertors had their heyday. This neglect proved very costly. The Sikh values were eroded and corroded in a subtle and not so subtle manner. Because of Sikh Sardars' (ਸਰਦਾਰ) carelessness, Brahminical ritualism took hold of the common man of all denominations—Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims alike. The Brahmins were aided and abetted by Udāsīs (ਉਦਾਸੀ) and Nirmalās (ਨਿਰਮਲਾ).

The Udāsīs had earlier, during the period of persecution of the Sikhs, managed the *Gurduārās* (ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ) but did nothing to promote Sikhī. They were far from the *Khālsā* fold. Over time, they had relapsed into old Hindu practices and emerged as a monastic order. With the grant of *Jagīrs* (ਜਗੀਰ) (land grants) to Sikh *Gurduārās*, their outlook became all the more sinister. They did not encourage the participation of Sikh Saṅgat in the management of the *Gurduārās* and thus they progressively became like Hindu temples. They began to present ten Gurūs as *Avtārs* (ਅਵਤਾਰ) of Vishnū (ਵਿਸ਼ਨੂ) and Gurū Granth Sāhib (ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ) as the fifth Ved (ਵੇਦ).

Then there were Nirmalās who did provide teaching of Gurmukhī (ਗੁਰਮੁਖੀ) alphabets and of the Sikh scriptures. Because of their Vedantic interpretation of the Sikh scriptures, their impact was not wholesome. They provided the groundswell in which the activities of Udāsīs and Brahmins could not be looked with disdain. The Nirmalās began to establish *Derās* (ਡੇਰਾ), hospices, wherein they began to practise Hindu rites for births and deaths, and provide guidance regarding Hindu *Sāhās* (ਸਾਹਾ) and *Nakshatra* (ਨਕਸ਼ਤਰ), auspicious or inauspicious days, and astrological fixtures. They ceased to provide correct leadership to the community. This went on during the period of Raṇjīt Singh too.

Excerpt from: The Sikhs in History. Saṅgat Singh. p 111-112

Corporate responsibility as outlined in the Sikh Rahit Maryādā (ਸਿਖ ਰਹਿਤ ਮਰਯਾਦਾ)

Panth's (ਪੰਥ) Status of Gurūhood (ਗੁਰੂ)

Article XXIII

The concept of service is not confined to fanning the congregation, service to and in the common kitchen-cum-eating house, etc. A Sikh's entire life is a life of benevolent exertion. The most fruitful service is the service that secures the optimum good by minimal endeavour. That can be achieved through organized collective action. A Sikh has, for this reason, to fulfill his Panthic obligations (obligations as a member of the corporate entity, the Panth), even as he/she performs his/her individual duties. This corporate entity is the Panth. Every Sikh has also to fulfill his obligations as a unit of the corporate body, the Panth.

Facets of Corporate Sikh Life

Article XXII

The essential facets of Panthic life are:

1. Gurū Panth (the Panth's Gurū status);
2. The ceremony of ambrosial initiation;
3. The statute of chastisement for aberrations;
4. The statute of collective resolution;
5. The appeal against local decisions;

The Gurū Panth (ਗੁਰੂ ਪੰਥ) (Panth's status of Gurūhood) means the whole body of committed baptized Sikhs. This body was fostered by all the ten Gurūs and the tenth Gurū gave it its final shape and invested it with Gurūhood.

Sarbat Khālsā (ਸਰਬਤ ਖਾਲਸਾ) and *Gurmatā* (ਗੁਰਮਤਾ)

The following is the official definition of *Gurmatā* as outlined in the Sikh Rahit Maryādā (ਸਿਖ ਰਹਿਤ ਮਰਯਾਦਾ):

Method of Adopting *Gurmatā*

Article XXVI

- a. The *Gurmatā* can only be on a subject that affects the fundamental principles of Sikh religion and for upholding these principles, such as the questions affecting the maintenance of the status of the Gurūs or the Gurū Granth Sāhib (ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ) or the inviolability of the Gurū Granth Sāhib, ambrosial baptism, Sikh discipline and way of life, the identity and structural framework of the Panth. Ordinary issues of religious, educational, social or political nature can be dealt with only in a *Matā* (ਮਤਾ) (resolution).
- b. A *Gurmatā* [Holy resolution] can be adopted only by a select primary Panthic group or a representative gathering of the Panth.

Method of Adopting a *Gurmatā*

The *Gurmatā* (ਗੁਰਮਤਾ) or Gurū Sāhib's decision is a special resolution passed by the corporate personality of the Sikh community. Its common features are as follows:

1. A *Gurmatā* may be taken only by one of the five *Takhts* (ਤਖਤ) in the presence of the Gurū Granth Sāhib.
2. Pañj Piāre (ਪੰਜ ਪਿਆਰੇ) (Five tiār-bar-tiār - ਤਿਆਰ-ਬਰ-ਤਿਆਰ Ammrithdārī Sikhs) including the Head (*Jathedār* - ਜਥੇਦਾਰ) are selected by the participants on the basis of merit and Gursikhī Jīvan (ਗੁਰਸਿਖੀ ਜੀਵਨ) (religious living).
3. The persons present must have no enmity against one another, and must declare their impartiality. Personal differences cannot be expressed here.
4. The issue must be of concern to the entire Sikh Community and must not pertain to the interests of a group or party of Sikhs.

5. The gurmatā has to be unanimous. There is no question of majority view.
6. The gurmatā is binding for all Sikhs. They must respect and implement it though they may not be personally in favour of it.

Adapted from: Method of Adopting a Gurmatā, The Panthic Weekly. January 26th, 2007, Khālsā Press. <http://www.panthic.org/news/132/ARTICLE/2270/2006-02-26.html>

History of the Origin and Development of Gurmatā

Sarbat comes from the Sanskrit word *sarva* (ਸਰਵ), and means whole or entire. Hence, in the conceptual sense Sarbat Khālsā (ਸਰਬਤ ਖਾਲਸਾ) can be defined as a mystic entity representing the “integrated conscience” of the entire Sikh people imbued with the all pervasive spirit of the Divine. This concept was set into development right from the beginning by Gurū Nānak (ਗੁਰੂ ਨਾਨਕ) himself, as he had started the practice of arranging and establishing Saṅgat (ਸੰਗਤ) in the places he visited and preached and assigned an authorized leader or *Masand*, (ਮਸੰਦ) upon his departure. The personality of the Gurū was the ultimate binding factor for these Sikh congregations while the Gurū was alive. As the faith spread, the binding force of these Saṅgats became the Gurū’s word, Gurbāṇī (ਗੁਰਬਾਣੀ), as the Gurū and the Word became indistinguishable. The spirit of the Gurū was believed to mystically reside within the congregation of Sikhs. This assumption of high authority eventually culminated into the collective whole being called the Panth. Thus, the Sarbat Khālsā as the Gurū Panth, along with the Gurū Granth Sāhib, is held to be the true and eternal spiritual successor in the line of personal Gurūs ending with Gurū Gobind Singh Sāhib (ਗੁਰੂ ਗੋਬਿੰਦ ਸਿੰਘ ਸਾਹਿਬ).

As an institution the Sarbat Khālsā is the highest organ of the Khālsā Commonwealth representing its “integrated will,” which no Sikh—member or leader—can defy. Even Gurū Gobind Singh Sāhib is said to have obeyed the *Hukam* (ਹੁਕਮ) of the Khālsā in the form of the Pañj Piāre who asked Gurū Sāhib to leave the fort of Camkaur (ਚਮਕੌਰ) when they were outnumbered against the Mughal forces. The Sarbat Khālsā, meeting in the presence of the Gurū Granth Sāhib, is the supreme sovereign body, with deliberative and executive powers, that is duly authorized to direct the affairs of the community.

Though the institution of the Sarbat Khālsā and the passing of *Matās* and *Gurmatā* had been around ever since the Gurū period, it became very important in the 18th century during the time of the Sikh *Misals* (ਮਿਸਲ). Henceforth, the Sarbat Khālsā met every Vaisākhī (ਵਿਸਾਖੀ) and every Divālī (ਦਿਵਾਲੀ) to discuss matters pertaining to the Panth.

Some of the most important meetings of the Sarbat Khālsā in the 18th century which were integral to the development of the Sikh *Misal* period are as follows:

Divālī 1723

The ‘discrepancies’ between the Tat Khālsā (ਤਤ ਖਾਲਸਾ) and the Bandā Singh Bahādar (ਬੰਦਾ ਸਿੰਘ ਬਹਾਦਰ) and his Bandās (ਬੰਦੇ) were resolved with the help of Bhāi Manī Singh (ਭਾਈ ਮਨੀ ਸਿੰਘ).

1726

The second meeting took place soon after the martyrdom of Bhāi Tārā Singh (ਭਾਈ ਤਾਰਾ ਸਿੰਘ) (of Dal Vām – ਦਲ ਵਾਂ). This is when the first gurmatā was passed. They decided at this meeting to plunder government treasures in transit between local and regional offices and the central Treasury; to raid government armories for weapons, and stables for horses and carriages; to eliminate government informers and lackeys.

1733

This is when the Sarbat Khālsā decided to accept a *Navābī* (ਨਵਾਬੀ)—an offer that had been made by the government.

March 29th, 1748

The Sarbat Khālsā met at Vaisākhī in an attempt to unify the Panth. Sardār Jassā Singh Āhluvalīā (ਸਰਦਾਰ ਜਸਾ ਸਿੰਘ ਆਹਲੂਵਾਲੀਆ) was chosen to be head of Dal Khālsā (ਦਲ ਖਾਲਸਾ).

1753

A *Gurmatā* was passed that recognized the system of Rākhi (ਰਾਖੀ) that had been instituted by the *Misals*.

1758

Territory held under Rākhi was recognized as a territorial possession of the *Misal* that was concerned. Organization of the *Misals* was given cohesion with overall corporate control of the Panth.

November 7th, 1760

The Sarbat Khālsā met at Akāl Takht (ਅਕਾਲ ਤਖਤ) and passed a *Matā* to occupy Lāhaur (ਲਾਹੌਰ).

October 27th, 1761

At Akāl Takht, a *Gurmatā* was passed to chastise the supporters of Ahmad Shāh Abdālī (ਅਹਮਦ ਸ਼ਾਹ ਅਬਦਾਲੀ). In particular, the Khālsā decides to assassinate Harbhagat Nirañjan (ਹਰਭਗਤ ਨਿਰੰਜਨ) for allying with Mughals to kill Sikhs, for proclaiming gurūdom and for creating spurious literature; this resulted in Abalī's invasion and the Vaḍā Ghalūghārā (ਵਡਾ ਘਲੂਘਾਰਾ) in which half of the Sikh population was killed.

1762

Sarbat Khālsā resolves to defeat Abdālī at the leveled ground of Akāl Takht on October 16th. Abdālī is defeated the next day.

March, 1765

During Vaisākhī, the Sikhs passed a *Matā* to occupy Lāhaur.

1765

An important *Gurmatā* was passed, emphasizing the supremacy of the Sarbat Khālsā over the decisions of individual leaders. Through a formal *Gurmatā*, a coin struck with the inscription:

Deg Teg Fatih, Nusrat Be dirang, Yaft az Nānak Gurū Gobind Singh! (ਦੇਗ ਤੇਗ ਫਤਿਹ, ਨੁਸਰਤ ਬੇ ਦਿਰੰਗ, ਯਫਤ ਅਜ ਨਾਨਕ ਗੁਰੂ ਗੋਬਿੰਦ ਸਿੰਘ!)

Obverse: Prosperity, Power and unfailing Victory received from Nānak and Gurū Gobind Singh.

Reverse, Struck at Lāhaur, the seat of Government, in the auspicious year Sammat (ਸੱਮਤ) 1822 (C.E. 1765).

The *Matās* relating to securing the release and avenging the murder of Bhāī Tārū Singh (ਭਾਈ ਤਾਰੂ ਸਿੰਘ), constructing a fort at Ammirtsar (ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤਸਰ), sending expeditions against enemies, recognising the territorial possessions of the Sardārs (ਸਰਦਾਰ), etc. are available in contemporary and semi-contemporary records. After 1765, when the Sikhs assumed sovereignty of different parts of the province, the meetings of these councils became less frequent, but they continued to be held occasionally until 1805, when Ranjīt Singh had been securely settled at Lāhaur.

Adapted From: Sarbat Khālsā Workshop, Sikh Research Institute. and Bhagat Singh, Institution of Gurmatā. December 31st, 2006. <http://www.sikh-history.com/sikhhist/institutes/gurmatta.html>

The Institution of Gurū Khālsā Panth (ਗੁਰੂ ਖਾਲਸਾ ਪੰਥ) in Modern Sikh Society

Sarbat Khālsā

- A mystic entity representing the “integrated conscience” of the entire Sikh people.

- The highest organ of the Khālsā Commonwealth representing its “integrated will,” which no Sikh – member or leader – can defy.
- Is the supreme sovereign body with deliberative and executive powers that is duly authorized to direct the affairs of the community.
- Meets in the presence of Gurū Granth Sāhib.

Gurmatā

- A decree of the Gurū, a resolution duly passed that has received sanction of the Gurū (a holy resolution).
- Sikh Rahit Maryādā states that a *Gurmatā* can be passed on the following issues: “fundamental principles of Sikh religion and for their upholding, such as the questions affecting the maintenance of the status of the Gurūs or the Gurū Granth Sāhib or the inviolability of Gurū Granth Sāhib, Amrit, Sikh discipline and way of life, the identity and structural framework of the Panth.”
- “A *Gurmatā* can be adopted only by a select primary Panthic group or a representative gathering of the Panth.”

Akāl Takht / Akāl Buṅgā

- Located directly across from Harimandar Sāhib (ਹਰਿਮੰਦਰ ਸਾਹਿਬ).
- Embodies the principles of Mīrī-Pīrī (ਮੀਰੀ-ਪੀਰੀ), both essential in reaching a *Gurmatā*.
- Often chosen as the location to hold a Sarbat Khālsā, though not mandatory.
- Traditionally Sarbat Khālsā convened here twice a year on Divālī and Vaisākhī.
- The Akālīs, caretakers of the Takht, would issue invitations to all Sikh leaders.
- It was the duty of the *Akālī Jathedār* (ਅਕਾਲੀ ਜਥੇਦਾਰ) to perform Ardās and announce the decision reached by the Sarbat Khālsā.
- It was the duty of all *Akālīs* to follow, inform, and help implement the *Gurmatā* reached.

Examples of Recent *Hukamnāmās* issued from Akāl Takht Sāhib

- The Laṅgar *Hukamnāmā* (ਲੰਗਰ ਹੁਕਮਨਾਮਾ)
 - Issued in 1998, banned *Gurduārās* (ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ) from serving Laṅgar on tables and chairs.
 - This was very controversial for Sikhs living overseas. Many wanted this *Hukamnāmā* revoked while others were vehemently in favor of the ruling.
- On December 31st 1998, another *Hukamnāmā* was issued that called for a stop to the infighting between the Tōhrā (ਟੋਹੜਾ) and Bādal (ਬਾਦਲ) factions in the Akālī Dal (ਅਕਾਲੀ ਦਲ).
 - Though the *Hukamnāmā* does not seem too controversial, it was again vehemently opposed by both political factions and the *Jathedār* was called to revoke the *Hukamnāmā*.

Questions raised by such *Hukamnāmās*

- The fact that so many *Hukamnāmās* have been issued and opposed recently prompts us to ask a few questions:
 - What is the role of the Akāl Takht Jathedār in terms of holding a Sarbat Khālsā or issuing *Hukamnāmās*?
 - Should *hukamnāmās* be revocable? Under what conditions?
 - Is there any method by which an edict can be issued in such a form and manner that no Sikh should feel the necessity of challenging it?
 - And if a decision or an edict divides the community, can some honourable way out be found to this?

Politicians and *Hukamnāmās*

- As has already been indicated, if politicians do not like an edict issued from Akāl Takht, they put all their energy into getting the edict revoked. It seems that these politicians have scant regard for the true principles of Sikhī. If the Gurū’s command is found beneficial by them, it

is acceptable to them, otherwise they will not hesitate in rejecting it.

- Should *Hukamnāmās* be subject to the approval of politicians and leaders, even if these leaders belong to the Sikh community?

What is a *Hukamnāmā* and what is its correct position in Gurmat?

- The word *Hukamnāmā* existed much before the birth of Sikhī. Till then the *Hukamnāmā* was issued only by the kings because they used to be the highest authority and none was considered higher than the king.
- In Sikhī, Akāl Purkh (ਅਕਾਲ ਪੁਰਖ) is the supreme ruler, but in physical form, the Gurū (Gurū Nānak in his ten forms) is the highest authority for a Sikh and the Gurū alone can issue *Hukamnāmā*.
- In 1699, after the creation of the Khālsā Panth, for the first time in world history, only Panth and not an individual, was given the Gurū title. In practical terms, whatever collective decisions the Sikh Panth takes, under the guidance of Gurū Granth Sāhib, are binding on all Sikhs.
- After Gurū Gobind Singh Sāhib, only the Gurū Panth in the presence of the Gurū Granth, and none else, has the right to take decisions that are binding on all Sikhs.

Can the Akāl Takht Jathedār issue a *Hukamnāmā*?

- So far as Akāl Takht is concerned, neither the *Jathedār* singly, nor with the concurrence of other priests, can issue any *Hukamnāmā* as the Gurū has not authorized him to do so.
- The right bequeathed to the Gurū Khālsā Panth by the Gurū himself cannot be passed on to any person or group.

What is the role of the Akāl Takht Jathedār?

- The *Jathedār* should help in bringing Sikh groups with divergent views to sit together, and arrive at a consensus and adopt *Gurmatā*.
- Thus, the Gurū Panth, of its own accord, entrusts this duty to the *Jathedār* of Akāl Takht.
- It authorizes him to call a gathering of Sikh representatives at Akāl Takht twice a year, so that an agreement can be reached on contentious issues, and so that a *Gurmatā* (resolution or consensus) can be adopted.
- But neither did the Gurū Panth ever authorize the *Jathedār* of Akāl Takht to issue a *hukamnāma* on his own, nor can this right be delegated to him.

In case of division of disunity in the Panth, can a *Hukamnāmā* be withdrawn also?

- The first and foremost aim of every Panthic tradition is to forge unity and lessen dissensions and differences.
- If at any time, it appears that a particular step has made the achievement of the above aim impossible, then in the interest of the Panth, the earlier step should be withdrawn and new steps should be taken to achieve unity.
- No tradition, convention and edict can be greater than the Gurū Panth.

***Hukamnāmās* have never been withdrawn in the past, should they be reversible now?**

- The argument is being advanced that no *Hukamnāmā* has ever been withdrawn in the past. The reason for this is that earlier, every edict was issued after careful deliberations and after arriving at a consensus.
- In such a case, when all possibilities of differences of opinion cropping up later were taken care of in advance, where was the need to withdraw an edict?
- It is for the first time that *Hukamnāmās* have been issued by the *Jathedārs* and *Granthī* Singhs (ਗ੍ਰੰਥੀ ਸਿੰਘ) themselves, in violation of the Khālsā tradition and the mode prescribed by the Gurū. That is why, for the first time, edicts issued by them have been widely criticized. Edicts issued by the Gurū Panth were neither criticized before, nor will they be criticized in future.

If the Akāl Takht Jathedār can not issue any *Hukamnāmās*, then what is meant by