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Militarization of the Sikh Panth; A Classic Example of Devotion and Dissent

Shriya Bandyopadhyay

Research Scholar (PhD, JNU, SSS,CHS)

Sikh movement in India started in 15th Century by Guru Nanak, was from its very beginning a struggle against all types of establishment. Sikh religion had always been an open rejection of state power, dominant religions, existing socio-economic inequality, traditional customs and norms, and against the caste ridden society and its gender discriminations. Thus, the Sikh Movement in India has to be understood in its historical context if we want to see the dissent in it. The dissent part was so strong that it came into direct conflict with dominant Hinduism and the Mughal state system, both.

Hinduism as a pluralist, all embracing, tactful religion had always been comfortable with non Hindu sects which got incorporated under its broad umbrella, in spite of its initial persecution against them. The problem Hinduism and the Mughal state faced with Sikhism was because of its fearless assertion of its separatist, distinct, military and even militant opposition against all establishments, which were not only based on Sikh religious philosophy but also in the deeply grounded regional fervour, linguistics, ethnic identity of Punjab from the medieval times.

So, it was a small sect fighting vigorously against all odds. Naturally they were subjected to oppression, massacres, persecutions be it the Mughal state or later. As a reaction, the concept of martyrdom/ shahidi, denial of painful, agonizing death etc. were central along with the zeal to serve the righteous/ needy, to uphold the panth, to serve and protect the gurudwara etc. as reflected in the writings/preachings of Guru Nanak (1469-1539), Guru Govind Singh (1581-1606), Hargovind (1606-1644), Guru Teg Bahadur and even in the recent past in the writings of Beyant Singh, the Khalistan chief. In this paper I would like to discuss the theme of dissent inherent in Sikhism, gradually took a militant form in face of brutal state repression and how that reflected in the evolution of some central religious organizations like Guridwara, Khalsa and dharamshalas.

The martial, fearless attitude of Sikhism was rooted in the philosophy of Sikhism and that impressed the process of Sikh resource-mobilization and gradual institutionalization of the panth. Process of militarization got a momentum as reaction to some events when the Mughal state from Jahangir onwards started taking harsh measures towards the panth. Guru Arjun's persecution in Jahangir's time and killing of Guru Teg Bahadur in Alamgir's reign added a crusadic impulse to the panth of which the reaction was forming the military organization of Khalsa. They were seen as the 'lions'/ singhs and the potential martyrs. Sikh panth became a state within the state.ⁱ Guru Govind Singh was one of the main architects behind the formation of Khalsa but the zeal was present from Nanak's time. Guru Nanak wrote- "if you want to play love/ approach me with your head on the palm of your hand//"ⁱⁱ So, Sikhism was not merely a religious movement but one with socio-political goal of its own. So was the Mughal state's reaction against it- Political, although it might appear as a mere religious one.

There has been a long-standing notion among western-scholars to see Sikhism as a synthesis between Hinduism and Islam. Smith called Sikhism a blend of Hinduism and Islam.ⁱⁱⁱ McLeod calls it 'mixture theory', but J.S. Grewal warns us against such stereotypes. He says, under the influence of such theories, western scholars have believed that Sikhism, tried to breach the gap between Hinduism and Islam, and they believe Guru Govind Singh's militaristic approach was actually a rupture from Guru Nanak's pacifism. Of this the logical culmination was the rift between Nanak-panthis and Khalsa singhs. But, we can question this argument by western scholars by citing Nanak's poetry which reflects dissent, militarism etc. from the early Sikh period rooted in its philosophy.^{iv}

To judge these arguments and to see the element of dissent as central to the panth, we must visit the socio-economic and political context of Sikhism's emergence. On the eve of the Turkish invasions in the 12th c, India was undergoing 'full blown stage of Feudalism', of which the characteristic features were- growth of landed intermediaries, exploitation and pauperization of peasantry, relative decline of trade and commerce, deurbanization, more rigidity in the caste system, which stood in way of mobility. During the rule of the Delhi sultanate earlier landed aristocracy was replaced by new ones, new class of iqtadars, exploitation on peasants were more and more intensified. But the process of urbanization thrived and commerce started to flourish again. Punjab during the time of Nanak was ruled by Lodi sultans. The upper echelon of administration was comprised of Afghans who enjoyed almost autonomous rights over their assigned territories. Their possessions now became hereditary and were sub assigned. The status of 'higher caste' Rajputs lowered due to the Ghorian conquest, so did the position of Brahmins as the former were their patrons. In 13th, 14th centuries, with the establishment of the Delhi sultanate, and the 'Urban Revolution', the number of craftsmen, artisanal population, skilled professionals increased drastically. In Punjab, the Vaishyas and Khatri became prominent, through trade, money lending, artisan activity. They were the first converts to panth. The sedentary-agrarian jat-population who were treated as Shudras in the Hindu varna system converted en masse to Sikhism.^v

Guru Nanak was a non-conformist with a vision. He not only rejected the existing religious practices but offered a strong alternative; waged a war against caste-ridden Hinduism, rejected individual-asceticism as the way to achieve salvation. His religious and missionary preachings was a campaign against the existing socio-religious, political-economic system. His was, thus a socio-religious movement with a political vision. Sikhism always raised its voice against state corruption, be it the Sultanate and the Mughal empire, be it corruption of Hinduism in social issues or gender discriminations. Nanak incorporated the so called 'lower caste and class' people- craftsmen, peasants, artisans and others in his strictly monotheistic religion who were required to worship collectively, reside collectively in Gurudwara, dining collectively in the communal kitchen/ Langar, serve the poor, help the needy, serve everyone coming to the Gurudwara, by karseva.^{vi}

Nanak's god is omnipresent and omnipotent, unchanging and formless. He reveals himself through his creations. The most important thing is to understand the naam and the sabad. Guru is the intermediary between God and human beings. Devotion and love is the ultimate thing. Human beings being separated from God want to reunite with him. In this journey there are several stages after man reunites with the beloved God. The post of Guru became increasingly important in the Sikh doctrine. The organizations, Gurudwara and Dharmasala became central. These provided the organizational basis for the panth.

Sikhism also had a strong ethical base. The moral attitude of the religion was not passive and individualistic but, active and social. The social and collective ethics is reflected in its collective worship, meal, charity in dharmasalas. Religious devotion, act of service is seen as foundation of morality. Courage, mercy, karma all has been equally emphasized.^{vii}

A very important cementing role was played by the early Gurudwaras and Dharmasalas. Later the Khalsa Sings also understood that religious centers and organizations are crucial to establish the distinct characteristics of a religion.

These were the places of worship, pilgrimage. Khalsa raftnamahs mention, for a Sikh, the most pious duty is to serve and protect the gurudwara. Guru Amar Das said, as we can find in the Janamsakhis, “my beloved will himself protect the honour of those who take refuge at the Guru’s door.”^{viii} So we can easily understand the immense role played by these institutions at a time, when the newly founded sect was being subjected to active and violent position from the powerful Mughal state. The importance of Gurudwaras increased after the execution of the ninth Guru Teg Bahadur (1664- 1675 AD). From this time onwards Dharamsalas had been the most prominent feature of the Sikh institutionalism. The Gurudwara of Amritsar (previously Ramdasapur), with a tank of ritualistic significance, and the Akal Takht, representing the miri power of the guru can be understood as something like royal paraphernalia and expression of its political consolidation.

Now we will see another feature of Sikh institutionalism, or machinery in the institutionalization of the panth- the methods of resource mobilization. It was of crucial importance for the constant warfare against the Mughal state. Panth needed resources, both in cash and kind and manpower to continue the resistance.

Guru Nanak had only given the ideological basis of the panth, the organizational structure as a cementing link came during the later gurus. Guru Angad introduced some new elements which gave the panth the flavor of a coherent community like- Gurumukhi dialect, as the language of preaching easily intelligible to the mass- and most importantly, a compiled scripture- the adi granth. This made Sikhism a scripture based religion which more and more instigated the forces opposing Sikhism. Some distinct Sikh ceremonies were introduced during the time of Guru Amardas, like- Baishakhi, Magh, Diwali, in which the armed congregation of the martial Sikhs were viewed as a potential threat to the local chieftains, who sought the emperor Alamgir’s help.^{ix}

Spiritual jurisdiction was divided into manjis and pirhas. So, the character of Gurudom was changing along with the panth, due to the practical situation and state repression, and also, due to the development of different institutionalized religious forms as reaction to opposition. Finally the resource mobilization process Guru Amardas authorized some Sikhs as his representatives who collected contribution in cash/ kind. Collection of tribute became a regular system. The important trading centers of Lahore, Multan, Amritsar with its rich merchant class- Khatris, Aroras, and small scale professionals provided the monetary basis for the institutionalization of the panth. The masnads were Guru’s tax collectors and they had their deputies. Majority of the followers now, came from the merchant class which added a different dimension in the exploitation of peasantry.^x

Now, corruption emerged in the masnad system and its paraphernalia gave rise to a feudal hierarchy which reflected in the writings of Mohsin Fani. Guru Arjun adopted a luxurious lifestyle. P. S. Grewal said- “the anti-feudal ethos of Sikhism had traveled full circle. Gurudom had developed into a feudal institution and the Guru into a petty feudal.”^{xi} Surplus from peasantry was exploited both by the Mughal state and by the panth. This, more and more generated Mughal opposition. As a reaction against it, the militarization process of the panth further intensified. The power of the Gurudom increased more during Guru Hargovind’s time, and under Guru Har Rai, Guru’s court became like that of a semi-independent military chieftain.^{xii} In Har Rai’s time (1644-1661 A.D) many landed elites embraced Sikhism. They were the exploiters of the peasants. Gurudom, now became an institutionalized hierarchical structure which was approaching the zamindar class, as a reaction of which some peasant upsurges took place in Punjab during the time of Guru Teg Bahadur.^{xiii}

Though Guru Nanak was very critical of the Mughal rule and criticized Babur’s invasion by saying, Hindustan was a diamond, destroyed by Mughals and Pathans, he and the next four Gurus- Angad, Amardas, Ramdas, Arjun had a cordial relationship with Emperor Akbar. After Akbar, this attitude changed. Especially in Jahangir’s time, increasing hostility from the state’s part led to the crystallization of militaristic attitude among the followers of the panth.^{xiv} Jahangir was opposed to the Sikh religion and termed it ‘shop of falsehood.’ He, under the impression that Guru is helping the rebel prince Khusraw, imposed a heavy fine on Guru Arjun. Unable to pay the amount Guru Arjun was

imprisoned, tortured and killed. This incident marks an watershed in the militarization of the panth. Immediately after Arjun's execution Hargovind became the guru and now, two swords represented Guru's spiritual and worldly power- piri and miri. Akal-takht, Lohagarh fort etc. were all built during this time. This, further increased tension between the shahi and the panth. A strong army was also built. *Dabistaan* says- the guru had 700 horses, 300 horsemen and 60 musketeers always at his service, for his security. So, Hargovind transformed the Sikh panth into a body in which adherents were to act as saint soldiers or soldier saints.^{xv} They believed, the martyrs and the followers would attain heaven. The conflict of panth and state continued in Alamgir's time too.

The ninth Guru Teg Bahadur was very vocal against the state especially when Alamgir ordered the demolition of the non-Muslim shrines. He asked all his followers to be brave, courageous. He said although state has all its power, it's the Guru who has the ultimate moral courage. He was soon taken by the Mughal force to Delhi, where he was forced to accept Islam, which he didn't accept. He was beheaded on 1675, at Delhi.^{xvi}

The martyrdom of Teg Bahadur generated more crusading impulse to the panth. He actually played a great role in the militarization of the panth and consolidated the political and military power of Sikhism. Took the title *sacchha padshah*, used to issue *hukumnamahs* to the Sikh *sangats* and made Sikhism a state within a state.^{xvii}

Guru Govind's increasing interest in military activity, archery, firing the musket, swordfighting, throwing of spears strengthened the existing militarism. This was also a time when Alamgir's Mughal state was waging war on Rajputana. *Jaziya* was reimposed. Guru Govind built a fort at Paunha, and was resisting the Mughal force. In his writings he mentioned- "war is the cause of righteousness, it should be indulged."^{xviii} In contemporary source *Bicchitarnatak* Guru Govind is represented as divinely ordained to destroy all evils.^{xix} It also said, he needs more men to fulfill the need of *dharmayuddha*. Now, in Sikhism, God was seen as the mightiest warrior and weapons came to be seen as divinity. *Sangats* were asked to mobilize more resources- material as well as in terms of manpower.

In this time the *masands* played a disruptive role because of its increasing need for more resources. It started showing discriminatory attitude towards the poor followers of the panth which undermined their actual duty. Simultaneously the opposition of the nearly independent hill chiefs sharpened as they saw Sikhism as a threat to their power. This was the context when Guru Govind formed the *Khalsa sangat*, which was the cornerstone for the future *Khalsa raj*.^{xx}

Through a dramatic incident on the eve of *Baishakhi* festival, on 1699, *khalsa sangat* came into being. Guru Govind demanded voluntary sacrifice from the Sikhs, with an open sword in his hands. Five Sikhs came forward and they were the first *Singhs* of the *khalsaorder*, known as – *panj pyare*. They had an uniform external appearance which demarcated them from the other followers of the panth, these were- *panj ka s- kesh, kripan, kachha, kanga, kada*. A contemporary source said- "the death of a heroic man is holy. Should they lay down their lives for a religious cause."^{xxi} The tradition of championing heroic death for the right cause continued in the *misl* period, which culminated in the establishment of the Sikh kingdom under the *misl-dar* of *Sukar chakia, Ranjit Singh*.

Khalsa tradition was defined by Guru Govind Singh in two ways. It will be used in defense of faith, when all other defense have already failed. He tried through this, to create an egalitarian panth where the cementing link would be – militant brotherhood. *Masand's* power was curbed and it was finally liquidated. Even *Guruship* was replaced by *Khalsa*. *Khalsa* had a direct link with Guru's office. Their popularity was increasing drastically. They became the microcosm of the community. Who, in order to uphold the cause of the righteous would sacrifice their lives, and prove their loyalty by blood. Their main goal became, to attain the glory of martyrdom. They were, by now, more important than the Guru.^{xxii}

So, Sikhism, which initially started as a socio-religious movement gradually acquired a political and military character. In course of its dispute with the state Militarism reached its culmination when *khalsa raj* was established in 1674. It took the shape of a theocratic confederate feudalism.^{xxiii} Though Sikhism shows similarity with Sufism, Kabir panth,

Islam, they had their own distinct philosophy with a spiritual yet materialistic approach, symbolized by two swords. The inherent dissent of Sikhism took a very prominent shape through its militarism.^{xxiv}

ⁱ J. S. Grewal, 'The Sikh Movement', in J. S. Grewal Ed. *Religious Movements and Institutions in Medieval India*, Oxford, 2006, p. 469

ⁱⁱ L. E. Fenech, *Martyrdom and the Sikh Tradition*, Americal Oriental Society, 1997, p. 180

ⁱⁱⁱ M. W. Smith, *Synthesis and Other Processes in Sikhism*, Americal Anthropologist, 1948, p. 304

^{iv} J. S. Grewal, 'The Sikh Movement', in J. S. Grewal Ed. *Religious Movements and Institutions in Medieval India*, Oxford, 2006, p. 450

^v P. S. Grewal, 'Nanak's Doctrine and the Feudalization of the Sikh Gurudom,' *Social Scientist*, 1983, p. 18

^{vi} S. Iraqi, *Bhakti Movement in Medieval India*, Manohar, 2009, p. 168

^{vii} A. G. Widgery, *Ethical Aspects of the Religion of the Sikhs*, Chicago Press, 1929, p. 25

^{viii} Cited at J.S. Grewal, *The Gurudwaras*, Ed. J. S. Grewal, *Religious Movements and Institutions in Medieval India*, Oxford, p. 535

^{ix} J. S. Grewal, 'The Gurudwara', in J. S. Grewal Ed. *Religious Movements*, p. 535

^x P. S. Grewal, 'Nanak's Doctrine and the Feudalization of the Sikh Gurudom,' *Social Scientist*, 1983, p. 24

^{xi} *Ibid*, p. 26

^{xii} *Ibid*, p. 20

^{xiii} *Ibid*, p. 28

^{xiv} S. Iraqi, *Bhakti Movement*, p. 174

^{xv} *Ibid*, p. 468

^{xvi} 'The Gurudwara', in J. S. Grewal Ed. *Religious Movements*, P. 468

^{xvii} S. Iraqi, *Bhakti Movement*, p. 105

^{xviii} J. S. Grewal, 'The Sikh Movement', in J. S. Grewal Ed. *Religious Movements and Institutions in Medieval India*, Oxford, 2006, p. 468

^{xix} *Ibid*, p. 464

^{xx} *Ibid*, p. 467

^{xxi} *Ibid*, p. 469

^{xxii} L. E. Fenech, 'Martyrdom and the Sikh Tradition,' p. 14

^{xxiii} S. Iraqi, *Bhakti Movements*, p. 147

^{xxiv} J. S. Ahluwalia, *Anti-Feudal Dialectics of Sikhism*, *Social Scientist*, vol. 2, 1974; Mahmood C. Keeplay, *Sikh Rebellion and the Hindu Concept of Order*, W.H. McLeod, 'The Influence of Islam upon the thought of Guru Nanak', *History of Religion*, 1948;

