

SARBAT KHALSA AND GURMATTA IN SIKH PANTH

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ABSTRACT: The pioneer of Sikh history was Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the first Guru in the Sikh religion. It is a vast history of around 300 years which can be associated with the history of Punjab. After Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Sikh religion was led by other Gurus following the teachings of the later. With the passage of time, Sikh religion showed many twists and turns depending upon the views and thoughts of the leading Guru. The religious practices were formalized by Guru Gobind Singh Ji. He gave birth to great warriors in Sikh history by establishing *Khalsa Panth*. Two main organizations came into being during 18th century, those were *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmatta*.

Index Terms- Sarbat Khalsa, Gurmatta, Hukamnama, Khalsa Panth, Dal Khalsa.

18th century is exemplary for Sikh religion. It did not show only the brave and incomparable sacrifices of Sikhs but also two main organizations of Sikh religion came into being in that period only. Those two were *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmatta*. It is the history of one century in Sikh religion from the time of the *Khalsa* in 1699 AD. Guru Nanak Dev was the founder of Sikh religion and nine other Gurus succeeded him. But after Guru Gobind Singh there was no prominent leader in Sikh community. At that time the Sikhs had to suffer badly to stay alive. *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmatta* were the two institutions which brought the Sikh together and protected them from foreign invaders. Both institutions were based on self – governance and democracy. These two were the pillar of *Sikh Panth*.

Guru Gobind Singh appointed Banda Singh Bahadur as the commanding officer of Sikh army and sent him to Punjab. He also sent Bhai Mani Singh to Amritsar alongside five other Sikhs with full charge of Akal Takht and Harimander Sahib. People restarted visiting the Harimander Sahib for worship because of Bhai Mani Singh's arrival. Every morning in the Harimander sahib recitation of hymns could be heard and the evening court was re-rooted in the routine of people, which resulted in people converting in to Sikhism.¹ Bhai Mani

1. Sukhdyal Singh, 1983, Atharavi Sadi da Ithas Vich Akal Takht Sahib Te Gurmatta, Sheesh Ganj Masik Patrika, Vol-22, Parkashan Chandni Chownk, Delhi, p. 65.

Singh was quite old by that time and could not roam around to preach about *Khalsa Panth*. So he used to act as main speaker in the meetings of *Sarbat Khalsa* whereas Banda Singh would indulge in fight with enemies of Sikh religion. He was given a *Hukamnama* by Guru Gobind Singh and thousands of Sikhs joined him. He fought many battles. In 1716 AD he was killed alongside several hundred Sikhs. That was the darkest time of Sikh history. After the death of Banda Singh, Sikhs were divided into two parts. They became enemies to each other. Bhai Mani Singh reconciled them through *Gurmatta*.² Thus rituals like *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmatta* played an important and positive role in the Sikh history of 18th century.

The word *Gurmatta* is made up of two Punjabi words, *Guru* and *Mat*. *Guru* means religious leader and *Mat* means decision or guidance, so the word *Gurmatta* means guidance or decision of *Guru*. Those decisions which were taken in the meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa* were known as *Gurmatta*.³ *Sarbat* means whole and *Khalsa* means Sikhs. In other words a meeting of whole Sikh community was known as *Sarbat Khalsa*.⁴

The gathering of *Sarbat Khalsa* would be called at *Akal Takht*. At the time of some calamity, they would call the gathering of *Sarbat Khalsa*. Sikhs had high regard for *Sarbat Khalsa*. They would even leave their fight in-between to be present at the meeting. The decisions taken at the meetings were taken without any jealousy and following the rules of Sikh religion. The decisions were not motivated by personal gains but for the whole community.⁵ The meetings were held among the leaders of different *Jathas* from those who had been invited. They all took decision on one ethical point of not letting their personal differences govern their decisions in the presence of *Guru Granth Sahib*. The decisions taken were read aloud to each and everyone and afterwards all the members would go to their respective areas and would follow that decisions.⁶

The genesis of *Gurmatta* can be traced back to *Guru Gobind Singh*. He gave superior position to the *Khalsa* stating it to be superior even from the *Guru*. Because, *Gurmatta* is the decision and wish of *Khalsa* hence is superior. There are two incidents showing the superiority of *Gurmatta* even in the time of *Guru Gobind Singh*. First, when *Aurangzeb* besieged *Anandpur Sahib*. Sikhs were facing shortage of food and water. Sikhs were asked by *Mughal* army to go away from *Anandpur Sahib* and *Guru Ji* gave in for the respect of his Sikhs and

2. Ibid.

3. Kashmir Singh Samra, 2001. Parmukh Sikh Sanathavan, ed. Narinder Kaur Bhatia, Jaswinder Kaur Dhillon, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, p. 255.

4. Gurmukh Singh (Major), 1998. Sarbat Khalsa, in Harbans Singh, Ed. *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*. Punjabi University, Patiala, p. 62.

5. Surinder Singh Kohli, 1975. Gurmata Sidhantak Pakh, Singh Sabha Patrika, Prabhjot Printing Press, Amritsar, p. 48.

6. Bhai Vir Singh, 2002. Satwant Kaur Part- 1, Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadhan, New Delhi pp. 17-18.

for the betterment of the citizens of Anandpur Sahib. Even though Sikhs had to face many difficulties and loss, Guru Gobind Singh did not refuse the decision of *Gurmatta*. Second, in the battle of Chamkor Sahib, in thick forest of Chamkor Sahib Guruji was accompanied by 40 Sikhs and two of his sons. The Mughal army surrounded them again. Their number reduced by the evening and Sikhs asked Guru Sahib to leave the place to organize the army but he refused to do so. At that point, Sikhs called the meeting of *Gurmatta* and decided for Guru Sahib to leave the place; he left the place at once respecting the decision of *Gurmatta*.⁷

The party presiding over the *Gurmatta* is called *Sarbat Khalsa*. The decisions taken in the meetings of *Sarbat Khalsa* were mostly religious in manner rather than political. Those were mostly about the enlargement and protection of Sikh religion. Sometime the motivations were political and social too. Some decisions were for the reconciliation between Sikh leaders, to work out a strategy for a common enemy and to decide for the social betterment works. Every activity in the favor of the *Panth* comes in the jurisdiction of *Gurmatta*.⁸

Much of the information about *Sarbat Khalsa* comes from European writers. These writers have written about *Sarbat Khalsa* in an authentic way. Malcolm wrote about *Sarbat Khalsa* that these were the activities of *Akalis* or *Nihangs*. These were attendants of *Akal Takht*. In a meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa*, any *Akali* Sikh would present a proposal about Sikh religion and they discussed the matter publically and they mutually decided and it was called *Gurmatta*. Then it was read out to Sikhs as a law. Malcolm called it the National Institute of Sikhs.⁹

Another famous European historian wrote that *Sarbat Khalsa* was such an institution where the leaders of the *Misals* were meeting together. Henry T. Princep believed that even though all the *Misals* were independent still they would keep aside their personal motives and personal conflicts. The meeting would be held twice a year on *Diwali* and *Baisakhi*.¹⁰ Major James Brown, European historian, called *Sarbat Khalsa* the diet of the Sikh religion. He said that in Amritsar on the shore of sacred tank diet of Sikhs was called. In that meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa*, Sikhs discussed several issues and made decisions on them. That institution also elected the commander for different battles.¹¹

The meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa* for political reason held in 18th century from the death of Guru Gobind Singh to 1805. The last *Gurmatta* for any political motive happened in 1805 in the times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He

7. K. S. Thaper (December 1981- January 1982). *Gurmatta: Asli Varton Da Ganraj*, Jaspal Printig Press, Amritsar, p. 29.

8. Khushwant Singh, 1999. *History of the Sikhs*, Vol – 1, Oxford University Press, New Delhi p. 116.

9. John Malcolm, 1981. *The Sketch of the Sikhs*, Vinay Publications, Chandigarh, p. 41.

10. Henry T. Princep, 1970. *Origin of the Sikhs Power in the Punjab*, Language Department, Patiala p. 26.

11. Ganda Singh, 1974. *Early European Accounts of the Sikhs*, Today and Tomorrow's Printers and Publishers, New Delhi, p. 16.

abolished the tradition of calling the meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa* for political decision. He took the charge in his own hands. Afterward the decisions were made only on religious and social issues. Then *Gurmatta* was held on special occasions only like on some festivals. In those meetings, leaders of *Misals* would come to *Akal Takht* with their followers. Those men would not indulge directly in the meeting but would tell their views to their leaders. All the decisions were mutually decided. The decision was not consider over vote but over the reputation of the persons involved. It was expected of them to think about the betterment of the *Panth*. Anyone who was against the proposal for some personal conflict was talked separately and he would be settled as suited him or her best. After resolving the conflict they would discuss on the proposal that became a *Gurmatta*. In a need to make any amendments, the presence of five Sikhs was considered necessary. All the *Gurmatta* were passed at any of the five *Takhts*. Except *Akal Takht*, Patna Sahib, Nander Sahib, Keshgar Sahib and Damdma Sahib are other four *Takhts*. Any political issue was taken into consideration at *Akal Takht* only though religious issues can be resolved at any *Takht*.¹²

It is necessary to know why it has been compulsory to call the meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa* at *Akal Takht*. Every group had its central institute where serious matters can be addressed. Every democratic country has a central place where activities and policies have been thought about. This place has its sacredness and propriety. In the similar way, people gathered there could take decisions in that very manner. The place has been addressed as their central capital. *Akal Takht* has remained the central agency or capital to call the meetings of *Sarbat Khalsa*. This would be the place to work out the possible ways to handle the issues related to Sikh religion. *Akal Takht* contains the sacredness of *Sarbat Khalsa* and Sikh religion. The participants would bow down at Harimander Sahib and the positivity and sacredness of the place cleans the persons' heart from malice. This also connects religion and politics and helps to keep the propriety of *Sarbat Khalsa*. The meeting had been presided over by *Panj Pyaras* and they made and still make decisions under the guidance of *Guru Granth Sahib*. In the time of peril, *Sarbat Khalsa* can be called at some other places also but main decisions and *Hukamnama* should be released from *Akal Takht* only. Therefore, we have seen that *Sarbat Khalsa* has been related with religion and politics. It holds sovereign place in Sikh religion till date. The decisions of *Sarbat Khalsa* become law for Sikhs.¹³

Guru Gobind Singh formed *Sarbat Khalsa* as an organization. However, it was brought into practice in the 18th century only. The reason was that Guru Gobind Singh himself was their leader. He did not face any situation where he was unable to decide. Any organization would play its role when the ruler is unable to decide

12. Labh Singh, 1975. *Gurmatta Te Isda Mahatav*, Singh Sabha Patrika, Sidhantak Panth, p.48.

13. Roop Singh, 2015. *Sikh Sankalp*, Sidhant Ate Sansthavan, Dharm Parchar Committee, Amritsar, p.302.

14. Sukhdyal Singh, 2002. *Shri Akal Takht Sahib*, Gurmat Parkashan Naveen Shadara, Delhi, p. 140.

for that organization or community. At that juncture, they would ask people's advice. This advice in Sikh religion has been taken in the presence of *Panj Pyaras* and under the guidance of *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* called *Sarbat Khalsa*.¹⁴

Sarbat Khalsa has been the second strong pillar of Sikh politics. It has been serving like a Parliamentary institution for Sikhs. It has never been a crowd gathering for celebrations, but a meeting between the representatives of many organizations, i.e. *Misals*. The people taking part in the meeting had always been considered as equal. The representatives had never been driven by their personal motives rather they kept the ideal of the welfare of the whole *Panth* in their mind. Those who did not follow that idea or indulge in personal motives were considered as offenders of the Sikh *Panth*. Sikhs could file a plea with *Sarbat Khalsa* against such a person, the final decision remains with *Sarbat Khalsa* only. The members of *Sarbat Khalsa* have never been permanent, until a person who keeps his welfare in his mind. The person who ever kept his designation prior to the service to community cannot be called a true Sikh. That person would be excommunicated. The one who keeps his personal motives ahead of the welfare cannot be a true Sikh.¹⁵

Sarbat Khalsa and *Gurmatta* are interdependent. Any decision taken in the meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa* in the presence of *Guru Granth Sahib* is called *Gurmatta*. The meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa* happened twice a year on *Diwali* and *Basakhi*. They discussed over the issues and passed the resolutions for the same. The leaders of different *Jathas* would gather on this occasion that was named as *Sarbat Khalsa*. The meeting would be held in an open field. The leaders could bring their companion but they had to sit back and could participate through their leader only. These leaders would keep their personal motives aside. The conflict between the leaders would also resolve. Leaders of Sikh *Misals* gave importance to *Sarbat Khalsa* as the supreme defense of *Sarbat Khalsa*.¹⁶

The first meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa*, as the source have it happened in 1723 AD. In 1721 AD, a conflict began in two Sikh groups. One group was of *Bandai Khalsa* and other was of *Tat Khalsa*. *Bandai Khalsa* was the group of the followers of Banda Singh Bahadur and *Tat Khalsa* were the group of the followers of Guru Gobind Singh. The *Tat Khalsa* held a treaty with Mughals in 1715 AD and refused to help Banda Singh Bahadur. The conflict was not a small one for Harimander Sahib. One day, Amar Singh organized an army to attack and capture Amritsar. Bhai Mani was the head attended of *Akal Takht*. He called a meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa* to resolve the issue. *Sarbat Khalsa* gave the power of decision to Bhai Mani Singh. He wrote the name of both the groups on slips and threw them into the holy tank of Harimander Sahib. The name that would appear first on the surface would be given the responsibility. The slip with the name of *Tat Khalsa* came out

first. And it was decided that the winner side would be given the responsibility. The *Bandai Khalsa* had accepted decision of *Akal Takht* and *Sarbat Khalsa*. Then the *Sarbat Khalsa* worked in real sense.¹⁷

The second gathering of *Sarbat Khalsa* happened due to Tara Singh Van's martyrdom. Tara Singh Van killed Har Sahayi in the fight of Amritsar in 1709 AD. Sahib Rai, his son, was the enemy of Sikhs. To avenge the murder of his father, he traduced about Tara Singh Van to the satrap of Lahore that Tara Singh's house was a camp and resting place for the Sikhs travelling to and from Amritsar. The governor sent police to arrest him. He fought along with 22 Sikhs and all of them were killed in the fight. Bhai Mani Singh called the meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa* and passed a *Gurmatta*. They planned to kill the Mughal soldiers, to raid on their horses and weapons and to loot the government treasure.¹⁸

When Mughal Empire became cautious of Sikh's guerilla activities, they sent Subhegh Singh to Amritsar to make Sikhs accept their proposal of *Nawab* and *Jagir*. A meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa* was held to decide the issue at *Akal Takht*. The meeting was presided over by Darbara Singh, a close associate of Bhai Mani Singh. First proposal was to ask Bhai Subhag Singh to apologize as he, even in the times of peril for Sikhs, was working for the enemies. He accepted the punishment and the proceeding were followed.¹⁹ All main Sardar refused to accept *Nawabship*, then they choose S. Kapoor Singh. He accepted the decision but on the condition of serving in *Langer*.²⁰

Nawab Kapoor Singh, the main leader of the Sikhs, called a meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa* on Diwali in 1746 at *Akal Takht*. The aim of the meeting was to decide about the right way to handle the politics of *Sikh Panth*. Sikhs gathered at *Akal Takht* for the meeting presided over by *Nawab* Kapoor Singh. They presented the proposal to strengthen the political side of *Sikh Panth*. They passed the *Gurmatta* to divide the present *Jathas* into 25 *Jathas*.²¹

15. Harjinder Singh Dilgir, 2005. *Sikh Tawarikh Vich Akal Takht Sahib Da Role*, Sikh University Press, Belgium, p. 65.

16. Mohinder Kaur Gill, 1997. *Hukamnama, Akal Takht, Gurmatta Ate Sarbat Khalsa Ik Adhiyan*, Seesh Ganj, Masik Patrika, ,p. 20.

17. Ibid, p. 99.

18. K. S. Thapar, 1996. *Gurmata*, In *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism, Vol- II* , ed. By Harbans Singh, Punjabi University, Patiala, p. 154.

19. Sukhdyal Singh, *Atharavi Sadi da Ithas*, p.21.

20. Surinder Singh Kohli, op.cit. p. 204.

21. Gyani Gyan Singh, 1970. *Tawarikh Guru Khalsa, Bhasha Vibhag Punjab*, Patiala, p. 159.

22. Sukhdyal Singh, 1983. *Akal Takht Ate Gurmatta*, Seesh Ganj Masik Patrika, Vol-22, Delhi,

Mughal Government took action to stop the activities of the Sikhs. *Chota Ghallughara* happened in 1746. Sikhs gathered in the form of *Sarbat Khalsa* at *Akal Takht* in March 1747 AD. They passed a resolution to construct a fort to treasure their food and weapons. *Khalsa* built Ram Rauni fort for that purpose. Sikhs had a special connection with Amritsar so they constructed it on that land only. Sikhs did all the construction.²²

Sikhs had divided themselves into 65 *Jathas* in 1747 AD in the gathering of *Sarbat Khalsa* at *Akal Takht*. However, in 1748 AD, due to a political uprising they again met as *Sarbat Khalsa* and proposed to make *Khalsa* army more organized and powerful. *Nawab* Kapoor Singh, being aged, could not handle all the responsibilities of *Khalsa* army. He elected Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, the Supreme commander of the Sikh army. They divided the army into 11 *Misals*. Every *Misal* had one leader called *Jathedar*. All those *Misals* were under Sardar Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. Those *Jathas* collaborated as *Dal Khalsa*.²³

They decided that any one was free to change the *Jathas*. They also decided that during a battle they would obey the order of Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. They also decided to meet twice a year on *Diwali* and *Basakhi* at *Akal Takht* for the meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa*.²⁴

Ahmed Shah Abdali invaded India several times. During his invasions of 1751 AD, Mir Manu was commander of Mughal forces. He was afraid of Abdali's invasion so he sought help from Sikhs. He sent *Diwan* Kora Mal for that purpose. Sikhs called a meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa* at *Akal Takht* to decide whether to help Mir Manu.²⁵ Sikhs passed a *Gurmatta* and decided to send thirty thousand soldiers to help him. However, Mir Manu accepted the sovereignty of Abdali before that treaty could take place.

In 1760, *Dal Khalsa* passed a *Gurmatta* in the meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa* to capture Lahore. Ten thousand of Sikhs besieged Lahore under the leadership of Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. Governor of Lahore offered them gifts in lieu of their return.²⁶

Sikhs had lost their families alongside thirty thousand Sikhs in *Vada Ghalughara* and insult of Harimander Sahib wrenched the heart of Sikhs. They dispersed because of mass murder. They gathered at *Akal Takht* in 1762 AD and passed a *Gurmatta* to avenge their loss. Abdali sent a messenger for a treaty with the Sikhs. But they insulted him. At last he attacked on Amritsar, but he got a strong defeat from the Sikhs. Then the Sikhs captured Sirhind and divided the areas between them.²⁷

p. 81.

23. Hari Ram Gupta, 1939. History of the Sikhs (1739-1768), Jadunath Sarkar, Calcutta, pp. 51-52.

24. Harjinder Singh Dilgir, 2005. Sikh Tawarikh Vich Akal Takht Sahib Da Role, Sikh University Press, Belgium, pp. 114-115.

25. Ganda Singh, 1987. Sardar Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, Punjabi University, Patiala, p. 73.

26. N. K. Sinha, 1960. Rise of the Sikh Power, Calcutta University, Calcutta, p.33.

The meeting of *Sarbat Khalsa* was also held in 1763 AD on the occasion of *Basakhi*. A Brahman requested them to save his wife, whom the ruler of Kasoor had abducted. Sikhs passed a resolution to send Charhat Singh Sukerchakiya and leader of Bhangi *Misal* to release the woman. Their army besieged Kasoor and the ruler of Kasoor, Usman Khan was killed.²⁸ All the matters related to the whole community were took in the meetings of *Sarbat Khalsa*.

Sikhs had to fight many bloody battles after the death of Banda Singh Bhadur. Sikhs were tortured to exterminate. Sikhs had to live secretly during that time. Mughal Empire had given the order for public mass slaughter of Sikhs, they were killed like animals. In that period, they had the only support of their faith in Lord. They met quite often at *Akal Takht* and passed many *Gurmattas*. They were charged with positive energy while at *Akal Takht* and they were filled with rare courage and were able to save their religion.²⁹

Punjab politics took a turn in the year 1799 AD when Maharaja Ranjit Singh began his rule. Many historians believed that with the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the conventional and traditional rituals of Sikh religion ended and the influence of older conventions began to have its hold.³⁰ In fact Maharaja Ranjit Singh followed the policy of religious tolerance and *Gurmatta* was only for Sikhs therefore it was the demand of the time to stop it. Another thing was that *Gurmatta* was the way to reach on some decision in a situation of uncertainty. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was able ruler, so there emerged no situation of the kind that they would have needed *Gurmatta*. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a diplomat and could face any problem. Still he never considered himself superior to *Khalsa* and always thought of the betterment of the religion.³¹

Sarbat Khalsa and *Gurmatta* were organized by the Sikhs in the absence of their Gurus for the unity and safety of Sikh community. Both were based on equality and responsibility of all. These were formed on the guidance of the Gurus and worked in the presence of *Guru Granth Sahib*.

27. Idid, p.43.

28. Rattan Singh Bhangu, 1962. Prachin Panth Prakash, Khalsa Smachar, Amritsar, pp. 385-386.

29. Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha, 1960. Gursabad Ratnakar Mahaan Kosh, Bhasha Vibhag Punjab, Patiala, p. 527.

30. Teja Singh, 1970. Sikhism-Its Ideals and Institutions, Khalsa Brothers, Amritsar, p.44.

31. Bhagat Singh, 1978. Sikh Polity, Oriental Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, pp. 118-119.