



Social Institutions of Sarbat Khalsa and Gurmata: An Introduction

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Abstract

Throughout the eighteenth century, two significant social institutions played an essential role in the Sikh struggle: Sarbat Khalsa and Gurmata. These two institutions are inextricably linked and cannot operate independently under normal circumstances. Despite their closeness, these organisations have a distinct history, and hence were examined separately. When Sikh confederacies were formed, their leaders and adherents used to gather in Akal Takht assemblies known as Sarbat Khalsa. Sarbat Khalsa was once democratically managed and constructed. Sikhs used to prioritise Guru Garanth Sahib during discussions. Gurmata, or unanimously accepted exceptional decisions, are the terminology used to refer to the judgements rendered by these assemblies. The term 'Gurmata' consists of two components: 'Guru' and 'Mata' (Wisdom of the Guru). At the Diwali, Baisakhi, and Dusahra festivals, the community's major problems were addressed in the presence of Garanth Sahib. As previously stated, after achieving consistency, this assembly was termed Sarbat Khalsa. Gurmata was considered as the Guru's ultimate verdict. Sardars and the majority of their subordinates and Misdars used to visit Amritsar during this period. Sardars were formerly sheltered in hospices near Harmandir Gurdwara. Prior to the establishment of Sarbat Khalsa, the Sardars used to make donations to the Harmandir in the form of nazars. Standard protocols used to be followed when the Sarbat Khalsa was held at Amritsar's Akal Takht. The Gurmata were not transported individually in order to address their difficulties with one another. The Gurmata and the Sarbat Khalsa flourished for about a century until being politically suppressed by Ranjit Singh at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Keywords:

Sarbat Khalsa, Gurmata, Khalsa, Misl, Misdar, Garanth, Akal Takht, Akali, Nazar, Panth, Sangat, Jathedar, Sardar.

Contents

In Indian history, the eighteenth century is remembered for the fall of the Mughal Empire and the establishment of regional kingdoms, one of which was Punjab. The Sikhs established a great kingdom in the north-western part of the Indian subcontinent. The Sikh faith, founded by Guru Nanak, was instrumental in the foundation of the Punjab state. Along with the sect's inception, Guru Nanak and his successor gurus established a number of social organisations, and it is only via these institutions that Sikhs have endured for centuries. These were the social institutions that provided the Sikhs with strength and solidarity throughout the era of the Mughals' tyranny and foreign invasions. During the eighteenth century, two major social institutions played a critical part in the Sikh struggle: *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmata*. Under normal circumstances, these two institutions are inextricably linked and cannot operate individually. Despite the fact that both institutions were related to one another, the backgrounds of each were distinct, and therefore they will be examined separately in order to have a better knowledge of one another.

Sarbat Khalsa, in its literal sense, refers to the whole Khalsa community. Following Guru Gobind Singh's establishment of Khalsa in 1699 AD, the word gained prominence. In idea, it was not a new fabrication, but a version of the *Panth* notion. As Sikhism flourished and expanded, it encountered a variety of social, cultural, and political challenges. As a result, the entire community was obliged to convene in order to devise a strategy for resolving those issues. Sikh gurus established the institutions of *Sangat* and *Panth* throughout the whole process. *Sangat* and *Panth* had gained a special sanctity as a result of the gurus' emphasis on their value. Sikh gurus nurtured and endowed these institutions with several virtues.

When Guru Gobind Singh, the last human Guru, established Khalsa in 1699 AD, he designated *Sangat* as Khalsa. Guru Gobind Singh established a practise that during Baisakhi and Diwali, all the *Sangats* of the whole Khalsa would congregate at Sri *Akal Takht* in Darbar Sahib Gurdwara, Amritsar to absorb and meditate on the Sikh religion. Following that, during Baisakhi and Diwali, Sikhs began congregating in huge numbers at *Akal Takht* in the presence of *Guru Garanth Sahib* and passing resolutions. As a consequence, these gatherings are referred to as *Sarbat Khalsa*, and the decisions adopted by *Sarbat Khalsa* are referred to as *Gurmata*. Because Guru Gobind Singh invested the *Panth* with Guruship, the *Sarbat Khalsa* naturally acquired dignity and consideration. *Sarbat Khalsa's* resolution was imbued with sacredness.

Sarbat Khalsa is open to any Sikh male or female. When the Sikh confederacies formed, their chiefs (dubbed Sardars) and supporters attended *Sarbat Khalsa* gatherings. The whole *Sarbat Khalsa* sat in a state of self-surrender and devotion to their gurus. Sikhs placed a premium on *Guru Garanth Sahib* during talks. The *Sarbat Khalsa* convened twice a year on average, although routine judgments were not accorded *Gurmata* importance. *Gurmata* were exceptional decisions made unanimously during *Sarbat Khalsa* sessions discussing specific issues. Bhai Mani Singh convened gatherings as the eighteenth century began. Following Bhai Mani Singh, Nawab Kapoor Singh, Jassa Sing Ahluwalia, and in the late eighteenth century, *Akalis* conducted similar assemblies.

Sarbat Khalsa was a democratic institution in its operation and makeup. The whole Sikh *Panth* used to attend *Sarbat Khalsa* sessions. While gathered at *Akal Takht* for *Sarbat Khalsa*, no one could claim dominance. Each attendee took part on an equal ground and as a humble servant of Guru. Because the

confederacies' collective leadership was elected, they operated democratically. Sardars had open and candid conversations about national and regional issues, and decisions were reached by common agreement. The Sikhs held the institution of *Sarbat Khalsa* in the highest regard. The Sikhs' topmost organisation was dedicated to maintaining the Sikhs' corporate existence and enhancing their eloquence.

The members of *Sarbat Khalsa's* assembly retained the fundamental concepts of equality, accountability, and unity in front of them. All collective actions were done objectively. Diverse points of view were spoken, yet they were linked by a solemn commitment to be together in the Guru's presence. The resolutions were unanimously adopted. *Sarbat Khalsa* appointed a committee to implement *Gurmata*. The committee was accountable to the parent body for its activities, which had the authority to alter it as required. *Sarbat Khalsa* routinely made decisions on territory acquisitions, campaign strategies, successions of confederacies, resolving conflicts among chiefs, combining two or more confederacies, assessing the growth of Sikhism, choosing leaders, and erecting Sikh temples, among other matters.

Sarbat Khalsa as an organisation functioned efficiently as long as threats to the Sikhs' survival existed. However, when certain risks disappeared, *Sarbat Khalsa* assemblies decreased in frequency and participation became weak and non-serious. Even during Zaman Shah's raids in the late eighteenth century, the *Sarbat Khalsa* did not gather in full strength. However, it is also true that the institution of *Sarbat Khalsa* as a notion or custom has lasted throughout history. Numerous Sikh political and social organisations have made references to *Sarbat Khalsa* in recent years, demonstrating that the notion of *Sarbat Khalsa* has not faded from Sikh historical memory. For example, on September 30, 2019, a *Sarbat Khalsa* panel demanded the release of Sikh prisoners serving life sentences; on November 10, 2015, "*Sarbat Khalsa* hardliners appoint Hawara Akal Takht Jathedar"; and on June 18, 2016, "Sikh radical *Jathedars* issued *Gurmata* at Akal Takht," according to national news and regional publications.

Gurmata is composed of two components: 'Guru' and 'Mata'. Guru is the Sikh religion's spiritual leader, while Mata denotes wisdom. Thus, the *Gurmata* denotes Guru's knowledge as conveyed in a large assembly via the selected five Sikhs. *Gurmata*, or the Guru's knowledge, is obtained directly from the Guru. Sikhism is referred to as '*Gurmata*' by Guru Nanak, and it is mentioned in the *Adi Garanth*. *Gurmata* is vested in the assembly of the chosen five beloveds (*Panj Payaras*) through Guru Gobind Singh. Because the *Gurmata* (Guru's wisdom) was greater to human intelligence, it must be recognised as divine edict.

The first *Gurmata* is claimed to have been conducted during the war at Chamkaur. Guru Gobind arrived with a total of forty-two pupils, including his two oldest sons, five beloved ones, and thirty-five more. During the days of warfare, both of Gobind Singh's sons were assassinated, as were three of the five beloved ones and thirty-two other followers. Guru Gobind Singh had been reduced to just five disciples. He was debating whether or not to join the struggle for his life the next morning. Guru Gobind's martyrdom was a foregone conclusion under the circumstance. Five disciples objected to this course of action. With Guru in front of them, the five Sikhs recalled their first Guru, Gur Nanak, and prayed for heavenly guidance in their time of need. They informed him via this *Gurmata* that they were the Guru's cause and that Gobind Singh was only a disciple. Guru Gobind Singh was tamely surrendered after a resolution (*Gurmata*) was made that he must flee in the welfare of the *Panth*.

In 1708 AD, the regular *Gurmata* were formally declared at Nander. On October 3, 1708 AD, a few days before his decease, Guru Gobind Singh convened a gathering with all available Sikhs in the presence of the Holy *Garanth*. All Sikhs present in Nander, including Bhai Mani Singh, attended this assembly. Guru Gobind Singh stated that guruship was hereditary, despite the fact that he had already lost all of his children. To prevent future rivalries, he proclaimed the abolition of human guruship. He endowed the Holy *Garanth* with guruship throughout all future. Guru Gobind Singh said that the *Panth's* affairs would be governed by a council of five beloved selected for the occasion, whose judgement would be known as *Gurmata*. *Gurmata* would be recognised as the Guru's verdict. It was to be accepted unanimously by the legislature. Its enforcement was obligatory on the whole community, and any violation was to be regarded as disrespectful.

There was no established mechanism for enforcing *Gurmata*. *Gurmata* embodied the community's collective will. It was seen as a Guru-given mandate, and no leader, Sardar, or royal, no matter how strong, dared to oppose *Gurmata*. Each confederacy pledged loyalty to the *Panth* and *Sarbat Khalsa*. On the festivals of Diwali, Baisakhi, and sometimes Dusahra, the community's major issues were debated in the presence of the *Garanth Sahib* in the grand assembly at Amritsar before the *Akal Takht*. The subjects of debate were assigned and subdivided according to the occasion for *Sarbat Khalsa*. As it is discussed earlier, after establishing consistency, this assembly was named *Sarbat Khalsa*.

Apart from the regular *Gurmata*s, they may be convened in the presence of *Garanth Sahib* at any time and in any place in an emergency. One such *Sarbat Khalsa* was held in 1761 AD, after Ahmad Shah Abdali travelled to Afghanistan from Panipat following his victory over the Marathas. Afghans were enslaving a considerable number of women. Sikhs convened an urgent *Sarbat Khalsa* at Amritsar's *Akal Takht*. According to narrative, a great number of Sikhs and Hindus assembled at *Akal Takht* on this *Sarbat Khalsa*. They enacted a *Gurmata* and vowed holy war on the infidels (Dhram Yudh). They hoist a symbol that mentions:

“*Asan Desh di Dhiyan, Bahnan Kiwen Jjane Den*”.

Multiple small groups were formed. It has been said that that over 3000 women of Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim faiths were saved. Additionally, a considerable amount of loot came into their hands, and several Afghan guards were killed in the process. On another occasion a political *Gurmata* was held when Jawahir Singh (Raja of Bharatpur), asked for Sikh help. And a special *Sarbat Khalsa* was took place in 1764 AD near Barari Ghat on the Jamuna in the presence of *Adi Garanth*.

The *Gurmata* were not carried around individually in order to discuss one another's difficulties. Prose cannot adequately describe a Sardar. Attendance was mandatory, although all Sardars were required to attend in the *Panth's* overall interest. When *Sarbat Khalsa* was held in *Akal Takht* in Amritsar, a normal protocol was followed. Sardars and the majority of their subordinates and *Misldars* used to visit Amritsar during the *Sarbat Khalsa* period. They were accommodated in the hospices constructed around Harmandir Gurdwara by the community. When they came to Amritsar, these were their own residences. *Bungha* were the names given to these areas where they used to reside. Each chief also had their own designated area in the city marketplaces. Each confederacy's forces camped outside of the city in designated areas.

The Sardars presented *nazars* to the Harmandir prior to starting *Sarbat Khalsa*. Each leader gladly met and hugged the other. All quarrels and disagreements were forgotten under the shadow of their hallowed shrines. They used to set the *Guru Garanth Sahib* in front of them, and everyone paid tribute to the sacred document. A considerable amount of delicious bread was brought in a large basket and put in front of the *Garanth Sahib*. The whole assembly used to stand and *Akalis* would say an *ardas* or prayer. Everyone sat down after prayer, and the delicious bread was divided among the assembly, and everyone ate it as langar, provided by the Guru himself.

'Sardarji, this is *Gurmata*,' the *Akalis* declared. Everyone stood at this pronouncement, repeated the prayer, and sat down. All renowned Sardars swear their total allegiance to the Guru and commitment to the *Panth*. The *Panth's* problems were addressed one by one. Five cherished ones were selected after lengthy deliberations and arguments on the grounds of their service and loyalty to the *Panth*. They prayed for heavenly guidance, talked among themselves, and reached a unanimous conclusion. The representative for the five dear ones conveyed their decision to the *Akal Takht's* presiding authority. It was proclaimed by a chosen *Akali*, and it was universally accepted without protest. Following the passage of the *Gurmata*, a committee was created to oversee its proper execution.

For over a century, the *Gurmata* and the *Sarbat Khalsa* prospered. Banda Bahadur hosted the first and most significant political *Gurmata* before to the battle of Sarhind in 1710 AD. Maharaja Ranjit Singh hosted the final political *Gurmata* in 1809 AD, before to signing the Amritsar Treaty with the East India Company. On a political level, there were various reasons for the demise of *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmata*: Therefore, in order to maintain peace and stability in the country and establish a stable government, it was critical that the administration be secularised; foreign rule and foreign invasions had ceased, and the primary topic of discussion at a *Gurmata* had ceased to exist; the mode of foreign policy was changing globally, and thus should be a matter of state rather than community; and the principle of equality, which was the primary tenet of the *Misl* system, had ceased to exist. As a conclusion, Ranjit Singh was justified in disbanding the *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmata* for political reasons. Following that, the *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmatas* dealt exclusively with religious and social issues.

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