



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

THE NIHANG: ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

Dr.Daljit Kaur Gill /Kulwinder Kaur (Research Scholar)

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR (HOD)

Guru Kashi University

Talwandi Sabo, Bathinda.

Abstract : The research is basically based on the Sikh Community. The community of Nihangs in the Sikhism. "Etymologically, the word Nihang is traced back to Persian Nihang (alligator, sword) or to Sanskrit Nihsanka (fearless, carefree). The word could also be a modified form of Nihang often used in the Sikh scriptures to mean Nirlep (sinless, and not attached to anything),"

The Khalsa that had been fighting for a cause right since its inception found the job partially accomplished in the 19th century. The sacrifices of the Sikh Gurus and their followers, the longstanding traditions of the Khalsa created by Guru Gobind Singh, and the 18th century, a "heroic period of Sikh tradition" and "heroic century of the Khalsa", were all precursor to the ultimate establishment of the Khalsa Raj under Maharaja Ranjit Singh¹. The process of identity and self-assertion, which had started in the 18th century, continued even during the 19th century. Though Maharaja Ranjit Singh never allowed the religion to intervene in his polity or prevail upon the natives of the state, the Khalsa 'prefix' determined the nomenclature of the state as Sarkar Khalsa, its court as Khalsa Darbar, and the war cry of the Khalsa Fauj as 'Wah! Guruji Ka Khalsa! Wah! Guruji Ki Fateh! Right in the early 19th century itself, the Maharaja was recognized by the English as the sole sovereign ruler of the Punjab and was allowed the freedom to round of his conquests in the erstwhile Mughal subah of Lahore, to oust the Afghans from Multan and Kashmir and finally, to oust the successors of Ahmed Shah Abdali from the former Mughal subah of Kabul².? The agricultural production, trade, manufacturing cities and towns expanded during

¹ Baljit Singh, *Theory and Practice of Modern Gurrilla Warfare*, Asia Publishers, New Delhi, 1971,p.11

² *Ibid*,p.13

this period. Enormous encouragement was given to the new development of great cultural significance like some important historical and literary works. The Khalsa Darbar provided revenue-free grants without any consideration to the religion, caste and creed. Since all the Sikhs had not become the Khalsa, the ideological differences could also be marked especially during the early nineteenth century³. The Mazhabi Sikhs, Sehajdhaari Sikhs, and the Udasi version of Sikhism all flourished during the 19th century. Some sort of tension continued to exist between the Akali and the Nihang ideologues of the Khalsa and Maharaja Ranjit Singh. After the death of the Maharaja, there was a gradual decline of the 'pillars' of the Khalsa Empire and the paternal' rule was replaced by the 'machine rule' of laws, codes, and procedures. There was spread of English education. Despite Punjabi being the dominant language of the province, Urdu was introduced as the medium of education in the government schools upto the matriculation level. The Christian missionaries, the Brahma Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Dev Samaj, the Shuddhi movement, the 'Hindu nationalism', the Wahhabis, and the Ahmadiyah had deep-rooted impact on the Khalsa ideology. The Khalsa in the 19th century also witnessed the

Nirankari, Namdhari (Kukas), and the Singh Sabha Movements. However, the British government recognized the valour of the Khalsa and their proportion in the Indian army was raised to a very large extent⁴.

Before going into the details of the Khalsa in the 19th century, it is imperative to have a peep into the political and institutional backdrop since the inception of the Khalsa in 1699. The 18th century is a very crucial period for the history of the Khalsa. During this period the Punjab was passing through an era of political turmoil and turbulence and the Khalsa struggle for power. Eighteenth century Punjab had witnessed the disintegration of the Mughal empire, the foreign campaigns of Nadir Shah and the Durranis, the attempts made by the Rohillas, Rajputs, Jats and the Afghans to establish their respective regional governments and the emergence and rise of the Marathas and the Sikhs.:

In the Punjab, the Sikh Sardars, during this period, not only confronted the political powers, especially like the Mughals and the Durranis, but were able to carve out their own independent/semi-independent territories (zamindaries) for the purposes for revenue realization and administration.⁵ The most significant feature of the Sikh history during the course of the 17th and the 18th centuries is that the Sikh community/Nanak Panth which originally was socio-religious in character gradually transformed into socio- religious-cum political force comprising members of various clans and castes⁶.The Khalsa of the days of Guru Gobind Singh and Banda Bahadur was a purely religious community, suffering from great persecutions. In taking up arms, their chief object had been the defense of their religion and individual existence. Their predatory practice was merely the means of securing that object. Later on, however, the case was different. The Khalsa was then fighting principally for a dominion.' Initially, the Nanak- Panth mostly comprised the khatris, artisans, craftsmen, petty traders, low caste Hindus and a section of poor peasantry, more especially from the Majitha territories. The

³ Khuswant Singh, *Sikhism*, Lahore Book Snake, Ludhiana, 2013, p. 21

⁴ F.S.Chapman, *The Jungle is Neutral*, Chatto and Windus Press, London, 1969, p.30

⁵ J.N.Sarkar, *Military History of India*, Sindhi Press, Jaipur, 1970, p.21

⁶ *Ibid*, p.23

various Hukmnamas of the Gurus reveal that the sangat of Gurus (Sikhs) were equally drawn from the prosperous commercial classes and other sections of the peasantry as well. Another noteworthy change in the character of the Khalsa during the 17th and the 18th centuries was that they were not only drawn from the regions of the Punjab alone but also from Cis-Satluj territories, the regions around Delhi and other places in India. The socio-economic phenomenon involving the emergence of the new dominant clans in the landed structure in the Punjab and territories of Delhi, the conversion of these clans more especially the peasantry to Sikhism in the course of the 17th and the 18th centuries added a new dimension to the character of the Khalsa⁷.

The initiation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh, the armed struggle by Banda Bahadur in the territories of Delhi, hilly and plain regions of the Punjab against the Mughal state in the early 18th century, the later division of the Khalsa into Bandais (after Banda's death) and the Tat Khalsa, the ultimate supremacy of the latter further molded the militant character of the Singhan for safeguarding the interest of the Panth. But the emergence of Khalsa as a political force cannot be studied in isolation, rather the dissolution of the Mughal empire and the rise of the Marathas, Bundelas, Rajputs, the Jats and Afghans in other parts of India have also to be taken into consideration. The Mughal empire which, for its governance and stability during the 16 and 17th centuries, had depended upon its alliance with the Rajputs and its own nobility had been shaken to the point of dismemberment due to its fight with other socio-political forces during the 18th century. In spite of considerable element of continuity in the traditionally form of regional polity, administration and economic system, the other event had great impact on the social, economic and political developments during the 18th century which transformed the Khalsa, not only a mere political force but a force to reckon with.

The Khalsa Raj provided enormous encouragement to trade and number of urban centres, which exceeded one hundred, served as centres of trade. Safe passage for the caravans of traders was ensured and imposed very lenient duties. The trade serves as links between the areas of raw material, production and exchange between the manufacturing centres and the markets. There were several routes which connected Punjab with central Asian countries. Here a mention may be made of the 'trans- Himalaya' network of trade routes which ultimately joined with the so called 'silk routes' or "silk roads' (a term coined in the 19th century by Baron Ferdinand Von Richthofen) connecting China with Mediterranean after passing through many a region of Central and West Asian countries⁸.

The routes from the Punjab and North-Western India traversed through the Hindu Kush, the Pamirs and the Karakoram.' Apart from various other items, it was from this route that the import of goat fleece from Yarkand and Tibetan highlands had led to the development of shawl industry in Kashmir. During the period under study it was once again revived and extended to the places like Nurpur and Amritsar. After a period of political uncertainties, Lahore was once again revived as trade centre as well as centre for manufacturing of cotton, wool

⁷ M'George, History of Sikhs, vol 1, Forster Press, Calcutta, 1990, p.23

⁸ Fauja Singh, *Punjabi History of (AD 1000-1526) Volume III*, Punjab University, Patiala, 1988, p.66

and silk textiles and its metal work. In fact, cotton and silk textile industries, craftsmanship of war weapons, leather works, gold work, embroidery, woolen carpets, glazed pottery, and enameled silver, tailoring and household utensils representing cohesion of West Asian, Central Asian and Punjab cultures flourished during this period. The Punjab salt was supplied over long distances. The zamindari of salt mountains at Kheora and Sind Sagar belonged to the janjua tribe. The contemporary sources point towards the availability of banking facilities in the shape of the practice of insurance (bima) of the goods being transported on the main routes and the system of hundis. The banjaras/merchants were fully protected in the plains and the hilly regions⁹.

During the Khalsa Raj the administration of canal irrigation formed an integral part of the revenue administration of the local government darogh-i-ab-nahar (canal darogha), the mir-i-ab (expert irrigation engineer), and the mehmaran (masons) in cooperation with local jagirdars and zamindars managed the administration of irrigation as well as for equitable distribution of water to the cultivators.

The establishment of Khalsa State was conducive to the patronage and encouragement provided to music, painting, new style of architecture and an enormous amount of historical literature. Ram Sukh Rao, apart from compiling a separate treatise on music- Sri Radha-Govind-Sangit Sar, has given a comprehensive account of Indian classical music, the ragas, rababis of the Gurdwaras, musical concerts at the court and the marriage songs in his Sri Fateh Singh Pratap Prabhakar . The important historical literature produced during this period include, Sohan Lal Suri's Umdat ut-Tawarikh, Ahmad Yar's Shahnama-i-Maharaja Ranjit Singh (Persian), Ram Sukh Rao's monumental works on Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, Bhag Singh and Fateh Singh Ahluwalia, Sawan Yar's Siharfi Sarkar Ki, Jafar Beg's Siharfi, Hakam Singh's Siharfi (Gurumukhi). The literature that was meant for the common Punjabi included Qadir Yar's Qissa Sohni Mahiwal, Puran Bhagat and Raja Rasalu, etc.? This articulation of regional identity may be regarded as the cultural counterpart of the secularization of polity by Ranjit Singh, which ensured participation of all-important sections of society on a significant scale¹⁰.

Ranjit Singh established a liberal and just state, though of course to some extent, within the limitations imposed by the contemporary social atmosphere. He stopped the practice of cow-slaughter and as a symbol of ascendancy of Khalsa, he forbade public calls for prayers (azan) at certain significant mosques in some cities. The Khalsa administration was quite liberal in the dharamarth grants¹¹. The Khalsa Darbar period, with rare exception, renewed even the grants prevalent in the Afghan rule. A separate department of Dharamarth was established to maintain records of madad-i-maash, aimma, muafi and wafg grants bestowed for philanthropic, charitable and educational purposes¹². The land grants, assignments of revenues of the villages in kind or cash were made to religious persons-Imams, khadims (attendants), mujawars (holy persons), fairs, pandits as well as

⁹ Satbir Singh, *Our History*, New Book Company, Jalandhar, 2018, p. 75.

¹⁰ Baljit Singh, *Theory and Practice of Modern Gurrilla Warfare*, Asia Publishers, New Delhi, 1971,p.49

¹¹ *Ibid*,p.52

¹² Satbir Singh, *Our History*, New Book Company, Jalandhar, 2018, p. 78

institutional establishments of the mosques, khankas, temples, tiraths and dharmsalas. The beneficiaries included the Sunni and the Shia Muslims, the Hindus, more especially the Udasis of the Nanak Panth. Mufti Ali-ud-din in his *brat Nama* (1854) comments that the Sikhs during this period had generally shaken off the rituals that the Brahmins fostered on the other Hindu society. They mostly took to agriculture and invariably joined army. Many Sikhs belonged to the zamindari clans. They were highly sensitive for the protection of the honour of their woman folk. They did not observe the practice of preparing a *chauka* before eating meals. Meat was their staple diet but they would never eat meat of any animal slaughtered by a Muslim. They did not observe any formality in the matter of dress and social intercourse. Instead of saying *Ram Ram'* like the other Hindus, they would utter *Waheguruji ki fateh*. In the morning hours, they would recite only the *Guru's Bani*, i.e., *Japji* and the *Sukhmani*. A large number of Sikhs who embraced Sikhism called themselves *Singh Guruji Ka* and were engaged in the trade. They were, by and large, very fond of wearing arms. Those who could well afford liked riding horses and elephants. The Sikhs made an extensive use of *Gurmukhi* and read and wrote in that script. In social life they indulged in wine and sex. The sections known as the *Akalis* and *Nihangs* were extremely fanatics¹³.

The early year of *Khalsa Raj* witnessed enough social differentiation in the Sikh community to infringe the idea of equality, the very foundation, on which the Sikh Panth was based in theory. Despite every Sikh being equal in the *sangat*, the *langar*, and in the presence of the Holy *Guru Granth Sahib*, social difference were legitimized in their life in general.

These differences were espoused by a handful of the Khalsa, like the Akalis and the Nihangs.

The historically evolved religious authority in the form **Akali/ Nihang**? Factor could never find itself satisfied with head of the *Sardar Khalsa*.¹⁴ The *Maharaja* respected the *Khalsa* discourse of which the *Akalis* were the protagonists and their religious authority. His policy was compatible with the concept and practice of *langer*, *sangat*, *pangat*, and holistic text and context of *Guru Granth Sahib*¹⁵. The *Khalsa* 'prefix' determined the nomenclature of the state as *Sarkar Khalsa*, its court as *Khalsa Darbar*, and the war cry of the *Khalsa Fauj* was '*Wah! Guruji Ka Khalsa! Wah! Guruji Ki Fateh!* He described and proclaimed himself as *Ranjit Nagara* (the war drum) of *Guru Gobind Singh*, hence "a mere instrument of the *Khalsa* for the assertion and execution of its political supermacy.»He was addressed as *Sarkar-i-wala*, i.e., one who belongs to the government, not himself a government. He neither occupied the throne nor adorned himself with an emblem of royalty on his simple turban, and issued *Nanak Shahi* coins. Moreover, he wish fully presented himself as a "cog of the *Khalsa* machinery» and assumed the *Khalsa* symbols to illuminate the fruits of the Sikh struggle and in the process presented the elevated status of the *Khalsa* in its first kingdom. In short, he never attempted to rise above the *Khalsa*. But nineteenth century Punjab had inherited the *Khalsa* legacy and *Ranjit Singh* had to handle it in

¹³ John Clark, *The Sikhs*, The University Press, London, 1946,p.19

¹⁴ *Ibid*,p.21

¹⁵ Satbir Singh, *Our History*, New Book Company, Jalandhar, 2018, p. 81

statesmanlike fashion. The religious zeal of the Akalis was nothing but the by-product of the longstanding traditions created by Guru Gobind Singh on the threshold of the 18th century¹⁶.

They move about constantly, limed to teeth, and it is not an uncommon thing to see them riding about with a drawn sword in each hand, two or more in their belt, a matchlock on

Weir back, and three or four pairs of quoits fastened round their turbans. Guru Gobind Singh, while creating the Khalsa, had also activated soldierly qualities, which had already been embedded by the sixth Guru (Guru Hargobind 1595-1644 AD) while introducing the concept of piri and mir. The tenth Guru taught the members of the Khalsa to regard the Sword as God and God as the Sword¹⁷. Apart from the Holy Guru Granth Sahib, the Akalis, adored with their blue standards, also accorded a very high place to Dasam Granth of Guru Gobind Singh. For the protection of the Sikh faith, the Akalis, in brief-

- were committed to acting upon the instructions of the tenth Guru to sacrifice everything;
- had acquired "the character of priests in which capacity they acted effectively while directing the conduct of the Sikh councils at the Akal Takhat", constituting "the central league of the Sikh religion." they considered themselves as the self-appointed guardians of the Sikh faith, "exercised a fierce scrutiny as censors in upholding strict compliance with the militant creed of the Singhs", stood for a liberated person, free from the fear of danger of death; could readily be recognized by their dark blue loose apparel and their ample peaked turban fastened with quoits, insignia of the Khalsa; were fond of sukha, a portion of Indian hemp and would not object to opium eating; stressed upon shakti, significant of weapon; were a privileged class as they were the grantees of the Dharamarth grants and were patronized by the Sikh rulers; Amritsar, the real and true symbol of Sikh history was the hub of their activities: had assumed "a dictatorial sway in all the religious ceremonies at Amritsar..."

There was certainly a tension between the Khalsa 'State' and the Akalis, the whole time defenders and ideologues of the Khalsa. Ranjit Singh tried to maneuver his relationship with them by responding to their semi-theocratic influence and at the same time keeping them under his monarchical hegemony. His Sarkar Khalsa "was no less and no more than the state of Maharaja Ranjit Singh." He legitimized the authority of the state by not accepting the Akalis theocratic influence as an ideology. At the same time, he would not be in a position to ignore the long standing Khalsa tradition nor would the effective presence of the Akalis let the nascent royal will be an absolute one. Moreover, the Akalis were not his political rivals. Ranjit Singh would/could have been in a great soup if he had launched a frontal attack on them as the Sikh struggle of the 19th century, which had been dominated by the Khalsa, was very much in the memory. Bound by tradition, he had to respect and recognize the Khalsa, but did not "rule as the instrument of the theocracy or in the interest of the comparatively small religious community to which he belonged¹⁸.

¹⁶ Bakhshis Singh Nijjar, *Punjab Under the Great Mughals*, Thacker Press, Calcutta, 1968,p.34

¹⁷ *Ibid*,p.38

¹⁸ Indhu Bhushan Banerjee, *Evolution of the Khalsa*, Mukhrjee Press, Calcutta, 1947,p.46

The nineteenth century has been a very crucial period for the Khalsa. There was a time when even the very existence of the Khalsa was seemed to be at stake. After the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1839 AD, seven successive governments were installed, mainly through violent methods, in Lahore Darbar up to the outbreak of the first Anglo-Sikh War¹⁹. After the annexation, the British government had disbanded thousands of soldiers of the Khalsa army. Flocks of Christian missionaries began roaming about the country and converting thousands of ignorant and poor rural folk to the new faith." The onslaught of Christianity, patronized by the new rulers, was corroding the sources of the moral and spiritual heritage of the Khalsa. Maharaja Dalip Singh had been converted so also a wing of the Kapurthala rulers. There was an increased number of Sehajdharis during the period of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and they 'were fast merging back into their ancient faith Hinduism' and 'fears were openly being expressed that the future of the Sikhs lay only in the past.' Above all, there were British manufactured goods.

The most important movement, which partially threatened the very existence the Khalsa, was the Arya Samaj, founded at Mumbai (then called Bombay) on April 10, 1875 AD by Swami Dayanand (1824-1883 AD)²⁰.

Amongst all the places where he preached, he found the largest following at Lahore, where he reached in 1877 AD. So great was his success that Lahore became the headquarters of the Movement. In Punjab he got the support mainly amongst the middle class, educated city dwellers Hindus. They wanted a religion, which could meet the attacks of Christianity. The watchwords of Swami Dayanand were 'Back to the Vedas' and 'India for the Indians'. In other words, Indian religion for the Indians, and Indian Sovereignty for the Indians. In order to accomplish the first end, Indian religion was to be reformed and purified by a return to the Vedas, and foreign religions as Islam and Christianity were to be extirpated. Thus the programme included reform for indigenous religion and extirpation for foreign religion. He propagated, among other things, simpler ceremonies for marriage, birth and death, remarriage of 'virgin widows' founding of orphanages, education for girls, Ved parchar for the propagation of new ideas and shuddhi for reconversion to Arya dharma.

His work Satyarath Parkash (1874 AD) gives the details about his philosophy. He preached against idolatry and caste. He also emphasized man's commitment to the world outside and illumination within, through meditation, on the one Formless God as enjoined by the Vedas. The views of Swami Dayanand on society and religion created a great stir. In his book all prophets of religion, their philosophy and practices were reviled Jainism, Sikhism, Islam, and Christianity were mercilessly criticized. Guru Nanak was called an ignorant "dambi? (Pretender). This section of the book encouraged Aryas and provided them with very useful ammunition for their controversies, but it also created vehement hatred against the Samaj in many quarters. After the death of Swami Dayanand (1883), though the work was carried on with enthusiasm, there was, soon, a split in the Arya Samaj. It broke into the College Cultured' party and the Vegetarian or 'Mahatma' party. The former was

¹⁹ J.S Grewal, *The Khalsa, Sikh and Non-Sikh perspectives*, Manohar publishers, New Delhi, 2004, p.90

²⁰ Kartar Singh, *Sikh History*, Shiromani Gururdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar, 2003,p.65

progressive, stood for modern education and for freedom in diet, and declared that Arya Samaj was the one true universal religion, which must be taught to the entire world. The latter favoured the ancient Hindu education, stood by vegetarianism and declared that the teaching of the Samaj was pure Hinduism, but not the universal religion. In 1893-94 AD, the 'militant Aryas waged a war in print against Christianity, Muslims, Sikhs and the traditionalist Hindus. Earlier, despite the derogatory views, several eminent Sikhs had joined the Arya Samaj, but the 'thoughtless attack' on the Sikh Gurus by the 'fire-brands' Aryas in 1888 brought a decisive break between the two.⁶⁸ The confrontation between the Arya Samaj and the Sikhs sharpened the issue of the very identity of the Khalsa. The death of Dyal Singh Majithia in 1898 made the question of Khalsa identity a legal issue. His will was contested in the court by his widow on the plea that he was not a Hindu but a Sikh. This gave a new twist to the relation between the two communities. This prompted Bhai Kahan Singh to publish, by now a classic exposition of a distinct Khalsa identity, his well-known work *Hum Hindu Nahin*. It was further contended 'the Sikh dispensation was an independent entity and not a subsidiary system, based on Hindu philosophy.'" In 1900 AD, the Arya Samaj leaders reconverted some Sikhs through a ceremony involving the shaving of their heads in public. Later in the early 20 century Hindu Sabhas sprang up in the Punjab and the Punjab Hindu Conference was held successively for six years from 1909 to 1914 AD. The 'Arya' consciousness was being transformed in to 'Hindu' consciousness. The confrontation between the Arya Samaj and the Khalsa continued into the twentieth century as the latter evolved their own programme of purification (shuddhi)²¹.

An acknowledged reformer of the Hindu society, Dev Atma (Shiv Narayan Agnihotra), established the Dev Samaj on 16th February 1887 AD²². It sought to create a social atmosphere, which could do away with superstitions and caste system. He put into action all the social reforms for which he had fought. He made it imperative for the members of his society not to get their daughters married before the age of sixteen and their sons before the age of eighteen. He made it a condition for members of his society not to indulge in bigamy. He was of the view that education alone could open for women opportunities for enlightenment and independence, professional and public life. He made women's education as the chief plank of his Society's contribution to social reforms. Dev Samaj's service in women's education came to be publicly appreciated and acknowledged. The Dev Samaj institutions not only provided high standard of education, but also inculcated moral culture of highest quality." Dev Samaj had a deep impact on the Khalsa initiative for creating a society devoid of unnecessary rituals and thinking in terms of providing educational facilities, especially for the women folk²³.

The Khalsa, which had been retrenched from the army after the first Anglo-Sikh War and virtually disbanded after the annexation, came to form nearly a third of the 60,000 troops raised from the Punjab during 1857-58 AD²⁴. At the time when the other recruiting grounds were fighting against the British, the Khalsa were called out to save the Empire: They successfully fulfilled their mission. Ever since the revolt of 1857 AD, the

²¹ Giani Gian Singh, *Shamshir Singh*, Singh Brothers Press, Amritsar, 1923,p.21

²² *Ibid*,p.23

²³ Gurmit Singh, *Critique of Sikhism*, Ishar Singh Press, Sirsa, 1963,p.101

²⁴ *Ibid*,p.41

Khalsa became Great Britain's best friend. When the major portion of India was threatening the British power in this country, the Khalsa helped the English to weather the storm and steer the British baroque out of troubled waters. When there was the hour of peril for the British, the Khalsa saved the situation for their erstwhile enemies, a fact which all imperial records unhesitatingly affirm. Henceforth, the Khalsa were to hold the positions of honour. The Khalsa fought in nearly all major wars fought by the British in all the three continents of the world. The percentage of the Sikhs in the Indian army was significantly larger than the percentage of the Sikh population in India. The 'gallant and faithful service' provided by the Khalsa made them the "pride of the Punjab"²⁵.



²⁵ Indhu Bhushan Banerjee, *Evolution of the Khalsa*, Mukhrjee Press, Calcutta, 1947, p.99