SEHJDHARI SIKHS AND VAISAKHI OF 1699

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ABSTRACT

Distinction between the Sehjdhar Sikhs and the Amritdhari Sikhs owes its historical origin to the day of the historic Vaisakhi of 1699 CE. Although Sikhs practicing Sehj have existed since the days of Guru Nanak, it is in reference to the Vaisakhi day that Sehjdhari Sikhs today are distinguished from other Sikhs primarily for not being initiated (baptized). They often do not wear some of the five kakkars and not use “Singh” as their last name. A substantial part of the Sikh community continued to be Sehjdhari Sikhs after the Vaisakhi. Guru Gobind Singh and his successor, Guru Panth, continued to love them as their own. Further, Sehjdhari Sikhs continued to play a critical role in the Sikh history. More recently, in September 1997, Sehjdhari Sikhs joined their other kin at the World Sikh Convention to reaffirm their place in the Panth and its destiny in the next century.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to examine historical events and their written records that determine the place of Sehjdhari Sikhs in Panth under the leadership of Guru Gobind Singh. The term Sehjdhari is a compound of two Punjabi words, Sehj and dhari. During the period of the Sikh Gurus, the term Sehj was used in a theological context, to connote a state of mystic consciousness. The term dhari means the one who takes upon, assumes or adapts to something. Thus, all Sikhs could be Sehjdhari. A distinction between Sehjdhari and Amritdhari began during the time of the tenth Guru when many Sikhs elected to become Amritdhari while others remained to be Sehjdhari. Definition of the term Sehjdhari and role of the Sehjdhari Sikhs was recently discussed elsewhere [8, 9].

DISCUSSION

Vaisakhi and Sikh Congregations

In 1699, Guru Gobind Singh initiated (baptised) the Sikhs by Khandae dee Pahul and brought to an end the custom of Charan Pahul. He also terminated the authority of Masands to administer the initiation rites and asked the Sikhs to restrain from the congregation still led by the Masands. They were directed to join the congregation of the Guru now known to be Khalsa. The term Khalsa meant “Guru’s own congregation”, meaning the congregation not linked through the institution of Masands. According to the Bhai Gurdas (Second), all of the Sikh congregations of the Guru were to be known as Khalsa:

“Guru Gobind Singh designated the congregation to be Khalsa, the Guru oriented; those followers who remained self-oriented became fickle minded.”

The Khalsa congregation included all Sikhs, Amritdhari and Sehjdhari. There were many prominent Sehjdhari Sikhs in the Guru’s congregation, the Khalsa. For example: among the Sikhs remembered as Guru’s Darbari Ratan (court jewels) were included, Bhai Nand Lal [10], Bhai Kanyia (predecessor of Bhai Seva Ram, the founder of the Seva Panthi Sikhs), Bhai Kirpa Ram, Bhai Nanua Vairaghi, Bhai Ram Koir, Bhai Devi Das, Bhai Lakhnan Rai, Bhai Hans Ram Baijpayee, Bhai Nand Ram, Bhai Bhagwan Dass and numerous others whose names are mentioned prominently in the Sikh annals [14]. These Sikhs maintained their identity and position in the Panth as Sehjdhari Sikhs. As is clearly evident from their names and the names of even their descendants whose last names were often not Singh. Further, among the prominent Sehjdhari Sikhs there were included most of the poets in the Guru’s court. Among the 52 poets whose names are recorded by Bhai Kahan Singh [18] only less than one third used “Singh” as their surname suggesting that most of the poets in Guru’s court were Sehjdhari Sikhs. There were many...
Sehjdhari Sikhs in the Guru’s army. Many are included in the list of prominent martyrs. Let us cite one such historic event that may be relevant here. When Guru Gobind Singh called upon Sehjdhari Sikhs to fight at the battle of Bhangani they heeded to the Guru’s call diligently with speed and commitment. They left the ir safety of Gurdwaras and joined the Khalsa armies. Their leader, Mahant Kirpal and other associates such as Bhai Lal Chand as well as their many followers were martyred serving the cause of the Guru.

Kesar Singh Chibber [1] wrote a detailed account of the Sikh life in the Guru’s time through mostly a first hand knowledge. In Bansawali Nama Dasam Patshah-nia Da completed in 1769, he wrote: “Guru said there would be many types of Sikhs. 1) Didari Sikhs were handsome, healthy bodied, Guru’s body guards, will remain with the Guru in this world and thereafter, and recite Naam; 2) Makte Sikhs are those who will sustain Sikh after I leave. They will fight the enemy and make sacrifices everywhere, and those who will give their lives, but will remain as Sikh and will make many efforts to retain Sikh religion. Because of the meditation done by both of these Sikh groups, there will be established a Sikh rule; 3) Miaki Sikhs are those Sikhs who are succumbed to political power and let their religious practices decline, those who fall off their goal; and 4) Mureed Sikhs are those Sikhs who in spite of acquiring power and wealth will follow Guru’s path and who will stay above the worldly temptations of wealth and power.” These were the Sehjdhari Sikhs.

Dr. Maan Singh Nirankari cited Ratanmala [12] claimed by some to contain narration of many conversations of Guru Gobind Singh as below [11]:


Dr Nirankari translated this verse as: "The Guru described his having three categories of Sikhs; Sehjdhari, Charandhari meaning those initiated by touch of the holy water by the Guru’s feet, and Khandae de Amritdhari."

In the Gurmat Martand Bhai Kahan Singh cites the Bhagtavali of Bhai Mani Singh to indicate that there were many Sehjdhari Sikhs during the times of Bhai Mani Singh (1701-1791), a contemporary of Guru Gobind Singh (cited by Dr Nirankari [11]). Even at that time, the term Sehjdhari was commonly used to indicate those Sikhs who neither took the initiation of Khandae de Pahul nor they were strict about wearing five kakars. These and many other pieces of evidence clearly establish existence of a large number of Sehajdharis as a significant segment of Khalsa in the Gurus’ period.

Guru Gobind Singh’s trust in Sehjdhari Sikhs is further evident from the role given to Sehjdhari Sikhs in propagating the Guru’s religion and in the management of the Gurdwaras during that period. Guru Gobind Singh sent some Sikhs to the holy town of Kashi to learn Sanskrit and to establish a Sikh university in Punjab for the purpose of training scholars on Gurmat. This group of Sikhs, in turn trained many scholars of Sikh theology who are well recognized in the Sikh history. Among those were included some great Amritdhari Sikhs such as Gyani Gian Singh and Bhai Santokh Singh. This group, responsible for early translations of Guru Granth Sahib, also included great Sehjdhari Sikh scholars such as one Bhai Ishwar Das [22].

Another example of the Guru’s esteem for Sehjdhari Sikhs is the assignment of Gurdwara management to Sehjdhari Sikhs. According to the tradition prevalent at the time, the Guru himself assigned his chosen Sikhs to manage the Sikh holy places. After Guru Gobind Singh had fulfilled his mission of abolishing the Masand system, and designated the Khalsa as his successor, he chose to leave Anandpur on journeys to other parts of the country. He trusted the care of his institutions left behind at Anandpur in the hands of close Sikhs who would continue to attract masses to his new path in his absence. He appointed a Sehjdhari Sikh, Sant Gurbax Das as the Head Granthi of the historical Gurdwara Sri Kes Garh (place of initiation) and caretaker of the associated property [19]. The Sehjdhari Sant was among the closest Sikhs of the Guru who could be trusted to carry on the Guru’s mission at this historic center of the 1699 Vaisakhi fame.

According to Ganda Singh [16], a Sehjdhari Sikh Bhai Nath Mal accompanied Guru Gobind Singh to Nanded and he remained with the Guru to his last breath. Bhai Nath Mal and his companion party, dhadhi jatha, performed the role of the Guru’s cantors during the Guru’s last days in Nanded. Bhai Nath Mal composed a ballad known as Amar Namah, which was composed under the name of the Guru himself in the first person. It described the Guru’s last days at Nanded in 1708. Ganda Singh quoting Koer Singh paraphrased the description of the last act of Guru Gobind Singh stating that the Guru “bowed to Sri Granth, prayed in all reverence, made offerings to rababi musicians (Bhai Nath Mal) and was absorbed in the Word of the Guru Granth Sahib”. So much was the reverence that the Guru exhibited to his Sehjdhari Sikh cantors that he
bowed before them as the last act of his life. This event was consistent with the tradition in the Guru’s house where Guru Gobind Singh and his predecessor Gurus used to bow before the cantors in the Guru’s court. Bhai Nath Mal’s family continued to be Sehjdhari Sikhs and Bhai Fatta was traced to be his seventh descendant by Ganda Singh.

**Hukmnnae**

There exist many Hukmnnae (letter, an epistle, decree or edict) issued by Guru Gobind Singh to his individual followers or the Sikh congregations. They have been published [23] and authenticated. These Hukmnnae contain Gurus’ instructions to follow his path of Gurmat and perform specific chores to fulfill the needs of the Gurus’ house or the congregations. These Hukmnnae can be cited to indicate that Guru Gobind Singh bestowed full recognition to Sehjdhari Sikhs even after the date of the initiation of Amritdhari Sikhs. The Guru’s heirs issued some of the Hukmnnae after the Guru had left this earth for heavenly abode. Both sets of hukmnnae clearly indicate recognition of a large number of Sehjdhari Sikhs who were active among the Sikh congregations after the Vaisakhi of 1699, when Amritdhari Sikhs were initiated through the Pahul of Khanda. Similarly, the participation of Sehjdhari Sikhs is recognized in the services to the congregations in a variety of capacities including the leadership of various congregations both before and after 1699. We will examine some examples that have been reported in published literature.

There exists a Rehit Nama written and signed by Guru Gobind Singh specifically addressed to Sehjdhari Sikhs [12]. For example, in paragraph nine of that Rehit Nama, the Guru alerted Sehjdhari Sikhs against divisive role of those Sikhs who still followed the Masands. Further, he asked Sehjdhari Sikhs to propagate Gurmat and bring back the Masand followers into the Khalsa fold. These Hukmnnae entries clearly indicate that Guru Gobind Singh entrusted his mission of Gurmat parchar (missionary work) to all Sikhs, Sehjdhari as well as Amritdhari.

Guru Gobind Singh and his successors issued several Hukmnnae exclusively to Sehjdhari Sikhs as indicated by them not using “Singh” as surname. He also sent Hukmnnae to congregations that were presided by Sehjdhari Sikhs. Some examples are cited below to indicate that the Guru loved Sehjdhari Sikhs as his Khalsa.

Hukmnnae # 45 was issued on July 24, 1698 to leaders of the congregation of Shahzad-e-Ajim de Lashkar and was addressed personally and simultaneously to Bhai Muhkam Singh and Bhai Sati Das, a Sehjdhari Sikh. Hukmnnae #. 47 was written on April 24, 1699 (only a few days after the famous Vaisakhi of 1699 and was addressed solely to Bhai Des Raj, a Sehjdhari Sikh, who was asked to collect gold for the Guru’s projects. Hukmnnae # 86 of Guru Gobind Singh was issued to Sehjdhari Sikhs, Bhai Mehar Chand and Karam Chand. The Guru wrote to them saying: “… you are my Khalsa….” Similarly in Hukmnnae # 83, Guru Gobind Singh designated a Sehjdhari Sikh, Bhai Mehar Chand Jat, as “his Khalsa” two years after the baptism of Vaisakhi in 1699. In a Hukmnnae dated 1697 the Guru recognized Sehjdhari Sikhs, Sahib Chand and Dharam Chand, as the Guru’s khazanchi or treasures [21]. In 1704, five years after the initiation of the Amritdhari Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh issued a Hukmnnae in commemoration of his visit to Kurukshetra. This was meant to appoint a Sehjdhari Sikh as the priest of the Sikh congregation in that town. As is seen from quotations below that all congregations were told that a Sehjdhari Sikh Bhai Mani Ram of Kurukshetra would be the pastor of the Guru as well as the sarbat sangat [7].

The term Khalsa meant “Guru’s own congregation”, .. “It is the commandment of Sri Vaheguru Ji. It is my order to all congregations. All of the Sikhs of Vaheguru Ji should honor Mani Ram Prohit of Kurukshetra. It is a pleasure to announce. He is the priest of the guru ji, so is the priest of every one in the congregation. Any Sikh who will honor him shall be blessed.”

In the same year of 1704, the Guru wrote [3] a Hukmnnae to a Sehjdhari Sikh, Bhai Dharam Chand, recognizing him as the leader of a local Sikh congregation and asked all congregations to facilitate Gurbaksh Singh, son of Bhai Dharam Chand. There are Hukmnnae of the Guru in which the Guru asked both Sehjdhari Sikhs and others to send arms to the Guru and come to the Guru’s presence fully equipped with arms.

After Guru Gobind Singh, his widow, Mata Sundari [4], continued to guide his Sikhs until her death in 1747. Her major responsibility was to look after the interest of the Sikh community and promote establishment of various institutions of the Khalsa. She provided much of the instructions on day to day activity of the Khalsa Panth. In this capacity she issued edicts to various congregations including Sehjdhari Sikh congregations. For example, she wrote the Hukmnnae # 98 in which she addressed several...
CONCLUSIONS

From many events from the life of Guru Gobind Singh as they are recorded in the Sikh annals, along with the evidence from many 
Hukmnnamee it is clear that, during the times of the Guru, the Sehjdhari Sikhs became and remained as part and parcel of the Panth both as good citizens and as leaders of the Khalsa congregations everywhere.

Bhai Kahn Singh of Nabha (1861-1938), a scholar of the Singh Sabha fame, who wrote Ham Hindu Nahin to set the Sikhs apart from Hindus, wrote extensively to include Sehaj-dhari Sikhs in the Panth. While prescribing five salient requirements of the panthic characteristics of a Sikh, he wrote:

(9) देव रूपम् पवित्रे उज्ज्वले विन देव ज्ञान कृप दिश्ने चिर हि मूर्ति पूर्व लागि न भवनं नगि वें समं फलनं, अव एव देहे नमम न दुरु क्षितम् [20].

The fourth of the five requirements of the National character for a Sikh is that a Sikh shall consider every Guru Nanak Panthi (follower of the Guru Nanak’s path), no matter in which external form or shape he or she may be, as part of the Sikh religion and inculcate loving relationship with them.

Dr Maan Singh Nirankari [11] wrote an extensive account of the significance of Sehjdhari Sikhs in Gurmat and concluded that all those who believed in the prophecy of the Sikh Gurus and the Aad Granth were Sikhs. Both Sehjdharis and Amritdharies were equally qualified to be Sikhs and no one had the right to insult the former by calling them ‘Monas’ meaning Sikhs without hair. Only Sikhs who had taken the Pahul and then cut their hair could be called Monas; the word was most inappropriate if used for Sehjdhari Sikhs.

Bhai Ardaman Singh [15], a Sikh scholar of repute and a religious activist of 20th century, wrote: Sikhs as a whole are also known as and called the Panth. Panth includes all sorts of Sikhs whether perfect or imperfect, whether still novice or fully responsible, whether Sehjdhari or of any other Samprada. Any one who believes in the Guru and Gurbani and has faith in no one else, cannot be denied to be a Sikh and, therefore, is a member of the Panth.

The Guru urged each one of us to consider taking the first step toward the Guru, and the Guru vouchcd to travel millions of steps to receive you.

Similarly, Guru Panth who represents the Guru on a corporeal level is committed to do the same. Sehjdhari Sikhs have a significant role to play in the Sikh history for the next century. Singh Sahib Manjit Singh, then Acting Jathedar of Akal Takhat, convened the convention of the Sikh Nation in September, 1997, under the sponsorship of Sikhs’ premier organization Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. This convention convened a special session of Sehjdhari Sikhs to emphasize their Sikh role in the coming century.

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REFERENCES

1. Chibar, Kesar Singh. 1972 Edition. Bansavee Nama (in Punjabi). Ed.Rattan Singh Jagi, Publishers: Punjabi University, Patiala. (Chiber born in 1699, was related to Bhai Dharm Chand, who became one of the Five Beloved ones, spent a lot of time with the Guru's family, Guru's mother and Guru’s maternal uncle Kirpal ji. He also lived in Amritsar where he was very close to prominent Sikhs such as Bhai Mani Singh, Tara Singh, etc. He wrote extensively about the Sikh way of life in his times.


10. Bhai Nand Lal was the Poet Laureate of Guru’s court and the most dearly loved disciple of Guru Gobind Singh. He wrote two Rehit Namae; one written in 1695, i.e., four years before the Vaisakhi of 1699 known as Rehit Nama, and the other in 1699 known as Tankhah Nama. Nand Lal was asked by the Guru to compile Guru's injunctions for the guidance of the Sikh...
community after the Guru left his human body for the heavenly abode. Guru Gobind Singh made himself available for his conversation with Bhai Nand Lal to guide him to compose his writings.


