

## NEWS & VIEWS

### THE TABOO OF HALAL FOR THE SIKHS

#### ABSTRACT

***There are different opinions about eating of meat in Sikhism. Many scholars in favour and against eating of meat by the Sikhs have discussed this topic. This paper discusses the ignored and misinterpreted aspect of eating of Halal meat in Sikhism.***

#### INTRODUCTION

There is no mention of the prohibition of *Halal* (kosher meat) for Sikhs, either in the *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* (AGGS) [1] or in the *Bani* of Guru Gobind Singh according to my knowledge. However, the taboo of *Halal* for the Khalsa is found in the *Reht Namae* which were written by others long after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. These *Reht Namae* have been used in drawing up the current *Reht Maryada* (code of conduct) for the Sikhs. Piara Singh Padam [6] has compiled fifteen *Reht Namae* (manuals of code of conduct) in a book form (Punjabi) with his critique as a foreword: Every Sikh should read this book to understand the motives of the authors of the *Reht Namae*. Some of the contents of the *Reht Namae* are spurious, inconsistent with *Gurbani*, and unflattering to the Khalsa.

#### DISCUSSION

Gurtej Singh, National Professor of Sikhism has discussed the taboo of *Halal* for the Sikhs [5]. Professor Singh has followed traditional lines based on *Reht Namae*, and the misinterpretation of Guru Nanak's comments on *Halal* in *Asa Di Vaar* [2] to explain the origin of this taboo. I thought that an eminent scholar like professor Singh will shed new light on this topic by providing a rational explanation based on *Gurbani* from the AGGS or the writings of Guru Gobind Singh. He has left the readers rather confused by making contradictory statements. For example, in the opening paragraph, first, he states that the Guru commands a Sikh to use reason in the worship of God (*aklin sahib seviae*) [3], and then he goes on to persuade the readers that taboos are to be followed meticulously without questioning their validity. Furthermore, in the example showing Guru Gobind Singh's immense love for animals, the author says that Guru Gobind Singh cursed Baba Dan Singh's young son for hitting Guru's horse. Cursing is not the attribute of a *Brahm Gyani* according to *Gurbani*, and I firmly believe that the Ten Nanaks were *Brahm Gyani*s.

Those who interpret "...bhakhya ka kutha bakra

*khanha...*" (eating the meat of a male goat slaughtered in a *Halal* manner) as condemnation of eating *Halal*, should read Guru Nanak's commentary on the behavior of *Khatries* of his time in *Asa Di Vaar* [2]. In fact, Guru Nanak did not condemn the partaking of *Halal*, rather he condemned the hypocrisy of the *Khatries*. The *Khatries* had abdicated their religious duties of defending their country and the weak, and taking a resolute stand against tyranny and injustice. Furthermore, the subjugated *Khatries* had adopted the language, manners and dress of their Muslim conquerors whom they called *malech* (polluted ones). Some of them sought employment with the Muslim conquerors, and some of them held high ranks, and were responsible for the persecution of their Hindu brethren. However, these *Khatries* were very strict and rigid in the practice of caste system and other meaningless rituals. It was in this context when Guru Nanak ridiculed *Khatries* by pointing out that while they were meticulously observing the ritual purity of their food and kitchen, not allowing people of lower castes near their kitchens, were eating the flesh of animals slaughtered in a *Halal* fashion by Muslims, to whom they considered *malech*.

I have the following questions for those who interpret the above described quotation as condemnation of partaking of *Halal* by the Sikhs. If Guru Nanak had proscribed *Halal*, then why the Tenth Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh, had to declare *Halal* as a taboo for the Khalsa? Were the Sikhs not following Guru Nanak's teachings? How come there is no statement on the taboo of *Halal* by either of the other Eight Nanaks? If Guru Gobind Singh had appointed the *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* as the eternal Guru of the Sikhs, then why Sikhs have to look for their *Reht Maryada* from other sources like *Reht Namae*? Should not the *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* [1] be a guide for a Sikh in every walk of life?

Let me put forward an alternative explanation for the taboo of *Halal*. *Halal* is slaughtering of animals or birds according to religious rituals involving the cutting of the jugular vein slowly while the blood is

being drained out completely. A *kalma* (verse from Qu'ran) is read during the process of slaughtering. This process prolongs the suffering of an animal or a bird. It is essentially a slow death by torture. It is mandatory for Muslims and Jews to slaughter animals only in a *Halal* fashion for meat for human consumption. Law in western countries prohibits *halal* style slaughtering of animals or birds. Jews and Muslims are exempted from this law on religious grounds.

Debating the virtues of being a vegetarian versus non-vegetarian is futile according to *Gurbani*. Guru Nanak summed up so beautifully and eloquently when he said: "Food which affects the body and mind adversely should be avoided (*Baba hor khana khusi khuarr, jit khadae tan piriae man mein chalaе vikaar*)" [4]. Meat is just a part of human diet. No verse of *Gurbani* either encourages or discourages a Sikh from partaking meat. However, the Hindu ancestors of Sikhs were generally vegetarians due to the influence of Jainism, Buddhism and various sects of Hinduism, which also abhor eating flesh. Probably, there were very few Sikhs whose diet consisted of flesh during the time of the first five Gurus. The martyrdom of Guru Arjan brought new challenges to the young Sikh faith. The Sixth Nanak, Guru Hargobind, raised an army to fight against the Mughal rulers and their *Khatri* collaborators who were out to destroy him. He was an avid game hunter himself, and he encouraged his followers to do the same. His eldest son Baba Gurdita died in a hunting accident. The warlike atmosphere put greater emphasis on physical fitness and bodily strength, which required changes in the dietary habits of the Sikhs. I think more and more Sikhs started eating meat during this period and this trend continued with successive gurus. The hunting expeditions of the rider of the blue steed (Guru Gobind Singh) are very well known, I think a significant number of Sikhs were including meat in their diet by the time Khalsa was created. The increased demand for meat required the slaughter of a large number of domestic animals like goats and sheep. It was, perhaps, under these circumstances that Guru Gobind Singh issued a proclamation about the manner in which the animals were to be slaughtered.

Of course, every method of slaughter is cruel and painful. However, *Jhatka* (slaughtering with one stroke of sword) style is very quick, and the animal suffers for a very short period. That is why in western countries, slaughterhouses use those methods, which end the life of animals as quickly as possible. It is possible that before the arrival of Muslims, meat-eating Hindus used to slaughter the animals by *Jhatka* method. This might have prompted Guru Gobind Singh to issue an edict for those members of the Khalsa

fraternity who ate meat, to slaughter the animals by the *Jhatka* method only.

Did Guru Gobind Singh proscribe the eating of *Halal* prepared by Muslims for the Khalsa? I do not think so, because Guru Gobind Singh's dearest friends and followers were Muslims. These were his Muslim friends, who came to his help at very critical times of his life, and they made supreme sacrifices for him. They did not hold any thing back for his sake, It is hard for me to imagine that Guru Gobind Singh and his non-vegetarian Sikhs would have declined to partake *Halal* prepared by Muslim hosts. Additionally, what is the rational for a non-vegetarian Sikh against eating *Halal*? Probably, none! Then, who issued this edict that the Khalsa should not eat *Halal*? I think the followers of Kautlya (also known as Chanakya) are responsible for this edict. To understand my hypothesis, one has to understand the ideology of Brahminism.

Brahmins have used Kautlya's policy to overpower or destroy religions which challenged their supremacy and posed a threat to their way of life [7]. They have used this policy very successfully to strangle Sikhism. There are three very important features of this policy. First, infiltrate the ranks of the enemy to cause internal conflicts by playing one group against the other, resulting in destruction from within. The schismatic movements within Sikhism, and the other problems Sikhs have been facing since 1947 are largely the product of this strategy. Second, destroy the opposing faith by spreading misinformation against it, and by interpolating contradictory ideology in the religious texts of the opposing faith. This causes confusion among the followers leading to weakening of commitment to the faith and cohesiveness of the community. The creation of *kachi bani* (spurious verse), false reports about the teachings of Sikh faith to Mughal authorities, and the campaign to malign the entire Sikh community by labelling them as lawless, violent and terrorist all over the world for the last two decades should be seen in this light. Guru Arjan, the apostle of peace, put an end to the spread of *kachi bani* by compiling the real *Bani* into a Granth. The efforts to distort the fundamentals of Sikhism were relentless. The *Janam Sakhi* (biography) of Guru Nanak was distorted very successfully. Furthermore, the foes of Sikhism got a golden opportunity to carry out their nefarious deeds after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. They mixed the writings of Guru Gobind Singh with the writings of others and compiled a voluminous book, which is now called *Dasam Granth*. There is very little in this book which is consistent with *Gurbani*, and can be considered as the composition of Guru Gobind Singh. The purpose of this book was to

make Guru Gobind Singh look like a devout follower of a Hindu goddess, protector of Hinduism, and destroyer of Islam. This machanization had an active role in creating deadly conflict between the Mughals and Sikhs, that lasted for two centuries. Religion cannot be the basis of conflict between the Mughals and Sikhs, if religion had been the cause of these conflicts then Pir Budhu Shah [8] would not have sacrificed his dear ones for the sake of Guru Gobind Singh. The followers of Kautlya were not content just with the deadly conflict, between the Mughal rulers and Sikhs only, but also wanted a complete rupture of social ties between Muslims and Sikhs. This objective was accomplished through *Reht Namae*.

All the *Reht Namae* emphasize proscription of eating of *Halal* and a sexual relation with a Muslim woman for a member of the Khalsa fraternity. The later taboo has been replaced by adultery for a Sikh in the current *Reht Maryada*. The *Reht Namae* also urge the Khalsa to destroy the Turks (Muslims), and to have no social interaction with them. The above-mentioned items, in my opinion, have played a considerable role in undermining the cordial relations between the Sikhs and Muslim populace after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. The taboo of *Halal* was practised to such extremes that Sikhs stopped eating any kind of food cooked by Muslims. I was very young in 1947, but I have learned from the elders that Sikhs who originated from higher Hindu castes, used to treat Muslim Jats and Rajputs the same way as they treated lower caste Hindus or Sikhs when it came to inter-dining. In Punjabi there is saying that we do not have fraternal relation with those with whom we do not share our kitchen and food (*jina nal sadi chulae chaunkae di ate khaan pin di sanjh nahin ohna nal sada bhai chara hi kahda*). This resulted in minimal social interactions between Sikhs and Muslims, and that is what the followers of Kautlya wanted. No Sikh ever paid any attention to the consequences of this attitude of the Sikhs toward Muslims.

## CONCLUSION

*Gurbani* recorded in the AGGS and the authentic writings of Guru Gobind Singh do not discuss either in favour or against eating of *Halal* by the Sikhs. Nevertheless, I wish Sikh scholars have dealt with *Reht Namae*, *Dasam Granth* and other old writings that distort Sikh philosophy, as effectively as they have dealt with the writings of McLeod, Hajot Oberai, Pishaura Singh and Khushwant Singh.

## REFERENCES

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3. AGGS, M 1, P 1245.
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8. Ibid, P.54, 62, 72.

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AGGS, M 1, P 465.

***"Sikhi (Sikhism) is the philosophy of the Guru."***