

Tat Khalsa versus Sanatan Sikhi

A Look into the Early *Rahitnamas*

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The beliefs and practices which govern the Sikh way of life are known as the *Sikh Rahit Maryada*. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh faith and his nine successors who were temporal and spiritual head of the Panth up to the first decade of eighteenth century, had set for their followers high moral standards as well as a distinctive pattern of social and cultural life. The earliest norms of the *Sikh Rahit* are not found recorded in manuals but are scattered here and there in the Sikh Scripture, early Sikh religious literature and historical accounts. Some general instructions regarding the personal as well as community life of the Sikhs are also contained in various *hukamnamas* attributed to the Sikh Gurus. The systematic statement of these rules is found in the form of *Rahitnamas* or codes of conduct that appeared during the eighteenth century i.e. after the promulgation of Khalsa code of conduct by Guru Gobind Singh. Obviously, all these writings are of seminal significance and provide vital information about the Sikh beliefs and practices. One who intends to do study on the origin, nature and objectives of the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* is required to analyze this literature in a very objective and dispassionate manner.

Sometimes lack of knowledge of language in which this source material is written has led to incorrect formulations which in turn have generated a lot of debate. One of the issues which have cropped up in the recent past relates to the Sanatan Sikhi which is said to be the original/oldest version of Sikh beliefs and practices. It has also been remarked that the present *Sikh Rahit Maryada* is the product of *Tat Khalsa Sikhi* propagated by the Singh Sabha stalwarts who in turn were doing it on the behest of colonial power. Such an impression has been created as if the *Khalsa Rahit* finds no validity in the doctrines of predecessors of Guru Gobind Singh. The present study attempts to look into the veracity of above claim and for that we will be taking into account the *Rahitnamas* which had originated in the eighteenth century only.

On the basis of some isolated documents it has been put forward that the Sikh identity was amorphous, not fixed or well defined. Most of the Sikhs believed and practiced Sanatan Sikhi. The most prominent features of it identified are: the Sikhs used to worship various gods and goddesses of Hindu pantheon, indulged in Brahmanical rituals; worshipped ancestors, Gugga and Sakhi Sarwar alongwith practicing various rituals related to the folk religion. It has also been stated that the *Sanatan* Sikhs had begun to accord equal status to *Dasam Granth* and *Purans* with that of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. It has been alleged that this version of all inclusive *Sikhi* was in full consonance with the *Sikhi* that was prevalent during the times of Sikh Gurus. However, it was replaced by the Singh Sabha leaders with *Tat Khalsa Sikhi* which is intolerant, sectarian and exclusive in nature.

An analysis of the *Rahitnama* literature confirms that the cult of Gugga and Sakhi Sarwar and indulgence in various practices and rituals related to the folk religion finds no validity in it. Bhai Choupa Singh, Bhai Daya Singh and *Sakhi*

Rahit Ki mention various forms of idol worship which stood forbidden in Sikhism. The author of '*Sau Sakhi*' directs the Sikhs to avoid the worship of Muslim Faqir, (Pir) Sakhi Sarwar, goddess Seetla, so-called holy persons, evil spirits etc. and exhorts the Sikhs to remember the name of Guru on all occasions and shun the cult of non-Sikh deities and beliefs associated with them. The Idol worship along with the holiness of graves and cremation grounds has been recognized as selfish devotion which is performed because of fear or due to ignorance. The author declares that other people may indulge in the superstitious activities like exorcism but the Sikhs must keep themselves detached from them.

Chaupa Singh advises the Sikhs not to believe in graves, tombs or grave yards, temples, mosques and Islamic religious personalities, namely Maulvi or Qazi. He declares that those Sikhs are *tankahias* who indulge in the cult of Sakhi Sarwar, graves or tombs. Sukha Singh's *Gurbilas Patshahi 10* and Koer Singh's *Gurbilas Patshahi Daswin* support the above views.⁸ Bhai Prahilad Singh directs the Sikhs to meditate on the Name of the God only. According to him one who worships idols or images is a deceitful exercise. He says, 'Who worships idols of stone and bows his head in reverence to them is an unprincipled and a wicked person who does not deserve Guru's blessings and grace.' The *Rahitnama* authors, namely Bhai Nand Lal, Bhai Chaupa Singh, Bhai Prahilad Singh, Bhai Daya Singh and Bhai Desa Singh enjoin upon the Sikhs to have a firm belief in Guru Granth Sahib. Bhai Prehlad Singh states that the Khalsa has been created according to the will of Almighty so it is the order of the Guru that every Sikh should take up Guru Granth Sahib as his Guru.

Bhai Nand Lal defines the nature of Guru from conceptual aspect. On his request tenth Master is said to have elaborated the meanings of "Guru's Darshan"

i.e. a sight of the Guru, that the Guru has three aspects. These are first *nirguna* (without attributes or transcendent), the second *sarguna* (with attributes or qualities) and *Gur-sabda*, (the Guru in form of *sabda*). The first (Vahiguru) is beyond sensory perception but Guru in the second form can be seen manifested in the entire creation and its concrete third form is visible in the form of (Guru) Granth Sahib, the Sikh Scripture. “Whosoever wishes to see me,” said Guru Gobind Singh, “Should see Granth ji and should listen attentively to it and reflect upon the Guru's word contained in it.” Guru Gobind Singh further explained that another form of him is that of a true Sikh. “A Gursikh who every moment remembers and listens the word of Guru, recites the daily prayers attentively, joins in congregation, has overcome his alter ego, dedicates himself whole heartedly to the service of community and observes these rules in letter and spirit, is truly a representative of mine.”

Bhai Prahilad Singh also compares a Gursikh with the Guru. He says that one who wants a glimpse of the Guru is advised to see the Sikhs. According to him the Guru has commanded, “Consider the Khalsa as the visible body of the Guru, one who wants to see me can locate me among them.” *Sakhi Rahit Ki* states that the Khalsa is that which bow only before the Guru's word and shun Brahmanical beliefs, rites and rituals. Bhai Daya Singh counsels the Sikhs to recognize Granth-Panth as Guru and directs the Sikhs to avoid idol worship. He remarks, “By discarding all the religions a Sikh is required to consider Guru Granth as his Guru, meditate upon the True Name of the Lord which eradicates sorrows and sufferings of the birth and death.” Bhai Nand Lal considers apostasy in faith by a Sikh as a great offense. He who abandons his religion is compared with a thief by him. He says that a Sikh who discards his religion and instead of that adores the faith of others, consider him a thief of the Khalsa and he is liable to suffer in this world

and here after as well. According to Bhai Desa Singh, maintenance of unshorn hair is obligatory for a Sikh. In his writing the author lays emphasis upon the Khalsa code of conduct and remarks that baptism of *Khande di Pahul* is an obligatory rite for every Sikh. Besides the baptism by double edged sword, he adds that one should devote himself to *bani*; should recite regularly prescribed liturgical hymns; must carry the five symbols of the Khalsa. It is obvious that besides the Khalsa code, he gives equal importance to the daily *Nitnem*.

The *Tankhahnama* by Bhai Nand Lal deals directly with the rules and injunctions, especially related with the breach of code which attracts a religious penalty i.e. *tankhah* in Sikh terminology. Bhai Nand Lal declares that whosoever sings the compositions other than those of the Gurus is liable for religious punishment (*tankhah*). Bhai Prehlad Singh's *Rahitnama* forbids a Sikh to wear a cap or a *janeu*, the sacred thread of the Hindus and association with those who shave their heads. The Sikhs must shun idolatry and the worship of graves. They must have faith only in One God, the Guru Granth Sahib, and the Guru Khalsa.

Along with the *Rahitnamas* other writings of the period also give vital information regarding the prevalent of Sikh way of life. Koer Singh, the author of *Gurbilas Patshahi 10*, states that one who regards Guru Granth Sahib as the manifestation of Almighty's wisdom, is wise and intelligent.²⁰ He advises the Sikhs to keep firm faith in Guru Granth Sahib and discard all other type of beliefs. According to him '*Khande di Pahul*' is obligatory for every Sikh. He even goes on to give up association with those as mentioned in Gurbani and those who had not taken Amrit. In the Sanatan Hindu tradition, priestly class of the Brahmins played a dominant role in the Hindu society. The priest was a key religious personality who

had monopoly over the performance of rituals and ceremonies relating to the birth and death cycle of the Hindus. Koer Singh directs the Sikhs to solemnize their rites relating to birth, death and marriage themselves i.e. without the involvement of Brahmin. He also states that Guru's blessings are always with the Sikhs who firmly follow the Sikh way of life. "Guru loves and is always near the Sikhs who follow the truthful living. In the exegesis of Gurbani done by the Udasi and Nirmala scholars of the period under discussion, we find quotes from Puranic and Sanskrit literature. It suggests that they relied heavily upon the Hindu literature to support their interpretation of Gurbani.²⁵ Actually, these scholars had to hold many discourses with the prominent Hindu scholars and were interested in introducing to them the message of Gurbani. It is every possibility that these references have been employed by these authors because they wanted to highlight the significance of God's Name as enshrined in the Sikh Scripture. Therefore, while discussing religious issues with the Hindu scholars, they may have found it convenient to provide illustrations from their scriptures. Their objective was to put the Sikh scripture equal to that of the Hindus. Sometimes they give due importance to Gurbani and provide references from it to support their view point. But we should not forget that these scholars had been trained at major educational centers of the Hindus that too in the lore of the Hindu tradition. Consequently, they were prone to the cultural pressure so that is the reason that they have missed the point that Sikhism is an independent and separate religious entity. This is the only reason that their exegesis of Gurbani has not found wide acceptance with the mainstream Sikhism.

Every religion had experienced the emergence of groups/sects which had deviated from the specified code of conduct followed by the main stream. This type of development is a historical reality and every religion had experienced it but

it does not mean that identity of a particular religious tradition is determined on the basis of sects or people active on the periphery. It is a fact that people belonging to diverse social, religious, regional and cultural background had joined Sikhism. It is quite possible that some of them may be carrying with them the baggage of their old traditions. We have evidence to prove that some of the Sikhs settled in urban centres had opposed the promulgation of Khalsa code of conduct which was a total departure from the Brahmanical system of Hindu society. There is every possibility that these types of Sikhs may be interested in keeping their bonds intact with their Hindu brethren.

During the first half of eighteenth century the Mughal governors of Punjab had followed a relentless policy to persecute the Sikhs. They were considered outlaws, prices were fixed on their heads and they were hunted like wild beasts. The Sikhs had to seek shelter in the Shivalik hills and deserts of Rajasthan. Their women folk, homes and hearths were not safe. The central Sikh shrine in Amritsar was vandalized more than once. Many of the manuscripts of their Holy Scripture were destroyed. In these circumstances some of the Sikhs may have given up the *rahit* of unshorn hair simply to avoid persecution at the hands of Mughal authorities. Most of the Sikh shrines in those times were managed by the priestly/religious class associated with the Udasis and Nirmalas. Because they were interested in more offerings, consequently installation of Hindu idols in the premises of Sikh shrines was not an enigma to them. All these factors together were responsible for the deviation that had crept into the Sikh way of life towards the end of eighteenth century.

Transgression of basic principles of Sikhism along with deviation from the *Khalsa Rahit* has been identified among the chief features of Sanatan Sikhi.

However, we do not come across any reference to the Sanatan Sikhi in the original/primary Sikh sources. When did this type of *Sikhi* originated? Which section/group/sect of the Sikhs followed it? What were the objectives of these people? All these issues have not yet been searched out satisfactorily.

An analysis of *Rahitnama* literature testifies that the notion regarding displacement of the Khalsa episteme in the early nineteenth century by Sanatan Sikh tradition is far from reality as majority among the Sikhs continue to follow those rules that had been advocated by the Ten Masters and preserved in the Sikh Scripture. Sikh religious literature, especially the *Rahitnamas* confirms that the Sikhs did not take anybody as their religious mentor except Guru Nanak and his nine successors. They believed in One Almighty God. For devotional purpose instead of relying on any other scripture they had adopted the sacred writings (*Gurbani*) of their Gurus. So it is wrong to say that they had begun to accord an almost analogous status to the Purans or any other writing as the Sikh Scripture. They had their own scripture, Sri Guru Granth Sahib which was duly installed in their religious shrines. There was not any kind of rapprochement between the Khalsa and the Sahajdhari identities from the conceptual and strategic point. Among the outward features of Khalsa, unshorn hairs were the most distinctive feature of Sikh identity. An analysis of the *Rahitnamas* as well as a look into the eighteenth century Sikh history show that there was no deviation from the basic ideals, namely Guru Granth-Guru Panth, the Khalsa code of conduct and higher moral values that had been established by the Sikh Gurus.

It is a well established historical fact that Guru Gobind Singh had bestowed Guruship upon the Adi Granth himself. Thenceforth, the Holy Book is uniformly referred to as Guru Granth in the entire Sikh literature. It has been the

understanding and conviction of the Sikh community since Guru Gobind Singh left for his heavenly abode. It was the last commandant of their Guru that henceforth the Sikh Scripture, the Adi Granth holds the status of Guru for them. Resultantly, the whole Sikh community had taken up the Adi Granth as their Guru. During the exile when the Sikhs were declared outlaws by the Mughal government, they had to seek shelter in the hills, deserts and forests. At that time the most precious possession which the Sikhs cherished and defended at the cost of their lives was not anything else but their Scripture, Guru Granth Sahib.

It is obvious that no tradition of Sanatan Sikhi existed in the eighteenth century as propounded by some scholars. It is only the deviation or degeneration that had occurred in the Sikh way of life in the second half of nineteenth century has been labeled as Sanatan Sikhi which was not the true representation of Sikh spirit. All the arguments put forth by the exponents of above form of Sikhi are far from reality. They have taken only those references which suit their formulations and in this exercise they have ignored the whole mass of historical evidence which go against their pre-determined conclusions. It is admitted even by them that to locate, describe and analyze Sanatan Sikh tradition meaningfully is a difficult task. They acknowledge the fact that bulk of the matter in Dasam Granth is not sacred, even then they have depended upon it to define Sanatan Sikh conception of scripture, myth, doctrine, self-definition and social practices. They acknowledge that it is not possible to be very precise on the chronology of the Sanatan episteme. Even then they have gone ahead to establish a tradition which finds no validity in the Sikh historical writings. Those who project Dasam Granth in support of Sanatan Sikhi should not forget that the most authentic writings of Guru Gobind Singh included in it, emphasize upon the worship of only One, Omnipresent God.

The objective of the authors of Sikh *Rahitnamas* was to explain the Sikh code of conduct and its teachings in their real form. Similar was the purpose of rules and injunctions underlined in the *Tankhahnamas*. These injunctions indicate that there was no room for the guilty who deviated from the prescribed Sikh *rahit*. Though, some of the Udasis and the Nirmalas were transgressing the Sikh code of conduct but their number was very limited. The theory that the Khalsa Sikhs had compromised with the Sehajdhari Sikhs which resulted in the popularity of Sanatan Sikhi is not based on hard facts. It is crystal clear that majority of the Sikhs were following the teachings of the Sikh Gurus in letter and spirit.