

GURU GOBIND SINGH - THE MAN

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In the summer of 1921, a strange phenomenon was witnessed in the Punjab. That year the Sikhs launched a passive resistance movement to take possession of one of their historic shrines called Guru Ka Bagh, a few miles from Amritsar. Batches of passive resisters went to this shrine. They were mercilessly beaten by the police. Their arms and legs were smashed; they were dragged by their long hair; many were hung upside down from branches of trees till they became senseless. Instead of being cowed down by these brutalities, the number of passive resisters increased steadily till 500 began to arrive every day at Guru Ka Bagh, amongst them many who had suffered beatings earlier and had been discharged from the hospital. This "rare species of courage" as Gandhiji and Rev.C.F. Andrews described "was born of religious fervour" in its turn born of a legend widely accepted by the Sikhs. It was said that wherever five passive resisters assembled to say their prayers. Guru Gobind Singh appeared before them. He led them to Guru Ka Bagh and he, not the passive resister, received the blows showered by the police. When these satyagrahis were produced in court and asked their names and addresses, they gave their names correctly. But of their parentage and address, the answer invariably was: "My father's name is Guru Gobind Singh; my mother, Mata Sahib Devan. My home is the Guru's town Anandpur." The Guru Ka Bagh satyagrah went on for some months till the Punjab's goals were crammed ultimately, it was the police and the Government which gave in and agreed to Guru Bagh being handed over to the Sikhs. I have met many of these passive resisters and with my own ears heard them tell of the darshan of the Guru and his ethereal form lead them to face the police. They swear that they lost all fear, and when they were tortured they knew no pain.

Soon after Guru Ka Bagh yet another phenomenon was witnessed in the Punjab. The sacred pool surrounding the Hari Mandir in Amritsar was drained and cleansed. In this Kar Seva as it was known, millions of people took part. You can today

meet hundreds of men and women who will swear that many a time while they were engaged in this Kar Seva the Guru's white hawk swooped down from the skies and settled on the gold pinnacle of the Hari Mandir - and then as dramatically vanished in to the blue heaven.

Sceptics will undoubtedly have explanations for these phenomena. Let us concede that in an atmosphere of religious fervour, such experiences are possible. However, the point to bear in mind is that for the Sikhs these phenomena have been usually connected with Guru Gobind Singh, because he has been to them their father-figure, their supreme hero, the sustainer of faith, hope and courage, and their beau-ideal-all in one.

What kind of man was this Guru Gobind Singh? By now you must be familiar with the main events of his life. I will not repeat them. I will only draw your attention to five points to help you judge the Guru's place in history. The choice of the number 'five' is deliberate. Five has some kind of mystic significance in the Punjab - the land of the five rivers. The Guru himself subscribed to sanctity of the five:

panchon men nit barbat main hun
panch milan to piran pir.

"Wherever there are five there am I.

Where five meet, they are the holiest of the holy."

First, it should be borne in mind that he was only a child of nine when his father, the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur was executed by the order of Emperor Aurangzeb. In any mortal such an experience would result in a traumatic shock followed first by fear and then by hate and desire for revenge against the people who had perpetrated the crime. I have little doubt that many young persons must have tried to fill young Gobind's mind with feelings of hatred and revenge against the Mughals. The Guru remained impervious to these

'Speaking
the Truth is
the real Fast,
Remaining
contented is
the true
Pilgrimage,
Meditation is
the true worship,
Humility is
the real
Roasary

Guru Nanak Dev Ji,
S.G.G.S

"By saying prayers
over meat
or any other
forbidden foods,
they are not
made acceptable.
O Nanak,
from false talk,
only falsehood is
obtained."

Guru Nanak Dev Ji,
S.G.G.S page 141,

influences. When he grew into manhood he announced his mission in life in the following words: "I came into the world charged with the duty to uphold the right in every place, to destroy sin and evil. ..the only reason I took birth was to see that righteousness may flourish, that good may live and tyrants be torn out by their roots."

Secondly, it should be constantly before our minds, that the Guru never subscribed to the theory "might is right". Although he introduced the worship of arms in Sikh religious ritual and even described the sword, the spear and the musket as 'the Pirs' - religious mentors of the Sikhs, this was entirely in the context of force as the righter of wrongs. He was fully aware of the fact that the teachings of the first five Gurus and the Granth Sahib were pacified incontent. But should truth and goodness be allowed to suffer annihilation at the hands of falsehood and evil? The Guru's answer was a categorical "No". In a Persian composition entitled the Zafarnama, the Epistle of Victory said to have been sent to Emperor Aurangzeb, he wrote:

cu kar az hama, hilate dar guzasht
halal ast burdan ba shamskir dast
"When all other means have failed,
it is righteous to draw the sword."

In this very context it is significant that although Guru Gobind Singh dictated the final version of the Granth Sahib, he did not include any of his own compositions exhorting people to rise in arms in the sacred text.

Thirdly, the Guru took penal care that anti-Muslim sentiment should not stain the crusade he was about to launch against the Mughals. "My sword strikes tyrants not men", he said. Amongst the earliest recruits in his army were Muslims. Although he fought the Mughals all his life -as indeed he did the Hindu Rajputs of the hills -he had both Muslims and Hindus fighting on his side shoulder to shoulder with his Sikhs. This followed naturally from his conviction that all men were of one caste -manas ki jat sab ek pachanbo -he exhorted. And that the mosque and the temple to be the same; the call of the muezzin and the chanting of the pandit were the same. The non-communal tradition started by Guru Gobind Singh was continued into the time of Maharajah Ranjit Singh who was, as pointed out by Pandit Nehru in his "Discovery of India ", one of the few

genuinely secular rulers of our country. It was, therefore, in the fitness of things that in the crowning success of Sikh arms, the flag that the Muslim General Colonel Basswan, carried through the streets of Kabul bore the emblem of Guru Gobind Singh; likewise the Dogra Hindu, General Zorowar Singh, planted this saffron banner bearing Guru Gobind Singh 's Chakra with Kirpans crossed beneath in the very heart of Tibet.

Guru Gobind Singh was able to raise his fight against Mughals into a struggle of the down-trodden against oppression of the rich, into a demand for justice against tyranny of wrong-doers, in short, into a crusade, a veritable dharma yudha against the powers of evil. He forbade his soldiers from looting. He made them take solemn vows that they would never molest women of the enemy. He emulated the example of our ancient rishis and yogis and insisted that all Sikhs should wear their hair and beards unshorn -for they were not common soldiers but Sant Sipahis, Soldier-Saints.

Fourthly, what deserves your attention is the incredible sense of loyalty and sacrifice that the Guru was able to arouse amongst his followers. Let me give you a few examples. You may have heard of the famous baptismal ceremony when five men willingly agreed to have their heads cut off. There are innumerable examples of similar sacrifice. As well known as these first five Sikhs known as Panj Piyaras were another group of forty known as "chali mukte". Under great stress during the prolonged siege of Anandpur these forty men asked the Guru to let them go. After getting deed of renunciation the Guru released them from their obligation. When these men returned to their homes their women folk taunted them for disloyalty to the Master. The men (including amongst them a woman, Mai Bhago) rejoined the Guru at Muktsar and fell fighting. The last request their leader, Mahan Singh, made to the Guru, was to have the deed of renunciation torn up before he closed his eyes for ever. Yet another example was of an old woman who came to the Guru for help. She told him that her husband and two sons had been killed fighting. All that remained of her family was her youngest son who was dangerously ill. She begged the Guru's blessings to restore him to health -not to have someone to look after her in old age, but in order that this son too could attain martyrdom in the battlefield.

How was Guru Gobind Singh able to fire his followers with this kind of reckless valour?

*'The parrot of
the soul,
In love with
the cage of
the body,
Speaks in the
language of
the earth
If the parrot
pecks at Truth
And drinks
the Nectar
within,
It will fly out
of the cage
Once and for
all.'*

*Guru Nanak Dev Ji,
S.G.G.S*

*I crave to see my
Lord,
Like an arrow the
Guru's word has
pricked my heart.*

*Guru Nanak Dev Ji,
S.G.G.S page 141,*

Primarily by setting an example himself. This is the fourth point for your consideration. He fought alongside his men. He never put his family before his followers. On the contrary at one of the engagements he allowed two of his sons to go to a certain death before he allowed any of his *Panj Piyaras* to do so. Within a few months he lost all his four sons: two were killed fighting, the other two, aged nine and seven, were executed by the Governor of Sirhind. His own mother died of grief. When his wife asked him in tears for her four sons, the Guru answered, "What if four be dead; thousands live to continue the battle." It was by this kind of personal example that the Guru was able to train poor rustics who had handled nothing more lethal than a lathi and flabby, pot-bellied, timid shopkeepers to become some of the greatest fighters India has ever known. He redeemed his pledge that he would train the sparrow to fight the hawk and teach one man to fight a legion. Pathans, Persians, Afghans and Baluchis of the North West Frontier region who had for centuries invaded India, terrified, massacred and looted our people, were beaten back into the homelands by these new soldiers of Guru Gobind Singh.

It has never been fully appreciated by our historians that these Punjabis set up a human barricade against the invaders and so made possible the rise of Maratha power in the Deccan.

Fifthly, and this is my final point, is the genuinely democratic spirit of this great leader of men. Guru Gobind Singh never claimed a divinity for himself. He denounced those who tried to make him an incarnation of God. "I was ordained to establish a sect and lay down its rules", he wrote. "But who-so- ever regards me as Lord shall be damned and destroyed. I am - and of this let there be no doubt, I am but a slave of God, as other men are: a beholder of the wonders of creation. " He took no credit for what he did: he attributed all achievements to the Khalsa -all his victories, his power, his prestige, he said was due to the efforts of his followers. Although he was their Guru, he made himself their disciple - *ape gur-chela*. Whenever the congregation passed a resolution it acquired the sanctity of a *gurmata* - an ordinance of the Guru binding even on the Guru himself. Guru Gobind Singh was thus a rare combination of many

qualities -a sophisticated aesthete composing poetry in many languages -Sanskrit, Prakrit, Persian and Punjabi; a handsome cavalier fond of chase and danger; a soldier who dedicated his life to fight tyranny; a leader who looked upon his followers as comrades and equals, a Guru who exhorted people to worship the God they love best but insisted that they look upon their fellow beings as equals; a man who sacrificed all he had ~ his family and his worldly possessions and- ultimately himself for his ideals. This ideal he stated in lines which have become the most quoted of his compositions:

O Lord of Thee these boons I ask
Let me never shun a righteous task.
Let me be fearless when I go to battle,
Give me faith that victory will be mine.
Give me power to sing Thy praise,
And when comes the time to end my life,
Let me fall in mighty strife.

*Has the world produced many men as great
as Guru Gobind Singh?*

GURU GOBIND SINGH IN THE EYES OF A DISTINGUISHED MUSLIM HISTORIAN S. M. Latif

"Historians agree in eulogising the great merits of Guru Gobind. In him were united the qualities of a religious leader and a warrior. He was a law-giver in the pulpit, a champion in the field, a king on the *masnad* and a *faqir* in the Society of the Khalsa. He was the right man for the needs of time. Sikhism in the beginning, namely in Nanak's time, would soon have been extinguished, had its founder adopted the same plan as that recommended by Gobind, viz. The, free exercise of the sword in defence of religion. Credit is due to him for having founded a political community of no mean order, for he taught a anquished people how to obtain political ascendancy and national freedom. His persevering endurance in the midst of calamities and disasters was equal to his bravery and valour in the field, and although he did not live to see his great ends accomplished, yet it is acknowledged on all hands that the conversion of a band of undisciplined *jats* (given to raping and plunder or agricultural pursuits) into a body of conquerors and a political corporation, was due entirely to the genius of Govind, whose history is closely interwoven with that of the Sikhs as a nation"

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*"When all other
means have
failed, It is then
righteous to take
the sword in the
hand."*

(Zafarnama)

*'Truth is high
But higher still
is truthful
living.'*

*Guru Nanak Dev Ji,
S.G.G.S Sri Rag, p.62*