



The Saint-Soldier
Kharak Singh

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I. THE BACKGROUND

To grasp the significance of the ideal of 'saint-soldier', it would be helpful briefly to refer to two most prominent features of the religious tradition of India before Guru Nanak. These are:

- (a) Dichotomy between spiritual and empirical life, and
- (b) The Caste system.

While the former was common to practically all systems of religious thought, the latter constituted the very foundation of the diversity of faiths included in Hinduism.

DICHOTOMY BETWEEN SPIRITUAL AND EMPIRICAL LIFE

In a monistic system like Sankra's Vedanta, the world is unreal or *mithya*. In dualistic systems like Yoga, Sankhya and Jainism, two kinds of Reality are assumed - spiritual and material. And man is a combination of both. In Buddhism the world is a place of suffering in the endless cycle of birth, life and death. Goals vary from a realisation of the self to deliverance from transmigration, or *nirvana* or *mukti* or merger with the Ultimate Reality. The effort of the individual is directed towards a selfish end of personal salvation with little or no regard for, or even at the cost of, society and fellow men. Worldly activities were considered incompatible with, and a hindrance to spiritual progress. Renunciation or withdrawal from the world, asceticism, celibacy, and ahimsa were essential components of the spiritual discipline prescribed. There was little scope or need for altruism or moral deeds. Dichotomy between spiritual and empirical life was complete. In Nathism, which was the predominant faith at the time of Guru Nanak, the initiate had to take vows of following no occupation, living on alms, celibacy and ahimsa. Although living as a parasite on society, the Naths looked down upon householders, and any concern with society was considered irreligious and beneath the dignity of a religious man. Some of the practices endowed with religious merit have been recounted by Guru Arjun Dev:

Despite recitation of holy texts, study of Vedas and praxis of
 bowels and the *Kundalini*,
 From the five agents has not come parting of company,
 And more and more in egoistic thinking is one bound.
 Cherished one! By such devices comes not union -

Innumerable are the means I have adopted.
 Tired of all such, at the Lord's Portal I threw myself,
 Praying, 'Grant me discriminative understanding.'
 Vows of silence I observed; on my bare hands received food,
 And unclad in forests wandered;
 I wandered over water-edges and holy spots over the earth -
 Still has duality not dropped off.
 At holy water-edges I resided where desires are fulfilled.
 Had the saw placed over my head;
 Yet thus is not impurity of mind washed off, despite a million
 devices.
 Gold, maids, horses, elephants - thus charities of various kinds I
 dispensed;
 Gave away grain, clothing, land -
 Still found I not the Lord's Portal.
 To offerings before deities, sprinkling sandalwood paste,
 folding of hands,
 Lying prostrate, and to the six ritual acts have I remained
 devoted.
 Still, by egoism in bonds am I fallen -
 Not by these devices is the Lord met.
 Eighty-four poses of Yoga-praxis too to exhaustion I performed;
 Lived to a great age, yet found not union with the Lord,
 And into transmigration fell.
 Royal display of glory, the pomp of kingship I had,
 And exercised absolute authority;
 I lay in elegant couch, applied to my limbs
 sandalwood and attar - all these are gateway to terrible hell.
 Divine laudation in holy company is the supreme act of piety.
 Saith Nanak: This to such comes as by primal writ are this
 destined to receive.
 In such joy of devotion is Thy servant absorbed.
 By grace of the Shatterer of suffering of the humble,
 To Divine laudation is my mind devoted. ¹

CASTE SYSTEM

The Indian caste system is a unique institution evolved by the Hindu society, and has no parallel anywhere in the history of the world. The fun-

¹Guru Granth Sahib: Mahila-5, pp. 641-42 (Trans. Talib)

damental assumption of the caste ideology is that,² “Men were not - as for classical Confucianism - in principle equal, but for ever unequal.” They were so by birth, and “were as unlike as man and animal.” The whole society is divided into four major castes Brahmins, Kshatrias, Vaishyas and Sudras. The number of sub-castes, however, exceeds 3,000, all of which are meticulously arranged in a hierarchical social pyramid in which the social grade of each group was fixed permanently by birth. Each layer in this social pyramid was superior in caste status (i.e. virtually in social status) to all layers below it, and lower in caste status to all the others above it, irrespective of their political or economic position. The privileges, disabilities, obligations and duties, i.e., practically all aspects of social behaviour of each sub-caste were regulated by fixed rules and codes. At the top were the Brahmins enjoying every conceivable privilege, and at the bottom were the Sudras, mostly untouchables, doomed to perpetual serfdom doing all the dirty and disagreeable jobs required of them, with no hope of ever moving up along the social ladder. The system had religious sanction of the Vedas, and was confirmed by the *avtars* of Vishnu, incarnated as Lord Rama and Krishna. One was born as Sudra as a punishment for sins of one’s previous birth, and nobody could, therefore, change it. Every *varna* could perform only the specific functions allotted to it. Only Brahmins could preside over religious ceremonies. Wearing and use of arms was the monopoly of Kshatrias. Vaishyas could not do anything except farming and trading. It was a grave offence for a Sudra to attempt anything other than his menial jobs. Lord Rama, known as Maryada Purshotam, is said to have cut off the head of a Sudra for the sole crime of indulging in religious rites not allowed to his caste. Lord Krishna was supposed to have asserted that he was the creator of *Charuvivarnya*.

It is obvious that religious requirements or creeds of different castes were different. Guru Nanak draws attention to this anomaly:

The Yogi’s creed in seeking enlightenment is expressed.
 The Brahmin’s in following the Vedas.
 The Kshatria’s creed is heroism; the Sudra’s service of others.

The Guru, however does not approve of this. He goes on:

Should one, however, realise this secret,
 One creed all should inspire.

²Jagjit Singh: *Perspectives on Sikh Studies*, p. 14, Guru Nanak Foundation, New Delhi

Nanak is a slave to one with such realisation.
In him is manifest the immaculate Lord. ³

II. THE CONSEQUENCES

Rigid enforcement of the caste system ensured internal stability of the society and control of the Brahmins for almost three thousand years. The life-negating pacific religious beliefs also helped in this. But an unjust and exploitative system cannot sustain itself indefinitely. The vast majority of the population had been deprived of education, and had been disarmed. The shabby and cruel treatment meted out to the Sudras and even the Vaishyas did not inspire or encourage any feelings of sympathy or loyalty to the higher castes. So when the Muslim invaders started their attacks from the North and West, they met no formidable resistance. Malimud Ghaznavi is known for his seventeen invasions on India. It was almost a sport with him. He would come anytime he liked and return with as much loot as troops could carry. He desecrated temples, killed people by the thousands and took countless men and women as slaves. His official reporter records that while his troops were plundering the famous temple at Somnath and breaking the idols, people from the surrounding 300 villages collected and sat chanting mantras, and did not offer any resistance. Bakhtiar Khilji is believed to have crossed into India with only 300 horsemen, and trampling vast territories, reached as far as Nalanda, where he demolished the famous university, killing 1,000 teachers and about ten thousand students, besides destroying over 100,000 valuable manuscripts. Such examples of wanton destruction by invaders could be cited by hundreds from the Indian history. Muslim invaders were able to establish their empires in India without much difficulty. Indian pacificism was no match for the life-affirming approach of the invading armies. The Muslim rule in India lasted for almost a thousand years, only to be replaced by another foreign power, the British.

Guru Nanak was himself a witness to the attack of the founder of the Mughal Empire in India. In his famous composition, *Babarvani*, he gives a very vivid account of the atrocities committed by Babur's armies on innocent people, including women and children. He calls Babur's army a "horde of sin." At the same time he takes to task the local rulers for their unpreparedness. He points out the need for forethought to escape chastisement, as well as the futility of spells for dealing with the Mughal invaders, or any other aggressor.

³Guru Granth Sahib: *Asa di Var*, M-1, p.469

III. THE CONCEPT OF SAINT-SOLDIER

We have seen that religious thought of the pre-Guru period was oriented towards development of the individual, in respect of some selected traits or qualities, rather than his entire personality and the society. The popular couplet '*Janani jane to bhagat Jan, kai data, kai sur*' indicates the prevalent values of the times. The ideals sought were *bhakti* or generosity or heroism. One of these was considered enough. It never occurred to religious leaders that emphasis on a single quality would lead to lop-sided development of the individual, and emaciate the society. Guru Nanak, on the other hand, wanted balanced and fullest development of the individual, covering every aspect of his life, physical, temporal, moral and spiritual. Himself perfect, he set out to create a perfect society of perfect individuals, basing his philosophy on the unity of God, the Sole Loving Creator. This is amply testified by Dr Mohammad Iqbal in his reference to Guru Nanak thus:

*Phir uthi Tauhid ki awaz ik Punjab se,
Mard-i-kamal ne jagaya Hind ko phir khwab se.* ⁴

Then arose from the Punjab the call of Unity of God;
And the perfect man (Guru Nanak) shook Hind from its slumber.

Guru Nanak's religion derives its origin from his mystic communion with the Sole Loving Creator. He wanted all human beings to develop in God's image and to carry out His Altruistic Will.

'Harijan aisa chahie Hari he jaisa hoe' (Kabir)
God's servant should be each as God Himself.

One should, therefore, cherish the attributes of God, some of which are mentioned in the *Mul Mantra* of Guru Nanak as 'truthfulness', 'creativity', 'to be above fear or rancour', etc. God's image is not cast in saintly virtues alone. Guru Arjun hints at the fullness and versatility of His image as follows:

Among kings art Thou reputed as the Supreme King;
Among possessors of land also Supreme.
Among lords art Thou Supreme Lord;
Among the castes Thine is the pre-eminent caste.

⁴Mohammed Iqbal: *Bang-i-dara*

My father is the great Master, inaccessible.
 Lord Creator, what can we utter of Thy praise?
 In wonder are we beholding all.
 Among masters of joy art Thou also supreme;
 Supreme Bestower among those that bestow gifts.
 Among masters of glory art Thou All-glorious;
 Among hedonists the Supreme Hedonist.
 Among heroes art Thou Supreme Hero;
 among enjoyers of pleasures pre-eminent.
 Among householders art Thou Supreme Householder;
 among yogis the Supreme Yogi.
 Among doers art Thou Supreme Creator;
 among upholders of traditions the Supreme Traditionalist. ⁵

The Guru's system differs radically from earlier religious traditions in its goals. The Guru did not approve of any selfish goal of personal salvation through asceticism and withdrawal from life, flourishing on parasitism. The Guru saw God as All Love. He loves His creation, and has a Will that is Altruistic. So the goal for the Guru's ideal man or *gurmukh* is to carry out the Altruistic Will of God. The devotion of the Guru's disciple expresses itself as love for His creation in the form of service and sacrifice. For, love without sacrifice is meaningless. In fact love and sacrifice are closely linked complimentary qualities. Love of a cause inevitably leads to sacrifice or heroism. The Guru's religion, therefore, rejects pacificism of the earlier salvation systems, and prepares the seeker to be a saint as well as a soldier, and not a saint or a soldier. He says:

Shouldest thou seek to engage in the game of love,
 Step into my street with thy head placed on thy palm.
 While on to this stepping, ungrudgingly sacrifice your head. ⁶

Guru Arjun repeated the same thing, when he said:

Accept first death as inevitable, and attachment to life discard;
 Turn dust of feet of all - thereafter to us come. ⁷

Sikhism is a whole-life system combining spiritual life with empirical life. The *sant-sipahi* ideal is thus logically and morally essential. For, love of one's

⁵Guru Granth Sahib: *Gujri* M-5, p.507

⁶Ibid., p.1412

⁷Ibid., *Var Gauri*, M-5, p.1102

fellow men becomes meaningless, and even hypocritical, if one is not willing to sacrifice and secure for them sustenance, equality, safety and justice in all spheres of life. Hence in Guru Nanak's system the ideal of *sant-sipahi* is spiritually and naturally a necessary culmination. It is, therefore, neither incidental nor accidental that while the first four Gurus organised, motivated and developed the Sikh society, and Guru Arjun created a state within a state, the later five Gurus maintained a regular army and wielded the sword, when necessary.

It must be emphasised that while a Sikh is expected to acquire the skills of a soldier, he is permitted to use his sword only for a noble cause, to resist oppression and tyranny, and to secure justice and equality for humanity. Guru Gobind Singh gave a clear sanction to the use of force, when he said:

When all other means (to secure justice) fail,
It is righteous to take the sword in hand.

On the other hand, fighting for selfish ends, self-aggrandisement and lust for power, is condemned in clear terms. The Guru says:

Call not these heroes that in pride die and bear sufferings:
Blind, not realising the self, in duality are they absorbed.
In extreme of wrath they wage baffles.
In this life and the next sufferings.
Declare the scriptures, pride pleases not the Lord.
Those dying in pride, of liberation shall be deprived
And in the cycle of death and birth shall ever move. ⁸

Guru Nanak condemned the invasion of Babur in strongest words, since his exploits were not only devoid of saintliness, but were actually opposed to it. Dr Iqbal expresses similar sentiments, when he says:

Be it the pomp of monarchy,
Or the show of democracy,
Separate (nobility of) religion from politics,
What remains is the sheer tyranny of Jenghese. ⁹

⁸Ibid., *Var Maru*, M-3, p.1089

⁹Mohammed Iqbal: *Bang-i-dara*

Guru Arjun stressed the need for saintliness in heroes, when he said:

In this age such alone are designated as true heroes,
As in the love of Lord are dyed. ¹⁰

In numerous hymns the Gurus have urged upon the heroes to inculcate saintly qualities. Using metaphor of wrestling, the Guru refers to the fight with the evil forces thus:

The Lord's champion am I;
After meeting the Master is my tassel held high.
The tourney of champions assembled.
The Lord Himself is witnessing.
Trumpets and drums are playing;
Champions in the arena are moving around:
Five wrestlers have I overthrown;
The Master my back has stroked. ¹¹

The ideal of saint-soldier is the practical expression of the whole-life approach preached by the Gurus, who categorically rejected renunciation which is usually associated with saintliness. Guru Arjun says:

Saith Nanak: By contact with the Master is the true device of
living perfected.
In a life of smiling playfulness, enjoyment of wear and food,
Is attained liberation.

...

My self! In joy abide by endeavouring and working in the way of
God.

By meditation obtain union with the Lord:
Thus, saith Nanak, shall thy anxiety be removed. ¹²

IV. FOUNDING A SOCIETY OF SAINT-SOLDIERS

Guru Nanak was not content to merely state his doctrines. He knew that, in the background of the long Indian tradition, these would be forgotten, unless he could create a motivated and well-knit society, wedded to his principles and willing to fight for them. With this idea in mind he had been

¹⁰Guru Granth Sahib, *Dhanasri*, M-5, p.679

¹¹Ibid., *Siri Rag*, M-5, p.74

¹²Ibid., M-5, p.522

organising *sangats*, wherever he went. Towards the end of his tours he created the nucleus of a Sikh society and centre at Kartarpur, in the form of a colony, in which everybody including the Guru himself, worked and ate together, attended the daily congregations, and imbibed the spirit of the Master and his religion. The members of this community were the humble and the lowly people who had suffered for centuries under the Draconian *Varna Dharma* and the tyrannical rule of foreign invaders. The infant society had to be nurtured, until it grew in size and conviction, and developed full consciousness of the strength of its cause and potentialities. All this could not be achieved overnight or even in one generation. So the Guru introduced the institution of succession, passing on the torch to his worthiest disciple, Lehna, giving him the name of Angad, i.e., a part of his own self. This succession continued, until it reached the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh. Each Guru made rich contribution to the cause of advancing towards the goal of an organised society of saint-soldiers. The first five Gurus created the necessary infrastructure like the institution of *sangat* and *pangat*, creation of headquarters at Amritsar, compiling of the Scripture, organisation of districts for efficient administration, starting the institution of *daswandh*, developing physical strength of the individual and the society as a whole, etc.

The Sixth Guru, under instructions of his great father, took the next step to implement the doctrine of *miri-piri* by donning two swords at the time of his coronation. He took up in real earnest the training of his followers in the military skills and warfare. It needs to be noted that the symbol for *piri* or spiritualism was also a sword, and not a rosary, signifying that even spiritual obligations cannot be discharged fully without *shakti* or sword. In the initial stages even mercenaries were employed to impart training. For, the earlier disciples of the Guru, thoroughly grounded in the Sikh doctrines, required training in the arts of soldiery. The goal was to create a society of saint-soldiers, properly trained, equipped and willing to fulfill their social responsibilities to fight and even die for the cause of justice and defence of the poor and oppressed. History records that the army of Guru Hargobind fought four pitched battles with the forces of the local Mughal Chiefs, and won. The following three Gurus also maintained armies, approximately thirty thousand strong, and continued preparing their followers for the ensuing struggle. The ninth guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, who died a martyr for resisting the forcible conversion of Hindus to Islam, championing the cause of freedom of faith, is also famous for his slogan of the saint-soldierly concept.

Frighten not; fear not. ¹³

The first part shows a saint, and the second a soldier.

V. THE EPITOME

The revolutionary movement launched by Guru Nanak, culminated in the creation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh on the Vaisakhi day of 1699, when he dramatically selected the *Panj Piaras*, the most devoted of his Sikhs or disciples, who had offered their heads to the Guru for the saintly cause, to form the nucleus of the Khalsa *Panth*. Around this nucleus under the inspiring leadership of the Guru and the example of his unparalleled sacrifices, grew a society of saint-soldiers, with strong convictions of the spiritual realities of life, wedded to the highest moral values, trained in the arts of soldiering, and ever willing and prepared to fight for the cause of justice, in defence of the poor, the oppressed and the downtrodden. The exploits of the Khalsa are too well known to need mention in this brief paper. Suffice it to say that it was this organisation of saint-soldiers, that stemmed the spate of invasions from the North-West that had plagued India for nearly a thousand years, and introduced an era of peace, stability, freedom and human dignity after centuries of tyranny, destruction, slavery, humiliation and indignity.

VI. THE SAINT-SOLDIER IN HISTORY

The history of Sikhs after creation of the Khalsa is the story of an unending series of martyrs and saint-soldiers, who staked their lives for the cause of justice and resistance to oppression and exploitation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into details of such heroic deeds and near miracles performed by the Khalsa. One of the numerous examples, recorded by Rattan Singh Bhangoo in his *Panth Parkash*, is the attack on Kasur, on the complaint of a Brahmin whose wife had been forcibly taken away by the ruling Pathans. The attack was undertaken against heavy odds, with a meagre 24,000 soliders against an enemy over a *lakh* strong, involving tremendous risk. With conviction of the righteousness of the cause, and with faith in God, the attack was launched, because the Khalsa could not resist the call to duty as saint-soldiers. A mere saint of earlier traditions, would have paid little attention to the Brahmin's request, and would have advised him to accept it as the will of Providence. And a mere soldier would see no need

¹³Ibid., Sloka M-9, p.1427

or justification for such a risky operation. But the saint-soldiers of the Guru did not shirk their responsibility and succeeded in rescuing the Bralimin's wife at a heavy cost in terms of loss of life.

“Every page of Sikh history burns with a hundred star-like names; one name is enough to thrill a whole life in us with the noblest spirit of heroism. The names of Guru Arjun Dev, Guru Tegh Bahadur, Guru Gobind Singh, his Four Sons, the five Beloved Disciples, and of the Sikh martyrs and devotees, the heroes of war and peace, provide the Sikh with an inexhaustible and intense past which few races in history can provide in its life-giving, death defying powers of inspiration to serve the Master and His ideals!”¹⁴ Among the countless heroes, mention may also be made of the Forty Muktas, Baba Banda Singh Bahadur, Baba Dip Singh, Bhai Mehtab Singh, Bhai Sukha Singh, Nawab Kapur Singh, Maharaja Jassa Singh, Akali Phula Singh and others. Outstanding among the more recent saint-soldiers are the names of Bhai Sahib Randhir Singh and Baba Waisakha Singh, who spent their lives in jail for resisting the oppression of the British rule in India in response to the inner call for action as disciples of the Guru.

The spirit of saint-soldiers lives and will live for ever. The Akali Movement of the early twenties furnished ample evidence of this spirit. Professor Puran Singh makes a touching reference to this as follows:

The awe-inspiring scenes of the “Akalis” in their present somewhat confused struggle, however misled and misguided from certain points of view - counting death like moths, the Sikh women coming and garlanding their husbands before the Akal Takht to go and bare their breasts to bullets if need be, in the name of the Guru; mothers and fathers putting with their own hands the flaming crown of martyrdom on their young sons' heads and praying that the Guru may grant them the honour of death in His Name; people laying themselves down on railroads before the rushing railway engines, carrying a trainful of their brethren as prisoners, as an appeal for stopping the train to let them who are out of prison to feast those who are going in; thousands dressed in yellow and black, vying with each other to be the first to form the groups of five hundred or a thousand martyrs that are sent to face prison, torture and even death in the name of the Guru; and the universal diffusion of this one feeling of service and sacrifice throughout the Sikh masses - these make one wonder if one is living in an age of rank materialism as the present one, or in the age when under the direct inspiration of the Tenth Guru the

¹⁴Puran Singh: *Spirit of the Spirit*, Part I, p.9

Sikhs were taking the vows of absolute self-surrender to the Ideals of the Khalsa. ¹⁵

VI. CONCLUSION

The concept of saint-soldier is clearly traceable to Guru Nanak, who made a radical departure from the earlier pacific and personal salvation-oriented religious thought. Guru Nanak preached a positive approach to the world, and a whole-life religion, with emphasis on altruistic activity and righteous deeds, based on the highest moral values. He wanted a balanced development of the individual to create a perfect man or 'the man in all men' that he himself was.

The Guru's vision went far beyond the individual. He wanted to create a perfect society, and took positive steps towards that end. He envisaged a society of God-men living as householders in the midst of the social milieu, engaged in pursuits of daily life, discharging with a sense of responsibility their social and political functions, committed to carry out the Altruistic Will of the Loving Creator, and willing and ever prepared to resist oppression and fight injustice. That was his concept of the Ideal Man combining spiritual and empirical values, the saint-soldier, and a perfect society of such individuals. Under his successors the idea flourished and advanced towards the most fitting epitome of the creation of the Khalsa under Gum Gobind Singh. That was indeed the final event, on the Vaisakhi of 1699, the greatest day in the history of mankind. For, the sociospiritual ideal of saint-soldier is the highest ideal that has ever been given to mankind.

¹⁵Ibid., p.8