



Sikh Ideals and Institutions During Misl Period in Northwestern India

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Abstract

The Sikhs embodied the Guru's noble ideals of humanism, liberalism, women's respect, tenderness, forgiveness, justice, and equality. The Sikh chiefs attributed their prosperity to the Gurus, whom they saw as the genuine founders and masters of society. Sikh principles provide direction for Sikh leaders. The Guru Granth Sahib was considered the Sikh code of conduct, the nation's supreme law, and social values. Sikh leaders have always maintained langars (community kitchens) to give meals to travellers as well as the underprivileged and needy. The Sarbat Khalsa and Gurmata were very visible symbols of the community's collaborative decision-making. When the chiefs met at Akal Takht for Gurmata, they set aside personal vendettas and made sacrifices for the greater interest of society. Sikhs organised themselves into Dals and began functioning as military units. Sardars could not afford to criticise Sarbat Khalsa's selections for fear of destroying their community's image and support. The chiefs gradually abandoned the concept of equality and the high teachings or consultations implanted in them by Guru Gobind Singh. The Sardars developed rivalries and jealousies against one another, which resulted in controversy, conflict, and alliance against each other. At the end of the eighteenth century, when the Afghan danger was eliminated, the Sarbat Khalsa and Gurmata institutions were rendered obsolete. The Sikh leaders rejected the Guru's teachings and, rather than integrating their personalities into society, felt the community existed to further their own personal objectives. Prior to 1767 AD, all Sikhs fought against the Afghans in unison, but after that they started disobeying Sikh ideals and behaving like independent monarchs. Ranjit Singh, who disbanded the Misls, replaced them with a strong centralised monarchy.

Keywords: *Sarbat Khalsa, Gurmata, Granth Sahib, Guru, Misl, Sardar, Misdars, Langar, Panth.*

Contents

The Gurus' teachings served as the foundation for the Sikh chiefs' values. The Sikhs developed several unique practices that fit their circumstances in the eighteenth century. Sikhs embodied the Guru's great values of humanism, liberalism, respect for women, gentleness, forgiveness, justice, and equality. Prior to the eighteenth century, the Sikh community's core framework of political ethics had emerged, and it served as the primary source of inspiration and direction throughout the subsequent period. For Sikh leaders, the Sikh values stood as a guide. As a result, Sikh leaders dared not oppose Sikh values.

All Sikhs regard the Sikh commonwealth as a holy creation of the gurus, accomplished in 1699 AD by the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh, via the establishment of Khalsa. As Guru Gobind Singh incorporated the Guru's character into the Khalsa, no one could ever consider violating the ideals established for its members. In terms of the Sikhs' obligations to the Khalsa commonwealth, no Sikh or group of Sikhs can claim to be above the Khalsa. Sikh chiefs have traditionally maintained that their status is entirely owing to the Guru's and Khalsa's favor. Every Sikh was expected to undergo *Pahul* (baptism) and to join the Khalsa. Prior to taking a person into his *dera* or camp, he was required to be baptized into Sikhism.

The Gurus commanded that the Sikhs make their judgments in panchayat councils. All significant choices affecting the community's shared interests must be approved by the intended recipients. The Sikhs were conscious of the Gurus' democratic ideas and adhered to them to the fullest extent possible. The *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmata* were powerful manifestations of this noble concept of collective decision-making by the community. The practice of choosing a *Misl* and Dal Khalsa leader was both in pursuit of and fulfilment of the same republican and democratic ethos inherent in Sikhism.

Sikh leaders, as shown by their coinage, reigned in the name of the Guru and the Khalsa. The Sardars established their confederacies and credited their success to the Gurus, whom they claimed to be the community's true founders and masters. Sikh leaders were known for their kindness and enthusiasm for their people. At the time of their investiture, early Sikh monarchs solemnly pledged in the presence of *Granth Sahib*. The *Guru Granth Sahib* was regarded as the Sikh code of conduct, the supreme law of the nation, and social norms. Sikhs rejected caste barriers, disparities between high and poor, and untouchability, among other things, due to the significant impact of the Sikh Gurus' teachings. Because of ethics provided by Sikhism, that no *Misl* was given a name based on caste or profession.

Sikh leaders have long maintained *langars* (community kitchens) to provide meals to both travelers and the impoverished and needy. They placed more importance on this aspect of service during times of famine. Sikhs have seen a considerable measure of violence, tyranny, and intolerance at the hands of the Mughal administration and Afghanis. But even so, they always follow the guru's instructions. That is why they did not seek vengeance on the Muslims. As Campbell explains, they were neither exclusive and unreasonably biased toward their own, but hired talented Mohammadons and others practically as liberally as Sikhs.

Along with the development of Sikh principalities into *Misls*, two significant institutions known as *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmata* developed. *Gurmata* is the term used to refer to a resolution passed by an assembly, and the assembly that passed *Gurmata* was referred to as Sarbat Khalsa. The Guru is said to

preside over the Sikhs' debates when the Holy *Granth* is present. The *Gurmata* is composed of two terms: Guru and Mata. Guru refers to the teacher, while Mata refers to the Guru's instruction or order. British historians like as Cunningham, Browne, Malcolm, Forester, and Polier, among others, inaccurately understand the term *Gurmata* as the great gatherings of the Khalsa councils.

When Guru Gobind Singh established the Khalsa, the *Gurmata* and *Sarbat Khalsa* institutions began to operate. As Guru Gobind ceded all political and religious power to the Khalsa group, he also transformed it into a democratic entity by instilling a spirit of brotherhood and equality in its members. After Banda Singh Bahadur's death, the institutions of *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmata* became significant tools of authority. The Sikhs convened at Akal Takht in Amritsar to debate their grievances and future course of action in reaction to the Mughals' and Afghan invaders' brutal policies. *Sarbat Khalsa* (meetings) at Akal Takht were held on Baisakhi, Diwali, and sometimes on Dussehra as well. Additionally, they gathered on instances when they saw an imminent threat to their community. For example, in 1726 AD, after Tara Singh was assassinated, the Sikhs convened a *Sarbat Khalsa* and passed a *Gurmata* calling for a raid on government treasures in retaliation. At other important *Sarbat Khalsa*, Sikhs divided their fighting forces into Dals and started acting as military battalions.

When the chiefs gathered at Akal Takht for *Gurmata*, they put aside personal animosities and sacrificed their personal feelings at the shrines for the greater good of the community, guided by the principles of pure patriotism and thinking only of the religion and commonwealth to which they belonged, as Malcolm and Ahmad Shah Batalia described. At Akal Takht, a set of guidelines was established for *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmata*. The Sikhs took their seats in front of the *Adi-Granth* and began their deliberations after reciting a prayer. Unanimous discussions were held during which everyone was free to express their opinions, and after the decision was announced (*Gurmata*), the dissenting votes joined the majority, thereby making the decision unanimous. The Sikhs regarded the Akal Takht ruling in Amritsar in high respect, and it carried the burden of moral and religious endorsement. Sardars could not afford to oppose *Sarbat Khalsa*'s choices for afraid of ruining their community's reputation and support.

The Sikhs were not ruled by an absolute sovereign in the second half of the eighteenth century, but were split into twelve groups known as *Misls*. Each *Misl* behaves in accordance with its own interests and perspectives. The *Sarbat Khalsa* was the fundamental institution of the *Misls*' informal confederacy. The federation's leader was elected, and the elected leader never behaved dictatorially; rather, he engaged in extensive consultation with other Sardars and generally followed the desire and direction of other generals. The only thing that bound them together was *Panth's* defense.

When the common threat was gone, the leaders were transformed from needy adventurers to domain rulers. As a consequence, Sikh leaders began to display disinterest for the *Sarbat Khalsa*'s gatherings at Akal Takt, Amritsar. Now when these sessions were attended by just a few chiefs, and the majority of the absentees who retained some influences were courageous enough to oppose the council's resolutions or judgments, the strength that the Sikhs had accumulated via the decisions of the *Sarbat Khalsa* meetings started to wane.

Prior to the eventual demise of the Delhi government and the Durrani invaders, the *Gurmata* was a powerful and efficient institution of the Sikhs, but its popularity swiftly declined when the threat from the

Durrani ceased. With the passage of time, the chiefs abandoned the idea of equality and the lofty teachings or gatherings that Guru Gobind Singh instilled in them. The Sardars developed feelings of competition and jealousy for one another, which eventually resulted in controversy, conflict, and cooperation. The last quarter of the eighteenth century witnessed struggle not between Sikhs and Muslim authorities or foreign invaders, but between Sikh Sardars and *Misls*.

The boundaries of the *Misls'* territories had been precisely defined, but they were sometimes disputed. Additionally, every powerful man in the *Misl* desired to be the *Misl's* leader. Under such conditions, the *Misl* would lack stability, and its government would be always in danger of dissolution. The *Gurmata* and the *Sarbat Khalsa* were helpless in the face of the *Misldars'* and *Misl* leaders' most audacious schemes. *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmata* institutions suffered a blow at the end of the eighteenth century when they became obsolete owing to the abolition of the Afghan threat. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Ranjit Singh discontinued these institutions in 1805 AD. However, during the *Misls'* golden age of political dominance, *Gurmata* was successful and persuasive in influencing political events.

The Sikh *Sardar's* groupings and regroupings were clearly aimed at weakening one another and attempting to subvert the weaker's lands permanently. It was undoubtedly a fight to impose one onto the other. The institutions of *Sarbat Khalsa* and *Gurmata* were founded with the primary goal of uniting the Sikhs, and it was through these organizations that they gained unity and strength against a common enemy. When the threat from the north-west disappeared in the late eighteenth century, Sikhs grew apathetic to *Sarbat Khalsa* gatherings, which were ineffective as a source of symbolism of unity. Ranjit Singh convened a gathering of Sardars in 1805 AD to address a problem resulting from Jaswant Rao Holker's arrival into Punjab. Only a few chiefs participated, and it is reported that they show little desire to sustain the institution that dated all the way back to their forefathers' time, with its religious devotion and political power of acting in unison against a common adversary.

Initially, Sikhs prioritized talent while selecting a leader. However, leadership became hereditary over a period of time. Following the father, the leadership was passed on to his son, nephew, or widow of the Sardars. Strong men in the *Misl* aspired to be leaders of existing *Misls* or to found new ones. As a result, small chiefs often defected from one Sardar to another. Even within the bounds of each *Misl*, the Sardars were always at odds, with one leader succeeding another. This was undoubtedly owing to Sikhism's constitution, which made no mention of such matters or feudal dominance. While the *Khalsa* was still in its infancy, this notion of independence was a long cry from reality. However, when some powerful chiefs grew in authority, their weaker and lesser neighbors were forced to either offer protection against one another or escape absorption entirely.

Due to the chief's strong feeling of self-aggrandizement and ownership, the flame of the *Khalsa* brotherhood and their mutual cooperation had dwindled. Every chief desired to expand his lands, construct powerful forts, and raise the size of his army by involving them in internal struggles for power and personal ambition. Sikhs abandoned fundamental ideals and exploited the premise of equality. The Sikh leaders disregarded Guru's teachings, and rather than incorporating their personalities into the society, they believed the community existed to serve their own personal ambitions. Thus, Sikh democratic aspirations dissolved into chaos, unleashing forces of disruption and disintegration.

There was a significant provision in the Rakhi system that no other Sikh would violate or loot and assault the other Sardar's assets. However, the chiefs broke this ideal, and they grew eager to acquire ever-larger areas for themselves. Thus, the Rakhi system, which was a powerful institution, was violated and progressively lost its strength. When a person obtains control of a certain region with the assistance of some companions, he transfers some of that land to his colleagues in exchange for their support. He assumed the role of Sardar of that *Misl*, while the others assumed the role of *Misldars*. In the *Misl*, the majority of followers of individual Sardars regarded themselves as companions and partners rather than subordinates. Although each *Misl* was autonomous, they all stared at one another, establishing a single commonwealth.

The *Misl* organization's demise was a foregone conclusion in history. Although sophisticated, the Khalsa was not a frail organization. However, the mere existence of an external adversary might prevent such a loose confederation from cooperating and unifying in its ownership of its compound components. As can be seen, prior to 1767 AD, all Sikhs united and fought the Afghans. Following 1767 AD, there was no external threat to the public. As the connection between shared adversaries was disrupted, this signaled the onset of internal instability. However, in the lack of a shared adversary and threat, the Sikh values were abandoned, culminating in *Misls'* demise. There was no one capable of integrating the different components and forming a kingdom who had political understanding and enthusiasm, as well as meticulous preparation and strong execution. The moment came, as did Ranjit Singh, who dissolved the *Misl* and established a powerful centralized monarchy in its stead.

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