

What is Sikhism?
Series 9


ਦੇਗ ਤੇਗ ਫਤਹਿ

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Traditions of Sikhism

**Sikh Awareness Society of USA
Tampa--Florida**

Traditions of Sikhism

Sikh religion is rooted in history and not in mythology. The Sikhs have evolved their own traditions which are only unique to Sikhism:

Tradition of Sarbat Khalsa in Sikhism

Sarbat Khalsa literally means the Sikh nation as a whole. In the context of the Sikh polity it is an assembly of the representatives of all the Sikh organizations loyal to Akal Takhat, at Akal Takhat under the patronage of Guru Granth Sahib. This institution has its foundation in the grant of the leadership of the Sikh nation to the 'Guru Khalsa Panth' by Guru Gobind Singh in 1708. All the national resolves are made by the Sikh nation in the gatherings of Sarbat Khalsa at Akal Takhat under the patronage of Guru Granth Sahib.

During the persecution of the Sikhs under the later Mughals and Afghans, Khalsa used to visit Amritsar on Diwali and Vaisakhi after their campaigns in the country, to listen to the Guru's words in Harmandar Sahib, to hold diwans at Akal Bunga (Akal Takhat), to adopt Gurmata to resolve matters and to administer justice. These meetings were called Sarbat Khalsa.

Sarbat Khalsa made many important decisions which changed the history of the Punjab as, for example, regarding confronting the Moghul government (A.D; 1726), accepting a Jagir (estate) in 1733 AD., building a forte at Amritsar (AD.1747), reorganization of Dal Khalsa and constitution of Misals (A.D.1748), attacking Lahore (A.D.1760) etc. Through Sarbat Khalsa and Gurmatta the Sikhs destroyed the Muslim rule and domination in their homeland within one hundred years of the formal consecration of Sikhism by Guru Gobind Singh and established an independent Sikh Empire in 1799 A.D, with Lahore as their capital. During the British rule in Punjab they forced the British government to enact the Sikh marriage Act (Anand Marriage Act, 1909), legalization of wearing of Kirpan by the Sikhs, grant licenses for Jhatka meat in Sikh dominated areas, create separate electorate for the Sikhs and the Sikh Gurdwara Act by following the tradition of Sarbat Khalsa and gurmatta. After the independence of the Indian subcontinent they successfully forced the Hindu government of India to create a Sikh dominated Punjabi speaking province in 1966.

Tradition of Gurmata in Sikhism

Literally meaning a decision made according to Guru's *Matt* (Counsel). All decisions affecting the Sikh Sangat reached through consensus, in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, and in accordance with the Sikh philosophy are called *Gurmata*. A *Gurmata* cannot be made to change the fundamental principles or basic postulates of Sikhism. The subject must be of concern to the entire 'Sikh Sangat', and must not pertain to the interest of a group or party of the Sikhs. *Gurmata* has to be unanimous; there is no question of majority view. The *Gurmata* is morally binding on all because the Guru is present in the sangat. There is no difference between the Guru and the Sangat / Panth / Khalsa. What is true of Panth is true of Sangat. The power of the Guru is in the Panth. The Guru is the Khalsa and the Khalsa is the Guru. There is no difference between the Guru and the Khalsa. So in essence, *Gurmata* is a "decision of the collective will of

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the Sikh Sangat'. It is the symbol and form of the supreme authority of the Sangat / Panth (Sikh Nation). It has the sanction of the Guru Granth Sahib (Guru) and the entire Sikh Sangat / Sikh Nation. In case of local issues Gurmatta is implemented by the Sangat through Panj Piaras.

The solution of new problems facing the 'Sikh Nation' can be sought through the institution of Gurmata, by Sarbat Khalsa at Akal Takhat. *Gurmatas* at Akal Takhat are taken in cases of emergency or when a crisis faces the 'Sikh Nation' as a whole. This *Gurmata* is issued as a *Hukamnama* to the 'Sikh Nation' by the '*Sewadar*', of Akal Takhat.

Tradition of *Hukamnama* in Sikhism

Hukamnama literally means: Royal order. In Sikh theology Akal Takhat is the Throne of the Almighty and the orders of the Almighty are of course, *Hukamnamas*. A *Hukamnama* is the *Gurmata* of the Sarbat Khalsa, issued from Akal Takhat Sahib for implementation. A *Hukamnama*, when it is issued in a proper manner, is binding on the whole Sikh nation. The tradition started during the eighteenth century after the abolition of human Guruship by Guru Gobind Singh, till then Guru's personal orders were called *Hukamnas*.

Tradition of honouring in Sikhism *Siropa*

Siropa literally means, from head (*Sir*) to feet (*Pao*), but in Sikh culture, *Siropa* means robe of honour. *Siropa* is presented to those persons who have contributed something positive and remarkable for the cause of the Sikh nation. It usually consists of a stole alone but it can be a stole in combination with a kirpan (sword).

Tradition of Punishment in Sikhism—*Tankha*

The term, *Tankhah* in Sikhism is used for fine (religious punishment) imposed upon a Sikh who has confessed his guilt or has been declared guilty of breach of rehatmaryada or for some activity against the interest of the Sikh nation. The religious punishment (*Tankhah*) in Sikhism, is usually in the form of dusting the shoes of Sangat in the *Jora Ghar* of the Gurdwara, cleaning floors of the Gurdwara or cleaning the used utensils in the Langar for a specified number of days along with reciting Path and on successful completion of the penance offer Karah Parshad in the Gurdwara and pay obeisance. After he has carried the same, he should have no grudge or feeling of religious devotion and not with a feeling of guilt.

Tankhahia

A person who has been held guilty of breach of religious discipline is called *Tankhahia* i.e; one who has been granted or is liable to be granted *Tankhah*. Any person who has been declared *Tankhahia* must personally appear and submit himself to the Sangat in a Gurdwara (if act was personal) or Sarbat Khalsa at Akal Takhat (if the offence was national) as a humble Sikh. He should have a feeling of repentance and must make public expression for his guilt and ask for forgiveness. He should declare his will to accept the verdict. If convicted, then the sentence is passed, jointly by *Panj Piaras*.

Tradition of *Daswandh* in Sikhism

Daswandh, in Punjabi literally means one-tenth, but in Sikh theosophy it refers to the obligation on each Sikh to contribute voluntarily according to his/her wishes for the organized help of the Sikh community. It is a method of sharing the wealth with the needy or the less fortunate. It is used for running the *Langar* and propagation of Sikhism. If a Sikh cannot afford money he / she may contribute his/ her time or his / her services for the nation. The concept of *daswandh* as compared with traditional charity/alms giving is unique in Sikhism. It is not charity (*Daan*) as in Sikhism there is no place for Brahmanical alms giving. In Sikhism no particular section of community like Brahmins in Hinduism is entitled to alms or charity, instead, it is the poor man's mouth, ਗਰੀਬ ਦਾ ਮੂੰਹ ਗੁਰੂ ਦੀ ਗੋਲਕ ਹੈ—“*Gharib da moonh Guru dee golak hai*”. Sikhism does not have any set complicated or strict rules for its collection / realization as are found in Islamic scriptures regarding Zakat. It was introduced in Sikhism by the 5th Nanak, Guru Arjan Dev. *Daswandh* serves the dual purpose of organizing help for the needy as well as for providing an opportunity to members to participate in *Sewa* (voluntary-selfless service) and thus weld them together in closer ties.

Tradition of *Sewa* in Sikhism

Sewa is another cardinal principle of Sikhism. In Sikhism it is not ordinary unpaid service, it is voluntary selfless, humble, without motive, without hope for reward or compensation. The founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak wished the followers of the Sikh faith to be servants of God and his people. “Having created the human body, God has installed HIS very-self there in,” said he. And, “This world is the chamber of God where in the true one resides”—ਇਹੁ ਜਗੁ ਸਚੈ ਕੀ ਹੈ ਕੋਠੜੀ ਸਚੇ ਕਾ ਵਿਚਿ ਵਾਸੁ॥—“*Ih jag sachay kee hai kothari, sachay ka vich vaas*”. Therefore, with this human body, “Let us be of service in this world so that we may find a seat in the court of the Lord”--- ਵਿਚਿ ਦੁਨੀਆ ਸੇਵ ਕਮਾਈਐ ਤਾ ਦਰਗਹ ਬੈਸਣੁ ਪਾਈਐ॥—“*Vich dunia sev kama-iy, taan durgeh baisan pa-iy*—In this world perform Lord’s service. Then you will get seat at God’s Portal” (GGS, p.26). It is held by the Gurus that service, if it is to be worthwhile, ought to be done without any consideration of reward. In case any reward is solicited for rendition of service it can be termed as bargain. “He who serves without desire for rewards, he alone attains to God”—ਸੇਵਾ ਕਰਤ ਹੋਇ ਨਿਹਕਾਮੀ ਤਿਸੁ ਕਉ ਹੋਤ ਪ੍ਰਾਪਤਿ ਸੁਆਮੀ॥—“*Sewa karat ho-ay nihkami, tis ko hot prapat soami*” (GGS, Gauri Sukhmani M5, p.286).

Sewa can be done by:

Physical means ie; *Tan dee sewa*,

Intellectual means ie; *Man dee sewa*,

Monetary means i.e; *Dhan dee sewa*,

Physical Sewa (Voluntary bodily service-*Tan dee sewa*): comes first of all and can be done by cooking food or by washing dishes in the *Langar* (the sacred community kitchen), by taking care of visitors shoes, by sweeping and cleaning floors in a *Gurdwara*, participating in Sikh National struggle, by doing humatarian work and so on.

Mental-intellectual service (*Man dee sewa*): can be done by imparting knowledge about Gurbani, Sikh religion, Sikh history and general education to the needy and the poor.

Monetary help or *Dhan dee sewa*: can be done in cash or kind. A Sikh is religiously required to contribute “Daswandh” for the community's welfare projects. Daswandh literally means ten percent of donor's income. Though this percentage is not always forthcoming, devotees do maintain a tremendous flow of funds for the maintenance of existing or the construction of new Gurdwaras or community's welfare projects.

From Sewa springs humility, tolerance and generosity. It brings an end to ego (Haumai). It gives a Sikh a feeling of being a useful part of humanity. Gurbani lays great stress on Sewa:-

- ਜੇਤੇ ਜੀਅ ਤੇਤੇ ਸਭਿ ਤੇਰੇ ਵਿਣੁ ਸੇਵਾ ਫਲੁ ਕਿਸੈ ਨਾਹੀ[--“*Jetay jee tetay sabh teray vin sewa phal kisay nahee*—As many as living beings, so many are all Thine Without service none obtains any reward.” (Ibid, p.354).
- ਨਿਹਕਪਟ ਸੇਵਾ ਕੀਜੈ ਹਰਿ ਕੇਰੀ ਤਾ ਮੇਰੇ ਮਨ ਸਰਬ ਸੁਖ ਪਾਈਐ[--“*Nih-kapat sewa keejay har kerī tan meray man sarb sukh pai-ay*—If you servest the Lord without pretence, guile O my mind, thou shalt be blessed with all comforts” (Ibid, p.861).
- ਆਪੁ ਗਵਾਇ ਸੇਵਾ ਕਰੇ ਤਾ ਕਿਛੁ ਪਾਏ ਮਾਨੁ[--“*Aap gva-ay sewa karay taan kichh pavay maan*—if he effaces his self-conceit and performs service, he, then obtains some honour” (GGS, p.474).
- ਬਧਾ ਚਟੀ ਜੋ ਭਰੇ ਨਾ ਗੁਣੁ ਨਾ ਉਪਕਾਰੁ।। ਸੇਤੀ ਖੁਸੀ ਸਵਾਰੀਐ ਨਾਨਕ ਕਾਰਜੁ ਸਾਰੁ “*Bhada chatti jo bharay na gun na upkar. Stee khusee savaaree-ay Nanak kaaraj saar.*—One paying forced tribute neither acquires merit nor is helpful to any. Nanak says, the act performed with sweet will, is the best” (GGS,p.787).
- ਵਿਣੁ ਸੇਵਾ ਪ੍ਰਿਠ ਗਥ ਪੈਰ ਹੋਰ ਨਿਹਫਲ ਕਰਨੀ[--“*vin sewa dhrig hath per, hor nehphal karni* i.e, Cursed are those feet and hands who donot engage themselves in service and indulge in fruitless doings” (Varan Bhai Gurdas, var 27, pauri, 10).

Kaar Sewa, in Sikhism

Literally in Punjabi *Kaar* means work and *Seva* means service, but in the theosophy of Sikhism *Kaar Sewa*, means work or service organized for religious purposes especially for the construction of Gurdwaras. Since it involves voluntary service by the community, this is the most respected method of constructing historical Gurdwaras. Most of the Gurus resorted to *Kaar Sewa* as a method of organizing labour for a common cause. Guru Hargobind got Akal Takhat constructed by the followers of the faith with their own hands.

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