

# SEHJDHARI SIKHS AND VAISAKHI OF 1699

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## ABSTRACT

**Distinction between the Sehjdhari Sikhs and the Amritdhari Sikhs owes its historical origin to the day of the historic Vaisakhi of 1699 CE. Although Sikhs practicing Sehj have existed since the days of Guru Nanak, it is in reference to the Vaisakhi day that Sehjdhari Sikhs today are distinguished from other Sikhs primarily for not being initiated (baptized). They often do not wear some of the five kakkars and not use "Singh" as their last name. A substantial part of the Sikh community continued to be Sehjdhari Sikhs after the Vaisakhi. Guru Gobind Singh and his successor, Guru Panth, continued to love them as their own. Further, Sehjdhari Sikhs continued to play a critical role in the Sikh history. More recently, in September 1997, Sehjdhari Sikhs joined their other kin at the World Sikh Convention to reaffirm their place in the Panth and its destiny in the next century.**

## INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to examine historical events and their written records that determine the place of *Sehjdhari* Sikhs in *Panth* under the leadership of Guru Gobind Singh. The term *Sehjdhari* is a compound of two Punjabi words, *Sehj* and *dhari*. During the period of the Sikh Gurus, the term *Sehj* was used in a theological context, to connote a state of mystic consciousness. The term *dhari* means the one who takes upon, assumes or adapts to something. Thus, all Sikhs could be *Sehjdhari*. A distinction between *Sehjdhari* and *Amritdhari* began during the time of the tenth Guru when many Sikhs elected to become *Amritdhari* while others remained to be *Sehjdhari*. Definition of the term *Sehjdhari* and role of the *Sehjdhari* Sikhs was recently discussed elsewhere [8, 9].

## DISCUSSION

### Vaisakhi and Sikh Congregations

In 1699, Guru Gobind Singh initiated (baptised) the Sikhs by *Khandae dee Pahul* and brought to an end the custom of *Charan Pahul*. He also terminated the authority of *Masands* to administer the initiation rites and asked the Sikhs to restrain from the congregation still led by the *Masands*. They were directed to join the congregation of the Guru now known to be *Khalsa*. The term *Khalsa* meant "Guru's own congregation", meaning the congregation not linked through the institution of *Masands*. According to the Bhai Gurdas

(Second), all of the Sikh congregations of the Guru were to be known as *Khalsa*:

ਸੰਗਤਿ ਕੀਨੀ ਖਾਲਸਾ ਮਨਮੁਖੀ ਦੁਹੇਲਾ॥ [6]

"Guru Gobind Singh designated the congregation to be *Khalsa*, the Guru oriented; those followers who remained self-oriented became fickle minded."

The *Khalsa* congregation included all Sikhs, *Amritdhari* and *Sehjdhari*. There were many prominent *Sehjdhari* Sikhs in the Guru's congregation, the *Khalsa*. For example: among the Sikhs remembered as Guru's *Darbari Ratan* (court jewels) were included, Bhai Nand Lal [10], Bhai Kanyia (predecessor of Bhai Seva Ram, the founder of the *Seva Panthi* Sikhs), Bhai

**Any one who believes in the Guru and *Gurbani* and has faith in no one else, cannot be denied to be a Sikh and, therefore, is a member of the Panth.**

Kirpa Ram, Bhai Nanua Vairaghi, Bhai Ram Koer, Bhai Devi Das, Bhai Lakhan Rai, Bhai Hans Ram Baijpayee, Bhai Nand Ram, Bhai Bhagwan Dass and numerous others whose names are mentioned prominently in the Sikh annals [14]. These

Sikhs maintained their identity and position in the *Panth* as *Sehjdhari* Sikhs. As is clearly evident from their names and the names of even their descendants whose last names were often not Singh. Further, among the prominent *Sehjdhari* Sikhs there were included most of the poets in the Guru's court. Among the 52 poets whose names are recorded by Bhai Kahan Singh [18] only less than one third used "Singh" as their surname suggesting that most of the poets in Guru's court were *Sehjdhari* Sikhs. There were many

*Sehjdhari* Sikhs in the Guru's army. Many are included in the list of prominent martyrs. Let us cite one such historic event that may be relevant here. When Guru Gobind Singh called upon *Sehjdhari* Sikhs to fight at the battle of Bhangani they heeded to the Guru's call diligently with speed and commitment. They left their safe haven of *Gurdwaras* and joined the *Khalsa* armies. Their leader, Mahant Kirpal and other associates such as Bhai Lal Chand as well as their many followers were martyred serving the cause of the Guru [2].

Kesar Singh Chibber [1] wrote a detailed account of the Sikh life in the Guru's time through mostly a first hand knowledge. In *Bansawali Nama Dasam Patshahania Da* completed in 1769, he wrote:

"Guru said there would be many types of Sikhs. 1) *Didari* Sikhs were handsome, healthy bodied, Guru's body guards, will remain with the Guru in this world and thereafter, and recite Naam; 2) **Mukte Sikhs** are those who will sustain Sikhi after I leave. They will fight the enemy and make sacrifices every where and those who will give their lives but will remain as Sikh and will make many efforts to retain Sikh religion. Because of the meditation done by both of these Sikh groups, there will be established a Sikh rule; 3) **Miaki Sikhs** are those Sikhs who are succumbed to political power and let their religious practices decline, those who fall off their goal; and 4) **Mureed Sikhs** are those Sikhs who in spite of acquiring power and wealth will follow Guru's path and who will stay above the worldly temptations of wealth and power." These were the *Sehjdhari* Sikhs.

Dr. Maan Singh Nirankari cited *Ratanmala* [12] claimed by some to contain narration of many conversations of Guru Gobind Singh as below [11]:

ੜੇ ਪ੍ਰਕਾਰ ਮਮ ਸਿਖ ਹੈਂ ਸਹਜੀ, ਚਰਣੀ, ਖੰਡਾ॥ (cited by Bhai Kahn Singh [17])

Dr Nirankari translated this verse as: "The Guru described his having three categories of Sikhs; *Sehjdhari*, *Charandhari* meaning those initiated by touch of the holy water by the Guru's feet, and *Khandae de Amritdhari*."

In the *Gurmat Martand* Bhai Kahan Singh cites the *Bhagtawali* of Bhai Mani Singh to indicate that there were many *Sehjdhari* Sikhs during the times of Bhai Mani Singh (1701-1791), a contemporary of Guru Gobind Singh (cited by Dr Nirankari [11]). Even at that time, the term *Sehjdhari* was commonly used to indicate those Sikhs who neither took the initiation of *Khandae dee Pahul* nor they were strict about wearing five *kakars*. These and many other pieces of evidence

clearly establish existence of a large number of *Sehjdharis* as a significant segment of *Khalsa* in the Gurus' period.

Guru Gobind Singh's trust in *Sehjdhari* Sikhs is further evident from the role given to *Sehjdhari* Sikhs in propagating the Guru's religion and in the management of the *Gurdwaras* during that period. Guru Gobind Singh sent some Sikhs to the holy town of Kashi to learn Sanskrit and to establish a Sikh university in Punjab for the purpose of training scholars on *Gurmat*. This group of Sikhs, in turn trained many scholars of Sikh theology who are well recognized in the Sikh history. Among those were included some great *Amritdhari* Sikhs such as Gyani Gian Singh and Bhai Santokh Singh. This group, responsible for early translations of Guru Granth Sahib, also included great *Sehjdhari* Sikh scholars such as one Bhai Ishwar Das [22].

Another example of the Guru's esteem for *Sehjdhari* Sikhs is the assignment of *Gurdwara* management to *Sehjdhari* Sikhs. According to the tradition prevalent at the time, the Guru himself assigned his chosen Sikhs to manage the Sikh holy places. After Guru Gobind Singh had fulfilled his mission of abolishing the *Masand* system, and designated the *Khalsa* as his successor, he chose to leave Anandpur on journeys to other parts of the country. He trusted the care of his institutions left behind at Anandpur in the hands of close Sikhs who would continue to attract masses to his new path in his absence. He appointed a *Sehjdhari* Sikh, *Sant Gurbax Das* as the *Head Granthi* of the historical *Gurdwara Sri Kes Garh* (place of initiation) and caretaker of the associated property [19]. The *Sehjdhari Sant* was among the closest Sikhs of the Guru who could be trusted to carry on the Guru's mission at this historic center of the 1699 *Vaisakhi* fame.

According to Ganda Singh [16], a *Sehjdhari* Sikh Bhai Nath Mal accompanied Guru Gobind Singh to Naded and he remained with the Guru to his last breath. Bhai Nath Mal and his companion party, *dhadhi jatha*, performed the role of the Guru's cantors during the Guru's last days in Nanded. Bhai Nath Mal composed a ballad known as *Amar Namah*, which was composed under the name of the Guru himself in the first person. It described the Guru's last days at Naded in 1708. Ganda Singh quoting Koer Singh paraphrased the description of the last act of Guru Gobind Singh stating that the Guru "bowed to Sri Granth, prayed in all reverence, made offerings to *rababi* musicians (Bhai Nath Mal) and was absorbed in the Word of the Guru Granth Sahib". So much was the reverence that the Guru exhibited to his *Sehjdhari* Sikh cantors that he

bowed before them as the last act of his life. This event was consistent with the tradition in the Guru's house where Guru Gobind Singh and his predecessor Gurus used to bow before the cantors in the Guru's court. Bhai Nath Mal's family continued to be *Sehjdhari* Sikh and Bhai Fatta was traced to be his seventh descendant by Ganda Singh.

### Hukmnamae

There exist many *Hukmnamae* (letter, an epistle, decree or edict) issued by Guru Gobind Singh to his individual followers or the Sikh congregations. They have been published [23] and authenticated. These *Hukmnamae* contain Gurus' instructions to follow his path of *Gurmat* and perform specific chores to fulfill the needs of the Gurus' house or the congregations. These *Hukmnamae* can be cited to indicate that Guru Gobind Singh bestowed full recognition to *Sehjdhari* Sikhs even after the date of the initiation of *Amritdhari* Sikhs. The Guru's heirs issued some of the *Hukmnamae* after the Guru had left this earth for heavenly abode. Both sets of *hukmnamae* clearly indicate recognition of a large number of *Sehjdhari* Sikhs who were active among the Sikh congregations after the *Vaisakhi* of 1699, when *Amritdhari* Sikhs were initiated through the *Pahul of Khanda*. Similarly, the participation of *Sehjdhari* Sikhs is recognized in the services to the congregations in a variety of capacities including the leadership of various congregations both before and after 1699. We will examine some examples that have been reported in published literature.

There exists a *Rehit Nama* written and signed by Guru Gobind Singh specifically addressed to *Sehjdhari* Sikhs [12]. For example, in paragraph nine of that *Rehit Nama*, the Guru alerted *Sehjdhari* Sikhs against divisive role of those Sikhs who still followed the *Masands*. Further, he asked *Sehjdhari* Sikhs to propagate *Gurmat* and bring back the *Masand* followers into the *Khalsa* fold. These *Hukmnamae* entries clearly indicate that Guru Gobind Singh entrusted his mission of *Gurmat parchar* (missionary work) to all Sikhs, *Sehjdhari* as well as *Amritdhari*.

Guru Gobind Singh and his successors issued several *Hukmnamae* exclusively to *Sehjdhari* Sikhs as indicated by them not using "Singh" as surname. He also sent *Hukmnamae* to congregations that were presided by *Sehjdhari* Sikhs. Some examples are cited below to indicate that the Guru loved *Sehjdhari* Sikhs as his *Khalsa*.

*Hukmnama* # 45 was issued on July 24, 1698 to leaders

of the congregation of Shahzad-e-Ajim de Lashkar and was addressed personally and simultaneously to Bhai Muhkam Singh and Bhai Sati Das, a *Sehjdhari* Sikh. *Hukmnama* #. 47 was written on April 24, 1699 (only a few days after the famous *Vaisakhi* of 1699 and was addressed solely to Bhai Des Raj, a *Sehjdhari* Sikh, who was asked to collect gold for the Guru's projects. *Hukmnama* # 86 of Guru Gobind Singh was issued to *Sehjdhari* Sikhs, Bhai Mehar Chand and Karam Chand. The Guru wrote to them saying: "... you are my *Khalsa*..." Similarly in *Hukmnama* # 83, Guru Gobind Singh designated a *Sehjdhari* Sikh, Bhai Mehar Chand Jat, as "his *Khalsa*" two years after the baptism of *Vaisakhi* in 1699. In a *Hukmnama* dated 1697 the Guru recognized *Sehjdhari* Sikhs, Sahib Chand and Dharam Chand, as the Guru's *khazanchi* or treasures [21]. In 1704, five years after the initiation of the *Amritdhari* Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh issued a *Hukmnama* in commemoration of his visit to Kurukshetra. This was meant to appoint a *Sehjdhari* Sikh as the priest of the Sikh congregation in that town. As is seen from quotations below that all congregations were told that a *Sehjdhari* Sikh Bhai Mani Ram of Kurukshetra would be the pastor of the Guru as well as the *sarbat sangat* [7].

### The term *Khalsa* meant "Guru's own congregation",

.. "It is the commandment of Sri Vaheguru Ji. It is my order to all congregations. All of the Sikhs of Vaheguru Ji should

honor Mani Ram Prohit of Kurukshetra. It is a pleasure to announce. He is the priest of the guru ji, so is the priest of every one in the congregation. Any Sikh who will honor him shall be blessed."

In the same year of 1704, the Guru wrote [3] a *Hukmnama* to a *Sehjdhari* Sikh, Bhai Dharam Chand, recognizing him as the leader of a local Sikh congregation and asked all congregations to facilitate Gurbaksh Singh, son of Bhai Dharam Chand. There are *Hukmnamae* of the Guru in which the Guru asked both *Sehjdhari* Sikhs and others to send arms to the Guru and come to the Guru's presence fully equipped with arms.

After Guru Gobind Singh, his widow, Mata Sundari [4], continued to guide his Sikhs until her death in 1747. Her major responsibility was to look after the interest of the Sikh community and promote establishment of various institutions of the *Khalsa*. She provided much of the instructions on day to day activity of the *Khalsa Panth*. In this capacity she issued edicts to various congregations including *Sehjdhari* Sikh congregations. For example, she wrote the *Hukmnama* # 98 in which she addressed several

*Sehjdhari* Sikhs as *Guru Ka Khalsa* and designated the same *Sehjdhari* Sikhs as “Guru’s beloved sons.”

## CONCLUSIONS

From many events from the life of Guru Gobind Singh as they are recorded in the Sikh annals, along with the evidence from many *Hukmnamae* it is clear that, during the times of the Guru, the *Sehjdhari* Sikhs became and remained as part and parcel of the *Panth* both as good citizens and as leaders of the Khalsa congregations everywhere.

Bhai Kahn Singh of Nabha (1861-1938), a scholar of the Singh Sabha fame, who wrote *Ham Hindu Nahin* to set the Sikhs apart from Hindus, wrote extensively to include *Sehaj-dhari* Sikhs in the *Panth*. While prescribing five salient requirements of the panthic characteristics of a Sikh, he wrote:

(ੳ) ਗੁਰੂ ਨਾਨਕ ਪੰਥੀ ਭਾਵੇਂ ਕਿਸੇ ਭੇਖ ਅਤੇ ਰੂਪ ਵਿਚ ਹੋਣ, ਉਨ੍ਹਾਂ ਨੂੰ ਸਿਖ ਧਰਮ ਦਾ ਅਮਰ ਜਾਣ ਕੇ ਸਨੇਹ ਕਰਨਾ, ਅਰ ਹਰ ਵੇਲੇ ਸਭਸ ਦਾ ਭਲਾ ਲੋਚਣਾ [20].

The fourth of the five requirements of the National character for a Sikh is that a Sikh shall consider every Guru Nanak *Panthi* (follower of the Guru Nanak’s path), no matter in which external form or shape he or she may be, as part of the Sikh religion and inculcate loving relationship with them.

Dr Maan Singh Nirankari [11] wrote an extensive account of the significance of *Sehjdhari* Sikhs in *Gurmat* and concluded that all those who believed in the prophecy of the Sikh Gurus and the Aad Granth were Sikhs. Both *Sehjdharis* and *Amritdharis* were equally qualified to be Sikhs and no one had the right to insult the former by calling them ‘*Monas*’ meaning Sikhs without hair. Only Sikhs who had taken the *Pahul* and then cut their hair could be called *Monas*; the word was most inappropriate if used for *Sehjdhari* Sikhs.

Bhai Ardaman Singh [15], a Sikh scholar of repute and a religious activist of 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote: Sikhs as a whole are also known as and called the *Panth*. *Panth* includes all sorts of Sikhs whether perfect or imperfect, whether still novice or fully responsible, whether *Sehjdhari* or of any other *Samprada*. Any one who believes in the Guru and *Gurbani* and has faith in no one else, cannot be denied to be a Sikh and, therefore, is a member of the *Panth*.

The Guru urged each one of us to consider taking the first step toward the Guru, and the Guru vouched to travel millions of steps to receive you.

ਚਰਨ ਸਰਨਿ ਗੁਰ ਏਕ ਪੈਡਾ ਜਾਇ ਚਲ ॥ ਸਤਿ ਗੁਰ ਕੋਟਿ ਪੈਡਾ ਆਗੇ ਹੋਇ ਲੇਤ ਹੈ॥ [5].

*Sehjdhari* Sikhs as any other Sikh take a step towards *Guru* by declaring their faith in *Guru’s* path, *Gurmat*. *The Guru* promised to receive them with open arms.

Similarly, *Guru Panth* who represents the *Guru* on a corporeal level is committed to do the same. *Sehjdhari* Sikhs have a significant role to play in the Sikh history for the next century. Singh Sahib Manjit Singh, then Acting Jathedar of Akal Takhat, convened the convention of the Sikh Nation in September, 1997, under the sponsorship of Sikhs’ premier organization Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. This convention convened a special session of *Sehjdhari* Sikhs to emphasize their Sikh role in the coming century

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