

## INSTITUTION OF GURMATA: SIGNIFICANCE AND ROLE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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### ABSTRACT

Gurmata was one among the important institutions of Sikhs in the eighteenth century which played a big role to unite them in the crucial period they faced after the demise of Banda Bahadur. The main thrust of this paper is to study the various aspects of Gurmata to reveal its significance. There are three parts of this paper. First part depicts the meaning as well as the historical background of this institution. Different views of the historians towards the actual meaning of Gurmata have been given along with generally accepted view. This part also throws light on the origin and evolution of this institution. Second part deals with the functioning as well as nature of this institution in the eighteenth century. Third part gives information about the important Gurmatas passed in different times on various important issues. It also deals with the ending of Gurmata.

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## I

Gurmata was one of the important institutions of Sikh history to play a noteworthy role especially in the eighteenth century. The word Gurmata consists of two Punjabi words, Guru means spiritual Master and Mata means intention of the Guru.<sup>1</sup> This term has been interpreted by various scholars in different manner. Polier accepted Gurmata, the greatest council of the Sikhs. George Forster declared it grand convention of the Sikhs whereas J. D. Cunningham opined Gurmata as the gathering of chiefs. Some of the Sikh scholars like Ratan Singh Bhangu, Ganda Singh and Teja Singh finally accepted the meaning of Gurmata is resolution advocated by the Guru (spiritual Master).<sup>2</sup> Because it is generally believed that the Guru presides over the discussions of Sikhs held generally in the presence of Adi Granth called Guru Granth Sahib.<sup>3</sup>

There is a general belief that Guru Gobind Singh started the institution of Gurmata. He surrendered his authority to his disciples and declared Khalsa as his (Guru's) own form. First he baptized the five Sikhs and later they baptized his Guru in the same way as he did before. After his death in 1708, the *guruship* transferred to the community known as Panth, they believed religious scripture (Adi Granth) as their Guru. Though Khalsa accepted the concept of Guru Panth in the eighteenth century but only five members used to work as the representatives of Khalsa.<sup>4</sup>

After the departure of Guru Gobind Singh from this world, this institution became an instrument of power. The Sikhs from different parts of the country used to meet at Akal Takht of Amritsar in front of Guru Granth Sahib on different festivals like Dussehra, Diwali and Baisakhi to discuss various issues. In the eighteenth century, the supreme organization of the Sikh Misals was Sarbat Khalsa and its decisions taken in those gatherings were announced in the form of resolutions called Gurmata. Gradually this practice developed into an institution.

## II

The institution of Gurmata played a major role to solve the political, deliberative and judicial matters. To choose a leader of the Khalsa army called Dal Khalsa and to draw a future plan of action of Sikhs against their common enemies were its prominent functions in eighteenth century. Sometimes, the representatives of Sikhs used to meet and discuss the plan and measures to spread their faith in different areas. The Gurmata also acted as a judicial body in some cases of renowned Sikh Sardars and even their cases of disputed succession.<sup>5</sup>

Malcolm drew a picture that how Sikhs used to proceed to adopt a Gurmata, “*when the chiefs meet on this occasion in the presence of Adi Granth and Dasham Granth, it is concluded that all private animosities cease and that every man sacrifices his personal feelings at the shrine of the general good, and actuated by principles of pure patriotism, thinks of nothing but the interests of religion and the commonwealth to which he belongs.*” After this the members took their seats. The prayers were then offered, at the end of which Karah Prasad, or the sacred pudding was distributed and then eaten together signifying that they were all one.” Then head priest presented the agenda in front of all members present there. All leaders came close to one another and said, “*The holy book is amidst us. Let us swear by this sacred book, forget our internal troubles and be united*” The Gurmata was used to pass after healthy discussions. Then it was read in the prayer to conclude the proceedings of assembly.<sup>6</sup>

The interesting point to note here is that if a decision was taken by a body of the Khalsa in the absence of Adi Granth, the Mata also used to declare Gurmata because Sarbat Khalsa was believed to be form of Guru. This belief added sanctity to the earnestness of the Gurmata adopted by the Khalsa. At any rate, the Gurmata had become much more significant after the end of the personal *guruship* for Sikhs. The Khalsa *sangat* were henceforth not only entitled but also obliged to take vital decisions for themselves and this led to the increasing importance of the Gurmata.<sup>7</sup>

The nature of Gurmata cannot be described as a political construct because no politics was involved when this institution emerged. The base of that institution was Sikh ideology preached by the Gurus. Gurmata was considered as the decision of Guru that is why it was known sanctimonious. Sikh leaders used to meet generally as the representatives of Sarbat Khalsa to pass a Gurmata. But there was no restriction on anybody to attend those meetings, all were free to present their perspective. Externally, it seems aristocratic by appearance but in actual it seems democratic.<sup>8</sup>

Akal Takht of Amritsar had become an important place in eighteenth century to have gatherings of the Khalsa, that is why, many important Gurmata were adopted there. But Amritsar was not the only place to discuss the issues as well as to pass Gurmata. In the case of local problems, Sikh leaders used to pass Gurmata in local Gurudwaras before Adi Granth. The noteworthy thing is that local Gurmata also had same significance and force.<sup>9</sup>

### III

The institution of Gurmata, undoubtedly, proved a boon for Sikhs to take unanimous decision during their tough period in eighteenth century. During this period, the Sikhs faced a number of challenges from the side of Mughals as well as by the Afghan invaders came from across north western frontier of India.<sup>10</sup> However Gurmata got an important position in the eighteenth century but it is believed that the Gurmata was passed first time during the period of Guru Gobind Singh to decide that he should exit the fortress in crucial period of the battle of Chamkaur.<sup>11</sup> After that battle many important Gurmatas were passed in different times, played a significant role to add a number of pages in the history of Punjab. Some scholars accepted that, the earliest Gurmatas of eighteenth century were passed near Kasur, Sialkot and Sirhind to teach a lesson to Mughal Government after the martyrdom of Tara Singh of Van village and his comrades in 1726.<sup>12</sup>

On July 1, 1745, Zakaria Khan was died, his two sons started quarrel to become the viceroy of the Punjab.<sup>13</sup> To take advantage from contemporary situation prevailing at Lahore, a Gurmata was passed on October 14, 1745 to consolidate Misals of the Sikhs into different 25 groups having 100 persons each. Dal Khalsa was also formed at the same time to act as the vanguard of Sikhs.<sup>14</sup>

According to the view of Giani Gian Singh and some other scholars, three Gurmatas were passed in 1746 concerning the battle of Kanuwan which was fought between the Sikhs and Diwan Lakhpat Rai. Among them first was related with the proceeding of the Sikhs towards a lake at Kanuwan where the battle was fought. According to the second Gurmata, the Sikhs retired to a place of safety. The third Gurmata was concerned with the event when many leaders of the Khalsa advised to avail the opportunity of attacking the enemy at night when they were asleep.<sup>15</sup>

To unite different groups (*jathas*), a Gurmata was passed on March 29, 1748 at Amritsar to accept the suggestion of Kapur Singh. Jassa Singh Ahluwalia was selected as the chief of Dal Khalsa which was reorganized now consisting of only twelve Misals. On November 7, 1760, a Gurmata was passed at Akal Takht in Amritsar on the festival of Diwali to conquer Lahore. Another Gurmata was also passed at the same place on October 27, 1761 to punish Aqil Das of Jandiala as well as other supporters of Ahmad Shah Abdali.

Ahmad Shah Abdali was on the way to go back after defeating the Marathas in 1761. The Sikhs learnt about a huge number of women who were caught by the Afghans and they were

planning to bring them to their country for physical abuse or for sale. A number of Sikhs gathered at Amritsar to pass a Gurmata to plan their activity. They resolved on a *dharamyudh* (holy war) "*Asan desh di dhiya, bhaina kiwen jane den.*" After that Sikh warriors organized themselves into various groups and chased the Afghans without losing time. They rescued thousands of women while Afghans were crossing river Jhelum. They also got success to find a large booty in that expedition. Many Afghan guards were killed by Sikh warriors.

To get rid of Sirhind's Zain Khan, the Sikhs passed a Gurmata and they killed him on January 14, 1764. One Gurmata was passed to sack Sirhind. In 1765, Sarbat Khalsa passed a Gurmata at Akal Takht of Amritsar for occupying Lahore on the day of Baisakhi. Some other Gurmata concerning different issues of Sikhs are believed to be passed in the years between 1766 and 1798.<sup>16</sup> After 1765, when Sikh leaders had established their rule on many provincial parts, the gathering of Khalsa was not regular activity. But the institution of Gurmata remained continued till 1805 when Ranjit Singh had established as well as secured his rule and there was no problem left confronting the Sikh community.<sup>17</sup>

It is generally believed that last Gurmata was passed in 1805 when Ranjit Singh had to decide his role to play in the case of conflict between the British Government and Maratha leader Holkar. After the settlement of his rule, Ranjit Singh did not permit the institution of Gurmata to act as a political organization regularly. The reason was that he wished to act freely without the interference of Khalsa.<sup>18</sup> This does not mean that the Sikhs stopped to meet together after 1805. During the period of Sikh Misals, i.e. from 1748 to 1805, most of the important decisions concerning the entire Khalsa community were taken in a regular assembly of Sikh chiefs which met at Akal Takht once or twice a year. But after 1805, Ranjit Singh set up an absolute Government and took all the functions of the Gurmata in his own hands.<sup>19</sup> In 1920, Shiromani Gurudwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) was formed to look after all affairs of historical Sikh Gurudwaras. This committee became the apex representative organization of the Sikhs and acted as mini Sarbat Khalsa.<sup>20</sup>

To conclude, it can be observed that Gurmata proved a symbol of unity of the Sikhs especially in the eighteenth century. However, its origin connects with the period of Guru Gobind Singh. But it became powerful after the death of Banda Bahadur. The force working behind the institution was undoubtedly religious. The belief of the Sikhs in the Panth and Granth made this institution successful at that time. Though, the main issues for deliberations were

remained political and judicial. But this institution did not neglect the common problems of Sikhs. This was the reason that two types of meetings were called as per local or general problems to pass the Gurmata. However, the institution of Gurmata lost its importance with the passage of time. But a big number of Gurmatas passed in the eighteenth century mark it as one of the important institutions of that time.

## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> K.S. Narang and Hari Ram Gupta, *History of the Punjab (1469-1857)*, New Delhi: U.C. Kapur & Sons, 1973, p.259. J.D. Cunningham, *History of the Sikhs*, New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2010, p.104. W.H. Mcleod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975, p.48. Surjit Singh Gandhi, *Sikhs in the Eighteenth Century*, Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 1999, p.334.
- <sup>2</sup> Bhagat Singh, *A History of the Sikh Misals*, Patiala: Punjabi University, 1993, p.385. Gandhi, *Sikhs in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 335. Gurbachan Singh Nayyar, *Sikh Polity and Political Institutions*, New Delhi: Oriental Publishers & Distributors, 1979, P.86.
- <sup>3</sup> Narang and Gupta, *History of the Punjab (1469-1857)*, p.259; Cunningham, *History of the Sikhs*, p.104; Mcleod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, p.48. Veena Sachdeva, *Mughal Raaj De Patan Uprant Da Punjab, Atharvin Sadi, Punjabi*, Chandigarh: Lokgeet Parkashan, 2015, p.120. Gandhi, *Sikhs in the Eighteenth Century*, p.334.
- <sup>4</sup> Bhagat Singh, *A History of the Sikh Misals*, p. 386. Gandhi, *Sikhs in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 334. Sachdeva, *Mughal Raaj De Patan Uprant Da Punjab, Atharvin Sadi*, p.121.
- <sup>5</sup> Narang and Gupta, *History of the Punjab (1469-1857)*, pp. 259-60.
- <sup>6</sup> Nayyar, *Sikh Polity and Political Institutions*, pp. 94-95. Gandhi, *Sikhs in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 336.
- <sup>7</sup> Nayyar, *Sikh Polity and Political Institutions*, p.91.
- <sup>8</sup> Gandhi, *Sikhs in the Eighteenth Century*, p.340. Bhagat Singh, *A History of the Sikh Misals*, pp. 392-93 & 396.
- <sup>9</sup> Nayyar, *Sikh Polity and Political Institutions*, p. 96. Bhagat Singh, *A History of the Sikh Misals*, p. 388.
- <sup>10</sup> Gandhi, *Sikhs in the Eighteenth Century*, pp.335-36.
- <sup>11</sup> Mcleod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, p. 49. Gandhi, *Sikhs in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 338.
- <sup>12</sup> Gandhi, *Sikhs in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 341. *Bhai Tara Singh of Van was one of the devoted sikhs who quarreled with an official, Sahib Rai of Nowshera Dalla. Sahib Rai said 'You would see my scissors trespassing into your beard and long hair.' As a Sikh, Tara Singh could not tolerate that comment. He, therefore, took away one of the mares of Sahib Rai, sold it and donated money to the Guru's Langar. Sahib Rai approached Jaffar Beg, the Faujdar of Patti, to help him in punishing Tara Singh. A force of more than one hundred soldiers was sent against Tara Singh, but they were defeated. Then, a big force of more than 2,000 men was sent against Tara Singh by Zakaria Khan and Jaffar Beg. Tara Singh fought against that force with only 22 Sikhs. At last, all of them were killed by Mughals.* Narang and Gupta, *History of the Punjab (1469-1857)*, p. 214.
- <sup>13</sup> Bhagat Singh, *A History of Sikh Misals*, p. 388.
- <sup>14</sup> Gandhi, *Sikhs in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 341-42.
- <sup>15</sup> Nayyar, *Sikh Polity and Political Institutions*, p. 93.
- <sup>16</sup> Bhagat Singh, *A History of Sikh Misals*, p.389. Gandhi, *Sikhs in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 342.
- <sup>17</sup> Sachdeva, *Mughal Raaj De Patan Uprant Da Punjab, Atharvin Sadi*, p. 122. Bhagat Singh, *A History of Sikh Misals*, p. 390.
- <sup>18</sup> Gandhi, *Sikhs in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 338-39. Bhagat Singh, *A History of Sikh Misals*, p. 398.
- <sup>19</sup> Narang and Gupta, *History of the Punjab (1469-1857)*, p. 260.
- <sup>20</sup> Gandhi, *Sikhs in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 340.