



Review Paper

## Sikh Vision of an Ideal Ruler

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### Abstract

*Sikh Gurus reacted very sharply against prevailing political tyranny during the Guru Period (1469-1708 AD). They rejected the age-old theory of Divine origin of Kingship. They denounced the Divine rights and sovereignty of earthly kings. To them, the God is the ultimate sovereign. They visualize an image of an ideal ruler who rules in accordance with the eternal message of Supreme Reality (God). An Ideal ruler in Sikhism is a personification of teachings of the Sikh Gurus. An ideal ruler in Sikhism observes the higher standards of socio-spiritual and political ethics throughout his life and is accountable to people. He is a benevolent in judgment, ethical in action and God fearing in approach. An ideal ruler is a Saint-Soldier and act as vanguard of deprived and weaker sections of society.*

**Keywords:** Sikh gurus, political tyranny, sikh gurus, sikhism, socio-spiritual

### Introduction

Frequent foreign invasions, political despotism, discrimination with the non-Muslim population by racial arrogant ruling class, exploitation of working classes and political apathy towards welfare of masses were the key indicators of miserable political state of affairs of the Medieval India. The political conditions during this era were highly undesirable and disappointing for nearly all sections of society. Guru Nanak and his successor Sikh Gurus in their divine hymns made harsh comments on brutality, cunningness and inhuman attitude of Mughal rulers and their administrative functionaries. Guru Nanak described them as butchers and blood suckers in his divine composition. Instead of protecting the weaker and marginalized strata of society they exploit and dominate them. Sikh Gurus gave fought against Mughal rulers to resist their political oppression and tried to liberate the vulnerable and demoralized masses. They laid down higher standards of ethical code conduct and qualifications for rulers.

Fighting the evil and cleaning the world of social and religious excesses was a special attribute of the Sikh tradition. Guru Nanak deplored fearlessly the corrupt practices of the Muslim rulers and the built-in excesses of the Hindu society like the caste discriminations and meaningless rituals. He confronted the invading Babar and condemned his atrocities. Guru Hargobind fought battles with the Mughals; and Guru Har Rai and Guru Harkrishan refused to meet Aurengzeb. Guru Arjun Dev and Guru Teg Bahadur sacrificed their lives fighting for the cause of freedom of social and religious thoughts. It was with this heritage, that Guru Gobind Singh arrived on the scene and blessed the Sikhs into the Khalsa discipline<sup>1</sup>. When Guru Gobind Singh had to fight tyranny of the rulers, he made no distinction between the Muslim rulers or the Hindu Rajas,

and his army had Muslims fighting on his side, because the fight was for righteousness and not personal ends<sup>2</sup>. The history of Sikhs illustrates numerous examples of supreme sacrifices laid down by the Sikh Gurus and the members of Sikh community for the sake of religious freedom, human dignity and political liberation.

### Sikhism and Institution of Kingship

Sikhism does not condemn the institution of kingship as such. But it does not uphold the theory of the divine rights of kings to rule. The kings can enjoy the rights to rule only as long as they rule with justice and look after the interests and welfare of their subjects, on the other hand, has the duty to obey the rulers and pay the state dues. But they have also the right to punish and even remove the ruler if he fails to perform his duty and acts against the law<sup>3</sup>. Justice is a cornerstone of Sikh conception of good governance and indispensable characteristic of an ideal ruler. It is first and foremost moral and administrative duty of an ideal ruler to remove social injustice and political suppression of weaker, helpless and downtrodden people.

Sikh Gurus denounced the Divine origin of the state and kingship. Guru Nanak said, "If He cast an angry glance, He makes monarchs as grass blades. Even though they may beg from door to door, they receive no alms"<sup>4</sup>. Guru Ram Das said, "All the monarchs, bankers, kings, nobles, dukes and chieftains that there are, they are all the creation of the Lord. Whatever God makes them do, that alone do they. All of them are the Lord's mummies"<sup>5</sup>. Guru Arjan Dev, "He is whose mind is the pride of kingship, becomes a hell dweller and a dog"<sup>6</sup>.

Guru Arjan Dev said, "The sovereigns and nobles, in an instant, He reduces to worms. Patronizing the poor, the Lord makes them kings"<sup>7</sup>. He also said, "In an instant He can make a groveling worm a king. The Transcendent Lord is the Patronizes the humble"<sup>8</sup>. Bhagat Kabir said, "A beggar, He makes rule an empire and a king, He turns into a beggar"<sup>9</sup>. The rise of demise, ascendancy or decline of worldly powers is according to incomprehensible cosmic law. But this does not give the kings a divine right to be cruel. Indeed, the theory of divine rights of the kings as advocated by the Stuart kings does not find support in the sacred verses of the Guru<sup>10</sup>.

To Sikh Gurus temporal attractions and possessions are short lived phenomenon. Guru Nanak said, "They, who go by the names of kings and lords are beheld being reduced to dust"<sup>11</sup>. To Guru Nanak, "Of the kings, subjects and chiefs none shall remain"<sup>12</sup>. He also said, "Were I to become an emperor, raise a huge army, set my foot on the throne, and seated on the throne, were I to issue commands and collect revenue; O' Nanak ! All this is liable to pass away like a puff of wind"<sup>13</sup>. To Him, Guru Nanak said, "The lances bands throne and salutations of others increase the desire and the mortal is engrossed in lust"<sup>14</sup>.

To Guru Ram Das, "These enjoyments of wealth are like the color of saf-flower, which wears off in a moment. These revilements of the monarchs and Kings look pleasing for four days"<sup>15</sup>. Guru Arjan Dev said, "Various types of enjoyments, dominions, pleasures, beauty, canopy and fan waving over head and throne to sit upon, in them, only unwise, ignorant and blind are engrossed. Desire for riches, says Nanak, to like a dream"<sup>16</sup>. Guru Tegh Bahadar said, "Consider thy wealth as just a dream. On what do you take pride? The Empire of the earth is like the wall of sand"<sup>17</sup>. For Sikh Gurus, temporal kings are created by the God and their earthly possessions are worthless. They believed that temporal kings have no final authority. They are mere pawn in the hands of Lord Almighty. King possesses an authority so long God continue to bestow his grace on him. When political ruler deviate from righteous path the he cease to hold political power

Guru Nanak conceiving God as the king and the universe as his kingdom or state puts forth his concept of an ideal state. At some places, he uses the image of a state for human body that of a ruler for human mind and that of the *panches* for the five senses, and thus evolves the conceptual structure of the state. Therefore it is from the metaphorical usage of the political phraseology interspersed profusely in his verses that his political ideas can be inferred<sup>18</sup>.

Guru Nanak said, "There is but One Throne and One King. The Absolute Lord is contained in all places"<sup>19</sup>. Guru Arjan Dev said, "Magnificent is Thy court, O lord and true is Thine Throne. Thou art the Emperor over the head of the kings and ever-stable is Thine throne and crown. Whatever pleases the Supreme Lord that alone is the true justice"<sup>20</sup>. He also said, "True is His throne and truest His sovereignty"<sup>21</sup>. To Guru

Arjan Dev, "Unique is my Lord over whose head is the royal umbrella there is not any other (like him)"<sup>22</sup>.

### Ideal Ruler in Sikhism

Sikh Gurus concern for an ideal human society did not allow them to shut their eyes to the political setup of society or in other words the political values concrete references are available in Guru Granth sahib which favor a righteous rule and in which special emphasis has been put on the conduct, duties and responsibilities of a ruler so as to ensure a just rule. The concept of the duties of a ruler corresponds with the ancient Hindu concept of Raja Dharma. But the Sikh political thought differs from the ancient Raja dharma in so far as it enjoins on every Sikh to strongly oppose an unjust rule in order to secure justice for the people<sup>23</sup>.

It was believed that as unjust king disturbed the equilibrium of society and created all round chaos, while his injustice, greed and avarice resulted in calamities like famine, scarcity of rainfall, economic and political crises and shedding of innocent blood<sup>24</sup>. If any ruler becomes corrupt in delivering justice to his subjects, he loses his right to be a ruler "Guru Nanak even goes to the extent that if the subjects obey the orders such corrupt ruler, who has failed to deliver justice or who takes bribe for delivering justice. It is the fault more of the subjects than that of the ruler. It is just like the habit of a dog who obeys the just or unjust orders of his master only for a piece of bread"<sup>25</sup>.

Guru Nanak was critical of injustice, oppression and inhuman atrocities of the rulers over the ruled. He did not denounce the rulers because they were Muslims. He took a secular view of politics as opposed to the then prevalent communal view. More clearly, he identified himself with the ruled as against the rulers. His sympathies or 'aversions' definitely cut across sectarian or communal barriers<sup>26</sup>. According to Guru Nanak dev when the king forgets his duties and indulges in self gratification his people are sure to revolt against him. His sons will be thrown into the streets where they will not be able to get even a morsel of food. The reign of only those kings will be durable, who follow the democratic ideals when the king becomes ferocious like a lion, his servants also become corrupt. The king got the lion's share of the booty and the remainder was licked by the corrupt officials<sup>27</sup>.

Guru Hargobind was propagating the philosophy of Guru Nanak that none of the forces, *Piri* or *Miri* is superior to the other. Becoming of *Pir* by renouncing the household is of no avail. Similarly, establishment of *Miri* (kingship, power) without good deeds is not the way of salvation. There is nothing like superiority of *Piri* over *Miri* or vice versa in the Nanakian Philosophy<sup>28</sup>. Sikhism proposes a *miri-piri* in man. The *sant-sipahi* idea is *miri piri* in practice. This ideal man of Sikhism comes closer to Plato's ideal of philosopher-king. However, the ideal of *sant-sipahi* is less elitistic and less aristocratic than the Platonian philosopher-king<sup>29</sup>.

With the formation of the *Khalsa* the Sikh movement started by Guru Nanak, reached its highest fulfillment. The Sikh community of saints and martyrs turned into a band of bold saint-soldiers without losing its original attributes of compassion and selflessness<sup>30</sup>. 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 organized 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<sup>31</sup>.

According to Sikhism, the country belongs to the people. Kings are appointed to rule, but they have no right to indulge in tyranny. On the other hand, it is a sin for people to bear tyranny patiently. If the king is doing wrong, the people must rise in revolt. Force is essential to strengthen political liberty, and without political liberty religious cultural, intellectual, social and economic freedoms cannot be maintained. With this objective in view, the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, created a new society named "Khalsa"<sup>32</sup>. Guru Gobind Singh's purpose, in the establishment of the Khalsa state was to transfer sovereignty to the poor of our land. In the framework of the Khalsa state, the greatest act of genius was when the Guru transferred the divine sovereignty vested in him to his chosen people, the Khalsa. The Guru believed in the people whose personality is transmuted into the divine personality of the selfness being<sup>33</sup>.

Guru Nanak said, "He alone, who is worthy of the throne, sits on the throne. He is such a page of the Lord; who by Guru's instruction has silenced the five demons"<sup>34</sup>. To Him, "Imbued with the Lord's fear and the five virtues, soul, the King, is seated on the throne"<sup>35</sup>. Guru Amar Das said, "That King alone sits on the throne, who is worthy of the throne. They, who realize the True Lord, They alone are the True Kings"<sup>36</sup>.

According to Guru Nanak only such a person who has raised the truth is qualified to be ruler. He must have subdued the five evils viz lust anger greed attachment and ego. Only such a person can become a selfless and self abnegating ruler. Only a soul attuned to the True word can truly understand the meaning of Parenthood of God and fraternity of man. In order to attain to this state of mind he has to renounce worldly passions. A person engrossed in the mundane infirmities is by no means fit to become a ruler<sup>37</sup>. The person who has not conquered the weaknesses of common man is not at all fit to sit on the throne. The person who has conquered his weaknesses can never be defeated in any sphere. The ruler should consider himself as a servant to the Master and not master himself<sup>38</sup>.

Guru Nanak expected certain norms of behavior from the rulers as well. The foremost obligation of the ruler was to be just; both legally and morally Guru Nanak accepts the monarchical frame of government. He does not condemn the

offices he denounces the office holders From the functionaries of the government he expects honesty and integrity in the performance of their duties and also consideration for the common people Guru Nanak does not pose the question 'what is to be done if the rulers fail in their duties and obviously there is no answer to this question But his condemnation of oppression and corruption delivered in unequivocal terms may be taken as form of answer<sup>39</sup>.

The king or the chief of state should be an ideal personality in whom all his subject can repose confidence. He should be humble servant of the poor; He should follow the democratic principles, without which his kingdom is sure to fall after some time. He should be worthy of the throne and his officials should be god fearing and law abiding persons. The king and his officials should only take from the subjects whatever is reasonable and with which they can reasonably manage the affairs of the state<sup>40</sup>.

According to the Guru Granth Sahib the responsibility of the society rests on the shoulders of the state. The King or the chief of the state should be an ideal personality in whom all his subjects can repose confidence. He should be the humble servant of the poor. He should follow the democratic principles, without which his kingdom is sure to fall after some time<sup>41</sup>. King should be merciful, not cruel (as the Mughals), to his subjects, Further, the king should dispel sorrow and confer happiness. Though 'sorrow' and 'happiness' are subjective words, in the present context their meaning should be viewed against the historical background. Sorrow is more for poverty, as suggested by Guru Hargobind, conferring of happiness means removing of want and hunger<sup>42</sup>.

The Guru called upon the rulers to stand to reason and to rule in the interest of the people. He said that the king had no right to exercise and enjoy absolute powers. During those days the people believed in the divine right of kings to rule. It was held that the king was ordained by god to rule over the people. The Guru challenged this idea. He said that there was no divine right of the king. He even went one step further and made kingship conditional like Plato's philosopher king. Guru Nanak declared that the king rules by the strength of his virtues and in accordance with the will of the representatives of the people. This was a very democratic and progressive principle which Guru Nanak enunciated and advocated in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. He emphasized that only a person who was virtuous and moral, fair and just had the right to rule<sup>43</sup>.

## Conclusion

From the above analysis, it can be inferred that Sikh vision of an ideal ruler is the epitome of Sikh Guru's incessant search for an ideal political order which facilitates the socio-spiritual development of humankind. Sikh Gurus portrayed an image of Saint-Soldier ruler who is an embodiment of *bhakti-shakti and miri-piri* doctrine. An ideal ruler in Sikhism follows the

virtuous path, devoted to welfare of masses; broaden in vision and defender of faith and guardian of oppressed sections of society.

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