



NIHANG SINGHS: GUARDIANS OF SIKH MARTIAL AND SPIRITUAL HERITAGE

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Abstract:- Nihang Singhs, an elite warrior order within Sikhism, have played a significant role in safeguarding Sikh traditions, faith and sovereignty. Emerging under Guru Gobind Singh, they become the frontline defenders of Sikhism, particularly during the Mughals, Afghans and the British period. This paper explores their historical origins, military contributions during the misl period, religious significance, and their role in preserving sikh martial traditions.

Preservation of Sikh Martial Traditions: The Nihang Singhs have the chief preservers of Sikh martial traditions, serving as a living link between the martial legacy of the Gurus and present-day Sikh society. Their preservation efforts are centered on Shastra vidya, the traditional Sikh martial science that includes training in weaponry, physical agility, battlefield strategies and mental discipline. They believed that the Shastra Vidya started by Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Guru Ji blessed Baba Budha Ji to maintain Shastra vidya and Bhai Jetha Ji trained Guru Hargobind Ji in martial arts under the leadership of Baba Budha Ji. Guru Hargobind Ji adopted two swords of 'Miri and Piri'.¹ He gathered the army and fought four wars against Mughals. Guru Gobind Singh used to wear armor at Patna from his childhood. Guru Sahib taught the Sikhs to chant the name of God and wear armor.

Khadag DhroTan Ujal Hoi!

Naam Japo Mukh Kanth So Loi!²

¹ Avtar Singh, Caste, Sikhism, Ate Nismavali, Page 5

² Kaur Singh, 'Gurbilas Patshahi 10', Shamshir Singh Ashok (Ed.): Page 66

(When you carry a sword or use a weapon for the protection of religion and righteousness, it purifies the body When you chant the name of the Lord through your mouth and throat, so that you become spiritually enlightened as well.)

Guru Sahib gave the Sikhs a special uniform after drinking nectar (Amrit), which had five Kakars (code of dress): Kada (an iron bracelet worn on the wrist), Kesh (uncut hair), Kangha (a wooden comb), Kirpan (a sword), and Kachera (short breeches). Every Sikh made it necessary to keep a Kirpan. Guru Ji started the tradition of Ape Gur Chela and gave the all authorities to the Khalsa. In Guru Gobind Singh's times, the Sangat was known as Sarbat Khalsa in whose name all prayers were offered and all formal decisions taken, any person, however highly placed, was not considered above the jurisdiction of Sarbat Khalsa rules.³

Guru Ji sent Hukamnamas (orders) to the Sangat that they should come for Darshan (visit) only in armor.⁴ Even today, the tradition of Nihang Singhs is that they carry five types of weapons – Teer (arrows), Bandoon (gun), Chakkars (steel rounds around their neck), Teg (spears), and Katar (daggers). Nihang Singh carries five weapons in his turban (called Kesh weapons): Chakkar (steel round around their turban), Khanda, Teg (spears), Bagh Nakh (iron claw), and Teer (arrows). Guru Sahib ordered to learn and teach the weapons. Who does not learn to use weapons will not get the Singh. This tradition continued even after Guru Sahib. Amrit was given only after 12 years of living in Budha Dal.⁵ Guru Gobind Singh addressed the Akal Purukh with the name of Khargket (who has a symbol of sword on his Flag), Asdhuj (Lord of the sword), Aspan (who has a sword in his hand).⁶ The Nihangs are following their Guru's teaching till today and preserve the sacred art of Shastras through daily practice in Deras (Camps), where younger generations are taught not just to fight but to embody the warrior spirit of the Khalsa.

They follow a daily routine in Deras like Ishnaan (Bathing), Nitnem & Simran (morning prayers). They clean their Shastras, (Shastra Ishnaan) and practice Gatka (traditional Sikh martial art) and often weapon training like sword, spear and archery. Gatka is a graceful yet deadly martial art involving the use of wooden sticks, swords, shields and other traditional weapons. It is a deeply spiritual, merging physical movements with recitations of Gurbani (scriptural hymns), allowing practitioners to channel inner strength through divine connection. They practice horse riding daily. Nihangs are traditionally expert horsemen. Nihang Singhs love horses very much because the Sixth Guru Ji loved his here by calling it Jan Bhai (dear brother).⁷ Nihangs also wear traditional battle gear – blue Cholas (robes), steel-armored

Saint Soldier, Dr. Sukhdyal Singh Kapoor, Hemkunt Press, New Delhi, 1999, page 130³

Ganda Singh (Edi.), Hukumnama, Guru Sahibaan, Mata Sahibaan, Banda Singh Ate Khalsa ji Ke, Publication⁴
Bureau, Pbi. Uni. Edison-2, 2013, page-167.

Johan Smith, the Fighting Traditions and Fighting Arts of The Traditional Sikhs Warriors; The Beloved of⁵
Guru Gobind Singh Ji the Akali Nihangs, Edi.-2, 1998, academia.edu.in.

⁶ Sukha Singh (Bhai), Khalsa Patshahi 10, Dr. Gurcharan Kaur Jaggi (Ed.), page 26.

⁷ Giani Gurwinder Singh, Twarikh Nihang Singhan, page- 46.

turbans, and weapon-adorned attire – which reinforces their constant readiness for defense and self-sacrifice. This traditional dress is known as Khalsa Swaroop. Guru Gobind Singh gave this colour to Nihang Singhs. Guru Sahib wrote in his work ‘Zafarnama’:

Karaho Khalsa Panth Teesar Parvesa !!

Jagreh Singh Jodhe Dhashe Neel Bhavesa !!

(“Let the Khalsa Panth enter for the third time. Brave Singhs appear wearing blue attire.”)

In these lines Guru Ji possibly indicating a third major era or wave of Khalsa assertion or rule.

According to Dr. Sukhdyal Singh, the blue dress of the Khalsa was itself a war dress.⁸ It consists with blue robe, Karra (iron bracelet), open Kirpan (an open blade Kirpan), Kamarkasa (a belt around the waist), a Kachhera up to the knees, Dumala (a high turban). This dress was given by Guru Gobind Singh. They were given the surname Singh meaning ‘lion’.

(Subsequently) for women, the Kaur, meaning ‘Princess’ came to be prescribed.⁹ They were always to wear of their person the five sacred emblems of their new order. These were kesh the untrimmed hair, kangha or a comb to keep the hair tidy, kara or a steel bracelet, kacchehra, short breeches and a kirpan, a sword.¹⁰ But later after the occupation of Punjab by the British this bana (dress) disappeared. The Nihang Singh still retain this war dress. Nowadays their martial exhibitions during festivals like Hola Mohalla display this dress. Hola Mohalla is a public testament to the Sikh martial spirit, featuring mock battles, horse-riding stunts and weapon demonstrations that attract large audiences and inspire community pride. By integrating martial training with spiritual discipline and cultural expression, the Nihang Singhs have ensured that Sikh martial traditions remain a living and evolving heritage rather than a relic of the past.

Guardians of Sikh Religious Institutions:

The Nihang Singhs have historically served as protectors of Sikh religious institutions, playing a vital role in preserving the sanctity and sovereignty of sacred spaces. Their service as spiritual guardians is rooted in their deep commitment to the Khalsa tradition and their unwavering readiness to defend Sikhism both physically and spiritually. One of the primary institutions under their historical protection is the Akal Takhat Sahib, the temporal throne of Sikhism established by Guru Hargobind Sahib in 1606. The present day Akaal Takhat Sahib was originally built on a single platform. The platform is 14 feet long, 8 feet wide and 7 feet high.¹¹ Nihangs regard the Akal Takhat not just as a building but as the seat of Sikh political and religious authority. They have defended it multiple times in history, especially during periods of persecution and invasion. In Misl periods, the Sikh Sardars made special policy to protect Sri Harmander Sahib. The ecclesiastical affairs were managed by Akalis who were in charge of

⁸ Sukhdyal Singh (Dr.), Khalsa Di Janam Bhumi Sri Anandpur Sahib, Page - 23

Dr. J.S. Neki, In The Footsteps of Guru Gobind Singh, Himalayan Books, 2009, Page 38.⁹

Ebid.¹⁰

Giani Kirpal Singh, Edi. Inderjeet Singh Gogoani, Sri Akaal Takhat Sahib Ate Jthedar Sahibaan, Bhai Chatar Singh Jiwan Singh, Amritsar, 1999, page 16.¹¹

the temple and Tank of Amritsar.¹² The Harmandir Sahib too also benefitted from the presence of Nihang warriors. During turbulent times, including the 18th century invasions by Afghan forces and the oppressive policies of Mughal rulers, Nihangs often stationed themselves in and around Amritsar to guard the sanctity of the shrine and ensure the continuity of daily religious observances like Guru Granth Sahib's Parkash and Sukhassan ceremonies. Akali Phula Singh, along with his group, arrived Amritsar in Samvat 1857.¹³ He kept the entire management of Darbar Sahib under their supervision. Akali Phula Singh managed Amritsar well as Sri Damdama Sahib and Anandpur Sahib. Akali Phula Singh born in 1761 and he was contemporary of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He participated in many campaigns of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. While Maharaja Ranjit Singh undertook significant efforts to modernize his army by incorporating European military practices, the Nihangs maintained their traditional methods and resisted such reforms. They were heavily armed with traditional weapons and refused European-style training, choosing instead to adhere to their established martial traditions. Although they would not submit to military discipline or training, and insisted on pursuing traditional Sikh tactics rather than the new-fangled European system introduced by Ranjit Singh.¹⁴ Their leaders, such as Akali Phula Singh and Akali Sadhu Singh, commanded respect and wielded considerable influence within the Sikh military framework. Akali Phula Singh was instrumental in bringing together the Sikh Misls in Amritsar. His foresight and leadership greatly strengthened Sikhism and elevated the Khalsa Panth. Known for his fearless spirit, he was a formidable warrior who even the British deeply feared. Nihang Singhs attacked a British envoy and his escorts as early as 1809.¹⁵ Despite repeated efforts to capture him, his extraordinary bravery and sharp strategic mind made him unstoppable. The relationship between the Nihangs and Maharaja Ranjit Singh's regular forces was complex. There were instances where the Nihangs engaged in conflicts with other segments of the Maharaja's army, highlighting tensions arising from differing military philosophies and the Nihangs' staunch independence. Even after the fall of the Sikh Empire in 1849, Nihangs refused to surrender to British rule. They fought against British rule under the leadership of Akali Naina Singh.¹⁶ They continued their independent way of life, preserving Sikh martial traditions and resisting colonial policies that sought to weaken Sikh identity. In addition to these central institutions, Nihangs have traditionally safeguarded smaller Gurdwaras and religious sites across Punjab and beyond. They take special pride in upholding maryada (religious discipline) within these spaces, ensuring that proper recitation of Gurbani, care of sacred texts, and respectful conduct are maintained at all times. Modern Nihang Singhs also deny efforts to preserve the old texts like Baba Santa Singh Ji. Baba Santa Singh (1911–2008) was the 96th

Hari Ram Gupta, *History of the Sikhs*, Vol. 4, Mushiram Manoharlal Publishers pvt, 2007, page-374.¹²

¹³ Baba Prem Singh Hoti Mardan, *Akali Phula Singh*, Lahore Book Shop, Ludhiana, 2002, page- 23

Ian Heath, Michael Perry, *The Sikh Army 1799-1849*, Osprey Publication, 2005, page- 34¹⁴

Ebid.¹⁵

Jathedar Baba Hanuman Singh Ji Shaheed, *Nihang Singh.org-Blog*, web.archive.org¹⁶

Jathedar (leader) of the Budha Dal, the premier organization of the Nihang Sikhs. His role in Sikh religious and political life became especially prominent during the turbulent period following Operation Blue Star in 1984. After the Indian Army's attack on the Akal Takht Sahib inside the Golden Temple complex in June 1984, the Sikh religious institutions were left severely damaged — both physically and emotionally. In this crisis, Baba Santa Singh made efforts to preserve, restore, and protect Sikh religious institutions. After the destruction of the Akal Takht during Operation Blue Star, there was an urgent need to rebuild it.

Baba Santa Singh took the initiative to reconstruct the Akal Takht Sahib starting in late 1984, without waiting for political debates or external permissions. He mobilized the Nihang Sikhs and used traditional Sikh architectural methods to ensure that the spirit of the original structure was respected. This act was seen by some as a courageous defense of Sikh sovereignty, although others criticized it as being carried out too soon under perceived pressure from the Indian government. Baba Santa Singh worked hard to keep the Nihang traditions alive, which are deeply tied to the martial and spiritual heritage of Sikhism. He maintained the Budha Dal as an independent force that resisted both political interference and dilution of Sikh martial practices. Although he was criticized by some factions for working with the Indian state, Baba Santa Singh always emphasized that the protection of Sikh religious sites must come above politics. He made it clear that restoring the Akal Takht was a religious duty, not a political endorsement of any government. Through his leadership, Baba Santa Singh preserved the martial identity of the Sikh faith, encouraging young Sikhs to learn traditional martial arts, horse-riding, and arms training. In the aftermath of 1984, when Sikh institutions were leaderless or divided, Baba Santa Singh offered a stable and continuous line of authority for the Nihangs and other traditional Sikh orders, helping prevent a complete collapse of certain religious practices. A few Gurdwaras were constructed and a few others were renovated. Educational institutions were established, namely the Budha Dal Public school in the city of Patiala¹⁷

Nihang Singh have been instrumental in preserving and defending Sikhism throughout history. From battling the Mughals and Afghans to playing a crucial role in the British period and resisting British rule, their contributions are immeasurable. Even today, they symbolize Sikh resilience and serve as the guardians of Sikh martial and spiritual heritage. Their unwavering faith, discipline, and martial prowess ensure that the Khalsa spirit continues to thrive in contemporary Sikh society.