

Satguru Ram Singh

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As it is well-known Namdhari Sikhs derive their peculiar identity from their strict adherence to continuous *Nam* recitation since the days of Guru Ram Singh (1816-85) the initiator. *Kukas* (Criers) was their popular/nick name for their extra loud singing of sacred verse on occasions, in a highly excited emotional state.

They were dreaded by the British rulers for their patriotic zeal, much more so during the later half of the 19th century. Punjab was very dear to white masters, for which they had to contend against the ferocious Sikh army. Soon, after its annexation in 1849, another jolt came in 1857 uprising which shook their faith in their largely native army, their instrument for subduing politically fractured India.

Punjab was in a way their hope since they viewed the martial qualities of Sikhs as potential source for their own defence forces. While Guru Ram Singh had, in 1857, started a strictly religious process of regeneration of Sikh way of life, the farsighted among the British — One like Col. Taylor, Commissioner Ambala Division, prophesied — "...those lads mean war sooner or later." In his letter addressed to Punjab Government on 11.9.1866 he wrote: "The whole drift of his (Guru Ram Singh's) reformation being apparently to consolidate the power of Sikhism, with a view to political ends, I think it possible that this was not the original intention. But I fully believe that it was natural result of any religious revival among a warlike race panting to recover their much-loved land and to restore the glories of their sect. Ram Singh may have commenced as a mild religious reformer on the fashion of (Guru) Nanak, but his stirring lieutenants are hurrying him into a more near imitation of the warlike Guru Gobind (Singh)."

An alarmed Punjab Government took 'due note' of these forebodings and shot a letter to the Government of India on 29.9.1866: "There can be no doubt that a widespread and constantly increasing fraternity of a more or less secret character, apparently well organised and devotedly attached to their Chief, must contain the elements of political mischief."

The movement initiated by Guru Ram Singh was aimed at moral regeneration of the people of Punjab in general and of Sikhs in particular. This was admitted by the new rulers. "On initiation the convert has to bind himself to list of virtues which are very appealing to the eye." But this innocuous ritual of initiation, which involves uttering or whispering of *mantra* by the initiator into the ears of the devotee too assumed monstrous colour as per the perceptions of those in power: "Having a decidedly bad opinion of Ram Singh and his whole sect, I conceive the watchword may in all probability run 'all is fair against the firank (*firangee*, the white)..."

Born in 1816 in village Bhaini near Ludhiana, in the fraternity of Iron Smiths/carpenters, he joined the Sikh Army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the elite cavalry (horse riders) called 'Nav Nihal Singh Regiment' as a *Sowar* in 1836 when he was barely 20. Even while in the army he kept alive the religious fervour imbibed from his devout parents and felt alarmed at the prevailing moral degeneration which foreboded the impending disaster. Having realised the dangers of the internal weaknesses of the *Khalsa*, he became regular in his prayers and meditation.

The death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1839 plunged the Sikh State into a turmoil, rot and decay coupled with personal rivalries led to murder after murder. The movements of his Regiment all over the State had enabled him to interact with the large number of people. In 1845 on the eve of battle of Mudki, he left soldiering to meditate upon God's name (*Nam*), and thus became one of the *Namdhari*s. He had come in contact with Guru Balak Singh of Huzroo, the founder of *Namdhari* movement during his services in the army and had become his follower.

After his release from the army Guru Ram Singh took to his hereditary profession of iron smithy/carpentry in the village and started running a grocery shop too. Put so aptly by legendary

Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna of Ghadar Party fame “as the (iron) furnace became hotter and hotter, his soul too vibrated more and more with revulsion against foreign yoke with heat of revolt”. His life truly personified the sublime synthesis of honest labour, with meditation blended with spirit of social uplift and all round regeneration.

It goes to his credit that while his life was an open book for his fellow Sikhs and countrymen but till his end he remained an enigma to his enemies, the British rulers of the day. Besides all else, they could never reconcile his stately entourage with his most orderly conduct: “Ram Singh had with him forty horses for his own use and that of his *Soobahs* (Deputies). In all his processions he was proceeding with colours flying and drum beating with his most orderly conduct vis a vis the authority and he was ready to do whatever we (they) ordered.”

They were equally confounded with the facts that while he assumed the simple title of ‘Bhai’ or head of the brotherhood but were aware of the myth that he derived his power, success and spiritual authority (for his disciples implicitly obey and trust him) from a sacred copy of (Guru) Gobind Singh’s Granth, which is supposed to contain a prophesy that in these later days a great Sikh reformer, of the carpenter class, named Ram Singh should arise.

In the legal parlance they could not impugn any overt act of his, which went against the Indian Penal Code while being fully convinced that none else but Guru Ram Singh was the head source of all the seditious, rebellious and subversive activities associated directly or indirectly with the *Kukas/Namdharis*. More than anything else, he was able to throw, by his subtle ways of leadership, the authority off their guard in 1866 when surveillance over him was withdrawn, in the fond hope that he would lose his shine by mixing with people.

The disastrous consequences of their under-estimation were soon to follow in 1871-72.

Core of Namdhari Movement

Social Responsibility and Resistance Against Tyranny and Injustice

The tenets, the perceptions, and the demeanour of the *Kukas* is well brought out in the official reports of the relevant period.

One such report reveals that the initiation verse was:

(ਪਹਿਲਾਂ ਮਰਨ ਕਬੂਲ ਜੀਵਨ ਕੀ ਛੋਡ ਆਸ। ਹੋਏ ਯਭਨਾ ਕੀ ਰੇਨੁਕਾ ਤੋਂ ਆਉ ਹਮਾਰੇ ਪਾਸ।)

“First consent to death: Give up the desire to live; Become the dust of the earth; Then come to me.”

On initiation all vices such as lying, stealing, drinking, adultery, etc., are supposed to be foresworn and are strictly forbidden. *Kukas* so offending are punished by a *Panchayat*.

A circular purportedly addressed by Guru Ram Singh to his followers runs as under:

“Under favour of one true God, written by Ram Singh and the Khalsa of Bhaini to all the Khalsa. The Khalsa is of pure great God, victory be to the pure great God. Be this accepted, an epistle of precepts for all the brethren.

“Rise in the last ‘watch’ (i.e. three hours before sun rise) of the night, and purify your mouth, then bath, read the scriptures, if they are not known, then acquire them by rote; everyone, old women and maiden *Jup, Jap*, complete *Raihras, Arti, Sohila* (the daily recitals of Sikh scriptures), this much be particular to learn.

“All practise virtue and continence. Worship the true God during the whole eight watches (twenty four hours). Look upon the daughters and sisters of others as your own.

“Of others’ rights, the Guru (Nanak) has already written: “ਹੱਕ ਪਰਾਇਆ ਨਾਨਕਾ ਓਸ ਸੁਅਰ ਓਸ ਗਾਏ” (‘Other right’, Nanak says, ‘are pig to one and cow to the other’).

“Should any one enquire (acquire) the secret of worship and not practise it, then his face will be blackened in both worlds.

“Let not one speak ill or harshly; be meek; bear ill or harsh sayings from all; even if anyone strikes you, even then be meek; your protector is God.

“Always hide your good deeds. Assemble often. Sing the scriptures daily...

“Do not cover the evil deeds of others. Let no one receive money in lieu of a daughter or a sister or

barter them.

“Continually repeat God, God. Do not eat flesh, or drink spirits. Continue always in the fear of God.”

The magnitude and sweep of its appeal can be gauged from the contemporary official reports to the effect that all castes of Hindus and even Muslims may become *Kukas*. Major Perkins, District Superintendent of Police at Ludhiana reports (1867) that converts are chiefly made from *Juts*, *Tarkhan* (carpenter) and *Muzhbees* (lowest castes); very few are obtained from *Khatris*, *Brahmins* and *Bunnias*; and he only knows of two Muslims who have embraced this faith.

Namdharis had, by their strict devotion both in letter and spirit to the moral-social code enjoined upon them had a favourable impact on the social milieu in which they thrived. The estimation in which they were held is well depicted in an official report based on opinions in this regard gathered from native officers. “They (the people) all seem to have a great respect for the tenets of the sect, and agree that it is an effort to restore the Sikh religion to its original purity, and to do away with the innovations which have crept into it, such as consulting Brahmins as to the proper day for marriage, etc., from what they say... They hold that God is one, not made or born but existing by himself and they appear to hold in utter reprobation the Hindu beliefs of various incarnations of the deity.

“They inculcate a very strict morality, condemning most strongly lying, theft and adultery and appear anxious merely to revive the Sikh religion in its original state of purity and to eradicate the errors which have from time to time defiled it.

“All with whom I have conversed on the subject, laugh at the idea of the movement having any political significance and regard it simply as a religious one.

“There is no doubt that all the Sikhs and *Kukas* among them would be glad to see their own rule established: but I do not think that any danger is to be apprehended from the spread of this sect, further than the well-known fact that at any disturbance very strict religionist or fanatics of any denomination, are apt to let their passions carry them away and to be more desperate than those who are more careless in their religious views. As a proof of this I may mention the state of ecstasy into which the disciples of this sect fall, and which all the Sikhs, with whom I have conversed on the subject, attribute to their great mental excitement.”

The government, till mid-sixties was in two minds about the political dimensions of the movement. This is signified by the relaxation in surveillance over Guru Ram Singh in 1866. But from 1867 onwards, the authorities started taking serious note of the political potential of the sect. A communication from London Government (Secretary of State for India) dated May 31, 1867 addressed to Government of India, after having perused the report on the matters submitted by the latter, observed that “the *Kukas* have *ulterior political objects of a dangerous* and while I do not at present, see reason to urge on your government any active interference with the proceedings of Ram Singh and his associates, I must express the hope the Her Majesty’s Government that these persons be quietly but very narrowly watched.”

Be as it may, the denouement of the movement in course of a few years made the British rulers realise that Punjab which was their stronghold in 1857, was to become a hot bed of sedition in 1872.

Political overtones

It is a moot question whether Guru Ram Singh and his close associates visualised for the *Kukas* a high profile political role which they (inevitably) assumed in any case by 1871-72. But it was inherent in the logic of the historical process initiated by them at that juncture. It was not thus incidental that quite a few among the establishment put it bluntly to the powers that be that the moral preaching of Guru Ram Singh was only a sort of blind (curtain) to hide his true intentions. The same official warns that “the plant is yet tender (i.e. in 1868) and can be bent at pleasure (sic!) hereafter it will not yield. No one will ever be able to *find out the root of all this mischief and scandal unless every Kooka be put to the gun or by other torture*, which at this

moment is *no cruelty*, and would be of endless service to the Government.... (Emphasis added). Continuing: "This movement is a *type* of that which has been done in India, *before, during the rule of Mughal princes*, for when Muhammadans fought against the Hindus, Guru Gobind Singh raised men and money in *precisely the same manner as things are going now*, although not a half is yet known of their present proceedings to the Government." (Emphasis added)

Presumably the first overt act in this direction was taken on the Baisakhi Day (April 13) 1857 at Bhaini. "Before an august assembly a flag was unfurled followed by administration of baptism (*amrit*) to five Sikhs. The flag was triangular in shape and white in colour and became the symbol of freedom struggle. In order to recreate the spirit of Guru Gobind Singh the baptism ceremony was christened *Khande Da Amrit* (nectar of the sword). As the keeping of the sword had been disallowed, the disciples were commanded to keep a heavy *lathi*. And in order to keep a distinct identity each one of them was ordered to keep a woollen rosary, put on white dress and have a white turban tied in a straight manner.

"His fame had spread rapidly and by 1863 he had been able to recruit as many as 40,000 disciples whose unity, oneness of purpose, love of the Guru and moral tone was so pronounced that the English felt shaken."

The apportioning of Punjab into twenty-two *Subahs*, each put under one *Subah* was possibly circumstanced by restrictions imposed on the movements of Guru Ram Singh from 1863 onwards. But it had the potential of being seen as a sort of "shadow administration" which could be expected to fill in the gap in the wake of a successful insurrection against foreign rule.

The chain of events culminating in attack on Malod and Malerkotla (January 15/16, 1872)

The Forebodings

A shrewd British officer, Mr. Macnabb, Commissioner Ambala Division on November 4, 1871 had put the higher authorities on guard, possibly visualising an upheaval. He was categorical in his reading of the contemporary phase of the movement that whatever may have been the intentions of the leaders of the sect at the beginning, its tendency is distinctly political.

"I see in the earlier papers that Ram Singh was looked upon as a successor or actual embodiment of Guru Nanak, the saint. He is now the representative of (Guru) Gobind (Singh) the warrior.

"In a sect which organises itself into Districts (*Soobahs*), with ruler and sub-agents, in each and sends its emissaries to Lucknow or Hyderabad, or wherever Sikhs are found and arranges its tenets so that it carefully avoids anything really antagonistic to the Sikh religion, the political element cannot fail, after a while, to be the mainspring of action. Everything points to this. Ram Singh has no pretension to be the saintly fakir. He visits you attended by half a dozen horsemen; he is followed by scores of men on foot; he comes to your room surrounded by a court like a prince. He and his people are dressed in exquisitely fine white clothes."

"Again, when Subah Gyani Singh (executed in Raikot case) wishes to account for his presence at this village or that, he says (he) had gone to one to settle a dispute between some *Kukas*, in another, to look after the interests of *Kukas* who were before the Patiala police authorities. In fact, he is a Magistrate and a leader, not a spiritual guide.

"The *Subahs* I have seen are young *daring looking men*. The *Kukas* I have seen, are with a few exceptions... *remarkable for their physical frames*.

"I think the natural deduction from the above is that the movement has *become* (whatever it was in the beginning) *A political* and not a purely religious movement.

"It has next to be shown that Ram Singh is not a mere puppet in the hands of designing men. I have shown the state he keeps. No one who has seen and talked with Ram Singh will have failed to observe an intelligence, firmness and decision of *character, which couples also with self restraint*, do not belong to a mere religious enthusiast still less to a puppet." (Emphasis added)

The 'Dire' Secrecy

Such like forebodings were rooted, in part, in the impregnable communication network of *Kukas*. Needless to say, the success of the peculiar system lay in the highest qualities of self-discipline and selflessness of the persons involved.

It is not so well known that the unprecedented '*Swadeshi*' spirit among the *Kukas* encompassed not only a complete boycott of the official courts, but comprehended the total avoidance of rail travel besides the absolute non-use of official postal system. From the angle of intelligence alone, the latter two measures foreclosed the most obvious 'sources' of secret police, viz., the railway stations and the postal mail. How often one comes across the incidents of arrest and follow up of those wanted by police from the clues discovered, from these two links.

"The *Kukas* have a private post of their own which appears to be admirably organised. Confidential orders are circulated much in the Scottish bygone days. A *Kuka*, on the arrival at his village of another of the same sect with a dispatch, *at once leaves off whatever work he may be engaged upon*; if in the midst of a repast (meal), not another morsel is eaten; he asks no questions, but, taking the missive (letter), starts off at a run and conveys it to the next relief or to its destination. Important communications are sent verbally and are not committed to writing.

"In carrying messages, they make great *detours* to avoid the Grand Trunk Road.

"There is no doubt that, though this machinery has been introduced to work a religious reform, yet *in the hands of designing and unscrupulous men, it can easily be made an engine of political danger.*" (An official report of 1863). (Emphasis added).

Festivals and 'the Festival'

The mass gatherings of the *Kukas* always synchronised with traditional Sikh festivals, like *Baisakhi* and *Diwali* at Amritsar and *Hola Mohalla* at Anandpur Sahib. Interestingly, among the earliest intelligence reports, emanating from one such gathering at *Diwali* at Amritsar where one Capt. Menzies a police officer, where Roor Singh, the leading *Kooka* present waited on him and solicited instructions for the guidance of his followers, who then acting upon the advice received, behaved in a most orderly manner...

When restrictions on the movements of Guru Ram Singh were imposed, he was enjoined upon to seek advance permission to visit such festivals. One such occasion was the *Hola* festival at Anandpur Sahib in March 1867, the application for permission was submitted on February 6, 1867, i.e., about six weeks before the festival. It was granted subject to a few stringent conditions, all in the name of peace and tranquility but ultimately what possibly weighed most with the authorities was (apprehension or fond hope) that "If a row did take place, it would give us a hold upon Ram Singh, and a ground of proceeding against him, should it be considered advisable to do so." It is a matter of record that as per the knowledge of T.D. Forsyth, the Commissioner of Jullunder Division "he (Guru Ram Singh) or his followers have been guilty of no act that can be construed unfavourably to his prejudice."

Such like orderly conduct continued to be the norm in every festival involving the gatherings of *Kukas* enmass.

The gathering of above 1,000 *Kukas* on January 11 and 12, the traditional *Lohri* followed by *Maghi* festival of the Sikhs was the occasion of *Bhog* to commemorate the martyrdom of *Kukas* who were executed in connection with killing of butchers. *Maghi*, as per Sikh traditions is associated with the supreme sacrifice of *forty mukts* (the liberated) who laid own their lives at (now called) *Muktsar* to atone for their prior desertion from Guru Gobind Singh.

In particular there was a simmering feeling of vengeance on account of the execution of *Subah* Gyani Singh by linking him with Raikot murders.

This is what made this particular gathering different from such like aggregations in the past.

According to the official report about 1,000 *Kukas* were at Bhaini on the January 11 and 12, 1872. During these two days there was of course free inter communication among the leaders

and their followers. On the 13th, Deputy Inspector (police) heard that a body of hundred men *Mastanas* that is one who had worked themselves into frenzied excitement and a state of desperation, had separated themselves from the rest and were preparing to start for Malerkotla.

(Malerkotla, being a native state under a Muslim prince, was seen to be associated with kine killing).

“Hearing this D.I. went to Ram Singh and asked what it all meant, Ram Singh merely replied that they were Mastanas and had passed beyond his control... The D.I. then called on Ram Singh to bid them to go to their homes quietly, whereupon Ram Singh went to them putting handkerchief around his neck and begging them to go away and not to get into a row.”

In the same breath, however, the report indicates Guru Ram Singh having made a *feeble request* to his followers not to get into trouble, little realising that the mode of entreatment adopted by Guru Ram Singh (putting of handkerchief around the neck is the ultimate form of request or prayer ordinarily reserved for the spiritual authority or *Sangat*, i.e., the holy congregation among the Sikhs).

Continuing further the report goes on to say that: “It was generally known at Bhaini *what the plan of operation was to be*. The D.I. reported to the D.C. (Ludhiana) that Malerkotla was the first object of attack and from several a mouth, and from one of the prisoners (tried in the case) we know that it was arranged at Bhaini and made known to all the *Kukas* that Malerkotla being weak and torn with dissensions was to the rendezvous where arms and money could be found. Thence, attacks were to be made on Nabha, Jind, Patiala...” (Emphasis added)

These (Cis-Sutlej) native states were considered traitors to the Sikh cause since they had preferred to accept British protection to coming in the fold of Sikh kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Besides, they had solidly supported the British Government during the 1857 uprising. Inevitably, they sent their troops to subdue *Kuka* rebels.

As per official intelligence reports a rising in fact was to be in *Chet* (April) 1872. But apparently matters were precipitated...and the plan was formed at Bhaini, during the *Maghee* fair, 11th, 12th and 13th January — by a party of *Mastanas*, to at once avenge Gyani Singh’s death by murdering butchers at Malerkotla, and seizing arms there.

Why Deportation?

If the blowing away of 66 rebels with the guns on 17th and 18th January 1872 had the ‘most happy effect’ according to the prime executioner Cowan, how come that the “Country was not (yet) safe whilst leaders (were) at large” as per his own report to the Punjab Government in this regard.

As the chain of events regarding the deportation of Guru Ram Singh along with his Chief *Subahs* unfold, the nightmare of the White rulers was far from over.

Having failed to identify any tangible evidence against them, in utter desperation the Government ordered that Guru Ram Singh and his *Subahs* be kept as far away from Punjab as possible. In the first instance they were lodged in Allahabad fort, but that being considered nearer to Punjab. Guru Ram Singh was sent to Rangoon as State prisoner in quick despatch in March 1872.

As state prisoner he was not allowed to communicate with his friends in Punjab. When a sealed letter from him to one Gopal Singh in Punjab, and Budh Singh at Bhaini was detected the Government became nervous. They got them translated but found that the same appeared to be of apparently harmless. It read:

“Greetings to all members of my brotherhood, and ‘Ramsat’ (form of greeting to women) to Bibi Nandan.

“Physically I am well. The Government supplied us with food and raiment (clothing). But the fire of separation burns me. We are four and a half days’ journey from Calcutta.

Dread radiates even from Burma

A report from District Superintendent of police Sahnewal (Ludhiana) dated 20th March 1881 read:

“It escaped me to add that there is a report about that a *Kuka* messenger with a letter purporting to be from Ram Singh has been going from village to village inviting the *Kukas* to go to Bhaini and telling them that it was Ram Singh’s orders and the time predicated by the Guru had arrived. On the 17th instant Budh Singh of Bhaini confirmed this report before me but said that the alleged messenger was an imposter who was endeavouring to swindle money from the *Kuka* sect.”

In spite of the instructions regarding strict surveillance over *Kuka* prisoners, the Punjab Government learnt to its dismay that some correspondence was going on between the Guru and his disciples.

Yet all was ‘not well’

In spite of the precautions taken by Punjab Government and the Government of India. *Kuka* movement continued to gain momentum and when there was a scare of Afghan War in 1877-78, their activities increased manifold. In 1879 *Kuka* Gurcharan Singh was reported to be active in Russian Turkistan as an emissary of Guru Ram Singh. On May 1st he was found in possession of a Hindi letter purporting to be from him and signed by several others. In this he was represented as the spiritual leader of 3,15,000 *Kukas*, all brave soldiers. Due to the activities of the secret agent Gulab Khan for and against the Russians during the Second Afghan War and afterwards, Gurcharan Singh was arrested.

In short, *Kukas* had succeeded in making important contacts with the Russians in Central Asia. One Bishan Singh Arora, a *Kuka* of great wealth was reported to having agencies in Peshawar, Kabu, Bokhara and Russian territory and acted as the medium of communication between the Russians and Budh Singh.

The Punjab Government reported that in August 1879, Ram Singh was able to obtain writing material and send letters to his friends and adherents in Punjab.

Ultimately he was removed to Mergui in 1880 where he arrived on 21.10.1880. But the urge in his disciples was so great that two *Kukas* named Mihan Singh and Samund Singh succeeded in reaching Mergui too by S.S. Tavoy from Maulmin. It is on record that between 1879-81 several of his disciples made attempts to reach Rangoon and Mergui to see him or convey letters to him.

Guru Ram Singh felt very unhappy at the treatment meted out by the British Government to his disciples who only wanted to correspond with him. He not only felt anxious to meet his people, but also became worried about their safety. He always thus discouraged their visits to him. But his entreaties proved futile. He continued to decline in health, pining for *Sangat* (reunion) with his disciples, colleagues and relatives.

(According to the report of the Civil Surgeon dated 29.11.1885, Ram Singh. State prisoner died at 4 p.m.)

The Headquarters of *Namdharis* at Bhaini, popularly known as Bhaini Sahib, continued to be under the strict watch of the British police. A police post remained posted at the entrance of their residential house right till 1922.

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