

4-2006

# Sikh Leadership: Established Ideals and Diasporic Reality

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## Repository Citation

Singh, H. & Singh, S. (2006). Sikh leadership: Established ideals and diasporic reality. *Teaching Theology and Religion*, 9, 133-138. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9647.2006.00275.x

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# Sikh Leadership: Established Ideals and Diasporic Reality

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**Abstract.** *As established in the Sikh scriptural canon, ideal leaders internalize qualities of self-sovereignty, intentional servitude, integrative creativity, authentic compassion, and perhaps most significant of all, Divine inspiration. Models of communal decision-making can also be derived from the lives of the Gurū-Prophets (1469–1708 C.E.) and the institutions they established. Though the faith recognizes no clergy class, graduates of historical seminaries often emerge as significant leaders for the Sikh nation. The community outside of the homeland, however, has experienced a lesser effort in the cultivation of leadership. With a primary focus on education, religious centers, youth camps, and retreats have played a critical role in imparting Sikh culture to the masses. While ideals are clearly articulated within the Sikh tradition, it is the application of the ideals that is necessary – Sikh leadership continually works towards these ends, and will ever seek to progress as individuals as well as a community.*

No man or society that has risen from the dead into the life of the spirit can tolerate political subjugation or social slavery to unjust laws or rules. Politics, in the sense of fighting against all social injustice, all tyranny, all wrong taxation of the poor, all subjugation of man to man were the “politics” of the Gurū. Without freedom no true religion or art can flourish anywhere. Human love, too, degenerates if freedom fails.

Liberty is the breath of true culture. The Sikhs raised by the Gurū fought for freedom. They were defeated, they might be defeated again; all attempts at liberty generally end in defeat. But their very fighting for liberty is the mark of new soul-consciousness that the Gurū had awakened in them.

(Puran Singh 1993, 3)

## Introduction

For the purposes of this paper, the term “Sikhī” stands for all that encompasses the Sikh faith – a faith that subsists as a revolution as much as a religion. Central to the Sikh ideology are the principles of equality, liberty, and selfless service, and a value system that envisions a diverse and egalitarian society that affords individual freedom and maintains no element, however miniscule, of state oppression. Sikhs firmly uphold the notion of equality, a claim supported by the doctrinal emphasis on social justice as well as the Gurū-Prophets’ advocacy and activism for universal human rights. And in a spiritual sense, selfless service functions as a form of grateful expression to the Divine, a praise of the Creator via Creation.

When establishing the political and legal structure of a nation-state, governance is highly impacted by the principles of equality, liberty, and selfless service. At the same time though, the pluralistic nature of society seems sustainable via the secular separation between religion and state. Ultimately, members of a Sikh nation, whether Sikh or non-Sikh, might exist in a self-regulated communal order in which these three elements would be integral to the fabric of the social system.

Of course, in order to achieve any level of success, every organization needs leadership. The issue of what characteristics constitute quality leadership, therefore, becomes extremely relevant to each and every member of the human race. Furthermore, all individuals find themselves in vital decision-making situations at some time or another, an eventuality that elevates the importance of understanding the attributes of reputable leadership.

While it may seem to only offer a one-dimensional perspective, an exploration of religious worldviews on ideal leadership would certainly prove to be beneficial. Within the Sikh tradition, much can be inferred from internal evidence derived from the Gurū Granth Sāhib, the Sikh scriptural canon. Additionally, the ten Gurū-Prophets (1469–1708 C.E.) outlined and exemplified the qualities of Sikh leadership within their own lives. Therefore, interpretations of their personalities would provide ideas in our endeavor to define leadership from a Sikh perspective. Due to the belief that each of the Gurūs embodied the same Divine Light, each of the ten Gurūs is also referred to by the name of the founder of the faith, Nānak.

Though recent trends might indicate the contrary, the Sikh faith maintains no separate clergy leadership. But while each individual possesses an innate right to self-sovereignty, all require guidance from mentor-figures. The Gurū-Prophets played this role for 239 years, before passing on the responsibility for community guidance to the Gurū Granth Sāhib and to the Gurū Khālsā Panth, the collective leadership of the Sikh nation established by the Gurūs.

While the Gurū Granth Sāhib offers wide availability and accessibility, the community still requires leaders that can accurately and genuinely guide those Sikhs unable to directly interpret the message. The presence of Sikh leadership would also assist in developing theologically grounded perspectives on contemporary issues, while also enhancing recognition of the Sikh tradition among other communities.

Based on the above, this essay will concentrate on three main areas. The first is an exploration of the Gurūs' vision for the ideal leader, an ideological establishment based on interpretations from the revelatory scriptures as well as the lives of the Gurū-Prophets. Section two looks at established institutions within the homeland, and section three at contemporary approaches within the western world to train and develop aspiring Sikh leaders. The final portion suggests effective methods of imparting Sikh leadership to the masses in the future.

### Deriving Qualities of Sikh Leadership

Over the last five centuries, the Sikh nation has been led by numerous personalities. The Gurū-Prophets guided the community in all spheres from 1469–1708 C.E. Following the demise of the tenth and final Nānak, Bandā Singh Bahādur led the Sikh army while adhering to the principles of the tradition. In the late eighteenth century, *Misaldāris* controlled small areas of land in the Pañjāb region of South Asia, and from 1799–1849 the Sikh *Mā hānājā* ruled the locale after Māhānājās Ranjīt Singh united the *Misaldāris* under one flag. In the twentieth century, the dominant leader in the Sikh context

emerged in the controversial character of Jarnail Singh Bhindrānvāle. Although there are several examples of great leadership material in Sikh history, we will focus our attention on those individuals whose lives are recognized by Sikhs as perfect examples of Sikh leadership. That is, we will focus our attention on the lives of the Gurū-Prophets.

A primary lesson from the Gurūs' lives and their documented teachings is the manner in which a leader should interact with his followers. Within this manner, the Gurūs emphasize a balance between leading for the benefit of others and maintaining a sense of self-sovereignty. Thus, a tyrant is condemned as unjust, but conversely, a weak leader is rejected as useless. Gurū Amardās, Nānak III, sets out: "These earthly rulers cannot be labeled as kings; they suffer in love of duality" (Shabadārath Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib 1088). In this statement, Nānak III refers to materialistic-driven royalty as leaders unworthy of noble recognition.

Generally speaking, a large majority of the qualities desirable in a leader operate as admirable qualities of the Divine. For example, a perfect leader should "live fearlessly among their enemies" (Shabadārath Sri Guru Granth Sahib 1394). This element directly corresponds with the Divine quality of fearlessness articulated in the opening verse of the Gurū Granth Sāhib. Similar characteristics found within the opening of the scriptural canon include creativity, honesty, integration, and compassion.

While possessing the qualities that affect all levels of personal behavior, a leader should maintain a level of knowledge that enables positive decision-making. Fundamentally, leaders should be aware of all articulated goals and be able to guide the followers towards the given objective. But perhaps more importantly, leaders should be knowledgeable in their own specific area of leadership. A battle commander, for example, should know and understand the practices of warfare: "O Nānak, the blind one who shows others the way misleads all his companions" (Shabadārath Srī Gurū Granth Sahib 140). Unlike this blind man, however, the one who leads should be capable of making informed choices.

But according to the Gurūs, there is one other piece of knowledge that a true ruler should possess – a requirement fairly unique to Sikhī. The ideal leader should not merely possess worldly knowledge, but also Divine Wisdom. "Those who realize the Truth are the only true kings" (Shabadrath Sri Guru Granth Sahib 1088). The term "Truth," while substitutable by imperishable, also serves as a synonymous title for the Divine.

Summarily, the role of leadership within the Sikh nation is limited, perhaps akin to that of a chief executive officer. One institution, the Sarbat Khālsā, is a traditional form of decision-making in which the entire

Sikh community gathers and seeks consensus. In this way, Sikhī keeps no place for individual leaders who might make Sikh-related decisions in all affairs.

By example, all Gurūs have shown that leaders live to serve the collective interest rather than self-interest. Nor is this collective interest limited to the realm of Sikhī. When Kashmirī Pandits approached Gurū Teghbahādur, Nānak IX, and requested his assistance in protecting Hindus from the forceful conversions authorized by Aurangzeb, an Islamic emperor from the Mughal Empire, the Gurū stood up for his belief in the freedom of religion, and he was eventually martyred.

The Gurūs' style of leadership allowed the Nānaks to maintain the spirit and enthusiasm in current adherents while attracting new people to the message. None were given special preference, no matter their rank, status, caste, social standing, and so on. In the eyes of Sikh leadership, all followers were equal.

By examining the Gurūs' leadership, a model for post-Gurū-Prophet leadership emerges. The Gurūs established a democratic procedure for collective decision-making through what was termed the *gurmatā* system. This form of joint leadership consisted of at least five individuals, and came into effect during the life of Gurū Gobind Singh, the tenth Nānak. He formally installed this decision-making mechanism within the community when he initiated the first five Sikhs into the order of committed Sikhs. He encouraged such leadership so that no reliance would be placed on any single individual. Simply stated, five people are less likely to become corrupt than a single individual.

Paradigmatically, the committee of initiated Sikhs believes in serving the community not for power, status, or money, but in a selfless manner. The leadership should keep the capacity to interpret the Gurū's message for the masses, though this onus is also retained by individuals as sovereign beings. Sikhs maintain independent thought as well as the ability to keep an open mindset. Practicing what they preach, Sikhs are approachable, forgiving, and ever willing to struggle against any tyranny or injustice. While the ideals of the Gurūs are certainly difficult objectives, striving for the ideal is the most effective way that Sikhs can achieve the Gurūs' vision.

### Institutions for Leadership Development in the Homeland

The term *gurmat* is often used to describe the Gurū's way, literally the wisdom of the Gurū. In imparting *gurmat*, the perennial postulate that perpetual glory for the great religions is possible whenever they realize the harmonious perspective that exhibits no dichotomy between visible social reality and abstract heights applies to the Sikhs as well. *Gurmat* is the confluence of the scriptural directives, history of the Gurū-

Prophets, and the ethical and moral dimension in the code of ethics.

The scripture, Gurū Granth Sāhib, is an infinite prayer (prophetic/collective/reverential) that assumes the dimension of eternal Gurū – a divine honor not accorded to any scripture before. It embraces only those parts of the universal cultures that have the potentialities to be generous, sublime, and impartial, and admits no hegemonic intrusion that may disturb the flow of its spiritual creativity.

The Prophet-genius for the Sikh is in the Gurū, the one who takes an individual from ignorance to enlightenment. The Gurū-image transcends all mythological mazes and proceeds to embrace the passion of day-to-day life. No magical labyrinths full of hallucinated fogs complicate the social life of the Nānaks I-X (1469–1708 CE).

The Code of Conduct, *rahit mariādā* (discipline/tradition), encompasses the wholeness of life and then raises its myriad forms to a level of transcendental purity, a rare filial generosity, and unimpaired freedom of person and soul. Herein, the paradoxical segments of life (e.g., war and peace) find a level of naturalness.

During the Gurū-period, several Sikh seminaries were established to impart knowledge and leadership to future Sikh generations. Their strong oral traditions and lineage of leaders have led the Sikh nation in various capacities, from spiritual to political. Their foremost function was to provide Sikhs with the tools to interpret the Gurū Granth Sāhib on their own, an objective accomplished thru rigorous studies, reflections, service, and so on. In this training, a wholesome Sikh lifestyle was developed and maintained. Additionally, the *graduates* of these institutions became spiritual leaders, royal aides, historians, politicians, and reformers.

The Gurū-Prophets are unique in that they not only founded a religion, but also devised a self-perpetuating technique for its development and learning. Historically, the special agency for imparting knowledge and leadership had consisted of *Taksāls*, *Nirmalās*, and *Udāsīs*. At no time, though, was it recognized in theory or practice that this leadership and intellectual training was the exclusive prerogative of these institutions (Singh 1995a, 49). As a principle, Sikhī does not recognize an ordained priestly class.

Regarding technique, the Gurūs have the unique distinction of abandoning the age-old exclusiveness of religious propaganda where the game of intellectual disputation has the object of achieving verbal victory over the representative opponent or heretic. The Gurūs, instead, adopted the technique of appealing to the entire nature of the individual concerned – the intellectual as well as the emotional – not merely through words, but primarily through example and true living (Singh 1995a, 49).

### Present Methods of Leadership Development in the Diaspora

Immediately surrounding the large immigration influx of Sikhs to America at key points of the twentieth century, the western Sikh collective concentrated its attention on individual and familial establishment. Sikhs in the western world continued to see and support one another on an informal level, but the primary concern permeating the mentality and approach of early Sikh Americans remained that of economic security. Sikhs became actively involved in all professions and trades. From blue-collar laborers to corporate executives, success was achieved in various spheres of the American free-market. However, now that members of the community have established themselves financially, the cultivation of Sikh leadership has emerged as a top priority. Particularly in recent years, Sikh education and training has emerged as a dynamic realm of bustling activity, a field of significance that has manifested in multitudes of forms.

The *gurduārā* is perhaps the most historical institution for education within the Sikh tradition. Originally established by the founder-prophet as a *dharamsālā*, the *gurduārā* was intended to serve as a locale for education, worship, and social justice. Unfortunately, the Sikh community has experienced periods where the *gurduārās* have failed to fulfill their three-pronged purpose. While the last few decades have observed a focus on spiritual development and socio-political issues, a recent sociological shift has led *gurduārā* management and administration to seek solutions for questions on youth education.

Theme-based youth camps have also occurred over the past few decades as a medium to connect with the next generation of community leaders, from kindergarten to college students. Comparable to traditional western faith-based camps, youth camps serve two equally important functions – religious education and social advancement. While the average camp maintains an intensive schedule that includes early wakeup calls, twice-a-day services, directed evening discussions, and at least six hours of classes, established camps recognize that the social aspect of camp leaves an equivalent, if not greater, impact on the Sikh youth. The ability to meet and develop friendships with people of the same age and faith is a rare opportunity for Sikh youth in the Diaspora. To see that there are other “normal” kids who are undergoing similar experiences is highly therapeutic for the easily impressionable youth.

Following the tragedy of September 11, the Sikh collective's distinct appearance and identity led to an immediate backlash. In realizing that the average American knew little or nothing about their community, numerous Sikhs began awareness campaigns and educational events. Organizations and coalitions committed to facil-

itating Sikh awareness and protecting civil rights were formed throughout the western world. Many of these young Sikh organizations have experienced such growth that within a few short years additional interns, volunteers, and employees have been acquired to assist with the workload.

These examples, in summary, depict that the cultivation of Sikh leaders in the Diaspora remains in a stage of infancy. As a grassroots effort, the movement is only a few years young and lacks any real experience to create an aura of credibility. Obviously, there is a disconnection between the implementation as opposed to the ideology of perfect leadership. The next section attempts to bridge the gap between how Sikh leadership currently exists as opposed to how it should be, the actual and the ideal.

### Imparting Leadership in the Future

The historical Sikh practices and principles have enduring relevance and can be directly applied to contemporary life. The respect displayed by the Gurūs to one another, regardless of status, can be adapted and applied to a nation seeking egalitarianism. This sort of open society would encourage internal cohesiveness, religious tolerance, and mutual respect between diverse cultures. A civilization such as this could only be constructed through a commitment to education respecting various cultures and religions.

In order to engender a social attitude that encourages the destruction of discrimination barriers within the internal Sikh community, as well as the division between Sikh and other religious groups, a secular structure would be needed to conquer any religious hegemony. Such progress might only be possible through a community-driven program to educate individuals on the theological constructs of their religion. This approach would encourage a widespread feeling that, as in the case of the Sikh religion, there are sound theological and historical reasons for an attitude that advocates an integration of society rather than its division.

There is a definite framework for equality in the Sikh nation but in light of the envisioned secular nation, enforcement serves as the main challenge. The chief tension lies in the necessity to redirect social attitudes. Humans have subconscious prejudices based on color, religion, and gender that are difficult to change, and though the Sikh leadership cannot legislate the alteration of outlooks, it can place greater emphasis on education and social development to ensure that the root causes of discrimination are tackled. From an educational standpoint, students must have exposure to individuals of all backgrounds and religions so that as they grow older, they will come to realize that any prevailing attitude that discriminates against particular members of society is misguided. It is only through this

gradual process of education and encouragement of social cohesion that any nation can hope to achieve absolute equality between its citizens.

With the theological and historical foundations of Sikhī closely linked to the principle of liberty, it is extremely difficult to conceive of a Sikh vision without it. The Sikh vision incorporates the following elements: plural, free, open and progressive society; divine-oriented, non-aggressive but firm adherents; a collective ever ready to combat the rise and growth of evil (perversion of mind) through organized resistance; and forward looking yet non-ambitious outlook on life (Singh 1995, 40). In such a vision, there is no place for religious dictatorship entailing proselytization or forceful conversion of the population. The battles against the Mughals and the liquidation of the *zamīdārī system* show that the modern Sikh leadership must protect individuals from oppression and arbitrary rule. As a result there must be an absolute freedom to lead life as one chooses, assuming there is no harm inflicted on others. The separation of the ideology from the messenger means that there needs to be a certain respect in any nation built on Sikh values for other religions and belief systems. The lack of sectarianism would mean that there would be no place for those who denounce other religions as inferior or invalid, and much greater emphasis would be placed on the message rather than the messenger.

The principle and protection of liberty would also extend into areas of foreign policy for Sikh leaders. A Sikh vision could not take a relaxed approach to foreign governments that exercise tyranny. While an emphasis must first and foremost be placed on diplomatic efforts to settle such problems, Nānak X taught that when all other courses do not yield a just result, it is fair, just, and necessary to embrace the hilt of the sword (Singh 2001, 217). Therefore, intervention may be required in humanitarian situations, and while this doctrine is an emerging principle of international law, the collective practice of the Sikh leadership, coupled with its commitment to assisting those suffering from oppression, will be sufficient to create a mechanism for such action.

Therefore, it can be seen that the principle of liberty in a Sikh nation will have two distinct areas of effect. Firstly, it will mean that individuals are free to practice their beliefs without fear of state oppression or forced conversion, and secondly, in the political field, a Sikh nation would take the attitude that the oppression of individuals anywhere requires immediate attention and intervention diplomatically and, if necessary, by military means.

## Conclusion

While it is extremely difficult to influence and alter prevailing attitudes, the Sikh vision cannot exist without

regard to the three principles of the Sikh leadership model: equality, liberty, and self-sacrifice. Each of these three has played a role in defining significant aspects of the Sikh character through a detailed examination of the historical and theological elements of Sikhī. In such a society, all live free of arbitrary discrimination while freely practicing their beliefs without fear of state oppression. Selfless service generates genuine goodwill among inhabitants to serve their fellow citizens and improve the standards of the community. Each of these principles has a significant magnitude of individual merit, but in combining and applying their spirit to the institutions of a nation, it is possible to imagine a society operating under Sikh ideals. The leadership at all levels, from spiritual to political, works towards this end.

Over the last few centuries, the vision of a Sikh leader, as articulated in the Gurū Granth Sāhib and demonstrated by the Gurū-Prophets, has been watered down and eventually lost. This has helped contribute to many of the problems faced by the Sikh community today. Education amongst Sikhs in Pañjāb is at a real low, which has led to poverty as well as problems with alcohol and drugs. Due to the lack of value-driven leadership, the Sikh nation has been ineffective in dealing with these problems. Similarly, Sikhs around the globe are losing their identity and relationship with the faith, but little is being done to make materials available to help people interpret the message of the Gurūs. Some attribute the lack of feasible solutions to the demise of the Sikh nation-state in 1849 and continuous tense relations with the Indian state.

Sikh leaders who follow the principles set out by the Gurūs would seek to initiate a progressive movement within the community. Remembering the sovereign identity, Sikhs would regulate their own affairs and appoint their own leaders without the assistance of political organizations with conflicting agendas. The ideal Sikh leader would be able to recognize, address, and resolve any and all issues relating to the community at large.

Sikh learning must incorporate the following traditions: universality of social conduct, historic patterns of fierce Sikh struggles, practices of *mīrī-pīrī* (political-spiritual sovereignty), and pristine attachment of the *Khālsā* (the ideal person) to their living five articles of faith. Practically speaking, this process will be hindered by a number of impediments. Initially, the situation requires that the community unites and recognizes that actions must be taken. Governmental interference will be difficult to overcome in India, and with the Sikh Diaspora around the world, many will remain oblivious to the issues at hand. However, if we look back to the *Singh Sabhā* movement of the early twentieth century, we see that it is possible to make changes against strong odds. In that movement, three courageous leaders dedicated their entire lives for the good of the community,

while upholding and imparting the principles of Sikhī. Their strength, fearlessness, and self-motivation, led them in transforming the Sikh nation. It may be that all that Sikhs need are a few good leaders who can inspire confidence in the people, and then Sikhs can transform themselves and their community once again.

A Persian muse, *rubāī*, by a contemporary Sikh poet and author, Harinder Singh “Mehboob”, is an apt Sikh cry and longing (Singh 1999, 6):

The Nations, insulted and humiliated,  
 inhabit a land at once isolated and treacherous;  
 A poisonous earth, threatened by sudden erosions,  
 spreads their unfortunate feet;  
 I give you this assurance, O my Nation,  
 that this All Powerful Time will not hurl you into  
 perdition;  
 If only you realize your existential dignity and  
 your heart doesn't loose the sacred sight of your  
 prophet.

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