

Guru Ram Das

In 1574 Guru Amar Das died, passing the responsibility of leading the Nanak-panth to his son-in-law, Jetha Sodhi, who became the fourth incumbent as Guru Ram Das. Following one who had lived to a very old age, Ram Das was Master of the Panth for only seven years. In his case also most of the information has been passed down by tradition and very little of it can be positively affirmed. There is, however, no question concerning the broad outline. There can be no doubt that Ram Das continued to lead a Panth that was largely rural and which preached liberation through meditation on the divine Name.

Among the traditions concerning Guru Ram Das one thing stands out. Guru Ram Das is very clearly associated with the founding of the new centre of Chak Guru or Ramdaspur, later to be known as Amritsar. The hostility of the sons of Guru Amar Das is said to have been responsible for the move from Goindval. Ram Das established himself in the new location and began excavating the sacred pool. The site thus chosen became the principal centre of the Nanak-panth until the sixth Guru, Hargobind, was compelled to abandon it early in the seventeenth century and move to the safety of the Shivalik hills. Amritsar recovered its prominence during the warfare of the eighteenth century and has ever since remained the chief centre of the Sikhs.

The other feature commonly associated with the fourth Guru is the appointment of *masands* or vicars who acted on behalf of their Guru in the more dispersed of his *saigats*. The word *masand* evidently means 'throne' or 'raised platform' and is an indication of the status these people were to acquire in the Nanak-panth. These were men who supervised individual *saigats* or clusters of *saigats* on behalf of the Guru, perhaps acting as spiritual guides and certainly empowered to collect the tithes or other contributions which a loyal Sikh might be expected to give to his Master. The Nanak-panth, in other words, had by this time reached the stage where the central organization was to some extent dependent on contributions, and this implies a development in terms of a complex organization.

We have already seen how in the time of the third Guru *manjīs* were apparently in existence and how their precise nature was exceedingly

vague. There can be little doubt, however, concerning the role and authority of the *masands*, or at least a measure of it. The *masand* system presumably did its job reasonably well in the first few decades of its existence and lasted until its decline into semi-independence and corruption produced formal abolition by Guru Gobind Singh at the end of the seventeenth century.

One characteristic of Guru Ram Das deserves particular notice and this is the quality of his works as recorded in the Adi Granth. Kirtan was of the essence of the Nanak-panth and the fourth Guru certainly provided his followers with hymns in praise of the divine Name. The Guru's sense of melody and rhythm place him high according to the exalted standards of the Adi Granth, a feature of considerable importance. The Sikhs of the Nanak-panth appreciated fine singing, and music which matched or exceeded their expectations was bound to have a favourable impact on the growth of the community.

Guru Arjan

In 1581 Guru Ram Das breathed his last. It was still the Nanak-panth which he passed on to his successor and that Panth still upheld the divine Name as the means to liberation. Also, although the appointment of *masands* implied greater numbers and more distant *saigats*, we are still quite unable to estimate the numbers who belonged to the Nanak-panth. There was, however, a change of some significance taking place. Guru Ram Das's successor was his son, and from this point onwards the Gurus follow a male line of the Sodhi Khatri, the sub-caste to which Guru Ram Das had belonged. It was not his oldest son, nor even his second son. Arjan, who succeeded his father, was in fact the third and youngest son. But son he was and every Guru who followed him was his direct descendant.

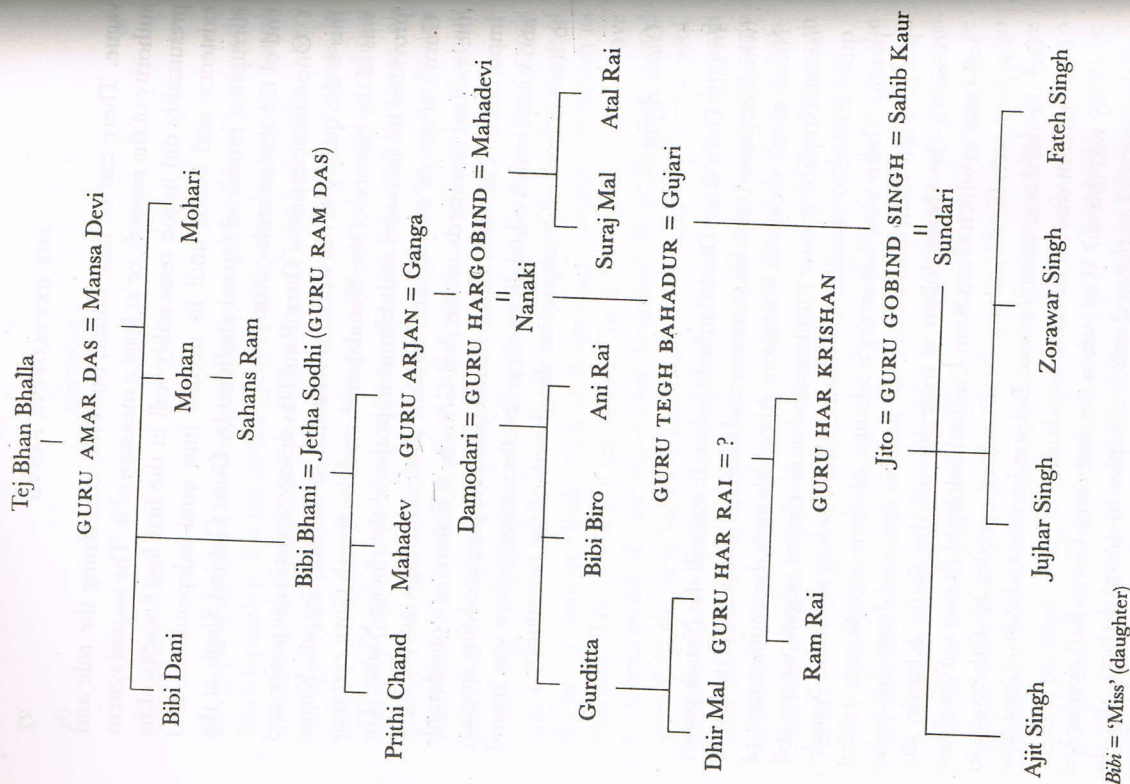
Why was this so? Why, when the first three Gurus had overlooked their sons and appointed other disciples to succeed them, did the fourth Guru choose his son? And why were all future Gurus his direct descendants? There are two answers needed here. The first three Gurus did the natural and sensible thing in appointing loyal disciples to succeed them in the days before the leadership of the Panth had

become a target for the ambitious. Tradition casts the sons of all three Gurus as seekers after power, yet it seems most unlikely that the Gurus could raise offspring who would be uniformly hostile to their fathers' intentions. A much more likely explanation is that they would make ideal opponents to confront their fathers' successors and so tradition casts them in that role.

By the time of the fourth Guru, however, the possibility of a disputed succession was real. This may also have played a part in the choice of his son-in-law by the third Guru. Establishing the convention that hereafter the succession should be limited to the direct descendants of Guru Ram Das certainly would not eliminate the possibility, but it would minimize it. Within the Guru's family of Sodhi Khatri the most suitable person should be chosen, and to succeed Guru Ram Das the youngest of his three sons, Arjan, was selected as the fifth Guru.

This theory is not wholly convincing, yet there seems to be no other possible interpretation. As a result Arjan had to face the disappointed and determined enmity of his eldest brother, Prithi Chand, and quarrels over the succession become a feature of the remainder of the Guru period. At least three of these disappointed contenders formed panths of their own, claiming to be the legitimate descendants from Nanak. When Guru Gobind Singh formed the Khalsa at the end of the seventeenth century, the followers of these contenders were singled out as three of the so-called *Patij Mel* (the Five Reprobate Groups) and members of the Khalsa were forbidden to have any dealings with them.⁴ Clearly they had proven a serious danger and to this extent the system of choosing the successive Gurus was only a partial success.

The period of Guru Arjan, which covers the years 1581-1606, continued the pattern of expanding numbers in rural areas. According to tradition these were the years when three towns were established in rural Punjab. Tarn Taran, Kartarpur (a second Kartarpur, not the village of Guru Nanak) and Sri Hargobindpur first appeared at this time. Under the fifth Guru, the Nanak-panth continued to grow and there is strong reason for believing that it grew impressively, particularly in rural areas. The sources are, as usual, slender (largely confined to the Adi Granth and Bhair Gurdas), but the profile certainly matches that of the later Panth.



1. A family tree of the descendants of Guru Amar Das and Guru Ram Das

As we have already noted, Arjan faced a disputed succession when he became Guru. Prithi Chand, his eldest brother, had evidently looked forward to the prestige the office would bring, only to be disappointed by his father's choice of his youngest brother to be the fifth Guru. For several years his opposition proved a great difficulty for Guru Arjan, particularly after Arjan's son was born, when Prithi Chand seems to have attempted something serious in the hope of undermining the child's claims to the succession. There is for this particular episode sound evidence which indicates that Prithi Chand was contemplating serious hurt (possibly actual assassination) to Arjan's only child, the future Guru Hargobind. As proof we have the testimony of both Guru Arjan and Bhai Gurdas. Prithi Chand, having failed in his attempt, set himself up as a rival Guru. To the followers of the legitimate line they were the Minas or 'scoundrels'.

Guru Arjan is important for at least four reasons. First, he it was who completed the excavation of the pool known as Amritsar and built the original gurdwara located in its centre. The eighteenth-century gurdwara that now occupies the site is known as Harimandir Sahib, later to be called by the British the Golden Temple.⁵ Secondly, he was the most prolific of the Gurus as a hymn-writer, leaving to the Panth a superb collection of religious songs, with *Sukhmant Sāhib* at its head. Thirdly, he was largely responsible for compiling the sacred scripture of the Sikhs, the *Adi Granth*, which was to become the *Guru Granth Sahib*. And fourthly there was the manner of his death, treated by all Sikh sources as the death of a martyr at the hands of the Mughals. The third and the fourth of these reasons require further treatment.

The *Adi Granth* is so called to distinguish it from the later *Dasam Granth*. 'Adi Granth' means 'the First Volume' or 'the Original Volume', separating it from the *Dasam Granth*, which was compiled during the early eighteenth century.⁶ The actual date of beginning the *Adi Granth's* compilation is not certain, but it is believed it was initiated by Guru Arjan in 1603. The task was certainly completed in 1604. During the past two hundred years it has ascended to a position far beyond that of its only rival. In the eighteenth century the *Dasam Granth* apparently ranked equal with the *Adi Granth*, but since that time has dropped away.

The collecting by Guru Arjan of all the hymns of his four

predecessors, together with his own substantial works and those of approved Sant poets, was of critical importance, not necessarily in his own time but certainly in the eighteenth century when the two sacred *Granth*s came to be accepted as the literal embodiment of the eternal Guru after the line of personal Gurus had ceased. Guru Amar Das, as we have seen, had evidently commissioned a preliminary compilation (the so-called *Goindval polhās* or *Mohan polhās*) and the fifth Guru is believed to have used this prototype when producing the larger version. In between the two versions came a manuscript prepared on Guru Arjan's instructions that served as a provisional text.⁷ The text recorded in Arjan's time was the *Kartarpur Bir* (or *Kartarpur volume*).⁸ Later in the seventeenth century some compositions by Guru Tegh Bahadur were added and the final result was the *Adi Granth*. The *Adi Granth* subsequently played a powerful cohesive role during the later history of the Panth, a role which continues undiminished today.

Guru Arjan apparently planned the enterprise carefully. A camp was set up on the outskirts of Amritsar and there the Guru had a pool excavated. Meanwhile he dictated the contents of the scripture to his amanuensis, the celebrated Bhai Gurdas, or indicated portions which were to be copied from the available prototypes. The pattern of organization is impressive, with the bulk of the scripture divided according to *rāg* (musical mode), type of composition and author.⁹ The occasions when the *Adi Granth* diverges from this pattern are very few indeed.

Tradition relates that the reason for compiling the scripture was that enemies of the Panth (notably the followers of Prithi Chand) were passing out spurious compositions and attributing them to the Guru. The *Nanak-panth* was still a religious Panth, with singing in *saigats* still the primary feature of its life, and it was important for it to have access to reliable hymns in the way that Guru Amar Das had sought to guarantee them. Guru Arjan was fulfilling the same need. The version whose preparation he had supervised would provide an approved text, and anything not contained in it was not sanctioned for use in *Nanak-panthi saigats*. His own contribution was the largest of all the authors and is equal in terms of quality. To this day his *Sukhmant Sāhib* is treasured by many outside the Panth or on its fringes, as well as by those who are firmly located within.

The Nanak-panth was still a religious Panth, a Panth with all the features of developing maturity surrounding it, but still a religious Panth. It was, however, just about to begin the process of change into something more and tradition marks the close of Arjan's life as the hinge of change. Guru Arjan's manner of death in 1606 evidently signifies a determinative turning-point in the development of the Panth. Difficulties had emerged in the Panth's relationship with the local Mughal authorities, and the hostility which fitfully developed during the course of the succeeding century has traditionally been held to account for the significant changes which eventually transformed the Panth.

There can be no doubt that the deteriorating relationship with Mughal authority supplies a large part of the explanation, and that Guru Arjan's death in Mughal custody provides an appropriate symbol for the change taking place. It is not a sudden change, though. The Nanak-panth of the sixteenth century was not instantly transformed into a prototype of the eighteenth-century Khalsa. The continuities remain evident and much that we may affirm concerning the early Panth applies with equal force to its seventeenth-century successor.

The Mughals had entered India in the lifetime of Guru Nanak, their authority established in the north by Babur, who in 1526 won the battle of Panipat against the Lodi dynasty and thereafter ruled as the first emperor. Mughal rule was significantly enlarged by the third emperor, Akbar (1556–1605), and now the fourth emperor was on the throne. This was Jahangir, who ruled from the death of Akbar until his own death in 1627. For most of the period the Sikhs had been too small a group to be worthy of notice, but in the time of Guru Arjan this changed. The Guru was arrested by the Mughal authorities in Lahore and died in their custody. Tradition reports that he perished of extreme torture, and to the Sikhs he is remembered with profound grief as the first martyr Guru.

The death by torture or execution has not been definitively established, but certainly Guru Arjan had attracted the emperor's unfavourable notice and with equal certainty he died in Mughal custody. Jahangir in his *Memoirs* records the episode which angered him. Arjan was said to have applied a saffron mark to the forehead of the rebellious Prince Khusrau, apparently blessing him. Jahangir had earlier heard how the

Guru had attracted many people to his following (Muslim as well as Hindu), and now he determined that either he should put a stop to this 'false traffic' or Arjan should be brought into the fold of Islam.¹⁰

Sikh tradition relates this directly to the important change which overtook the Panth at the death of the Guru. According to this tradition, Guru Arjan advised his son and successor Hargobind to sit fully armed on his throne; and Hargobind, as sixth Guru, symbolically donned two swords. Whereas one sword represented the continuing spiritual authority of the Guru (*gūrī*), the other signified a newly assumed temporal authority (*mūrī*). Tradition emphatically holds that the Panth was assuming a new militancy and that it was doing so as the Guru's response to the urgency of early seventeenth-century circumstances.

Guru Hargobind

The death of his father must obviously have had an effect on his son and successor Guru Hargobind, but precisely what was that effect? The orthodox view states that Guru Arjan, prior to his death at the hands of the Mughals, sent a message instructing Hargobind that henceforth the Guru must sit fully armed upon his throne. The Panth, in other words, is to assume a dramatically different condition. No longer is it to be a strictly religious group with its members unconcerned about their relations with the ruling power. Instead it is to be a Panth armed to defend itself against a power liable to attack it and persecute its members. As symbols of his altered role the eleven-year-old Hargobind, at his investiture as the new Guru, therefore girded himself with two swords, one representing his *gūrī* or spiritual function; the other his *mūrī* or worldly role.

Mūrī is the power of a *mūr*, an earthly noble or chieftain (a title which the early Sikhs would have associated with the Mughals). *gūrī*, on the other hand, was the spiritual authority of the *gūr*, strictly a Muslim superior of one of the Sufi orders but generally used of any who had earned a high reputation for piety. Both are in fact terms borrowed from the Muslim culture which extensively influenced the Sikhs in the Punjab. This dual authority was one the Guru now exercised. Seated upon his throne, he exercised a worldly authority in addition to the

spiritual powers that were already the right of the Guru. As the commander of an army of men dedicated to the discipline of *nām simaran*, Guru Hargobind was thus the holder of this dual *mūrī-pīrī* authority, which thereafter all the Gurus held as of right. Now the Panth was armed. Now it was in a position to defend itself.

This was the role which, according to tradition, Guru Hargobind assumed at his investiture. The traditional account also includes a number of other features. The woollen rosary which had been worn by his five predecessors was put aside as inappropriate to the new circumstances, and in its place the Guru would wear a sword-belt, weapons and an aigrette. *Masands* were commanded to bring offerings of arms and horses instead of money. Soon afterwards was laid the foundation of Akal Takhat ('the throne of the Timeless One'), facing the chief gurdwara of Harimandir Sahib, and when it was erected he took his seat there. This building was accepted as the seat of *temporal* power in the Panth, as opposed to Harimandir (the later Golden Temple), which represents *spiritual* authority within the Panth. The Panth now faces outward to the world as well as inward to the faithful. And the Panth now faces the outside world armed by command of its martyred Guru and led by his son and successor. According to tradition, the transition from a pacific Panth to a militant Panth, to a Panth that would be prepared to stand and defend itself, was thus made at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

There are two questions to be considered in this connection, each closely related to the other. First, did the Panth undergo the change from the pacific to the militant at the beginning of Guru Hargobind's period? Secondly, if there was such a change (or something like it), how was that change interpreted within the Panth of the time? Was it interpreted along *mūrī-pīrī* lines, with the Guru seen to be assuming specifically temporal powers in addition to the spiritual authority he already possessed? Or was change taking place more gradually, with the shift essentially one of differing personalities? The Guru had changed and Hargobind was a very different person from his father, Arjan. Could these changes in the character of the Panth be later developments (that is, late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century developments), with tradition backdating them to the person of the sixth Guru?

The actual term *mūrī-pīrī* certainly seems to be a later introduction.

The two words constitute the kind of rhyming phrase which exercises considerable appeal, and once it was introduced it would quickly gain currency. This, however, makes no difference to the reality of the situation. Guru Hargobind may not actually have been called *mūrī-pīrī dā mālīk* (the *mūrī-pīrī* Master), but that still leaves open the question of whether or not he really did occupy the dual role.

Certainly one highly reliable source makes it very clear that Guru Hargobind's way of life was completely different from that of his father, Guru Arjan. This was Bhai Gurdas, a loyal disciple of both. In a famous stanza from his *Vār* 26 he deals directly with the issue.

The earlier Gurus sat peacefully in dharamsalas; this one roams the land.

Emperors visited their homes with reverence; this one they cast into gaol.

No rest for his followers, ever active; their restless Master has fear of none.

The earlier Gurus sat graciously blessing; this one goes hunting with dogs.

They listen to gurbani and sang it but this one does neither.

They had servants who harboured no malice; this one encourages scoundrels.

And having posed the problem as he sees it in the first five lines of the stanza, he provides his own answer in the remaining two:

Yet none of these changes conceals the truth; the Sikhs are still drawn as bees to the lotus.

The truth stands firm, eternal, changeless; and pride still lies subdued.

This stanza is worth looking at closely because it casts rather a different light on the subject. It is possible to read it as an expression of genuine questioning on the part of Bhai Gurdas. Indeed, this conclusion is unavoidable. Bhai Gurdas was genuinely perplexed by the behaviour of the sixth Guru, as he surveyed such puzzling features as hunting, gaol-going and even untrustworthy servants in his retinue. The other Gurus were not like this. Why should this one be so different?

And then in his two concluding lines he provides the only answer that seems to him to make sense. The Guru is still the Guru and loyal Sikhs will recognize him as such. This suggests that change had certainly taken place under Guru Hargobind, but that the direction of the change was not yet clear.

Two features probably account for the nature of the change. The first is that the Panth had, in a sense, always been armed. The majority of its members were rural folk, predominantly Jat; and the Jats would be entirely accustomed to bearing arms. This does not mean that they would be accustomed to being organized as an army, but it is difficult to imagine a village Jat without at least a staff in his possession. It is also difficult to envisage an unwillingness to make use of it should need arise. In village society conflict is common – conflict over land, water and women – and when such issues arise they are frequently settled by an appeal to the strong right arm. Being Sikhs and belonging to the Panth would make little difference to this, just as it makes little difference in present times. They would not make a display of bearing arms when they came for *darshan* with the Guru, but neither would it occur to them to leave them at home.

In this respect the Panth was already armed and the Guru who chose to organize it for defence purposes already had the means at his disposal. It is here that the personality of the sixth Guru is important, and this constitutes the second feature. The first five Gurus had, as Bhai Gurdas reminds us, spent their days teaching their followers and blessing them in their endeavours. This one entered upon his responsibilities at the age of eleven and as such would have been dependent for several years upon Sikhs who were close to the family and could act as teachers and guides. Such people may well have been impressed by the signs of growing hostility on the part of the Mughal authorities and it would be natural for them to take precautionary measures. Even if the impulse came direct from the Guru himself, the result would be the same. He was different from his father and the active life appealed to him. As a result he lived a different life, a life which had him hunting with dogs and a life in which his followers were overtly ready to defend their chosen Panth.

This is the situation which later tradition has invested with a deliberate choice to adopt a more militant posture. The symbols that serve

this purpose are the two swords, the aigrette and the building of Akal Takhat; and later generations have been taught to see the transformation in these terms. In practice there is not much difference to observe in the symbolic policy as opposed to the actual. Guru Hargobind was a different man from his father, and living in more hostile circumstances he took appropriate measures to meet them. His Panth readily responded to the situation thus presented to them and adopted a policy which was always defensive and sometimes offensive as well.

The story of Hargobind's period and the history of the Nanak-panth during those years leave, like all these early and middle periods, a confused impression. We do have in the *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* (written shortly after his time) a very valuable source, but it too leaves an impression of confusion on several points. The *Dabistan* does, however, testify to the imprisonment of Guru Hargobind in Gwalior Fort, there to remain until the fine imposed on Guru Arjan was duly paid. This, it declares, was at the instance of the Emperor Jahangir. It is possible that after the term in gaol was over Jahangir decided to show favour to the Guru and may have engaged him in a series of discourses. This is open to more doubt, although the *Dabistan* does claim that Hargobind entered the service of Jahangir and, after his death, that of Shahjahan. The story of how the Guru received custody of the treacherous Chandu Shah is even more questionable, at least in terms of the punishment said to have been meted out to this unfortunate person following his transfer to the Sikhs.¹¹ We are in the realm of tradition again, as is so often the case.

Tradition also surrounds the other stories told of Guru Hargobind, but it seems possible to pick out a general picture. That the Guru had infantry and particularly horsemen at his command is attested by the *Dabistan*, the figure for the latter being three hundred. That he travelled across north India, as far east as Pilibhit in the Kumaon hills and up to Kashmir in the north, also seems likely. Likewise, it seems certain that in some manner he acquired land in the Shivalik hills, bordering on the plains, and that there he built the village known as Kiratpur. Baba Gurditta, his eldest son, was traditionally entrusted with the establishment of the new village. The land certainly came into his possession at some stage in his career and it was there that he withdrew following trouble on the plains around Amritsar.

The claim that, following the death of Jahangir, his men came into conflict with Mughal troops a number of times can also be accepted. The *Dabistān* certainly names Guru Hargobind as a servant of Jahangir's successor Shahjahan, but the two versions need not disagree. Horsemen in Hargobind's retinue could easily have had brushes with Mughal troops and the stories of the skirmishes that resulted may be essentially true. The first such instance occurred shortly after Shahjahan's accession in 1628 while the emperor was hunting near Amritsar. A hawk of his happened to be captured by followers of Guru Hargobind, and this led to fighting in which some men were evidently killed. The *Dabistān* reports this encounter and sets it in the context of Guru Hargobind's preparations for his daughter's wedding. Another skirmish is reported to have taken place near Sri Hargobindpur shortly after.

In 1631, following the recapture of two horses which the Mughals had previously taken from the Guru's followers, there was further trouble. The horses are said to have been the gift of Sikhs from Afghanistan and were being taken to the Guru when they were seized by Mughal troops from Lahore. They were retaken by the Guru's servant, Bidhi Chand. Following this incident the Guru decided it would be wiser to retire to the relative security of the wasteland to the south. There he encountered a Mughal force at Gurusar in the area of Nabha and a number of men on each side were killed. Yet another engagement occurred at Kartarpur after Painda Khan, his hitherto trusted Muslim follower, changed sides and was killed in the ensuing fight.

Although these conflicts are depicted in most modern accounts as mighty battles displaying conspicuous bravery, one is entitled to assume that these are cases of exaggeration. A combination of disturbed circumstances in the Punjab together with the accession of growing numbers of typically turbulent Jats to the Guru's Panth provides a sufficient explanation for the conflicts which evidently took place, and there is no need to magnify them into full-scale battles. The impression that the Panth attracted growing numbers of Jats and that many of them brought their unruly ways with them is an assumption, but it seems an eminently reasonable one.

Certainly the few sources available testify to the adherence of Jat

followers, and if they were notable more for their steadfast loyalty to their leader and for their capacity to fight rather than for the practice of *nām simaran*, who is to be surprised? Village people in the Punjab have always been like this and it would come as a considerable surprise to learn that the Jats in the early seventeenth century were any different. We can accept therefore that, during the time of Guru Hargobind, the Panth attracted significantly larger numbers; that these people were overwhelmingly from the villages; and that panthic membership was a matter of loyalty to the leader rather than deep awareness of the teachings of the divine Name. In the somewhat disturbed circumstances of the time, the rural people were bound to be involved in conflict with Mughal troops; and if a sizeable number of these rural folk should have been tied to a single leader, that leader would certainly have had his fair share of trouble with the Mughal authorities.

Because this share of trouble was growing increasingly serious, Guru Hargobind abandoned Amritsar and moved to Kiratpur on the edge of the Shivalik hills. There he remained until his death in 1644. Deaths which occurred in his family, compounded by disaffection, created serious problems concerning the next Guru. Hargobind had married three wives and had a family of six children, five of whom were sons. The oldest son, Gurditta – evidently marked out to succeed his father – was by reputation strongly inclined towards the Udasi panth¹² and as such would have introduced the Sikhs to the ways of asceticism. Just what difference this might have made was never to be discovered, for Gurditta predeceased his father in 1638.

His other sons had either similarly predeceased him (as with Atal Rai, whose multi-storeyed memorial stands adjacent to the Golden Temple) or for various reasons were thought unsuitable. Tegh Bahadur was thought to be too withdrawn, or so Sikh tradition reports. (His later selection as the ninth Guru casts some doubt on this tradition.) Dhir Mal, the elder son of Gurditta, was believed to be hostile to the interests of the Panth and so was similarly excluded. As the progenitor of the line of Kartarpur Sodhis,¹³ this elder son of Gurditta has also been the object of obscure tradition, but orthodox tradition seems clearly to brand him as unsuited to the rank of Guru. Har Rai (or Hari Rai), the younger son of Gurditta, was deemed the suitable

candidate, and so became the seventh Guru at his grandfather's death in 1644.

Guru Har Rai

At Guru Har Rai's succession the Panth retired into obscurity for at least twenty-five years. Official disfavour continued to be shown towards the leader of these worrisome rural folk, and within a year of his succession Har Rai was obliged to leave Kiratpur and withdraw further into the Shivalik hills. The Raja of Bilaspur provided him with shelter, and for much of the remainder of his period as Guru until his death in 1661 he lived in a village near the Shivalik town of Sirmur.

Evidently Guru Har Rai was a person of very gentle disposition, for the Sikh traditions (which, significantly, are considerably fewer concerning him) number two stories that emphasize this feature. One anecdote tells of his distress when, walking in a field, he accidentally brushed a flower with his clothing and broke its stem. Full of remorse, he thereafter always walked through fields with his clothing tucked out of the way. The second anecdote tells how the Guru (like his grandfather before him) liked hunting, but never if it involved the death of living creatures. Instead of killing his quarry, he snared them alive and kept them in a large zoo or aviary. This second anecdote is a difficult story to believe, but it does tell us something about the Guru's personality and about the impact he made upon his followers. Guru Har Rai certainly enjoyed the continuing support and reverence of his father's Sikhs, but the life he led was a quiet one and most of the time he gave little trouble to the Mughal authorities on the plains.

Just what happened to the Panth during this period is exceedingly difficult to tell. Guru Har Rai is said to have made periodic tours of the plains and some notable families in the Malwa area date their firm allegiance from this time (as, for example, the family which eventually produced the princely rulers of Patiala, Jind and Nabha). We can cautiously believe that, in the Malwa area at least, the growth in numbers continued. It is possible, however, that in Doaba and particularly in Majha there would have been a decline in support as many of the people, cut off from all effective contact with their Guru, let

their allegiance lapse.¹⁴ We just do not know. The history of the Panth during this period is obscure to say the least.

The same must be said for the *masands* during the same period. The *masands*, it will be remembered, were the Guru's representatives in the scattered *sangats* or congregations of the Panth. By the time of Guru Gobind Singh they had developed an unhealthy appetite for independence and some were corruptly keeping what they had collected in the Guru's name. Guru Gobind Singh's time is still fifty years away, and approximately sixty years had passed since the *masands* were first instituted. We are, in other words, a little over half-way through their history and we may assume that the tenuous control the Guru could exercise (particularly in the Majha area) would have encouraged them to think in independent terms. This, however, is mere assumption.

One further anecdote is frequently told of Guru Har Rai, one which explains why the position of Guru passed to his infant second son, Har Krishan, instead of to his older first child, Ram Rai. Guru Har Rai, late in his career, developed a friendship with Dara Shikoh, the elder son of the Emperor Shahjahan. If it was not an actual friendship, at least it was a connection of some kind, and one that led Dara Shikoh to appeal for assistance to the Guru when he was defeated by Aurangzeb in the struggle for the throne. When the war of succession was over, the successful Aurangzeb turned his attention to those who had assisted his rival and Guru Har Rai was summoned to Delhi to give an account of himself.

Instead the Guru sent his elder son, Ram Rai, who proved (according to Sikh tradition) to be the perfect sycophant. When challenged by Aurangzeb to explain an *Adi Granth* reference to *milīf musulmān* ('the earth formed from the bodies of Muslims') which the emperor considered slighting, Ram Rai claimed that the words were really *milīf beīmān* ('the earth formed from the bodies of faithless people').¹⁵ On hearing this, Guru Har Rai declared that Ram Rai should never see his father's face again and should not succeed to the position of Guru. There is no support for this tradition other than tradition itself and it must be assumed that Ram Rai fell out of favour for other reasons. What they may have been are impossible to know with certainty, though it is likely that they involved the Mughals, whose preferred successor was Ram Rai. He received land in Dehra Dun from the

Mughals and evidently attracted a following which regarded him as Guru. Obviously relations with the orthodox line were far from satisfactory, but the actual cause remains hidden.

Guru Har Krishan

With Ram Rai disinherited, the choice of Guru fell upon Har Rai's second son, a child of six at his father's death. Soon after receiving the title in 1661, Guru Har Krishan (or Hari Krishan) was summoned to Delhi and there he lived until his early death in 1664. Just what he was doing in Delhi continues the tale of obscurity which covers most of the mid-seventeenth-century Panth. It is, however, certain that he was in Delhi (there is unanimity on this point) and that he died there from smallpox.

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In just over a century the Panth of Guru Nanak had travelled a considerable distance. At the death of the second Guru, Angad, in 1552 it was still the loosely organized fellowship of Sikhs which had gathered around Guru Nanak. The third Guru, Amar Das, realized that tighter organization was needed and reintroduced into the Nanak-panth some of the traditional rituals of Hindu tradition. A collection of sacred hymns was compiled at his direction and a rudimentary structure of preachers was established. This pattern was sustained by Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjan, the former adding to it a system of deputies (the *masands*) and the latter a formalized sacred scripture. Under the sixth Guru, Hargobind, the Panth radically shifted direction. The Mughal rulers were proving hostile and in order to protect itself the Panth took up arms under the direct leadership of the Guru. During the time of the seventh and eighth Gurus, the emphasis on armed conflict receded, but the Panth remained aware that danger could recur. With the ninth Guru that danger did indeed reappear.

THE LATER GURUS

Tradition takes over again when Guru Har Krishan pronounces who will succeed him as Guru. His dying words were the cryptic *Bābā Bakālā*, and from this pronouncement it was assumed that the ninth Guru would be found in the village of Bakala (between Amritsar and the Beas river).

Guru Tegh Bahadur

Legend has it that twenty-two claimants to the title converged on Bakala, creating a considerable problem for the bewildered Sikhs. Their difficulty was overcome by the merchant Makhana Shah, who during a storm at sea had vowed to give five hundred gold mohurs to the 'true Guru' if his life should be spared. Arriving for this purpose in Bakala, he was confronted by twenty-two claimants to the title of Guru and so decided he would lay one (or two) mohurs before each claimant. The authentic Guru would doubtless request the remainder. Sure enough, Tegh Bahadur asked for the balance of the promised gift and Makhana Shah, rushing up to the rooftop, proclaimed that he had located the true Guru.

This is legend, though a very attractive one. A more likely situation was a contest between the followers of Dhir Mal and those of Tegh Bahadur. It is true that this is more guesswork based upon the nearness of Dhir Mal's abode, his known enmity, and the fact that his descendants acted as Gurus right up to the twentieth century. Dhir Mal could well have attached *masands* to his cause, and in the absence of the legitimate Guru in Simmur those *masands* from the Majha and Doaba regions may have supported him.

It should be clear, however, that this is supposition and not proven fact. Tegh Bahadur was in some way nominated to succeed Guru Har

Krishan and in some way he was able to sustain his claim to be regarded as the legitimate heir. The appointment was presumably disputed by the Minas and by the followers of Dhir Mal and Ram Rai. Tegh Bahadur's supporters were, however, able to sustain his position. Leaving Bakala to escape the hostility of his enemies, he retired to Kiratpur on the edge of the Shivalik hills. Soon afterwards he moved to the village of Makhoval, a short distance along the Shivaliks from Kiratpur.

This was in 1665. In the same year Guru Tegh Bahadur departed for the east on a lengthy tour. Just why he went is another matter of conjecture, although most traditional sources declare it a missionary journey. Some claim that he went to visit Sikh *saints* and others suggest he left the Punjab to escape the attentions of his disaffected kinsmen. Whatever the reason (and all the reasons may well have applied), he travelled as far as Assam in eastern India before retracing his steps.

On the way out his wife had been left at Patna in Bihar as her pregnancy was too far advanced for her to continue the journey. There in Patna, in December 1666, the future Guru Gobind Singh was born. (Although the actual date in December is disputed, the 22nd seems most likely.) The sequence of Guru Tegh Bahadur's travels is uncertain, but the birth probably took place while he was further east. On his travels he visited several Sikh *saints* in Assam and Bengal, which had been established by small groups of Punjabi Khatri.

The Guru visited Patna on his return from Assam and remained there for an indeterminate period (anything from one to three years). He then returned to the Punjab where, according to Sikh tradition, Aurangzeb was busy with his policy of persecution. It is very difficult to sort fact from fiction in the situation that now presents itself. Sikh sources say one thing, Muslim sources another. Aurangzeb has been depicted as a vigorous and vicious persecutor, a reputation which shows increasing signs of serious exaggeration as time passes. On the other hand, he seems clearly to have been determined to protect the interests of Sunni orthodoxy and took measures to effect this. The two versions are as follows.

The Muslim view is that the Sikh Guru had gathered around him a large body of men and was moving around the Punjab levying forced

exactions from all who opposed him.¹ A direction was sent to the Punjab ordering him to Delhi to answer these charges. He was, however, nowhere to be found, and for this reason a warrant for his arrest was issued. With a body of supporters he was apprehended in Agra, taken to Delhi, and executed there for his misdemeanours. The charge was lawlessness and on this charge he was adjudged guilty.

The Sikh account is very different, or rather the accepted Sikh account is. According to this version, Aurangzeb was determined to convert the Brahmans of Kashmir to Islam and vigorous steps were taken. A deputation consisting of five hundred Brahmans came to Guru Tegh Bahadur and begged him to intervene on their behalf. While the Guru was considering their request, his son spoke up, declaring that such a request needed a person of signal piety. Who could fulfil the task better than his father? Guru Tegh Bahadur accepted this advice and told the Brahmans to communicate a challenge to Aurangzeb. If the emperor could persuade him to become a Muslim, they too would convert to Islam. If, however, he refused, then they should be freed from the obligation to do so.

This challenge was communicated to the emperor and the Guru was invited down to Delhi to put it to the test. He proceeded there by means of a circuitous route, visiting *saints* along the way. In Delhi he refused to meet the emperor's demand that he should embrace Islam and was accordingly executed in Chandni Chowk.² This summary, needless to say, does no justice to the anguish and agony of the incident in Sikh reports. Few, if any, episodes in Sikh history or Sikh tradition have received such graphic and heart-rending treatment. The Sikhs had received their second martyr Guru and the second one, like the first, was a victim of the vicious and heartless Mughals. *Bachitar Nāṭak*, attributed to Guru Gobind Singh himself, expresses the grief of the Sikhs as follows:

For the cause of truth he performed this deed, giving his head in obedience to his resolve.

Bogus tricks are for counterfeit conjurors, deceits which God's people must spurn.

Dashing himself on the ruler of Delhi, he departed for God's abode.

Such was the achievement of Tegh Bahadur, the feat which he alone could perform.

At the death of Tegh Bahadur lamentation swept the earth.

From below came anguished wailing, from heaven triumphant cries!

The two lines which precede this quotation from *Bachitar Nāṭak* could conceivably have given rise to the orthodox Sikh interpretation of the death of Guru Tegh Bahadur.

For their frontal mark and their sacred thread he wrought a great deed in this Age of Darkness.

This he did for the sake of the pious, silently giving his head.

These lines make no reference to the Brahmins of Kashmir, but it is easy to see how the connection could be drawn.

There is, however, an alternative Sikh tradition, both old and significant. Chaupa Singh's *Rahit-nāmā*, dated near the middle of the eighteenth century, makes no mention of the Kashmiri Brahmins. According to this source, Guru Tegh Bahadur was summoned to Delhi as a result of complaints laid against him by Dhir Mal. These he succeeded in answering and he was allowed to return to the Punjab. He was, however, recalled to Delhi, and when he did not go his arrest followed. The source (the *Chaupa Singh Rahit-nāmā*) is relatively early, dating from shortly before the middle of the eighteenth century, and is significant because it was written by a Sikh who was also a Brahmin. Normally this family of Brahmins lost no opportunity to exalt other members of the same caste.

Whatever the explanation, there can be no doubt concerning the effect of the Guru's death on the Panth. The Mughal administration was identified as the greatest of its enemies. The effect on the Guru's son and successor can also be imagined. With his accession the Panth was destined to undergo the most momentous event in all Sikh history.

Guru Gobind Singh: early life

Sikh tradition reaches a climax in the execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur. A mighty storm swept the city. At its height two low-caste Sikhs stole the body away, one of them burning it by placing the decapitated corpse in his hut and then setting fire to the whole structure. The head was carried up to Makhoval, where it was humbly laid before the new Guru, the child Guru Gobind. Amid many tears, it was cremated on a sandalwood pyre. The new Guru then asked how many Sikhs had given their lives for him and in reply was informed that there were only three. All others were able to conceal their identity because they bore no outward sign of being a Sikh. The Guru then resolved that all should bear obvious symbols such that a single Sikh would stand out in a crowd of thousands.

This is the traditional answer to the most fundamental of Sikh questions, the reason why Guru Gobind Singh summoned his Sikhs on that most fateful day in their history and the cause for those most significant of commandments which he issued to them. The founding of the Khalsa constitutes the most important event in Sikh history and it will later be dealt with in greater detail. First, though, there are the earlier events of Guru Gobind Singh's life, setting the founding of the Khalsa in its appropriate context. What follows is the life of Guru Gobind Singh, much of it as reported in tradition but with important backing in some areas from authentic research. It falls into six periods: as a child and young adult; the Shivalik wars; the founding of the Khalsa; the assault on Anandpur; the escape to southern Punjab; and the final period in association with the Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah.

Gobind Das was the original name of the tenth Guru, at least so it seems. Muslim sources generally refer to him as Gobind Rai, but documents issued by his father, Guru Tegh Bahadur, give his name as Gobind Das. Gobind Das was the only child of his elderly father, born in Patna while Guru Tegh Bahadur was making his visit to eastern India. According to *Bachitar Nāṭak*, he was summoned to take birth from performing pre-birth austerities on the slopes of Hem Kunt near the mythological Mount Sumeru.

And now my own story I tell,
How from rigorous austerities I was summoned;
Called from the heights of Hem Kunt
Where the seven peaks so grandly pierce the sky. [6:1]

Bachitar Nāṭak was traditionally written by the Guru himself and much effort has gone into the attempt to identify the site of his pre-birth austerities in the Himalayas. The fact that the location is described in purely mythical terms makes this a rather doubtful proposition, but a site was nevertheless discovered in the Garhwal region during the early 1930s and during the summer months it attracts many Sikh pilgrims.

From Patna the child Gobind Das was brought to the Punjab to live in his father's Shivalik hills headquarters of Makhval. When he received his father's head he was only nine years of age. Those responsible for his guidance apparently took their duties seriously. Chief among his guides was his mother's brother, Kirpal. As the Guru grew to manhood, Kirpal evidently assumed the principal position within the Panth, encouraging his young charge to assume the martial style previously adopted by his grandfather Guru Hargobind. It was Kirpal who selected the site of Anandpur, only a short distance from Makhval but in strategic terms a much better location.

In this way the Guru grew to manhood. These are actually years of almost total obscurity. Plainly, though, as he grew to manhood the Guru also grew to complete mastery of the Panth he had inherited. Devout Sikhs have represented him in the following terms:

Every description of Guru Gobind Singh's person delineates him as a very handsome, sharp-featured, tall and wiry man, immaculately and richly dressed as a prince. Decked with a crest upon his lofty, cone-shaped turban with a plume suspended behind from the top, he was ever armed with various weapons, including a bow and a quiver of arrows, a sword, a discus, a shield and a spear. His choice steed was of bluish-grey colour and on his left hand always perched a white hawk when he sat on the throne or went out hunting.³

This is the Guru Gobind Singh of popular art and imagination, and a very powerful impression it continues to make, both consciously and unconsciously. It is as Lord of the Khalsa that popular Sikh taste

reveres him. He is always young and upright, he always bears various weapons, and he is frequently clothed in the most gorgeous of raiment. A common name for him is Kalgidhar, bearer of the plume which invariably surmounts his royal turban. Baba Nanak fulfils the role of one rapt in the most profound meditation. Guru Gobind Singh, by contrast, depicts he who is strong in battle, ever ready to fight for his people's rights and to resist those who deny justice. He also practised the art of poetry, such works as *Jāp Sāhib* and *Ākāl Ustat* dating from this period. Some of the Sikh traditions also credit the Guru with a retelling of the tales from Hindu mythology which appear in the Dasam Granth, stories such as those from the *Chandi Charitra*, the *Chandi kī Vār* and the *Chaubīs Avatār*.

In the first decade following the death of his father, Guru Gobind Singh received further training in the use of arms and also in the literary and religious ideals which had such a powerful effect on him. Hunting wild animals was a particular pleasure for the young Guru and the expeditions are graphically described in *Bachitar Nāṭak*. At the annual festivals of Baisakhi and Divali, the Sikhs assembled in large numbers, and as they were commonly armed, their presence gave the impression that the Guru's centre of Makhval had become a fortified camp.

In 1685 the ruler of Sirmur, one of Makhval's neighbours, invited the Guru to stay in his territory. This was apparently because Sirmur recognized the growing strength of his young neighbour and wanted his support in a threatened war with another of the hill states, Garhwal. Guru Gobind Singh accepted the invitation and moved to the strategic site of Paunta on the banks of the Jamuna river. This was on the border of Sirmur and Garhwal. A fort was built in Paunta and the Guru continued to strengthen his following. Eventually, in 1688, Garhwal invaded Sirmur with his hill allies and aided by mercenaries. Guru Gobind Singh faced their army at Bhangani.

In the battle of Bhangani, which is vividly described in *Bachitar Nāṭak*, Guru Gobind Singh suffered some losses, but his opponents suffered far more. The result was a victory for the Guru and marked him as the strongest power among the hill chieftains. Sirmur received no thanks for the victory, for Sirmur had left him to fight unaided. The Guru abandoned his fort in Paunta and after returning to