



Organization of Sikh Misls Under Sarbat Khalsa in Punjab

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Abstract

Misl is a term which originated in the eighteenth-century history of the Sikhs to describe a unit or brigade of Sikh warriors and the territory acquired by it in the course of its campaign of conquest following the weakening of the Mughal authority in the country. Although the misls were unequal in strength, and each misl attempted to expand its territory and access to resources at the expense of others, they acted in unison in relation to other states. The misls held biannual meetings of their legislature, the Sarbat Khalsa in Amritsar. Each Misl was made up of members of soldiers, whose loyalty was given to the Misl's leader. A Misl could be composed of a few hundred to tens of thousands soldiers. The Sikh Misls had four different classes of administrative divisions. The patadari, misaldari, tabadari, and jagirdari were the different systems of land-tenuere used by the misls, and land granted by the misl left the responsibility of establishing law and order to the owner of the land. The land under the direct administration of the chief of the misl was known as the sardari and the tabadari and jagirdari systems used land directly given by the chief from the sardari. The patadari and misaldari systems formed the basis of a misl, while tabadari and jagirdari lands would only be created after large acquisitions of land. The type of system that was used in an area depended on the importance of the chief Sardar of the area to the rest of the misl.

Keywords:

Misl, Sarbat Khala, Guru Granth, Gurmata, Diwali, Baisakhi, Sardar, Sarbat-Khalsa, Panth, Akal-Takht, Rakhi, Thenedar, lambardar, Patwari, Panchyat.

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There is much controversy regarding the nature of the Misls, Cunningham describes the Misls as “theocratic confederate feudalism.” While explaining it, “Cunningham says that it was theocratic because ‘God was their helper and only judge’, ‘Community of faith or object was their moving principle’ and the devotion to the Steel of Govind was their material instrument. Besides, twice a year they met at the sacred city of Amritsar and there, before the Guru Granth, used to draw plans of common action. Secondly, it is confederate, because these Misls were not completely independent. They were loosely knit together by the institution of Sarbat Khalsa, a sort of Central assembly, which in times of danger of a common enemy controlled the foreign policy of all the Misls. Cunningham further remarks that the Misl organization was feudal in character. Explaining it, he says, “The obvious feudal or military notion of a chain of dependence was acknowledged as the law and the federated Chiefs partitioned their joint conquests among themselves and divided their respective shares in the same manner among their own leaders of bands, while these again sub-divided their portions among their own dependents, agreeably to the general custom of sub - infeudation.”

But A.C. Bannerjee says that the Sikh Misl organization was not a theocratic confederate feudalism. The Misls were neither governed strictly on the principles of Sikh religion, nor did the Sikh priests hold complete sway in the Misl polity. It was also not feudal in nature, as feudalism cannot exist apart from monarchy. Besides, the subordinate Sikh chief showed no military or fiscal obligation to their chief. They could easily transfer their services. Thus, the Misl, as A.C. Bannerjee says, “really formed a confederacy which was democratic in composition and religious in its cohesive principles.” In other words, the Sikh Misls were confederacies or associations of warriors united by the ties of religion. The dominant feature of their organization was equality.

The supreme organization of the Sikh Misls was the Sarbat Khalsa which conducted its business through resolutions called Gurumatas. This word, ‘Gurumata’ consists of two Punjabi words ‘Guru’ and ‘Mata’. ‘Guru’ means ‘spiritual teacher’ and ‘Mata’ means ‘the advice of the ‘Guru’. After the death of Guru Gobind Sikh, the Sikhs from different parts of the country used to meet at Amritsar on certain festive occasions, such as Dussehera, Diwali and Baisakhi and, there at Akal Takht in the presence of the Holi Granth, they used to discuss the common plan of action for the entire community and that meeting of the entire Sikh community at Amritsar was called the “Sarbat Khalsa”. The decisions of the “Sarbat Khalsa” were embodied in the form of resolutions or ‘Gurumatas’. Gradually this procedure developed into an institution. The Sikh Misldars, after they had occupied the Punjab, began to meet regularly at Amritsar, generally twice a year (on Baisakhi and Diwali) to transact there all business concerning the entire Sikh community.

The function of this institution of the Gurumata was political, deliberative and judicial. One of its main functions was to choose a leader of the Khalsa Army, the Dal Khalsa, and to draw a plan of military operations against their common enemies. Sometimes, they would meet and discuss the plan and measures to spread their faith. They would also deliberate to end the private feuds of the Sardars of the different Misls. Sometimes, the Gurumata acted as a judicial body and decided cases of big Sardars and even cases of disputed succession.

There is no conclusive proof, yet it is alleged that the first Gurumata was held by Guru Gobind Singh. The last Gurumata, however, was called by Ranjit Singh in 1805. This does not mean that the Sikhs ceased to meet together after 1805. It’s simply means that during the period of the Misls, *i.e.* from 1748 to 1805, most of the political decisions concerning the entire Khalsa Community were made in a regular assembly

of Sikh Chiefs which met at Akal Takht once or twice a year. The 'Gurumata', or collective decisions by the Sikhs, however, continued to be adopted whenever the Khalsa faced any serious religious or social problem.

The institution of the Gurumata had no regular machinery to enforce its decisions. Nor was there any separate force maintained by the Sarbat *Khalsa* to make the chiefs carry out its decisions. The sanction behind the Gurumata was religious. All the heads of the Misl were the devotees of Nanak and the worshippers of the Guru Granth ; and whatever they swore in the presence of the Guru Granth at their most sacred place, the Akal Takht, Amritsar, they would never dare to violate it. Besides, no single Sardar, howsoever powerful, could think of defying the will of the whole community-the Panth.

At the head of each Misl was the Sardar or Misaldar. He was a petty sovereign and absolutely supreme in the internal matters of the Misl. But generally, the Sardar did not interfere in the day-to-day life of his followers. Rather, the latter enjoyed a good deal of autonomy. A follower of a smaller Sardar serving under the head of a Misl could easily leave him and seek service another under Misl. If a number of Misaldars were engaged in any action they would, after a victory, divided the booty among themselves on the basis of their men on the same basis. The Misl administration was mainly a village administration. The unit of administration was the village which was like a small republic, enjoying a good deal of autonomy in local matters. Its important functionaries were the Lambardar, Patwari, Chawkidar, *etc.* But it was the Panchayats which maintained perfect justice and equity in the village. The Panchayat's decisions were obeyed not because it had any force at its disposal, but because it could put social pressure on the people inhabiting the village under its charge. Besides, the villagers held the Panchayats in great esteem and the common belief among them was Panchayat men Parmeshwar (God acts through Panchayats).

The villages comprising a Misl were of two types-the villages which were directly administered, and the villages which were only taken under protection, *i.e.* governed through the Rakhi system; guarantee of protection. From the villages directly under the Misl, the Sardar used to charge one-fifth of the produce of the irrigated land and one-fourth from the rainfed (barani) soil as land revenue. Besides, for the convenience of the farmer, this revenue was collected at the time of two harvests-Rabi and Kharif. A village under the Rakhi system was to place itself under a Sardar who was to afford it full protection "against plunder, theft or molestation of any other kind either from among themselves or from their neighbors and government troops". In return, the village had to pay one-fifth of the estimated revenue of the village in two installments in May and October, *i.e.* at the end of each of the two harvests, *i.e.* Rabi and Kharif. That was called the Rakhi or Jamadari system.

The Sikhs charged one-fifth of the estimated income of the village, the motive of the villagers in paying this 'black mail' money was to save themselves from their repeated attacks. They thought that if they did not pay some handsome money, those bands would attack them with greater fury and cause much greater loss to them.

Besides the land revenue or the Rakhi, the Sikh Sardars raised money in many other ways. The war booty was an important source of income. Besides, sometimes they exacted tributes from the petty chiefs. In addition to this, heavy duties, "were levied on merchandise by each chief as it passed through his dominions" the shawl-trade, the horse-trade and the arms-trade yielded a good deal of income to the Sikh confederacies.

The Sikhs, during the period of Misls, did not possess a fully developed and up-to-date judicial system. They had no definite code of law to guide them in dispensing justice to the people. They were mainly guided by the old customs and general maxims of justice, as embodied in their sacred books. As there was

no well-defined law, judges exercised a good deal of discretion and sometimes even acted arbitrarily. Besides, most of the Sikh Sardars regarded justice not as a sacred duty, but as a source of income, and at every step they would raise money. When a plaintiff, particularly in a case of theft, wanted to file a suit, he was to pay the magistrate or Thanedar, a sum of money equal to one-fourth of the value of the article and on the recovery of the stolen property, he was again to pay some Nazrana. In other cases, too, offenders were fleeced. In case a man was found guilty, he was to pay heavy Jurmana or fine; if he was acquitted, he was to pay Shukrana or gratitude money; and if the trial was prolonged, during the period of trial, he was to pay money called Taj-Khana.

As the Misl administration was generally the village administration, the most common court of justice was the village Panchayat. The Panchayats maintained perfect justice and equity in the villages and generally strove to bring reconciliation between the parties involved in the dispute. They, however, enjoyed limited jurisdiction and could not give any serious punishment. But the general reputation of the Panchayat was good. Above the Panchayat was the Sardar's court which could try all types of cases-civil and criminal-and could give any kind of punishment-fine, imprisonment, mutilation of limbs or even give the right of self-redress or 'Gaha' to the wronged party. The death punishment was rarely given. Sometimes, certain cases, particularly those in which the chief of the Misl was involved or in which the general interests of the Sikh religion were concerned, were taken to the assembly of the *Sarbat khalsa*.

The 'Gaha' like the 'Lax talionis' of the Romans or self-redress was a very common feature of the judicial system of the Misaldars. For example, in cases of highway robbery, if the Sardar in whose village or territory the offence occurred, delayed or refused to make any restitution, the aggrieved party had the right to attack the territory in which the robbery had been committed and drive away several hundred head of cattle, or the aggrieved party could retaliate in any other way it liked. Similarly, in case of murders, the murders were handed over to the relations of the deceased to be lynched.

It is very difficult to determine the exact strength of the army of the Sikh Misls. Some Misls, *e.g.* the bhangi Misl, maintained as many as twenty-thousand soldiers, whereas the smaller Misls like Nakais and Nihangs had only three to five thousands horsemen. Some of the Europeans who visited the Punjab in the latter half of the eighteenth century have given varying accounts of the total military strength of the Sikh Misls. We can safely conclude that the Sikhs throughout the Misl period had more than one lakh soldiers and towards the close of the eighteenth century their army had enormously increased. The great mass of the Sikhs was horsemen and they were known for their effective use of matchlock, when mounted. The Sikh soldier considered it below his dignity to fight without a horse. It is why the infantry was not an important branch of the army of the Misl and was only used to garrison a few forts which the Misaldars had in their possession. The Sikhs also did not depend much on heavy artillery. In fact, one of the greatest difficulties that they experienced while fighting against the Afghans and the Mughals was the dearth of field-guns. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, however, the Misaldars had captured a few heavy field-guns and had, thus, acquired the position to give a pitched battle to the enemy.

The Sikh soldiers were given no training in drill and discipline. They were not taught how to march and how to make plans for offence or defense. Besides, the Sardars had not divided their army into regular regiments or companies of uniform size. The Sikh soldiers moved in bands of undefined numbers. This serious shortcoming, however, was compensated by their religious fervor and single-minded devotion to the Panth; and it was that factor which ultimately led to their repeated victories. Regarding the weapons that the Sikh soldiers used in those days, the most popular among them were swords, spears, daggers, matchlocks and Sabres. They were particularly expert in handling the matchlock and the sabre. As to their methods of warfare, they generally adopted the guerilla tactics. They would not draw lines or give pitched

fighting.

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