

Origin of Nishan Sahib: The Sikh Banner

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“ਗੁਰ ਕੈ ਸਬਦੇ ਦਰਿ ਨੀਸਾਣੈ ॥” [SGGS: 1330]

The edict of the Guru is your Pass-word.

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THE GURU'S WORD IS THE IDENTITY to go to the Lord's presence. This is the start of the spiritual domain. One of the pass-words – *identity*, at the worldly level is the flag. In the Sikh World, it has spiritual undertones, commands a high level of respect and is called *Nishan Sahib*. Particularly at Gurdwara Paunta Sahib, place of the Tenth Guru, the Sangat (Congregation) ambulates around it singing devotional hymns and bows to it. The Sikhs consider this banner auspicious and revere it as something (A fold) of the Guru. It links with the Guru and gives directions to his abode (Gurdwara). It is the symbol of unity, purity to following the Sikh ethics), sovereignty of a Sikh and his faith. It shows that the Sikh is always in high morale, his thinking is lofty, for every thing he looks up to one God only and is always united with Him.

A gently fluttering Nishan Sahib is a call to all those turned away and rejected by others, “Come on. You are most welcome, Here is food for you, a place for you to rest and of selfless service, without any discrimination of faith, caste, color, status, sex or country.”

A flag essentially, is a piece of cloth or other material, tied to one end of a pole, to symbolize a faith, country, rank, an organization, a discipline, or a principle. The flag of every denomination has its own distinct color, shape, design, symbol and of other details to make it distinct to represent the physical body it stands for (Country, rank, group, faith, organization) and to proclaim its philosophy.

Now, plastic-fiber cloth and plastic sheets are in common use to make usual flags. Paper is often used to manufacture them for some celebrations. The pole may be wood, bamboo, reed, cane, metal or plastic. So far, the Nishan Sahib is always made out of cloth, its pole is mostly bamboo, except the permanent ones which are of metal.

Most of the flags are rectangular. The Hindu religious flags are mostly triangular. The Nishan Sahib is always triangular with its vertical axis at 90 degrees to its horizontal base. The top makes an acute angle with the vertical axis. The top and the base meet at an acute angle at the tip to which a black pompom is tied with a free length of black thread. It helps gentle fluttering of the flag. At the top of the pole is fixed a Khanda (Double edged sword). The pole is covered with matching colored cloth. The flag is stitched at its base to the cover of the pole and both of these make one unit.

COLOR: The Nishan Sahib is of saffron (Zafrani) color. The Hindu religious flags are “Bhagwa” (Geruwa, brick-red, diluted blood), red or white. Mohammedans color is green. The saffron color stands for courage and sacrifice. Saffron was perhaps

adopted from the Rajput traditions, possibly, like the epithet “Singh” to the Sikh names. Amongst the Rajputs, the ritual of *Johar* (Sati-self-immolation of wife after death of her husband) was performed in the yellow clothes (Dr. Man Singh Nirankari). Green is for productivity (of the earth), growth and plenty. White and yellow too, denote purity.

POLITICAL RECOGNITION: The Sikh color (Saffron) was taken into the Indian flag (Editorial, “*Akali*” 24th December, 1921. In 1929, Pandit Moti Lal Nehru and other members of the Congress party accepted the condition of the Sikh-color in the Indian flag, proposed by Baba Kharak Singh. On March 25 and 26, 1931, in the Congress Conference at Karachi, saffron – the Sikh color, was accepted by the flag-Committee. Master Tara Singh was present in that session. Reference, Dr. Harjinder Singh Dilgir. [*World Sikh News*, June 30, 1995]. It proves the acceptance of the ideology of the Sikhs that a Nishan Sahib represents their politics, as well as their faith.

SYMBOL: The Nishan Sahib has < *Ikoankar* (God is one and omnipresent) on one and may have Ç Khanda-Kirpan-Chakkar (Double edged sword, two swords and sharp-edged circular sharp weapon) on its other side. Both the symbols are done in black. Dr. Taran Singh mentions it as blue color (*Sikh Dharam De Rahas Te Ramaz*). The presence of any one symbol out of the above two, will be sufficient to convey that it represents the Sikhs.

CONCEPT: A flag represents loyalty in unity and distinction as well as uniformity of the philosophy of the group it stands for. It lays right and claim to the territory and indicates presence and possession of the group whose flag is there. It announces freedom of the body and mind, individually, pride and sovereignty of the people who bear it.

NISHAN SAHIB: The Nishan Sahib represents the Sikhs in their body, mind and action – a promise to their freedom, physical purity and spiritual elevation through their belief in one God, faith in their Gurus, as well as Guru Granth Sahib and in the edicts of the *Amrit* (Eternal life giving Nectar for initiation into the Sikh faith). It speaks loudly of the unity of the Sikhs, their faith, beliefs, high morale, their honest conduct, hard work, truthfulness, “live and let live” attitude, forgive and forget policy, compassion and helpfulness to the needy.

KHANDA-CHAKKAR-KIRPAN: Ç It is hard to say any thing conclusive about the meaning of these “weapons”, because it all appears to be stretching the imagination and is hard to find any specific material about it, as far as I know. To some, the Khanda, like a numerical “1”, represents one God and to others the *Amrit*, which is prepared with it (Dr. Dilgir – reference given above. Naunehal Singh Grewal, *The Sikh Review* – June, 1995). The **CHAKKAR** may represent universality or eternity of God Factor – the mystique of the Almighty, humanity (Dr. Dilgir, referred above), universe and the life- cycle – the Cycle of birth and death.

KIRPAN: Two swords, one on each side, can be spiritual and temporal powers. It seems to be in line with the two swords, one of *Meeree* (Authority) and other of *Peeree* (spirituality) of the 6th Guru Hargobind. Mostly, at the Sikh Takhts (High Seats) especially, and at other Gurdwaras, these weapons are often seen arranged like Khanda-Kirpan-Chakkar. At all Takhts, the weapon used to be displayed on the

palanquins and it is only some time back that the holy Granth have been placed there (Dr. Nirankari).

TRIANGULAR SHAPE: Perhaps, the triangular shape has its own mystery like the Pyramids in Egypt. Triangle is generally believed to be a mystical-diagram pointing to the immortality, but in the Sikh faith, there is nothing secretive and all the teachings are open and clear. This shape perhaps, came as the natural outcome of the environment of the Hindu religious flags, as might have been the color as well. Triangular shape with its vertical axis perpendicular to the base, makes two flags out of one rectangular piece of material and so is economical to manufacture. This is not of much importance. The rectangular material easily tears up at its free flapping end.

PHUMAN (Pompom): It is a small black pompom attached to the apex of the flag through a length of a string. Maybe, it makes fluttering of the flag smooth in high wind and as well, enables it to flutter in low wind. Like their moving wheels, Tibetans think that each flutter of a flag is saying of their Mantar (*Mantra*) once, but there is nothing like this in the Sikh World. Is the pointed apex a finger towards one God? May be!

PHRERA: It is a blue cloth of short width and about three hands in length (From elbow to the tip of fingers – 18", is one hand). It is tied in its middle at the top where the end of the pole and the Khanda join. It leaves its two equal lengths free to wave. It reminds an incidence which will be taken up in the history of the Nishan Sahib.

HISTORY: It is generally accepted that the Nishan Sahib came into being at the time of the 6th Guru Hargobind Sahib. Nishan means a seal or stamp, i.e. a mark of identity. "Sahib" is added as respect, just like to other names of persons or places like Guru Gobind Singh Sahib, Anandpur Sahib. The flags are traced to the time immemorial, to the Hindu culture in India, civilization of China and to Egypt. Perhaps, the first flags were animal-heads on the poles, showing the bags of the hunters and human heads of the vanquished boasting the victory of the winners. Later, the animal skins were used to make flags (various Encyclopedias). The flags headed the armies and were put on the fighting vehicles, like chariots, as we see in the painting of the episodes of Mahabharata or Ramayana. Flags are there in the mythological and old historical paintings, too. Exact era of the advent of the flags can not be pinpointed. I did not find the required data anywhere.

When Jahangir confined Guru Ji to the fort at Gwalior, Baba Budha Ji and Bhai Gurdas Ji (Two well known Sikhs) organized morning processions carrying Nishan Sahib, at Amritsar, to express the resentment of the Sikhs, against it. After Guru Ji came back to Amritsar, these processions were continued in the *Parikrama* (Walkway) around the Golden Temple, to express their thanks to the Almighty. It was the start of the Sikh flag. There was no flag used by the Gurus, before this (See JMfw – Jhanda, *Mahankosh*, Kahn Singh).

The Sixth Guru fixed two flags at the place named Akal-Bunga (The place of the Divine), in front of the Akal-Takht. One flag is towards the Akal-Takht and other towards the Golden Temple. That towards Akal-Takht is one foot shorter than the other. It means that the temporal power should be under the reins of the spiritual authority. This has been affirmed by Professor Darshan Singh, ex. Singh Sahib (Head) of the Holy Akal-Takht. Dr. Madanjit Kaur, ex. Head of the Department of the Guru Nanak Studies and Dean of the Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, told me

that the measurements were taken with sextant, and what the Professor had claimed was true. The photographs taken by Mr. Gurinder Singh Khokar, my son, from different sides and at different levels were inconclusive.

In the Gurbani (Hymns in the Holy Book) the words like *Dhwja*, *Jhanda*, *Nishan*, meaning a flag, have been used. In an article “Nishan Sahib” : the Sikh Standard,” in ***The Sikh Review***, June 95, Sr. Naunehal Singh quotes –

ਜਿਸ ਧੀਰਜ ਧੁਰਿ ਧਵਲੁ ਧੁਜਾ ਸੇਤਿ ਬੈਕੁੰਠ ਬੀਣਾ ॥

[SGGS: 1393]

ਫੁਨਿ ਧੰਮ ਧੁਜਾ ਫਹਰੀਤਿ ਸਦਾ ਅਘ ਪੁੰਜ ਤਰੰਗ ਨਿਵਾਰਨ ਕਉ ॥

[SGGS: 1404]

ਕੁਲਿ ਸੋਢੀ ਗੁਰ ਰਾਮਦਾਸ ਤਨੁ ਧਰਮ ਧੁਜਾ ਅਰਜੁਨੁ ਹਰਿ ਭਗਤਾ ॥

[SGGS : 1407]

We have to keep in mind that the Gurbani is in poetry and similes have been used freely by the authors: Gurus, saints or Bhatts, it is difficult to conclude from this that the Gurus before Guru Hargobind, had the flags, white or of any other color. Dr. Grewal writes that it took 239 years for the Nishan Sahib to take its final shape by adding the Khanda to it (Reference, above).

According to Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, Guru Hargobind Ji (1595 – 1644 A.D.) first hoisted saffron colored Nishan Sahib with the emblem of Khanda, at a village in the police station Phagwara in the former Kapoorthala State (Unpublished article, Mr. Gurbachan Singh, New Jersey, U.S.A.). It needs a support of a reference.

Once the Udasis got the possession of the Golden Temple. Mahants Pritam Das and Santokh Das from Dera Brahm-Buta, fixed tall trunks of two trees and put Nishan Sahibs on them (1718). Perhaps, the color used was Bhagwa (Ocher Yellow). In 1784, one of them fell down in a storm and it was placed on one side of the bridge on the Holy lake. After Maharaja Ranjit Singh, two flags were hoisted again, one by Maharaja Sher Singh and other by Sardar Desa Singh of Majitha. Their poles were iron-pipes clad with gold covered copper sheet (Dr. Man Singh Nirankari).

The present day flag-poles are mostly very tall and they are iron-pipes held with steel-rope stays. Pulley, bucket and steel-rope are fixed to them for changing the worn out flags.

At the time of Guru Gobind Singh, the color of the Nishan Sahib was blue. In his battle of Anandpur in 1703, Bhai Man Singh, son of Bhai Jita Singh, who was a regular Nishan-Sahib bearer, was leading the Sikh force with a blue flag. He fell down wounded, and the flag also came down. At this, the Great Guru removed a piece from his Dastar (Short turban), tucked its one end into his regular turban and declared that the Phrera (A short length of cloth) would fly high ever. Tying a *Phrera* to a Nishan Sahib started since then. The Nihang leader displays it from his turban (Dr. Dilgir, referred to above).

The Nihangs maintain Guru Gobind Singh's tradition of the blue Nishan Sahib. There is no time period or mention in the history as to how and when the blue changed to saffron. Dr. Man Singh Nirankar tells, with reference to an English writer, that the flags at the Golden Temple were red, on one was written “Dhan Guru

Ramdas” and on other, “ੴ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਪ੍ਰਸਾਦਿ ॥” (*Ikoankar Satgur-parsad*). The red is the color of change, revolution and of celebration (Delight).

Sr. Manmohan Singh, disclosed to Dr. M. S. Nirankari that two Sikh army flags in the British museum at London, bear the symbol of Kartik – god of war, which is a peacock. It is clear that even in the era of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, this Khanda-symbol was not in existence or in use. In an article in *The Tribune*, Mona Puri wrote that “Khanda-Kirpan-Chakkar” is a very old symbol. Such a replica in stone is preserved in the museum at Madras. Its photograph is with the State Archives, Government of Punjab, Patiala.

The Khanda symbol Ç was perhaps designed for the Sikh army by the Britishers (Dr. M. S. Nirankari and Dr. Madanjit Kaur). The photocopy of two current Khanda-symbols used in the army, has been sent to me by Brigadier Pal Singh. One of it shows a Kirpan standing directly on the top of a Chakkar. In other, there is a lion inside a Chakkar. Dr. Madanjit Kaur checked photos of the coins and medals of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and did not find a Khanda-symbol on any one of them (Article by Sr. Manmohan Singh on the symbols, medals, seals and coins of Maharaja Ranjit Singh). Flag of Iran has a Khanda like emblem but it is the calligraphic representation of the Allah.

Dr. Dilgir (Refer above) writes that Khanda-symbol came in the time of Nirmalas, the color of the flag was blue, the Khanda-symbol was yellow and that the Khanda symbol was unanimously accepted by the Sikh Panth. No reference is available.

CONCLUSION: The Nishan Sahib is an open invitation to the travelers and others – one and all. It assures the comfort of free food, bed and bedding, to spend the night. He will have the benefit of uplifting his mind by a bonus of listening to *Asa Di Vaar* (Musical recitation of Gurbani) which is a morning-routine in the Gurdwaras.

Long time back, Sant Balwant Singh traveling at night, directed by the Nishan Sahib, went to a Gurdwara. The granthi Ji (Care taker) offered food, place to sleep and massaged the feet of the saint. On questioning, Bhai Ji (Granthi) said, “You have come to Guru Nanak’s house. See that Nishan Sahib! It calls and guarantees affectionate care, food and a place to rest” –

Jhoolte Nishan rahen Panth Maharaj ke.

May ever flutter the Banner of the Great Panth!

Anonymous

The revered Saffron Nishan Sahib is the pride of all those who believe in the Gurus’ Philosophy and they ever keep ready to offer their lives for its glory!

