THE KHALSA NAMIT:

The Sikh Identity Defined*

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Rahit: The Sikh Rahit is the code of discipline which all who enter the Khalsa order
must vow to observe . . .
Rahit-nāmā: A rahit-nama is a manual which records any version of the Rahit . . .
The Penguin Dictionary of Religions, pp. 265-66

Sikhs have been much in the news during the past year. Although reports have
been dominated by acts of violence, questions of custom, belief, history and aspirations
have inevitably been raised. One such issue has been the problem of distinguishing
Sikhs from Hindus, an elementary question which many seem able to answer without
hesitation. The mobs which assaulted Sikhs and their property in the days following
the assassination of Mrs Gandhi evidently had little difficulty with this particular problem,
and even the inexperienced foreigner commonly believes that a Sikh can be easily
identified. There is a strong likelihood, however, that the points of recognition will
be strictly limited. A brief question or two usually reveals that for the foreigner at
least it is only the male Sikh who can be recognised, and then only if he presents
to outward view the more obvious features of the Khalsa discipline. Most aspects
of the discipline remain unrecognised and the poor foreigner will commonly find
it quite impossible to distinguish Sikh women from Hindu.

The apparently simple question of a visible Sikh identity quickly becomes an
obscure and complex issue when we move beyond the well-known turban and beard.
The turban and beard nevertheless serve as an appropriate introduction to the larger
issue, for as we have just noted they are prominent features of the Khalsa discipline.
We are led directly to the essential nature of Sikh identity and to the substance
of this paper. We are led, in a word, to the Rahit.

It is perhaps surprising that the word 'Rahit' should be so little known and so
seldom used. A single word which expresses normative Sikh belief and behaviour
certainly deserves to be well known and a primary purpose of this paper is to encourage
its usage. It shares in the neglect which is typically bestowed on those other key
terms 'Gurmat' and 'Panth'. How much closer we should be to understanding the
Sikhs and their distinctive beliefs if we possessed even a rudimentary grasp of Gurmat,
Panth and Rahit. All three terms are intimately related, each to the other two, and
although I shall be concentrating on Rahit I should note in passing that 'Gurmat'
may be briefly defined as the corpus of Sikh doctrine and Panth as the Sikh community.
I should also mention that the terminology used in this paper is further explained
and illustrated in *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism* (Manchester University
Press, 1984).[1] Chapter 4 of this collection is largely devoted to the Rahit.

What then is the Rahit? The Rahit is the code of discipline which all members
of the Khalsa must vow to observe. Sikh tradition binds Khalsa and Rahit inextricably
together. According to well-founded tradition the Khalsa order was inaugurated by
Guru Gobind Singh on Baisakhi Day 1699. Following the dramatic choosing of the

first five members the Guru is said to have initiated them with a form of baptism and then to have promulgated the Rahit or code of discipline which all Sikhs of the Khalsa must thereafter follow.[2] Sikh tradition also affirms that the Guru restated the Rahit in an amplified form immediately prior to his death in 1708. At his death the Rahit was sealed. The Lord of the Khalsa had delivered, once and for all, the pattern of belief and behaviour which his loyal followers must thereafter observe.

The reality of the situation is, needless to say, rather more complicated than the tradition allows. It is slightly complicated by developments which precede the founding of the Khalsa in 1699; and it is vastly complicated by those which follow that crucial event. Pre-1699 sources indicate that a rudimentary Rahit was evolving prior to the founding of the Khalsa. Contemporary sources fail to deliver an authenticated 1699 version. Post-1699 sources demonstrate that much of the Rahit crystallized during the eighteenth century and that the discipline as a whole has ever since continued to mutate. In response to changing circumstances it has predictably introduced items which earlier versions lack, amended some which have come to be unacceptable in their original forms, and discarded others which could no longer be sustained. This should not suggest, however, a process of change so radical that the Rahit of today bears little resemblance to its early eighteenth-century precursor. Plainly this is not the case. The fact that the Rahit testifies to an ongoing evolution quite rightly implies continuity, a continuity which can easily be traced throughout the entire history of the Khalsa.[3]

Pre-1699 sources do little to complicate the issue because there is little in them which one identifies as typical Rahit material. Attention has frequently been drawn to an apparent difference in the spirit and general approach which evidently distinguishes the practices of the tenth Guru from the teachings of the first (the so-called 'transformation of Sikhism'). This particular controversy is essentially irrelevant in that the Rahit is recognisably a product of the later period. The early period, best expressed in the Adi Granth collection, is largely concerned with the interior discipline of meditation on the divine Name. This particular emphasis has ever since remained a conspicuous feature of Sikh belief, and as such it finds a place in the Rahit. Ever since the first versions of the Rahit were formally enunciated Khalsa Sikhs have neen enjoined to rise at an early hour and meditate on the divine Name. The injunction has, however, become one amongst many. Although it retains a fundamental importance the Rahit which was to emerge during the eighteenth century includes much more than this Adi Granth inheritance. A few other items evidently derive from the early practice of the Panth. Most belong to the period of the later Gurus and to the turbulent decades which followed the death of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708.

It was during the fifty years following the death of the tenth Guru that the earliest extant version of the Rahit was committed to writing. This brings us to the rahit-namas, the recorded versions of the formalised Rahit.[4] It has been widely assumed that Guru Gobind Singh himself must surely have instructed scribes to prepare copies of the Rahit which he had promulgated at the inauguration of the Khalsa. Earlier Gurus had already begun the practice of despatching *hukam-nāmās* or 'letters of command' and the tenth Guru had continued the practice. Although a *hukam-nama* might well include instructions of a kind which could have been incorporated in a rahit-nama these 'letters of command' never supplied the comprehensive list which constitutes the latter form. No extant rahit-nama can be safely traced to the lifetime of the Guru himself. All belong to the years following his death.

Sikh tradition acknowledges that the earliest rahit-namas may have been recorded after the tenth Guru's death, but it does not countenance a significant gap. Several rahit-namas claim to derive directly from the words of the Guru himself and if, in

fact, the recording took place after he had died, the injunctions which they contain express his actual words and authentic intention. Such is the claim lodged by most of the writers responsible for the earliest versions. One purports to be the work of the Guru's most trusted servant, a faithful retainer who had cared for the Guru during his childhood and who had subsequently remained by his side as a close confidant. Another declares itself to be the record of a conversation held with the Guru shortly before his death in South India. Three different rahit-namas are attributed to Nand Lal Goya, a celebrated poet of the Guru's entourage.

The earliest of these claimants apparently dates from the middle of the eighteenth century (between 1740 and 1765). This is the *Chaupā Singh Rahit-nāmā*, attributed to the tenth Guru's tutor and aide Chaupa Singh Chhibbar.[5] In its extant form it presents considerable difficulties from an orthodox Khalsa point of view, difficulties which seem plainly to explain the general neglect which it has suffered. These include . the composite nature of the text (it includes narrative anecdotes and apocalyptic prophecy as well as rahit-nama material); its insistence upon traditional deference towards Brahmans (Chaupa Singh was himself a Brahman); and its embarrassing involvement in the Devi cult. The neglect is thus understandable, but it is nevertheless unfortunate in that no existing rahit-nama carries us nearer to the time of Guru Gobind Singh than this work attributed to Chaupa Singh Chhibbar. It must be added that its value, though considerable, should not raise too many expectations. It emerges almost half a century after the Guru's death and there is insufficient evidence to sustain the claim that its rahit-nama portions are the work of the Chaupa Singh who served as an intimate member of the tenth Guru's retinue. What this means is that the *Chaupā Singh Rahit-nāmā* testifies to a later perception of the role of the Khalsa and the duty of the individual Sikh. It must also be remembered that it represents the views of a group which had once been influential within the Khalsa but which had since become disaffected.

In spite of these shortcomings the *Chaupā Singh Rahit-nāmā* can at least be dated and located within its appropriate context. Most of the other claimants to an early eighteenth-century provenance are more difficult to fix in terms of time or context. It is obviously safe to assume that like the *Chaupā Singh Rahit-nāmā* they do not derive from the period of Guru Gobind Singh and in the case of the Nand Lal versions their attribution is obviously contrived. If claims to authenticity were to be established it was essential that the relevant text should assert a context involving direct dictation by Guru Gobind Singh. Amongst his retainers none would have better qualifications as an amanuensis than Nand Lal Goya and he thus became a natural candidate for the role of rahit-nama author. The actual texts do nothing to sustain these claims, plainly indicating that they belong to a later period. That is the easy part. The difficult bit is to locate them within the decades (or centuries) following the Guru's death, and to identify the groups or individuals who produced them.

One of these later rahit-namas which does permit cautious conclusions is the work variously known as the *Prem Sumārg* or the *Param Sumārag*. This particular manual obviously belongs to the middle years of the nineteenth century, a conclusion which follows from its author's obvious knowledge of the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and from his evident nostalgia for that period. The only outstanding question with regard to dating concerns the precise time of its composition, whether shortly before the British annexation of the Punjab or shortly after that event.[6] The *Sau Sākhīān* or 'Hundred Episodes' also belongs to the same period, though in its extant form it probably emerged a decade or two later.[7] Like the *Chaupā Singh Rahit-nāmā* the *Sau Sākhīān* combines Rahit injunctions with apocalyptic prophecy. As such it was to provide comfort and inspiration to the Kukas in their opposition to the alien British.[8]

Much more difficult to place and evaluate are four brief rahit-namas written in verse form. Two of these rahit-namas are attributed to Nand Lal; one to a disciple variously called Prahilad Rai or Prahilad Singh; and one to Desa Singh, also said to be a contemporary follower of Guru Gobind Singh.[9] This cluster constitutes the principal problem associated with the rahit-namas. Their contents are far too important to be ignored and if we are to trace the growth of the Khalsa satisfactorily it seems imperative that these verse rahit-namas should be firmly fixed in terms of time and context. It is, however, impossible to draw adequate conclusions at this stage. We can certainly detach all four from their purported origins and thereby bring them forward in time. Their language is not that of the period which they claim to represent and the kind of verse which we find in them could scarcely be the work of the highly skilled Nand Lal Goya. But how far forward should they be brought? That precisely is the problem and no sufficient answer has yet been supplied.

The same problem also attaches to one of the two remaining earlier rahit-namas. These two are both brief collections of injunctions expressed in prose. One of them (another of the Nand Lal rahit-namas) is invariably found in association with the *Chaupā Singh Rahit-nāmā* and like its dominant colleague can probably be placed in the middle years of the eighteenth century. The second is attributed to Daya Singh, one of the first five Sikhs to be initiated by Guru Gobind Singh at the inauguration of the Khalsa in 1699. As with the four verse rahit-namas this prose product can safely be detached from its putative author. A nineteenth-century provenance is indicated by the nature of its language, but at this stage any such verdict must be a cautious one.

Whatever their dates and origins these were the formal rahit-namas which existed when representatives of the Singh Sabha reform movement turned their attention to the Rahit late in the nineteenth century.[10] Given their interest in restoring the purity of Sikh doctrine and practice it was inevitable that the Singh Sabha reformers should have directed a portion of their zeal to the Rahit and its formal enunciation. Their task was not easy. The legacy of the two preceding centuries was a sparse one and much of its content was plainly unacceptable to the educated men who led the movement. The Khalsa allegiance of the various rahit-namas may have been obvious, but so too were their many contradictions and the injunctions which no enlightened product of late nineteenth-century education could possibly accept.

One response was to prepare commentaries on the Rahit or on particular features of it, and several of the works published during the Singh Sabha period belong to this category. A prominent example of this genre was Avatar Singh's *Khālsā Dharam-śāstr Sanskār Bhāg*, first issued from Lahore in 1894.[11] A few years later that most influential of all Singh Sabha intellectuals, Kahn Singh of Nabha, published a different kind of response, one which clearly signalled the true nature of the problem.

Kahn Singh's *Gurmat Sudhākar*, first issued in 1901, was a compendium of works relating to the person and time of Guru Gobind Singh. Such a collection was bound to include material relating to the Rahit, but how could the rahit-nama wheat be sifted from the chaff and the weeds? Kahn Singh solved the problem by publishing what appeared to be abridged versions of the principal rahit-namas. In reality, however, his selections were expurgated versions rather than abridgements. Portions which were unacceptable were deleted (as well as those which were insignificant) and only those items which matched the reformist philosophy of the Singh Sabha movement were retained. Anything which conflicted with that philosophy must *ipso facto* conflict with the original intention of Guru Gobind Singh. As such it must surely represent interpolation by an enemy, a deviant, or (at best) an ignorant Sikh. Purging these excrescences should produce a version of the Rahit much closer

to the original version than that of any extant rahit-nama. Although this reasoning was not spelt out it seems clearly implicit in the procedure adopted by Kahn Singh.

Other attempts have subsequently been made to utilise the early rahit-namas. It is, however, a method doomed to fail if the objective is to be a comprehensive statement of the Rahit appropriate to contemporary circumstances. This awareness prompted a lengthy quest for the definitive rahit-nama, one which would draw into a single agreed manual the various injunctions which together constitute the sum total of approved Khalsa practice. Extant rahit-namas could contribute to this process, but alone they must be inadequate. Other sources had to be used for the details which they delivered; and a consensus had to be achieved with regard to inclusion, omission, and the actual form of words. The task was an exceedingly difficult one and the final result bears all the marks of committee procedure. It was nevertheless achieved after several decades of negotiation, a feat of no mean scale.

The attempt made during the Singh Sabha heyday was actually a failure. This was the manual of Sikh rituals published as *Gurmat Prakāś Bhāg Sanskār* in 1915, a work which incorporated Rahit injunctions in proposed orders for various rites and ceremonies. Its failure was implicitly acknowledged in 1931 when the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhandhak Committee (which by then had become the dominant voice in Sikh affairs) appointed a sub-committee to prepare a new rahit-nama. Although a draft was ready within a year the process of discussion was protracted and it was not until 1950 that an agreed version was finally published as *Sikh Rahit Maryādā*.

The brief introductory portion of *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* appropriately offers a definition of a Sikh.

> A Sikh is any person who believes in God (*Akāl Purakh*); in the ten Gurus (Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh); in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, other writings of the ten Gurus, and their teachings; in the Khalsa initiation ceremony instituted by the tenth Guru; and who does not believe in any other system of religious doctrine[13].

The remainder of the manual is divided into two sections, a lengthy 'Personal code' and a much shorter 'Panthic code'. The former includes instructions concerning modes of personal devotion; gurdwara worship and administration; approved methods of reading the sacred scripture; practices which are either enjoined or proscribed; and orders to be followed in the conduct of birth and naming-ceremonies, marriage and funerals. The second section consists largely of the order to be observed in conducting the Khalsa initiation ceremony (*amrit sanskār*). Several basic injunctions are incorporated within this rite as portions of the homily delivered to all who receive initiation. The manual concludes with a brief segment on penalties to be imposed for violations of the Rahit.

Sikh Rahit Maryādā has stood the test of thirty-five years remarkably well. Having acknowledged this considerable achievement one must add some predictable qualifications. For some the problem has been the evident fact that whereas the manual defines *normative* Sikh behaviour, *operative* practice is very different. The answer to this particular objection is, of course, that such manuals are by definition normative statements and that as such they serve to stabilise religious practice in the quicksand world of ignorance and self-interest. A second criticism is that although *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* grapples with the problem of the so-called Sahaj-dhari (or non-Khalsa) Sikh, it finally fails to provide a satisfactory place for the latter. To this the answer must be that *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* is, after all, a statement of khalsa practice. It does not pretend to cover the needs of the uninitiated who yet regard themselves as Sikhs.

A final comment is that although *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* was meant to be definitive, later editions have introduced surreptitious amendments. It is this comment which brings us to that most basic of all questions associated with the Rahit. Is the Rahit immutable, established once for all by the tenth Guru and subject to no acceptable change thereafter? Or is it to be regarded as firm yet flexible, adapting its forms as the world and its manifold pressures force change on the society of the faithful? The historian and the sociologist may find this an easy question to answer. For the believer it may not be quite so simple.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism* will hereafter be cited as *TSSS*. See also W. H. McLeod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 51-52. Relevant entries in *The Penguin Dictionary of Religions* may also be helpful.

2. *TSSS*, p. 34-37.

3. *TSSS*, pp. 9-10 and chap. 4.

4. W. H. McLeod, 'The problem of the Panjabi *rahit-nāmās*' in S. N. Mukherjee, *India: History and Thought. Essays in honour of A. L. Basham* (Calcutta 1982), pp. 103-26.

5. *TSSS*, pp. 74-75.

6. S. S. Hans, '*Prem Sumarg* — a modern forgery'. *Proceedings of the Punjab History Conference 1982* (Patiala, 1982), pp. 180-88.

7. An early translation of the *Sau Sākhīān* was published by Attar Singh of Bhadaur as *Sakhee Book, or the Description of Gooroo Gobind Singh's Religion and Doctrines* (Benares, 1873).

8. W. H. McLeod, 'The Kukas: a millenarian sect of the Punjab' in G. A. Wood & P. S. O'Connor (ed.), *W. P. Morrell: a Tribute* (Dunedin, 1973), pp. 85-103, 272-76.

9. *TSSS*, pp. 75-79.

10. *TSSS*, pp. 14-17. W. H. McLeod, 'The problem of the Panjabi *rahit-nāmās*', p. 119.

11. Titles are listed in N. Gerald Barrier, *The Sikhs and their Literature* (Delhi, 1970).

12. One such work was Sant Sampuran Singh's *Rahit-prakāś*, first published in 1923. See also Piara Singh Padam, *Rahit-nāme* (Patiala 1974).

13. *TSSS*, p. 79. *TSSS*, pp. 79-86, supplies a substantial part of the text of *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* in English translation.

Related works by the author of this paper:

Early Sikh Tradition: A study of the janam-sākhīs. Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1980.

Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.

*Most of this paper has been incorporated verbatim in the introduction to the author's forthcoming *The Chaupā Singh Rahit-nāmā: the rahit-nāmā attributed to Chaupā Singh Chhibbar and the associated prose rahit-nāmā attributed to Nand Lal.* Gurmukhi text and English translation with introduction and notes. University of Otago Press, Dunedin, 1986.