

We Are Not Symbols

This is the correspondence between a son (Jaskirat – who was in a dilemma and wanted to know why he should still be wearing the 5K's in the 21st century) and his father.

My dear Dad, Sat Sri Akal.

It is with extreme pain, conflict and misery that I am writing to you. I feel utterly empty, almost naked, my heart weary, dull and isolated. This could have been another one of those nice and happy letters, which we both have been writing to each other, all these years. But all those nice things seem to be happening no more. Happiness which completely ravished my heart once, has gone and now I have only the empty memory of it. I seem to have lost the intimate contact with life. I must apologize, for suddenly bursting forth like this and for not having written about my problems, all these months. But till about a week back I was confident of finding a solution to my questions. It was only when the books which I so patiently read, all those self proclaimed gurus I went to see, and hear, and my own experience and reasoning failed me, that I resolved to write to you Dad, my inability to accept the 5 K's, which all my life till now, seemed to be so crucial for me in my effort to be a God-fearing man, a religious man, a dutiful son and above all Guru ka Sikh.

I have no doubt and question about the efficacy of these symbols three centuries ago when they were essential in times of war to maintain the identity of Sikhs and give them a common denominator of unity and togetherness. It was a good strategy for fighting against an enemy bent on destroying the very seeds of Sikhism. But for the present these symbols have no justification, no meaning or any convincing explanation. Not only has it become difficult for me to explain the relevance of a kripa or a kara, but also for those who sermonise in the gurudwaras or those who so zealously write in the religious magazines.

Sardar Gajpartap Singh wrote a five page article on the utility of the 5 K.s, but when I met him at the club last month, he was definitely not carrying a kripa. He is no exception in these double standards.

It is not me alone who has felt this lacuna, but most Sikh boys in my college (Rajbir, Suchet, Mandeep) are also unable to accept these symbols and their validity for everyday life. They can establish no coherent connection between a kripa and the human effort for communion with God. In no way can I convince them that these symbols make me more of a Sikh than them. They are as much recognised as Sikhs as I am. In fact more so because they are seen in tune with the modern times and I so much of a romantic fatalistic idiot who sees in the idealistic past and in a set of 5 symbols a stepping stone for my liberation in the future. The belief in God, the need for a deeper consciousness, the harm in smoking, the ill effects of drinking, the daily reading of the Japji all these I have no objections to and fully agree with, but the 5 symbols do not fit into any logical framework. A happy and contented life -- 5 symbols seems to me to be such an absurd and illogical equation.

Dad, you teach to a certain extent because you are getting paid for it, I go to the university because I expect my education to provide me with a suitable career and it is the same story with everyone else all of us are engaged in something which is significant, useful and meaningful to us. But these symbols, seem to have no practical utility spiritual, physical or monetary. They have become like the dead skin which must be removed. That which cannot be made use of and understood, has no life in itself, it is superfluous and dead. Our life is full of unhappiness, with few moments of peace and joy. So anything that promises us a haven we readily subscribe to it. Some see the futility of the daily existence and consequently take recourse to religion, which turns out to be an effort to find hope and security in dogmas, in superstitions and in ritualistic symbols. As beliefs shape experience, these symbols become an inescapable reality.

Once the mind has experienced the pleasure which identification through these symbols brings, the mind is firmly entrenched in this deceptive pleasure and nothing can shake it, the end result is that we are slaves of this false identification. Resistance against this identification breeds fear. A fear which is the very antithesis of creativity, sensitivity and an integrated life. It is fear, conscious or unconscious, that makes us respect these symbols. We are never educated or helped to think for ourselves, to explore, but are always required to adhere to the given rules. The religious magazines inform us what is to be done, the priests tell us what is life and our inward fear compels us to obey, because if we do not conform we shall be confused, we shall feel lonely and lost.

So we take to these symbols because we are very scared without them. We do not want to question them because that would not be honourable. And the older generation does not want us to inquire: they do not have the courage to face our questions. They are too busy with their own idiosyncracies, with their do's and don'ts of bourgeois morality and respectability. The acceptance of these symbols with them has become the means for gaining status in society. The end result is that we are no different from a monkey who is imitating all the time. An imitation which springs out of our effort to be safe, to be enclosed and never be confronted with unhappiness. Not to imitate but to search for yourself -- that is living, is it not?

We are told that freedom to search comes only when we are old with experience but Dad, there must be freedom to live while we are young, freedom to grasp our own instincts and act accordingly. Why can't I free myself from this structure of imitation? It is constantly building up fear in me and this fear is further strengthening this structure. To be my ownself, I must break these imposed symbols.

Putting on my 5 symbols -- is that religion for you? These symbols may give me a certain pleasure; identification; but that is not religion. Accepting certain rituals, dogmas and symbols -- has all this got any link with religion? My belief in God is not bound to my hair. These symbols are not religion, they are only the result of our being forced to conform to war conditions, for the selfish interests of the present society. Is not religion something much finer, much purer and deeper than these symbols? We may put on an outer garment, but the inner essence of what we are is always the same. We must learn to live without these symbols and face reality. These signs have to be discarded and life has to be seen as it is.

So far I have merely written of what my own feelings were on these symbols, but even those who emphasizes on the absolute necessity of these symbols for my claim to be a Sikh have no consensus or a profound understanding of these symbols. They have nothing concrete to offer and one writer is as apart from the other in his explanation for these symbols, as two political opponents. Every Baisakhi, a new addition is made to the already innumerable explanations. Where could a young Sikh boy or girl anchor his or her boat? They are left to their own training for compass-reading to find the correct bearings and directions. In such circumstances it is not surprising that a wrong reading is made of the latitudes and longitudes and very soon the young one finds himself sinking deeper and deeper into this bog of multiple explanations. The best way out for him becomes to be rid of these explanations altogether and of what they seek to explain.

While trying to find a logical explanation for these symbols, I came across no shortage of methodological approaches, which range from efforts made to demonstrate the significance of the 5 K's, by drawing parallels with other religions and the lives of the great men of these religions, to the sociological method which seeks, "to relate the rite and the social occasion of its performance, to the total social system of the group or category of the persons who recognize the obligation, to perform it." Incidentally the basis of acceptance of any explanation, in academic circle is the quantity of jargon used by a scholar, instead of equalitative analysis. One sociologist claims that his approach is more suitable because he is adhering to explicitly formulated rules of method and the others are not probing in the right direction because they draw easy inferences from deductive reasoning and because they neglect the significant relations of opposition.

We are told that cultural, military, psychological, social, political, economic, spiritual, physical and sexual factors were the main considerations, which made Guru Gobind Singh endow the Sikhs with 5 K's. If I accept one set of these explanations, the next set contradicts the former. My despair with these historical constructs, is not isolated, it has become a common feature with thousands of Sikhs and I don't have to write the solution which they find for this despair. The picture can be very well illustrated if we take up, these symbols one by one look at what significance is attached to them:

The Kesh (Hair)

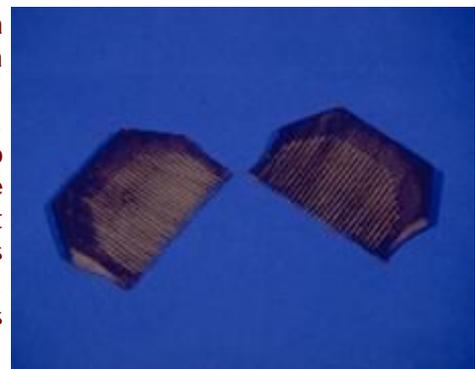


The explanation and the significance attached to them in most contemporary works starts from the instructive Biblical story of Samson and Delilah, as told in the Old Testament, which is made as a confirmation of the virtue of remaining unshorn. Many similar examples are also cited from the classical Hinduism. Manu the Hindu law giver lays down, "Even should a man be in wrath let him never seize another by the hair, when a Brahmin commits an offense for which the members of other castes are liable to death, let his hair be shaven off as sufficient expiation." The keeping of the hair is regarded as an indicator of living in accordance with the way of nature. The shaving of the hair it is maintained is an interference with the natural law of the growth of hair. A latest book published on Sikhism by a premier university of Punjab, emphasizes that the keeping of the hair was a part of the Sikh ritual which was life affirming, an indicator of the Sikh's commitment to a social and worldly life in contrast with the Hindu sanyasis and jogis who cut their hair, because they professed to the creed "I am no one's and no one is mine". The Sikhs in contrast were to be a part of the world and to affirm this worldly existence, they were instructed to keep long hair while the sanyasis shaved their head, beard and moustache, before entering the new ascetic phase of their life. The cutting of the hair is thus seen as a social death. The Sikh community on the other hand was an affirmation of the normal social world, "As the battle ground of freedom". The meaning of being unshorn, therefore, signifies according to this book. "The permanent renunciation of renunciation".

Various articles emphasis on the hair being a living organ of the body and to cut them is seen as depriving the body of an essential source of vitality, the hair seen as a contact point with the sun, the basic source of universal energy. One author cites the authority of C.G. Jung and claims that the Guru Sahib was a great psycho-analyst and he asked the Sikhs to keep hair so as to confirm the instinct of masculinity, from which man at time deviates. To convince the, youth, some influential speakers stress on the scientific validity of hair, but without any empirical data to substantiate their statements. Others see the hair as a symbol of virility, honor, power, aggression and so on.

The Kanga (Comb)

The Kanga is explained in utilitarian terms, as a means, to keep the hair neat and clean. It is also seen as a symbol of the discipline of mind. In a flight of imagination, one author writes in a magazine published from Calcutta, that by wearing the comb, the Sikh should be reminded to keep his mind under control, his thoughts should not be allowed to wander aimlessly, his mind should be kept orderly, methodological and well disciplined. The Kanga is seen as a fetter to excessive anger or excessive attachment. (It is not explained how?) Most writers dismiss its significance is one line and see it as a twin of the long hair.



The Kachera (Special Underpant)



The case of Kachera is even more interesting. An eminent writer, writes in a book sponsored by the Government of India, that the Kachera is for a smart wear as against the loose unstitched dhoti worn too earlier. Strangely, reading the mind of Guru Sahib, it is claimed that the loose dhoti represented to the

Guruji a loose mentality. By providing the Sikhs with the shorts it was intended to symbolize the spiritual and mental breakaway from traditional dress and thought. The mind was to be freed from the bonds of superstitions and the people were thus to be released from immature and effeminate submissiveness. They were destined to become mature, solid and active soldiers. Hence the symbol of the Kachera was same for the Sikh women, they were also intended to develop the same qualities as a Sikh man. (I fail to understand why the same qualities were to be developed through the medium of the Kacha). The Kachera is also seen as a symbol of control over excessive sexual indulgence.

The Kirpan (Sword)

The Kirpan is made out to be a symbol of royal authority and of freedom from oppression and servility. Its obvious meaning is stated to be of self-defense and the individual freedom and self respect, embodied in the right to bear arms. The sword it is said, cuts at the root of evil and worldly attachment and destroys them utterly. The primary significance is said to be that of self-defense, with a word of caution that it is not an instrument of aggrandizement but self protection.



The Kara (Steel bangle)



A Sikh journalist, in his account of the Sikhs, writes that the Kara was a symbol of humility as well as a charm worn before going to the war. On the other hand a senior Sikh historian feels that the Kara denotes the universality of the new religion. In very appealing reasoning it is also argued that the complete unbroken circle, symbolizes the Buddhist wheel of life. The spiritual reality of life exists continually, free of both time and space and the Kara is an appropriate symbol of such eternal existence. The human soul, it is instructed, must become as strong as steel used in the

Kara which has been tempered in the furnace. The other day a priest in the Gurdwara, insisted that the genius of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji was reflected in his providing us with a steel Kara, which can protect us from lightning. A student speaking on the relevance of the 5 K's felt that the Kara was to protect the arms in the battlefield from the sword cuts. It was an excellent shield for the arm, according to him.

The explanations for K's are a paradise of pick and choose. One may choose the one which fancies an individual the most, very much like a nice trouser in a show window. It is not strange if some think, that the choice is still not wide enough to appeal to their senses. So they come out with the choice of discarding these symbols. If I take the view that the Kirpan is for self-defense, can I discard it, if I have twenty bodyguards with all the latest equipment for protecting my life? Again if an individual feels that if the Kirpan is for self-defense, as is so often told to him by the historians, in that case he can hypo-thetically argue that he should be

allowed to do away with it, because he feels that the state has made adequate arrangements for his protection.

Daddy, I am utterly incapable of understanding, the value, the justification and the imposition of these symbols. I am deeply hurt but am unable to find any medicine for my wounds. The cures which have been suggested have further aggravated my malady. The numerous explanations given for these symbols seem to be like so many needles pricked into my body. The books, the priests, the glossy magazines, the well meaning speakers, have all failed me and I turn to you not only because you are my father but also because of your deep commitment, understanding and love for the Sikh way of life.

I understand, it is going to be a long, weary and difficult way to a deeper understanding of these symbols, but I am prepared to jump into the arena and take the challenge and I give you my word that in case you can show me the way and the significance of these symbols, I will not hesitate for a moment to go to Sri Anandpur Sahib and be a Amritdhari Sikh.

With lots of love.

Your loving son,

Jaskirat.

Dearest Jaskirat,

Sat Sri Akal.

I must thank you for the deep confidence and the love you have for me. It has always been a joy to read through your letters as they manifest, the sensitivity of a seeker of truth. I am very happy that you had the courage and conviction to express so openly the things that seem to have been distressing your heart. I somehow felt all this brewing up in you, for the last two years, but had never allowed myself to face it directly, till you wrote the present letter. It is a pleasure to hear it all, so plainly stated, and I hope, I shall understand and calm your mental anguish.

When you leave the university and face the world it seems to me that what is crucial in life is not to succumb, not to bow your head to various pressures, but to know and feel them as they are, in a gentle spirit, with a great inward strength, so that these pressures, will not create conflict in your life. You may question what is given to you or what many of your age assert is being forced on you but this also means that you must question yourself. You must not merely, question, what you call the significance, the need, the value of your own life. It is only with such an integrated total approach, that you will understand not only the Kirpan, the Kara, the Kanga, the Kesh and the Kachera, but also appreciate the agonies, the joys, the pain, the pleasure, the vanities and hope of living.

In your letter, the one word which has overpowered you, the one emotion which drives you on, is significance. Over and over again, you want to know what is the significance of the 5 K's? The word certainly is not out of place in our materialistic and individualistic existence. In our efforts to be practical individuals, we want to imbibe only what is of utility and significance, the rest we want to discard. The search for significance in everything is a curse of the present century. It is a form of self-enclosure, self-killing and therefore it breeds the fear of living. The whole world, all your friends, your relations, everyone is struggling for significant and useful things. But what might be significant for you might not be so for your friends. If you go to a man who has ill-health, he will undoubtedly say, what is significant is

good health. If you go to a man who has not had enough wealth, in all his life, he will say what is significant in life is money.

If you go to a mother she will say the significant thing is to have a son. This is the reason you find an intricate web of explanations, for the significance of the 5 K's. Every one views it from his own angle of significance.

The first step in your questioning of the 5 K's should be to be free of this yoke of significance. It is this illusionary search for significance, which has made many young ones and their seniors, discard their Kesh, because they see no value in them. It is a pity that we went to reduce Sahib Guru Gobind Singh ji, to our own mundane level of thinking and view all his actions in light of practical animal utility. If he was in search of merely objects of practical utility, he could have made a truce with Aurangzeb, when the latter made the offer. Shivaji did so at one stage, because his search was different, his life was different. If the rider of the dark blue steed, wanted the 5 K's to be reflections of practical use values, he could have very well added not only more weapons, but instead of a sword, he would have given us a gun, as guns did exist at that time. A gun would have been more efficient and better suited for self-defense and for war too. But he was not inspired out of a hunt for weapons of self-defense or practical value, as we would make it out, reflecting our own thinking backwards, in History. The Guru Sahib was not a novice in the ways of the arms, if he only wanted his Sikhs to be armed for war, through these 5 K's. He would have rather equipped them the way He did Banda Bahadur at Nander, when he gave him 5 arrows and a bow. The sword, anyway, in the battlefield would have been useless without a shield.

The Kanga, the Kesh, the Kara, the Kirpan, the Kachera (Kachera), were all delicate gifts of love and beauty to the Khalsa from a man who desired nothing for himself, but everything for the Khalsa. These gifts were from a Guru who garbed not the gifts of his disciples but instead he totally surrendered everything for the cause and love of the Khalsa. A way of total love which was to be unique for the Khalsa: "jau tau prem khelan ka chao sir dhar tali gali meri ao" (Guru Nanak Dev ji). "If thou art zealous of playing the game of love, then enter upon my path with thy head on thy palm." It was out of such love that these gifts were presented to the Khalsa and not out of any attempts to carve out soldiers. When there is total love there is action, there is sacrifice, is there not? The love of the Guru for the Khalsa was not the result of mental vibrations, and there was in his life no gap between love and action, as there is between our thinking and action. It is only we who want to be one sided in our love and make claims of loving the Guru in our ideals, in our heart and consequently we reason out that we don't have to express our love for Him in action, in the Kesh. But can there be love without total commitment and action? No. The total love of Kalgidhar Guru Gobind Singh ji for the Khalsa becomes apparent in the book titled the Sarbloh, where, He becomes one with the Khalsa and portrays the Khalsa as his highest love:

Khalsa is the breath of my body,
Khalsa is the very soul of my life,
Khalsa is my real pride and glory,
Khalsa is my own personal self,
Khalsa is my life's sustainer,
Khalsa is my body and breath,
Khalsa is my creed and karma,
Khalsa is my conscience keeper,
Khalsa is my perfect satguru,
Khalsa is my brave friend,
Khalsa gives me intellect and wisdom,
Khalsa is my object of meditation.

The mind that loves the Sikh way of life is a religious mind because it is in the movement of living, of action, of truth, of God and it is only such a mind that can know what is the beauty of the gifts the Guru gave to us. The 5 ornament that we wear are the gifts, from a Guru, whose two younger sons, seven and nine years old faced death in Sirhind in a manner which is

unequaled in the long annals of human history. These two innocent children were walled alive because they refused to bow before the sword of hatred. The Guru's mother expired at Sirhind out of shock, over the death of the small children. The two elder sons of the Guru died fighting in action for us. Guru Sahib, himself fell a victim to the dagger of two cowardly Pathans at Nander in Deccan, who stabbed him in the back.

Could such a man whose whole family was destroyed for the total love of the Khalsa, be looking for practical utilities of an animal existence? He was not the person to endow us with gifts of mere practical value, but gifts of love, which knew no questioning, no bartering, no deals and no betraying. His was a total sacrifice and a total love, in both thought and action, for the happiness of the Khalsa and these gifts had their pangs of birth in a sea of human blood. It was not out of any practical benefit that the evil genius of the Mughal government announced awards for the hair of the Sikhs. It was because they knew that without these gifts, without these embellishments of the Guru's love the Khalsa would disintegrate.

All the children of the Khalsa are to always wear a sword, in no way, their own private possession or property. The Kirpan is a gift from Guru Gobind Singh ji to the Khalsa. It is not to be judged and measured as a weapon of war or peace, it is a gift activated by the love of the Guru. Even a whole army of bodyguards or the best police state in the world cannot make it redundant. It shall always remain attached to me, the bodyguards cannot make it obsolescent. The sword is the love wherein the Guru resides. A Guru who in his love saw no difference between human beings and fused all of us in one creed of devotion, service and sacrifice, in an age when common men were hanged for even drawing water from the same well, as that of the higher castes. The lower castes were beaten to death if they as much as touched the kitchen utensils of a Brahmin.

A Kalal --wine distiller -- once came for the Guru's darshan and stood at a distance, for the caste of the Kalals was considered low in the social hierarchy. When Guru Gobind Singh ji, saw him, He said, "Come in and sit with all of us in the tent". The man quivered, hesitated and said, "How can I, the lowliest of the low, sit in the assembly of the gods? Guru ji, I am a kalal whose mere sight pollutes". On hearing this, Guru Sahib instructed His musicians and bards, to welcome the man with music and songs and coming down from the couch to bless him, He said, "You are not a kalal, but a "Guru ka-Lal" "A Ruby of the Guru". Who has such love for us? The sword which we have, is an ornament for all of us, the rich and the poor, you, me and the whole humanity. To wear a sword which was once a privilege of the few high born, under the dictates of the Mughal aristocracy, with the Guru's blessings became a gift which any-one could carry, without fear of being persecuted, because now it was in love from the Guru to the Khalsa, "dan dio iniko bhalo avranko dan na lagat niko" (Guru Gobind Singh). "To bestow gifts on them alone is worthy, to make gifts to others is not kind."

When his hands stroked our hair, washed them, combed them, I dressed them, knotted them and placed in them the invaluable Kanga, how can we, his sons and daughters, bear our hair to be cut? The Guru Sahib saturated our hair with Amrit. He left the imprint of his blessings and joy in our hair. Our hair are like the untouched pearls in the deep oceans not yet disfigured by the fortune hunters. You say it is inconvenient, frustrating, impractical to grow our hair long. But more frustrating is an existence of no inspiration, no effort. Our superficial hollow life is no way less discouraging. The day to day fragmentary living, the everyday struggle for food, the daily pain, suffering, distress, torments and headaches are in no way less discomforting. But in spite of all this do we cease to exist? No, on the contrary we strive all the more and struggle for pleasure, gratification, comforts, and joy. If we can reconcile ourselves to such an empty living, can we not grow our hair long which is so inspiring, creative, fulfilling and above all a gift from our Guru, a gift whose rejection would be a rejection of our existence, the negation of the very purpose of our life.

In the West, the children love so much the gifts made to them on Christmas by the mythical Santa Claus, they hungrily search their stockings for the gifts placed in them by their parents and after receiving their gifts feel so elated and we so ungrateful, that we fight, throw

away, kick at the gifts of our living father, who kept nothing for the future of his House and gifted to us everything he possessed -- physical, spiritual and material.

The elegant Kachera we wear everyday is the very same as the one worn by Guru ji himself, by his disciples and by his lovers. Clad in it, we are one with him. The exotic wooden comb he tucked in our hair, also combed, danced and swung in His hair. The Kanga, is the new born babe, playing in the lap of the loving mother, whom we so brutally want to strangle. It was these very same presents for which tens and thousands of my brothers laid down their lives. Have you watched the tears in eyes of a sheep when she is being sheared as against many of us so happy without our hair? We for sure, have traveled a long way from the animals!

The Kara has to be received by us as a present from our Guru, which is not comparable to our wealth, our intelligence, our achievements. It comes to us as a manifestation of His love and benediction. It is strange behavior indeed that we constantly argue about it. He put on our wrists the Kara, from that day it was forever ours, no one could separate it from a Sikh. And we still advance reasons for it. He loved me. He made me His own. He elevated me from the darkness of ignorance to light of spiritual consciousness. Can I not even make His gifts my own? We, his children, have to wear these gifts, carved out of infinite love. One with these gifts, we blossom, separated from them we wither. The decay in the Khalsa is apparent.

Each of us wears the hair and beard of Guru Gobind Singh ji, exactly as he wore them. We are created in his majestic image.

"jab lag rahe Khalsa niara, tab lag tej dio rnai sara, jab eh gahain bipran ki riti, rnai na karo in ki partit" (Guru Gobind Singh) "

"So long as the Khalsa retains its identity, I will bestow on them full glory; but the moment they adopt Brahmanical ways, I will not protect them".

Our significance is in Him, and not anywhere without Him and His gifts. In these gifts we are reminded of his Omniscience, Omnipotence and Omnipresence.

Jaskirat, do not make our presents into dead symbols, they are the gorgeous ornaments of the living. We are the "Wedded Women" of the God. They are the wedding gifts from our Bridegroom. He gave all of them to us and they are God-sent -- imperishable, indispensable and , indestructible. You may object and say all this is irrational, unacceptable, superstitious and fatalistic. But the waves of pure love always have i their own logic, irrationality and fatalism. I love the Guru's irrationality -- if you want to call it so.

"sev kari inhirnan bhavat, aur ki sev suhat na jiko. " (Guru Gobind Singh) "

"To serve therm pleaseth me, service of any other is not dear to me. "

I don't have the courage to reject such devotion. Does a would-be-wife question the intrinsic value of the engagement ring, she is gifted by her husband? No, never, even if it is made of copper or a shell. Today, you want to discard these gifts, because gold has more value. Yes, iron was poor in worldly goods. A wealthy merchant, Hargopal, once grudgingly brought for Guru Gobind Singh, two gold bracelets studded with precious jewels, not because he loved the Guru, but because he felt that in doing so, he would please his own father, who was a devotee of the Guru Sahib. One of these expensive bracelets accidentally fell into the Jamna river from the hands of Guru ji. At this, Hargopal was very displeased and when his attempts to recover the bracelet proved futile, he asked Guru ji to point at the exact place where he had dropped the bracelet, so that he could take it out. To indicate the place in the river, where the bracelet had fallen, Guru Gobind Singh ji took out the other gold bracelet, from his wrist and throwing in the river, he told Hargopal, "It is there."

You want to question the utility of the iron bangle of the Guru, but not of the gold bangle which is so much in vogue at Sikh engagement ceremonies today. You are ready to discard the Guru's bangle for the yellow metal. But do not forget your first marriage, out of whose womb you stand today, aspiring for these worldly gifts. The body can be made the basis of either animal incontinence or a divine temple. The choice is yours, the consequences are yours. The bliss of love is yours, the solitude of separation is yours. These gifts are not to be stored in the darkness of the cellars; drink deep into them, if you want to live in spiritual grandeur.

The head of a Sikh, the Kesh of a Singh, having been once offered and accepted, became for ever of the Guru. It is in unceasing trust with Him. It is therefore, imperative for a Sikh to carry his head high and not to bow it before a mortal barbar. It shall only bend and bow before the Guru. Once a new musket was brought as a present, for Guru Gobind Singh ji. He said, to test the love of his disciples, that he wanted to try the aim of the musket on someone's forehead. He looked around and asked if any of his Singhs would offer himself for the trial. Quick came up scores of unflinching Sikhs, each pushing the other one away, regarding it as a boon to meet death at the Guru's hand. And we today so uninspired, sleeping beauties, that except for empty words have no deeds worthy of our name.

Every day we recite in our prayer, "[Nanak das sada Kurbani](#)" "*Nanak thy servant is ever a sacrifice to Thee*". But what is it that we sacrifice everyday? Guru Gobind Singh was the purest sacrifice. We may never reach his height, but some sacrifice we can do. But instead we sacrifice our S K's. Shocking is our spirit of sacrifice. If the Khalsa today is hollow, it is because we forget our tradition of sacrifices, it is because we forget the love of a sacrificer, it is because we regard his gifts as mere symbols. "[balhari gur apne diohadi sadvar.](#)" (Guru Nanak) "*I am sacrifice to my Guru myriad times a day*". Are we the worthy inheritors of this heritage? After drawing on his blood, now we want to stab him in the back!

Jaskirat, one kilometer, from the Lahore railway station stands a gurudwara, sacred to the Sikhs in the loving memory of Bhai Taru Singh ji. It bears the name of Shahid Ganj, the Abode of Martyrs. Bhai Sahib was resident of village Poola, where he had a small piece of land. The wheat and the maize that he produced and the humble mud hut he had, he happily shared with all the weary travelers who passed through the village and needed a shelter to sleep for the night. He belonged wholly to the Guru's hymns and early in the morning, under the stars, while on the plough, with a white turban and a blue cho7a, a poor toiler of the earth, he recited the Japji The Japji which has in it the inimitable cosmicness of life in nature. The villagers loved Taru Singh for his fellow feeling, harmlessness and spiritual purity.

But being a Sikh, Taru Singh was not destined to live any longer, his life of love, free from the hatred of caste, color and region. The authoritarian Mughal government of medieval India, was not willing to appreciate the way of life of the Sikhs, which drew no dividing line between man and man, between Hindus and Muslims, between Brahmins and the Shudras. "[manas ki jat sab ek hi pahchanbo](#)". (Guru Gobind Singh) "*All men are the same*", was a creed which cut at the very root of Mughal establishment based on human distinctions. To extinguish this smithy of love, the government offered to its subjects numerous monetary awards for the heads of the Sikhs and they were declared outlaws. The greed for gold tempted Bhagat Nirangi to lodge a complaint against Bhai Taru Singh, with the Subedar (governor) of Lahore, stating that he gave shelter, to dacoits, the Sikhs, and the property of Muslim and Hindu subjects of His Gracious Majesty, was unsafe. Such a complaint was unnecessary for the very living of a Sikh, was a reason enough for the state armed forces, to go and imprison Bhai Taru Singh, who was bound in ropes and brought before the Subedar.

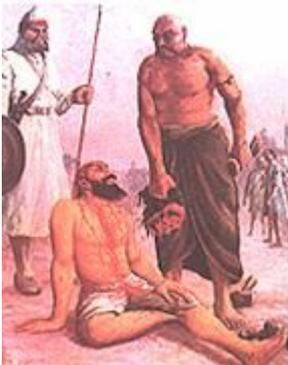
When the Subedar, saw this young man of 23, he was overwhelmed and shaken by his presence. He felt himself transposed to another world. There was a radiance around him which made the Nawab exclaim: "Khuda! What a divine Noor (glory) on his face. I pray that he should be a Musalman!" Addressing Taru Singh, the Nawab said, "O, graceful Sikh, I feel sorry for you and I wish to give you a new lease of life". Taru Singh with tears in his eyes,

responded: "Reward me with a new lease of life? Why stain me with such dishonor while my brothers and sisters are being martyred here before me, everyday, every hour."

The Subedar said, your presence is resplended with a heavenly light. Somehow my heart does not permit me to have you killed, but you must cut and present me your tress-knot".

Taru Singh replied, "The Sikh and his hair are one. I will be pleased to give you more than you ask me, my head with my tress-knot". These hair are the eternal Gift of love of immeasurable beauty to the Khalsa by our Guru, they cannot be separated from a Singh's head, without separating his head. The one who just looks at them can never understand them. It is like looking into a mirror, but you are not one with the mirror. The observer is only capable of experiencing, he is never the mirror, the experience, the state itself. These hair are the fountain of joy, the spring of life for us.

The Subedar, still confident of bribing him, then said: "Taru Singh, you are too young. You have not yet experienced the beauty and joys of life. I will make arrangements for your marriage with a woman of your choice. You will be awarded with a high mansab (office) in the Mughal army. You will be endowed with a hereditary jagir, I promise you all sorts of luxuries but you must part with your way of life and accept the Muslim religion".



A Guru ka Sikh can never be tamed and now his tears mingling with a smile of joy, Taru Singh replied, "Having been sent by Him they come (into the world) and recalled by Him they go back", said Guru Nanak. "It is the right and privilege of the brave to die," sayeth He. "For a Sikh, life has beginning and no end- it is both death and life. Neither my life nor my hair are for bargaining in your court which views beauty, life and religion in weights of gold. The value and beauty of our hair cannot be measured in terms of luxuries and jagirs. Your thinking is materialistic and is therefore negligible, but an integrated living is always spiritual".

The Subedar could no longer bear this song of truth and he cried out, "Stop him, for he disturbs the law and order of our province. Kill him at once, but cut his hair before". The Mughal soldiers caught hold of Bhai Sahib's head and chin, but the barber found it impossible to bring his hand near his head. With a stroke of his head he would push back his captors and make them whirl on the ground. A cobbler was then sent for, to try his skill with his tools and scrap off Taru Singh's hair, but his attempt too proved abortive. At last the help of a carpenter was asked for the foul deed. With a stroke of his adze, he cut off Bhai Taru Singh's head (1743 A.D.) but failed to cut his tress-knot.

Thakur Rabindranath Tagore, a great mystic-poet of Bengal has beautiful song of this episode:

Prarthona Atit Dan -- "More than asked For"

*For a Sikh to cut his tress-knots
Amounts to discarding his dharma.*

*The Pathans brought,
bound hand and foot, the Sikh prisoners,
Shahid Ganj earth turned red with their blood.*

*The Nawab addressing Taru Singh,
said unto him:*

'I wish to spare thy life'.

*Taru Singh retorted: 'Spare my life!
why thou dishonors me?*

*Said the Nawab: 'Thou art bravest of the brave?
I don't wish to wreak my anger on thee.*

*Taru Singh replied: 'O Nawab thy request
with my heart I comply and liberally grant thee*

*more than what thou beg'est of me:
`My head with my tress-knot.'*

Jaskirat, if Bhai Taru Singh had looked for practical utility, significance and relevance, wouldn't he have exchanged his hair for a jagir, for beautiful women and the power he was offered? But all these he regarded as worthless when he weighed them with his way of life. If the hair were mere symbols for him, would he have staked his life for them. The term, symbols can never express the depth of these gifts. You will never find even a most dutiful policeman leaping to death, to uphold a short circuited, burning, traffic light signal, because it is a sheer symbol for the cars and lorries on the road, it is an external factor to his life. But our 5 K's are much deeper and profounder than symbols and this is the reason we find not only Bhai Taru Singh, but a whole galaxy of martyrs in our history-- Bhai Mati Das, Dyal Chand, Bhai Mani Singh, Bhai Bota Singh, Sardar Mahtab Singh, Sukha Singh, and Subeg Singh -- all playing with their lives, which appears to us so irrational and fatalistic.



Son, you merely read about the 5 symbols in isolation, meditate on them as links with lives of your ancestors, it is only then that their meaning will be apparent to you. In themselves the 5 K's might appear to be mere symbols, show windows, but it is only when they are knit with our lives, woven in our existence, painted with our daily sorrows and joys that their value, justification and significance emerges. They are inseparable from our life and if you perceive of them as separate, it is not surprising that they appear to be frivolous, unjustified and a burden of the past. If you are wounded and in agony it is because you want to separate, from yourself, what is vital for existence.

Unfortunately, you visualized only a part in segregation from the whole. You are looking out of a small window set in the wall, from which the outside may appear to be attractive and convincing for sometime, but it does not allow you to view the beauty of life. Without linking these ornaments of love, with your daily existence, you can never have perception of the whole, therefore you will always be sad and when the end comes, you will still be groping in the darkness of your cell; you will have had nothing but hallucinations and a lot of empty words. But if you fall in love, now with these unique gifts, if you love your Kesh now, the Kirpan you wear, then, son as you grow up, you will not remain in your dungeon with its dark windows, but will leave it and love the whole way of life. If you don't constantly have a passionate love of these presents of the Guru, then you are like a flower without fragrance, withered and lying in the dust, being crushed and kicked by every pedestrian. Only he can have love for God, who abandons his ego, forgets himself completely and thereby brings the state of creative consciousness. The "me", the "I" from its very birth is constantly building a barrier of knowledge around itself, around its actions and ultimately leads to isolation and despair. A life of the dead.

Knowledge is only a minor part of life, not the totality and when this assumes all consuming significance, as it is now, then your life becomes artificial, an empty cup, from which man tries to escape, through superficial escapes with disastrous results. Knowledge is like a kerosene lamp on a dark night, but it can illuminate only so long as it has fuel. Life is much vaster and deeper, it cannot be lived with the aid of an extinguishable lamp. Knowledge is essential to everyday existence, as money is to buy your food, but it cannot grasp the reality of love, of God, of living. Love is not to be hooked in the net of intelligence; if you use knowledge to grasp love, it will die as the fish does out of water. Knowledge must be left behind for love to be. Burdened with mechanical learning, you will never understand what is

beauty, what is measurable. The light of knowledge is a covering under which lies a realm of truth, which knowledge cannot penetrate. The worship of knowledge is a ritualistic pilgrimage, which can never dissolve the contradictions and miseries of life. Mere knowledge, however earnestly learnt and cleverly assembled, will never resolve the meaning of the S K's, to assume that it will, is to invite frustration and misery. You may know all about the working of the earth and the functioning of the skies and still not be free from sorrow, envy and pain.

To know these gifts, to value truth, to be one with God, you must have no claims, to beliefs, nospeculations "[sochai soch na hovai je sochai lakhvar](#). "(Guru Nanak) "*Mortal cannot comprehend Him by thought.*" If you have gathered the knowledge of living, the knowledge itself becomes more important, not your living. If you want to understand these gifts, everything will come right. Live in them and there is understanding, "[hukmai andar sabh ko baht hukam na koe. Nanak humki je bujhai ta haumai kahe na koe](#)".(Guru Nanak) "*Nothing at all outside His will, is abiding. O Nanak, he who is aware of the Supreme will, never in his selfhood utters the boast: It is I*". The Supreme Will was to live in the glory of these embellishments of ours and so shall it be.

These gifts of ours are not symbols of a religion, or compulsory rites of a religion. The Sikh way of life is not to live on any set of rituals, formalism, talismans, penances, austerities, pilgrimages or symbols. The Sikhs were rebels against all this and more. The gurbani abounds, in hymns against ritualism and symbols. Guru Nanak Dev ji said in one of his compositions "[Yoga lies not in wearing patched garments, nor in carrying a staff, nor in smearing one's body with ashes, nor does it lie in wearing earrings, nor in cutting one's hair, nor in playing on a singi](#)." (Suhi 1). Could anyone have said something more against the irrelevance of symbols? How strongly he felt against empty symbols may be gauged from these lines, "With tikka (the sacred mark) on their foreheads and dhoti wrapped around their loins and legs, they look pious, but in fact they are the world's butchers carrying daggers in their hands." (Asa-di- Var) The shallowness of ritualism and symbols was exposed thoroughly by Guru Gobind Singh ji, in the Akal Ustati:

[Some worship but stocks and stones,](#)
[while others suspend the lingam from their necks.](#)
[Some look out for God in the East, other in the West.](#)
[Some worship but idols, some are unwise enough to worship the dead;](#)
[All these are involved in a false show, and they find not the Mystery, that is God.](#)

After the victory of the battle of Bhangani, Guru Gobind Singh ji blessed Pir Budhu Shah, with no reasures and no elephants, for his services, as was the custom of that time, but a kirpan and a comb with some broken hair of his. These gifts are still preserved as sacred relics in the former princely state of Nabha This very jewelry, he presented to all of us, inspite of the fact that our lives were not wrought in the furnace of sacrifice a jewellery which no craftsman, no intellectual, no jeweler is capable of imitating. These gifts of ours are the constellation of super consciousness, the very essence of breath of God in us, of which our tress-knots are the spiritual crown of humanity.

Jaskirat, ask not from me, the significance, the value, the power of our tress-knots, for I am incapable of describing it. In the meadows, dales and mountains of our tress-knots, the bliss of perennial joy flows, in the beautitude of our tress-knots, the lovers are fired. In our mystical tress-knots, insipid mankind is inspired; in the holiness of our pristine pure tress-knots, the Sun chariot rides high in eternity; in the infinity, of our tress-knots; the melting snow caps of the mountain peaks, wash away all sorrow; in our sublime tress-knots, the rapturous winds roar; in the sanctity of our-tress-knots, the ecstatic brooks soar; in our august tress-knots, the frenzied rain torrents pour; in the creativity of our transcendental tress-knots, his nakedness is robed anew in the effulgence of these gifts.

Live in the eternal joy of your tress-knots and you will know what it is, to be. Men collect the ashes of the departed soul and pray for him, in the church and the temples and you want to discard, this living soul, this living temple! People build monuments for the dead, you

want to uproot the living monument, the Guru gave to you. If you want it to disintegrate you may, but you shall forever be buried under it.

The love shall still come your way because you are one of the descendants of the ancient lore, you will still flex your muscles when the song is of your forefathers, but you would have converted the garden of the living into the weeds of the dead. The gardener will shed his tears but no more will you grow. Soon, even his tears will dry as he tends new gardens. A time comes when no one knows, of the long ruined monument. It passes back into the womb of agony and is possessed by the serpents, jackals and chameleons.

Jaskirat our 5 K's are beyond the realm of rituals and symbols, they are the timeless ones. Can you and me enclose with your intellects what is not measurable? Can you and me enclose with our intellects what is not of time? Can our constant hatred, anger, ugliness, lead us to the unknown? ~o we have an instrument to gauge, what has no beginning and no end? Can the truth of these gifts be trapped in the cage of our logic? What we may capture by our mechanical knowledge and logic, is superficial, never the cosmicness of these presents. Many of us spiritedly respond to tranquilizers, but living in love, needs no tranquilizers.

The beautiful, the loved can never be dissected and summed up. For these gifts, we can reach no conclusions, no morals and no judgments because they are not symbols, but pieces of art. What would the cuckoo's song mean to you, if you want to take down its notations and analyze them? What would your mother be for you if you want to know her by analysis? Only a biological skeleton for procreation. You have so much trapped yourself in a net of words, of speculations that the feeling itself, which is the only thing that is deep and vital in us, is lost. The significance or the insignificance of these gifts is not important. The highest art in life is to be beautiful. And these gifts are the force that creates the beautiful, the artist, in us. It is one in a million, who has the beauty of these ornaments.

The Kesh, the Kachera, the Kara, the Kanga and the Kirpan, are the gifts, chiseled out for the Khalsa, by the divine artist. These are the 5 gifts endowed to us for ever, by the Divine Bridegroom, on the day of our marriage to Him, on Baisakhi, in 1699, at Anandpur Sahib (The City of Bliss). They are the true embodiments of art and any one looking at them, can have his bosom full of meaning, ecstasy, inspiration, ove, joy and what more can we wish? In them we have the treasure, mines, in them is the beauty and we are so ignorant of it. We the cosmic brides will carry His gifts of love, in honor, purity and splendors of glory, and our love will blossom in all climes, in all times and in all continents.

May the blessings of Waheguru ji be with you forever.
Your loving father,
Harcharan Singh

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