

The Taboo of Halal for Sikhs

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Recently, Gurtej Singh, national professor of Sikhism has published an article on the taboo of Halal for the Sikhs in the Abstracts of Sikh Studies, October-December, 1996. Professor Singh has followed traditional lines based on Rehit Namas (manuals of code of conduct), and the misinterpretation of Guru Nanak's comments on Halal in Asa Di Var to explain the origin of this taboo. I had hoped that an eminent scholar like Professor Singh will shed new light on this topic by providing a rational explanation based on *Gurbani* or the writings of Guru Gobind Singh. He has left the readers rather confused by making contradictory statements. For example, in the opening paragraph, first, he states that the Guru commands a Sikh to use reason in the worship of God (*aklin sahib seviai*)[1], and then he goes on to persuade the readers that taboos are to be followed meticulously without questioning their validity. Furthermore, in the example showing Guru Gobind Singh's immense love for animals, the author says that Guru Gobind Singh cursed Baba Dan Singh's young son for hitting Guru's horse. Cursing is not the attribute of a *Brahm Gyani* according to Gurabani, and I firmly believe that the Ten Nanaks were *Brahm Gyani*s.

There is no mention of the prohibition of Halal for Sikhs, either in Guru Granth Sahib or in the *Bani* of Guru Gobind Singh according to my knowledge. However, the taboo of Halal for the Khalsa is found in the Rehit Namas, which were written by others long after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. These Rehit Namas have been used in drawing up the current Rehit Maryada (code of conduct) for the Sikhs. Sardar Piara Singh Padam has compiled fifteen *Rehit Namas* in a book form with his critique as a foreword. Every Sikh should read this book to understand the motives of the authors of the Rehit Namas. Some of the contents of the Rehit Namas are spurious, inconsistent with *Gurbani*, and unflattering to the Khalsa.

Those who interpret Guru Nanak's hymn (*abhakhya ka kutha bakra khanha*, eating the meat of a male goat slaughtered in a Halal manner) as condemnation of eating Halal, should read his commentary on

the behavior of Khatries of his time in *Asa Di Var*, on page 471 of Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Nanak did not condemn the partaking of Halal meat, rather he condemned the hypocrisy of the Khatries. The Khatries had abdicated their religious duties of defending their country and the weak, and taking a resolute stand against tyranny and injustice. Furthermore, the subjugated Khatries had adopted the language, manners and dress of their Muslim conquerors whom they called *malech* (polluted ones). Some of them sought employment with the Muslim conquerors, and some of them held high ranks, and were responsible for the persecution of the Hindu masses. However, these Khatries were very strict and rigid in the practice of caste system and other meaningless rituals. It was in this context when Guru Nanak ridiculed Khatries by pointing out that while they were meticulously observing the ritual purity of their food and kitchen by not allowing people of lower castes near their kitchens, they were eating the flesh of animals slaughtered in a Halal fashion by Muslims whom they considered *malech*.

I have the following questions for those who interpret the above described hymn as condemnation of partaking Halal. If Guru Nanak had proscribed Halal, then why the Tenth Nanak had to declare Halal as a taboo for the Khalsa? Were not the Sikhs following Guru Nanak's teachings? How come there is no statement on the taboo of Halal by either of the other Eight Nanaks? If Guru Gobind Singh had appointed Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal Guru of the Sikhs, then why Sikhs have to look for their Rehat Maryada (code of conduct) in other places like Rehit Namas? Should not Guru Granth Sahib be a guide for a Sikh in every walk of life? Let me put forward an alternative explanation for the taboo of Halal.

Halal is the slaughter of animals or birds according to religious rituals involving the cutting of the jugular vein slowly while the blood is being drained out completely. This process of slaughter prolongs the suffering of an animal or a bird. It is essentially a slow death by torture. It is mandatory for Muslims and Jews to slaughter animals only in a Halal fashion for meat for human consumption. Law in western countries prohibits Halal style slaughter of animals or birds. Jews and Muslims are exempt from this law on religious grounds. One of the reasons for this ban is the cruelty of this method of slaughter, which prolongs the suffering of animals and birds.

Debating the virtues of being a vegetarian versus nonvegetarian is futile according to *Gurbani*. Guru Nanak summed up so beautifully and eloquently when he said, " Food which affects the body and mind adversely should be avoided (*baba hor khana khusi khuar, jis khade tan piriai man mein chalai vikar*)

[2]. Meat is just a part of human diet (*jean ka aharjea khana eh karai*)[3], and *Gurbani* neither encourages nor discourages a Sikh from partaking meat. However, the Hindu ancestors of Sikhs were generally vegetarians due to the influence of Jainism, Buddhism and various sects of Hinduism which also abhorred eating flesh. Probably, there were very few Sikhs whose diet consisted of flesh during the time of the first five Gurus. The martyrdom of Guru Arjan brought new challenges to the young Sikh faith. The Master of *miri and piri* raised an army to fight against the Mughal rulers and their Khatri collaborators who were out to destroy him. He was an avid game hunter himself, and he encouraged his followers to do the same. His eldest son Baba Gurdita died in a hunting accident. The warlike atmosphere put greater emphasis on physical fitness and bodily strength, which required changes in the dietary habits of the Sikhs. I think more and more Sikhs started eating meat during this period and this trend continued with successive Gurus. The hunting expeditions of the rider of the blue steed (Guru Gobind Singh) are very well known. I think a significant number of Sikhs were including meat in their diet by the time Khalsa was created. The increased demand for meat required the slaughter of a large number of domestic animals like goats and sheep. It was, perhaps, under these circumstances that Guru Gobind Singh issued a proclamation about the manner in which the animals were to be slaughtered.

Of course, every method of slaughter is cruel and painful. However, *Jhatka* style slaughter is very quick, and the animal suffers for a very short period. That is why in western countries, slaughterhouses use those methods that end the life of animals as quickly as possible. It is possible that before the arrival of Muslims, meat-eating Hindus used to slaughter the animals by *Jhatka* method. Since one of the foremost attributes of a Sikh is compassion, Guru Gobind Singh issued an edict for those members of the Khalsa fraternity who ate meat, to slaughter the animals by the *Jhatka* method only.

Did Guru Gobind Singh proscribe the eating of Halal by the Khalsa prepared by Muslims? I do not think so, because Guru Gobind Singh's dearest friends and followers were Muslims. These were his Muslim friends, not high caste Hindus, who came to his help at very critical times during his battles and they made supreme sacrifices for him. They did not hold any thing back for his sake. It is hard for me to imagine that the Master of the white hawk and his nonvegetarian Sikhs would have declined to partake Halal prepared by Muslim friends. Additionally, what is the rationale for a nonvegetarian Sikh against eating Halal? Probably, none! Then, who issued this edict that the Khalsa should not eat Halal? I think

the followers of Kautlya are responsible for this edict. To understand my hypothesis, one has to understand the working of the mind of a Brahmin when he deals with his opponents.

Brahmins and their allies have used Kautlya's (also known as Chanakya) policy to overpower or destroy religions which challenged their supremacy and posed a threat to their way of life. They have used this policy very successfully to strangle Sikhism. There are three very important features of this policy. First, infiltrate the ranks of the enemy to cause internal conflicts by playing one group against the other, resulting in destruction from within. The schismatic movements within Sikhism and other the problems Sikhs have been facing since 1947 are largely the product of this strategy. Second, destroy the opposing faith by spreading disinformation against it, and by interpolating contradictory ideology in the religious texts of the opposing faith. This causes confusion among the followers leading to weakening of commitment to the faith and cohesiveness of the community. The false report about the teachings of Sikh faith to Mughal authorities, the campaign to malign the entire Sikh community by labeling them as lawless, violent and terrorist all over the world for the last two decades, and the creation of *kachi bani* (false *bani*) should be seen in this light.

Guru Arjan, the apostle of peace, put an end to the spread of *kachi bani* by compiling the Adi Granth. The efforts to distort the fundamentals of Sikhism were relentless. The *Janam Sakhi* (biography) of Guru Nanak was distorted very successfully. Furthermore, the foes of Sikhism got a golden opportunity to carry out their nefarious deeds after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. They mixed the writings of Guru Gobind Singh with the writing of others and compiled a voluminous book, which is called Dasam Granth currently. There is very little in this book, which is consistent with *Gurbani*, and can be considered as the composition of Guru Gobind Singh. The purpose of this book was to make Guru Gobind Singh look like a devout follower of a Hindu goddess, protector of Hinduism, and destroyer of Islam. Third, destroy your opponents by creating deadly conflicts between them. This machination had an active role in the deadly conflicts between the Mughals and Sikhs, which lasted for two centuries. Religion cannot be the basis of conflict between the Mughals and Sikhs, because Islam and Sikhism are so similar. Recently, I was reading a book on the philosophy of Islam by Hazrat Mirza Gulam Ahmed. While I was reading this book, I felt as if I was reading the pages of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. If religion had been the cause of conflict between Islam and Sikhism, then, Professor Iqbal, one of the

greatest poet and philosopher of this century would not have paid glorious tribute in his poetry to Guru Nanak, and Pir Budhu Shaw would not have sacrificed his dear ones for the sake of Guru Gobind Singh. The followers of Kautlya were not content just with the deadly conflicts between the Mughal rulers and Sikhs only, but also they wanted a complete rupture of social ties between Muslims and Sikhs. This objective was accomplished through Rehit Namas.

The two taboos for the Khalsa mentioned in Rehit Namas are eating of Halal and a sexual relation with a Muslim woman. The later taboo has been replaced by adultery for a Sikh in the current *Rehit Maryada*. The Rehit Namas also urge the Khalsa to destroy the Turks (Muslims), and not have any social interaction with them. The above-mentioned items, in my opinion, have played a considerable role in undermining the friendly relations between Sikhs and Muslims after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. The taboo of Halal was practiced to such extremes that Sikhs stopped eating every kind of food cooked by Muslims. I was very young in 1947, but I have learned from the elders that Sikhs who originated from higher Hindu castes, used to treat Muslim Jats and Rajputs the same way as they treated lower caste Hindus when it came to inter-dining. In Panjabi there is saying that we do not have fraternal relation with those with whom we do not share our kitchen and food (*jina nal sadi chulai chaunkai di ate khan pin di sanjh nahin ohna nal sada bhaichara hi kahda*). This resulted in minimal social interactions between Sikhs and Muslims, and that is what the followers of Kautlya wanted. No Sikh ever paid any attention to the consequences of this attitude of the Sikhs toward Muslims.

I wish Sikh scholars have dealt with Rehit Namas, Dasam Granth and other old writings which distort Sikh philosophy and are unflattering to the Khalsa, as effectively as they have dealt with the writings of W.H. McLeod, Hajot Oberoi, Pashaura Singh, and Khushwant Singh.

[1] Mahala 1, Ad Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1245

[2] Mahala 1, Ad Guru Granth Sahib, p. 16

[3] Mahala 1, Ad Guru Granth Sahib, p. 955