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Importance of Relics in Sikhism

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ABSTRACT

The general meaning of relics is signs or symbols, although several technical terms are also used in their place. In the technical sense, a relic does not merely mean a symbol or an emblem; rather, it refers to the remaining physical parts or possessions associated with a person or object. In religion, a relic is a part of the body of a saint or a revered individual, or an object connected with them, which is carefully preserved for purposes of veneration or as a tangible memorial. The word relic is derived from the Latin *reliquiae*, meaning "that which remains" or "something left behind." A reliquary is a shrine or container in which one or more sacred relics are preserved. In Sikhism, relics hold a dual significance for both the Sikh faith and Sikh way of life. Among Sikh relics, both bastar (garments) and shastar (weapons) were preserved with great reverence and care from the time of the First Guru to the Fifth Guru. However, from this early period, the relics that have survived are primarily garments. These articles are found at the birthplaces of the Gurus or at other places sanctified by their presence. Such relics are closely associated with these sacred sites. After the martyrdom of the Fifth Guru, however, the relics preserved were not limited to garments alone but also included shastar (weapons), reflecting the changing historical circumstances of the Sikh community.

Background of the Literary Works of the Sikh Gurus

The Sikh Gurus composed numerous literary works. These include Rehatnamas (codes of conduct), Hukamnamas (edicts), Gutka Sahib (prayer books), letters bearing the signatures of the Gurus, and manuscripts of the Guru Granth Sahib, among others. These sacred writings are still preserved in gurdwaras and in the homes of devoted Sikhs. They provide valuable insight into the significance, philosophy, and historical background of Sikhism. Although these manuscripts have become old with the passage of time, they continue to bear witness to the rich heritage and traditions of the Sikh faith. Today, the Guru Granth Sahib is ceremonially installed (Parkash) in gurdwaras, and a Hukamnama (divine command) is taken from it to guide the congregation. The divine hymns (Bani) of the Gurus continue to inspire humanity and reveal the path to God. Thus, the relics and literary works of the Sikh Gurus remain enduring symbols of Sikh history, spirituality, and religious heritage.

Its present purpose is to provide authentic information and help people overcome superstitions and misconceptions. The relics that exist among us today trace their origin to the Sikh Gurus. These relics themselves testify to their own historical background and significance. The term **Kosh** (lexicon or encyclopaedia), widely used in ancient Indian literature, refers to a compilation of knowledge. Throughout history, scholars around the world have recorded their learning in different books and treatises in their respective languages. The earliest encyclopaedic works were produced by Greek scholars, followed by Latin scholars. These works preserved and presented knowledge in a systematic manner. The word **Kosh** is derived from Sanskrit and has several meanings. In modern usage, it generally refers to a book that provides information about the words of a language and their meanings, while also offering important explanatory and reference material. According to Greek scholars, an encyclopaedia represents complete knowledge in the field of education. In English, this is known as an Encyclopaedia. The compilation of Gur Shabad Ratnakar Mahan Kosh (The Encyclopaedia of Sikh Literature) by Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha holds a unique place among encyclopaedic works. In Punjabi literature, the first encyclopaedic work was undertaken by Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha. He began this monumental project in 1900 after collecting extensive source material. Bhai Kahn Singh resolved to include those words and entries that had been omitted from **Guru Girarth Kosh** compiled by Pandit Tara Singh and **Sri Guru Granth Sahib Kosh** compiled by Bhai Hazara Singh. Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha was greatly influenced by the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Instead of preparing merely a dictionary of the vocabulary found in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, he decided to compile a comprehensive encyclopaedia of Sikh literature. Thus, he prepared the **Gur Shabad Ratnakar Mahan Kosh**, which is regarded as an encyclopaedic work of immense scholarly and moral value. This monumental work is widely recognized in Sikhism and Sikh literature as the foremost encyclopaedia of the Sikh tradition. The completion of the Mahan Kosh became the central purpose of Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha's life. The Mahan Kosh is the result of Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha's lifelong research, dedication, and perseverance. It is said that the preparation of this encyclopaedia required fourteen years of continuous effort, while the processes of printing and publication took a total of twenty-eight years. Gur Shabad Ratnakar Mahan Kosh is an outstanding scholarly achievement. The writing of the work began in 1912 and was completed in 1926, after which it was presented to the Darbar Sahib.

It was eventually published by the Patiala State. By the time of its publication, the Raja of Faridkot, who had intended to assist in publishing the Mahan Kosh, had passed away. Before his death, he had promised Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha financial assistance for the publication and printing of the encyclopaedia. Evidence of this commitment is found a few months later, when, on the advice of his friends, Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha decided to print a sample consisting of a few pages. One thousand copies of these sample pages were distributed free of cost among the public, and pamphlets were circulated through newspapers to publicize the work. After nine months of effort, only 200 copies

were ordered, of which 90 copies were purchased by a single subscriber, Sardar Bahadur Singh Dharam Thekedar. At that time, Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of the Patiala State offered to underwrite the entire cost of printing. The printing of the Mahan Kosh commenced on 26 October 1927 and took approximately two and a half years to complete. A total of 1,100 copies were printed at a cost of Rs. 18,700. The first edition, published in 1930, appeared in four volumes. Later, the Language Department, Punjab, Patiala, republished the Mahan Kosh in a single-volume edition. This edition was reprinted three times, with the last edition appearing in 1981.

Each entry in the Mahan Kosh has been treated comprehensively. Its etymology, various meanings, and different usages in a wide range of literary works have been carefully explained, supported by appropriate textual references. In the second edition, with the assistance of the Survey of India Press, photographs of the original printing plates were used, enabling four pages of the original edition to be reproduced on a single page. The price of this edition was fixed between Rs. 25 and Rs. 30. The third edition was published in 1974. Instead of four columns per page, it employed a three-column format. This edition was published in smaller type, comprising 716 pages, and after accounting for increased printing costs, it was priced at Rs. 28. The price of the fourth edition was further increased due to inflation. Before Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, most lexicons (Kosh) were written in Sanskrit, and Sanskrit dominated lexicographical scholarship in North India. Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha's Mahan Kosh contains more than 7,000 words of Arabic origin. Along with these, words of Sanskrit origin were also reproduced in their original scripts to help readers understand their correct pronunciation and meanings. Geographical names, particularly those of historical gurdwaras and other important places, were treated with equal care and scholarly attention. Every gurdwara and its historical significance were described in a systematic and detailed manner.

Legends and historical traditions associated with these places have been recorded. In the case of major pilgrimage sites, illustrations and maps have also been included. This Kosh is a true encyclopaedia that provides information on 64,263 historical and geographical entries. The material included in the Mahan Kosh has been drawn from the Guru Granth Sahib, the writings of Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal, as well as important Sikh literary works such as the Rehatnamas, Sarbloh, Gur Bilas, Gur Sobha, Suraj Prakash, and Bhai Bala's Janam Sakhi. The Mahan Kosh was compiled according to modern Western encyclopaedic methods. Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha also included scientific terminology and provided authentic and accurate pronunciations. He offered concise explanations of terms relating to Christianity, Islam, Persian traditions, and other religions. Furthermore, words of Arabic, French, and Sanskrit origin were carefully recorded with correct spellings and meanings.

The Mahan Kosh is an extraordinary scholarly achievement. Preparing such a monumental work was by no means an easy task for a single individual. Given the linguistic diversity of the time, the work

was extremely challenging. Nevertheless, Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha successfully completed this remarkable project. During its publication, he encountered numerous difficulties, but he ultimately overcame them. The Mahan Kosh stands as Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha's invaluable gift to the entire world and has had a profound influence on Sikh scholarship. His **Gur Shabad Ratnakar Mahan Kosh** is regarded as one of the greatest contributions to Sikh literature. The Sikh Gurus and the relics associated with them hold immense importance in Sikhism. These sacred relics possess a unique identity and significance within the Sikh faith. They are closely linked with the historic struggles and battles that continue to be a source of pride for the Sikh community. These relics keep alive the memories of the Ten Sikh Gurus and strengthen the spiritual consciousness of Sikhs. Inspired by these sacred relics, generations of Sikhs have developed a spirit of sacrifice, courage, and unwavering faith. The relics of the Sikh Gurus form an integral part of Sikh religion, Sikh character, the Sikh way of life, and Sikh society. These symbols have inspired Sikhs in every sphere of life and serve as enduring emblems of Sikh identity. Their true significance can only be fully understood by those who embrace and practice the Sikh faith. These relics are important not only from a physical or historical perspective but also because of their profound religious, literary, cultural, and social significance. By understanding the philosophy embodied in the relics of the Sikh Gurus, one gains a deeper understanding of the complete philosophy and spirit of Sikhism.

The Importance of Weapons (Shastar) in Sikhism

In the early period of Sikhism, Sikhs were imparted two kinds of education: Shastar Vidya (the science of arms and military training) and Shaastra Vidya (the study of scriptures and sacred knowledge). The Sikh Gurus trained their followers to become proficient in both forms of learning. According to the Gurus, the knowledge of arms (Shastar Vidya) is a divine gift bestowed by God.

According to Guru Gobind Singh (Kalgidhar):

"Khand Prithame Saaj Kai, Jin Sabh Sansar Upaya."

Similarly, Guru Gobind Singh praised the importance of weapons in the following verses:

"Pritham Bhagauti Simar Kai, Guru Nanak Lai Dhiaye;
Aas, Kirpan, Kharag, Tupak, Tabar Aur Teer, Saif, Sarohi—
Bai Yehi Hamare Pir."

These verses emphasize that weapons are not merely instruments of warfare but sacred symbols associated with righteousness, justice, and the protection of truth.

The Sikh Gurus always carried weapons, and with the establishment of the Sikh community, they made the bearing of arms an essential part of Sikh life. The Gurus adopted weapons for the protection of the Sikh faith and the defense of justice. Consequently, weapons occupy a place of great importance in Sikhism. Sikhs have traditionally regarded their weapons with deep respect and have never surrendered them to an oppressor while they remained alive.

The Sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind Sahib, adopted the two swords of Miri and Piri to symbolize the Sikh commitment to resisting Mughal oppression. These two swords represented temporal (political) authority and spiritual authority, signifying the inseparable relationship between worldly responsibility and spiritual leadership. According to Gurmat Martand, Guru Hargobind introduced these two swords as symbols of both spiritual and temporal sovereignty.

Guru Gobind Singh also adopted weapons for the purpose of self-defense and established the principle that bearing arms is essential for the defense of one's faith, country, and personal liberty. He made it a duty for every Sikh to be prepared to protect righteousness and justice whenever necessary.

Weapons (Shastar) are among the most revered symbols of the Sikh Gurus. According to the teachings of the Gurus and the Sikh Rehatnamas (codes of conduct), they are regarded as an integral part of Sikh identity and discipline. Every Sikh is expected to honor and uphold the tradition of bearing arms in accordance with Sikh principles.

Among these symbols, the **Kara** (steel bracelet) is also regarded as one of the sacred emblems associated with the Sikh Gurus. The historical accounts of the Gurus and their use of arms continue to be preserved at many sacred places. These weapons symbolize the protection of the Sikh faith, while the Kara represents courage, commitment, and the eternal bond between the Sikh and the Guru. Weapons have always been considered an essential part of Sikh life, and the Khalsa has traditionally maintained the practice of bearing arms throughout its history.

The Kara bestowed by the Sikh Gurus also possesses the character of a defensive weapon. Historically, members of the Khalsa could use the steel bracelet as a means of self-defense when required. Although it originally served a practical martial function, over time it evolved into the circular steel bracelet worn by Sikhs today as one of the **Five Ks**, symbolizing discipline, strength, unity, and an unbroken connection with the Guru.

Professor **Puran Singh** beautifully described the Kara by stating that it is "the trophy of victory bestowed by the Gurus." It is a precious and enduring gift that the Sikh Gurus presented to their followers, symbolizing courage, righteousness, and eternal commitment to the Sikh way of life.

The **Kara** (steel bracelet) made of iron, which was bestowed by the Sikh Gurus, represents the strength and resilience of the Khalsa. This symbol of Sikhism represents the preservation of a Sikh's complete way of life. While introducing the Kara, the Sikh Gurus stated that “this Kara is a symbol of unity and equality” and that it would always remain an integral part of Sikh identity. Weapons have been considered one of the most important aspects of human life. Evidence of their significance can be found through various ancient discoveries.

According to Bilas (page 10), Bhai Sukha Ji demonstrated that a person without weapons could be defeated through strategies and tactics, as such a person was considered weak and dependent. A weapon may be of any type, but if a person does not know how to use it effectively, it is equivalent to a mere toy. Therefore, it is essential to acquire training in the use of different kinds of weapons. In ancient times, when humans lived in forests, they used weapons such as bows, arrows, and knives for survival. This shows that human beings recognized the importance of weapons from the very beginning of their existence.

In the history of weapons and their training, the period of the **Mahabharata** is remembered as a golden age. During that time, various types of weapons and experts in the knowledge of warfare developed. However, detailed information about this tradition has not been fully preserved.

The British destroyed many ancient Indian manuscripts and historical records. Today, many ancient Indian weapons can be found outside India rather than in Indian museums. During the **Anglo-Sikh Wars**, the British took away a large number of Sikh weapons, many of which can still be seen in museums in England.

The Sikh Gurus made significant contributions towards protecting freedom and human dignity. However, even today, Sikhism faces discrimination in various spheres of life in India, and Sikhs do not always receive the recognition, respect, and positions they deserve.

The first Guru of Sikhism, **Guru Nanak Dev Ji**, was spiritually connected with the formless God (Nirankar) and was also highly active in social life. During the period of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the Mughal Empire ruled India. Due to the injustices and oppression committed by the Mughal rulers, people lived their lives in fear. At that time, Guru Nanak Dev Ji condemned oppression and stated:

“Raje Seeyaan Mukadam Kutte, Jaye Jagaen Baithe Sote.”

(Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Ang 222)

Guru Nanak Dev Ji challenged the oppression of the Mughals and inspired people to become fearless. He emphasized that if a Sikh could become **fearless (Nirbhau)**, then only such a fearless Sikh could attain the true spirit of courage and the art of defending righteousness in the battlefield.

Guru Gobind Singh Ji inspired the Sikhs to acquire both martial training and spiritual knowledge so that they would always follow the path shown by their Guru. However, even today, there are some Sikhs who remain disconnected from their rich historical heritage. During events such as 1947 and 1984, Sikhs faced many challenges, partly due to a lack of proper awareness and training related to their historical and martial traditions.

There are some Sikhs who proudly preserve the **Sri Sahib (Kirpan)** bestowed by the Sikh Gurus and maintain their distinct identity through it. However, today such practices are rarely found in Sikh households. The Sri Sahib is now mostly seen in gurdwaras and museums. In many places, it has become more of a display object rather than being understood as a symbol of Sikh history and responsibility. Some people acquire it from shops without knowing its historical background and spiritual significance; they are attracted only by its external beauty. Today, many such weapons are preserved mainly in gurdwara museums, while people remain unaware of their deeper history and importance.

There is a need to spread proper knowledge about these sacred weapons among people. Their history and significance should be explained during various religious and cultural programs. Sikhs should understand and follow the principles, teachings, and values established by the Sikh Gurus.

Through the symbols and relics of the Sikh Gurus, and after their sacrifices with the blessings of the Almighty, a distinct religious community emerged, known as the **Khalsa**. The word Khalsa means pure, clear, and free. It represents both the entire community that follows Sikhism as its faith and the special order of initiated Sikhs established by Guru Gobind Singh Ji. The Khalsa provided the Sikh community with a political and religious identity and was founded by the Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji.

The Khalsa was born with the spirit of the sword and became known for its unique identity. The Tenth Guru taught Sikhs to live a life of freedom and to resist oppression. He established the foundation of the Khalsa through courage, discipline, and the responsible use of weapons. His teachings indirectly challenged the discriminatory policies and oppressive taxation imposed by certain Islamic authorities of that period.

Through the weapons (Shastar) of the Sikh Gurus, Sikhs learned the importance of living a free and dignified life from ancient times. Weapons were considered an essential part of human life, especially

for protection and justice. Learning the proper techniques of using these weapons can be highly beneficial. Apart from museums, these historical weapons are also preserved in ancient gurdwaras and old royal households. Many weapons are also found among families who have preserved them through generations as a part of their ancestral heritage.

These weapons are preserved as the oldest possessions associated with our Sikh Gurus. It is our responsibility to protect and preserve them. They are given special respect and honor within Sikhism. Weapons hold a unique position in the Sikh faith. Sikhs respectfully refer to their sacred weapons as “**Ye Hamare Pir**” (these are our spiritual guides). Moreover, in the Sikh prayer (Ardas) before the Almighty, the remembrance of the Bhagauti (sacred sword/weapon) is made at the beginning.

Within Sikh tradition, Sikhs have also taken special care of the ancient manuscripts, scriptures, and writings of the Sikh Gurus so that future generations may gain knowledge and wisdom from them. The teachings, history, and philosophy of the Gurus have been preserved through these ancient texts, religious scriptures, and writings.

There are many important Sikh shrines such as Takht Sri Akal Takht Sahib, Patna Sahib, Takht Sri Kesgarh Sahib, Sri Damdama Sahib, and several other gurdwaras where the weapons of the Sikh Gurus are preserved. These sacred weapons are cleaned and maintained with special care every day. They are displayed in gurdwaras, where many devotees and visitors come to have their darshan (sacred viewing).

At night, after the recitation of **Sodar Rehras**, the sacred form of the Guru Granth Sahib and the weapons of the Gurus are respectfully placed in a special room or designated place. This ceremonial practice is known as **Sukhasan**, meaning the formal resting of the Guru Sahib. Before placing the Guru Granth Sahib in Sukhasan, the recitation of **Kirtan Sohila** is performed. In brief, Sukhasan is the opposite of the morning ceremony of **Prakash**, when the Guru Granth Sahib is brought from its resting place, known as Sachkhand. Sukhasan is performed after sunset or whenever the daily program of the gurdwara concludes.

The weapons of the **Sixth Guru, Sri Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji**, have been given immense love and respect. During his lifetime, whenever Guru Hargobind Sahib awoke, he would clean his weapons with a soft cloth and wear them with great reverence. He showed deep respect for his weapons, which is reflected in the Hukamnamas issued by him. He also instructed Sikhs to offer weapons as part of their **Dasvandh** (one-tenth contribution).

Once, a person named **Chaudhary Kapura** visited the **Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji**. He saw the weapons of the Guru Sahib placed on another bed. When he asked about the special care and

respect given to these weapons, Guru Gobind Singh Ji explained before Chaudhary Kapura and other devotees that serving (seva) these sacred weapons makes them equivalent to a divine symbol connected with the Almighty. Through weapons, a person gains the strength and courage to fulfill righteous purposes.

Through weapons, victories can be achieved in battles. According to historical accounts, when **Guru Gobind Singh Ji** departed from the North towards **Nanded**, he entrusted his weapons to **Mata Sundari Ji** and **Mata Sahib Kaur Ji**. He instructed them to worship and respect the weapons and to recite **Japji Sahib** in the morning. Guru Gobind Singh Ji also issued Hukamnamas to his Sikhs regarding the offering and preservation of horses and weapons in gurdwaras.

We have learned about these Hukamnamas through the history of Sikhism. It is important to keep the sword inside its sheath. A sword is made of iron, and the sheath protects it from rust and damage. For the preservation of weapons, the Sikh Gurus used ghee as a protective substance. According to Sikh tradition, ghee was applied to swords as a mark of respect and care for the sacred weapons placed before the Guru Granth Sahib. One who respects the Guru Granth Sahib also respects the weapons associated with the Gurus.

Not only weapons, but also the Hukamnamas of the Sikh Gurus, their writings, compositions, and other scriptures are included among the sacred symbols and relics of the Gurus. In Sikhism, weapons are considered incomplete without the guidance of **Gurmat** (the Sikh spiritual philosophy).

The title of **Sant-Sipahi (Saint-Soldier)** was given to Sikhs. According to Sikh philosophy, a person should possess the sword of wisdom for spiritual knowledge and the sword of iron for physical defense. Therefore, the swords of **Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji** preserved at the **Akal Takht Sahib** represent the importance of both temporal power and spiritual authority. If we wish to promote and preserve Sikhism, we must understand the significance of the symbols and relics of the Sikh Gurus.

Many sacred relics bestowed by the Sikh Gurus still exist. It is our responsibility to preserve these historical treasures. The Sikh community is enriched by the contributions of our ancestors, who played a significant role in shaping Sikh history. The science of weapons and martial arts exists in many parts of the world, but within the Sikh community today it is particularly represented through the martial art of **Gatka**.

Gatka is an ancient martial art that has been fully tested in combat and has existed in North India for thousands of years. It is considered both a spiritual discipline and a physical exercise. After the Sixth

Guru, **Guru Hargobind Sahib Ji**, adopted the two swords of **Miri and Piri**, this martial tradition continued among Sikhs, who preserved and developed its techniques through generations.

Gatka is a complete martial system that combines spiritual, mental, and physical skills in equal measure. It helps an individual become capable of defending oneself and others. This system is primarily intended for protection and self-defence. As Guru Gobind Singh Ji taught:

“When all other means have failed, it is righteous to take up the sword.”

Bhai Kahn Singh provides evidence of the relics recorded in the Mahan Kosh. We obtain accurate information about these relics from the references and details given in Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha's Mahan Kosh. He also mentioned those relics that were destroyed due to the negligence of certain individuals.

Conclusion

The Gur Shabad Ratnakar Mahan Kosh is a significant source of Sikhism, through which we gain knowledge about the meanings and background of various terms related to the Sikh faith. This Mahan Kosh is filled with extensive knowledge and information, making it a highly reliable and valuable work that can be trusted for understanding Sikh history, literature, and religious traditions.

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