

Nihang Singhs: Guardians of Sikh Martial and Spiritual Heritage

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Abstract

The Nihang Singhs constitute a distinctive and elite warrior order within Sikhism, historically entrusted with the defense of Sikh faith, sovereignty, and martial ethos. Emerging prominently during the time of Guru Gobind Singh, the Nihangs became frontline defenders of Sikhism during periods of sustained conflict under Mughal, Afghan, and later British rule. This paper examines the historical origins of the Nihang Singhs, their military contributions during the Misl period, and their enduring role in preserving Sikh martial traditions and religious institutions. Central to their identity is the preservation of Shastra Vidya, the traditional Sikh martial science that integrates weapons training, physical discipline, battlefield strategy, and spiritual consciousness. Rooted in the doctrine of Miri-Piri, the Nihang tradition embodies the synthesis of temporal authority and spiritual devotion envisioned by the Sikh Gurus. The study further explores Nihang religious practices, distinctive attire (Khalsa Swaroop), martial rituals, and training systems, such as Gatka, horse riding, and weapons discipline, which continue to sustain the living legacy of the Khalsa warrior ideal. Special attention is given to their role as guardians of key Sikh religious institutions, particularly the Akal Takht Sahib and Harmandir Sahib, across turbulent historical phases. The leadership of prominent Nihang figures, such as Akali Phula Singh and Baba Santa Singh, is analyzed to highlight Nihang resistance to colonial domination and political interference, as well as their commitment to institutional preservation, especially in the post-1984 period. By integrating martial training, spiritual discipline, and cultural expression, the Nihang Singhs have ensured that Sikh martial traditions remain a dynamic and evolving heritage. The paper argues that the Nihangs continue to symbolize Sikh resilience, sovereignty, and the enduring spirit of the Khalsa Panth in contemporary Sikh society.

Keywords: Nihang Singhs, Shastra Vidya, Khalsa Panth, Akal Takht Sahib, Sikh Martial Traditions

INTRODUCTION

Sikhism emerged in the fifteenth century as a dynamic spiritual tradition that emphasized devotion to the Divine, social equality, and moral responsibility. Over time, historical circumstances compelled the Sikh community to evolve a distinctive martial character to protect its religious freedom and

collective identity. This transformation reached its culmination under the leadership of Guru Gobind Singh, who institutionalized the Khalsa in 1699, integrating spiritual discipline with martial readiness. Within this framework, the Nihang Singhs emerged as an elite warrior order, entrusted with the defense of Sikh sovereignty, religious institutions, and martial traditions.

The Nihang Singhs occupy a unique position in Sikh history as the custodians of Miri-Piri, the doctrine symbolizing the inseparable relationship between temporal authority and spiritual power. Renowned for their distinctive blue attire, weapon-adorned turbans, and strict adherence to Khalsa

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discipline, Nihangs served as frontline warriors during periods of sustained conflict against Mughal repression, Afghan invasions, and later British colonial expansion. Their participation in the Misl period, coupled with their refusal to abandon traditional modes of warfare even during the modernization of the Sikh army under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, underscores their ideological commitment to the original martial vision of the Sikh Gurus. Central to the Nihang tradition is the preservation of Shashtra Vidya, the indigenous Sikh martial science encompassing weapons training, physical conditioning, battlefield strategy, and spiritual discipline. This martial system, deeply rooted in Gurmat philosophy, seeks not merely military proficiency but the cultivation of ethical courage and spiritual awareness. Nihang daily practices, including Nitnem, Simran, Gatka, horse-riding, and Shashtra Ishnaan, reflect a holistic warrior ethos in which devotion and combat readiness coexist. Beyond the battlefield, Nihang Singhs have historically functioned as guardians of Sikh religious institutions, most notably the Akal Takht Sahib and Harmandir Sahib. From the eighteenth-century invasions to the post-colonial challenges of the twentieth century, their role in safeguarding sacred spaces and maintaining Sikh maryada has been both continuous and influential. Figures, such as Akali Phula Singh and Baba Santa Singh, exemplify Nihang leadership in moments of institutional crisis, highlighting their enduring relevance within Sikh socio-religious history. This research paper seeks to examine the historical evolution, martial practices, and religious responsibilities of the Nihang Singhs, analyzing their contributions to the preservation of Sikh martial traditions and institutional sovereignty. By situating the Nihangs within broader political, religious, and cultural contexts, the study aims to demonstrate how this warrior order has sustained the Khalsa spirit across centuries, ensuring that Sikh martial heritage remains a living and dynamic tradition rather than a relic of the past.

PRESERVERS OF SIKH MARTIAL TRADITIONS

The Nihang Singhs have the chief preservers of Sikh martial traditions, serving as a living link between the martial legacy of the Gurus and present-day Sikh society. Their preservation efforts are centered on Shashtra vidya, the traditional Sikh martial science that includes training in weaponry, physical agility, battlefield strategies and mental discipline. They believed that the Shashtra Vidya started by Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Guru Ji blessed Baba Budha Ji to maintain Shashtra vidya and Bhai Jetha Ji trained Guru Hargobind Ji in martial arts under the leadership of Baba Budha Ji. Guru Hargobind Ji adopted two swords of “Miri and Piri” [1]. He gathered the army and fought four wars against Mughals. Guru Gobind Singh used to wear armor at Patna from his childhood. Guru Sahib taught the Sikhs to chant the name of God and wear armor.

Khadag DhroTan Ujal Hoi!

Naam Japo Mukh Kanth So Loi! [2]

(When you carry a sword or use a weapon for the protection of religion and righteousness, it purifies the body when you chant the name of the Lord through your mouth and throat, so that you become spiritually enlightened as well.)

Guru Sahib gave the Sikhs a special uniform after drinking nectar (Amrit), which had five Kakars (code of dress): Kada (an iron bracelet worn on the wrist), Kesh (uncut hair), Kangha (a wooden comb), Kirpan (a sword), and Kachera (short breeches). Every Sikh made it necessary to keep a Kirpan. Guru Ji started the tradition of Ape Gur Chela and gave all authorities to the Khalsa. In Guru Gobind Singh's times, the Sangat was known as Sarbat Khalsa in whose name all prayers were offered and all formal decisions taken, any person, however highly placed, was not considered above the jurisdiction of Sarbat Khalsa rules [1].

Guru Ji sent Hukamnamas (orders) to the Sangat that they should come for Darshan (visit) only in armor. Even today, the tradition of Nihang Singhs is that they carry five types of weapons – Teer (arrows), Bandoon (gun), Chakkars (steel rounds around their neck), Teg (spears), and Katar (daggers). Nihang Singh carries five weapons in his turban (called Kesh weapons): Chakkar (steel round around their turban), Khanda, Teg (spears), Bagh Nakh (iron claw), and Teer (arrows). Guru Sahib ordered to learn and teach the weapons. Who does not learn to use weapons will not get the Singh. This tradition

continued even after Guru Sahib. Amrit was given only after 12 years of living in Budha Dal. Guru Gobind Singh addressed the Akal Purukh with the name of Khargket (who has a symbol of sword on his Flag), Asdhuj (Lord of the sword), Aspan (who has a sword in his hand). The Nihangs are following their Guru's teaching till today and preserve the sacred art of Shastras through daily practice in Deras (Camps), where younger generations are taught not just to fight but to embody the warrior spirit of the Khalsa.

They follow a daily routine in Deras like Ishnaan (Bathing), Nitnem & Simran (morning prayers). They clean their Shastras, (Shastra Ishnaan) and practice Gatka (traditional Sikh martial art) and often weapon training like sword, spear and archery. Gatka is a graceful yet deadly martial art involving the use of wooden sticks, swords, shields and other traditional weapons. It is a deeply spiritual, merging physical movements with recitations of Gurbani (scriptural hymns), allowing practitioners to channel inner strength through divine connection.

They practice horse riding daily. Nihangs are traditionally expert horsemen. Nihang Singhs love horses very much because the Sixth Guru Ji loved his here by calling it Jan Bhai (dear brother). Nihangs also wear traditional battle gear – blue Cholas (robes), steel-armored turbans, and weapon-adorned attire – which reinforces their constant readiness for defense and self-sacrifice. This traditional dress is known as Khalsa Swaroop. Guru Gobind Singh gave this color to Nihang Singhs. Guru Sahib wrote in his work “Zafarnama”:

Karaho Khalsa Panth Teesar Parvesa!!

Jagreh Singh Jodhe Dhashe Neel Bhavesa!!

(“Let the Khalsa Panth enter for the third time. Brave Singhs appear wearing blue attire.”)

In these lines Guru Ji possibly indicating a third major era or wave of Khalsa assertion or rule.

According to Dr. Sukhdyal Singh, the blue dress of the Khalsa was itself a war dress. It consists with blue robe, Karra (iron bracelet), open Kirpan (an open blade Kirpan), Kamarkasa (a belt around the waist), a Kachhera up to the knees, Dumala (a high turban). This dress was given by Guru Gobind Singh. They were given the surname Singh meaning “lion”. (Subsequently) for women, the Kaur, meaning “Princess” came to be prescribed. They were always to wear of their person the five sacred emblems of their new order. These were kesh the untrimmed hair, kangha or a comb to keep the hair tidy, kara or a steel bracelet, kacchehra, short breeches and a kirpan, a sword. But later after the occupation of Punjab by the British this bana (dress) disappeared. The Nihang Singh still retains this war dress. Nowadays their martial exhibitions during festivals, like Hola Mohalla, display this dress. Hola Mohalla is a public testament to the Sikh martial spirit, featuring mock battles, horse-riding stunts and weapon demonstrations that attract large audiences and inspire community pride. By integrating martial training with spiritual discipline and cultural expression, the Nihang Singhs have ensured that Sikh martial traditions remain a living and evolving heritage rather than a relic of the past.

GUARDIANS OF SIKH RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

The Nihang Singhs have historically served as protectors of Sikh religious institutions, playing a vital role in preserving the sanctity and sovereignty of sacred spaces. Their service as spiritual guardians is rooted in their deep commitment to the Khalsa tradition and their unwavering readiness to defend Sikhism both physically and spiritually. One of the primary institutions under their historical protection is the Akal Takhat Sahib, the temporal throne of Sikhism established by Guru Hargobind Sahib in 1606. The present-day Akaal Takhat Sahib was originally built on a single platform. The platform is 14 feet long, 8 feet wide and 7 feet high [7]. Nihangs regard the Akal Takhat not just as a building but as the seat of Sikh political and religious authority. They have defended it multiple times in history, especially during periods of persecution and invasion. In Misl periods, the Sikh Sardars made special policy to protect Sri Harmander Sahib. The ecclesiastical affairs were managed by Akalis who were in charge of

the temple and Tank of Amritsar. The Harmandir Sahib, too, also benefitted from the presence of Nihang warriors. During turbulent times, including the 18th century invasions by Afghan forces and the oppressive policies of Mughal rulers, Nihangs often stationed themselves in and around Amritsar to guard the sanctity of the shrine and ensure the continuity of daily religious observances, like Guru Granth Sahib's Parkash and Sukhassan ceremonies. Akali Phula Singh, along with his group, arrived Amritsar in Samvat 1857 [8]. He kept the entire management of Darbar Sahib under their supervision. Akali Phula Singh managed Amritsar well as Sri Damdama Sahib and Anandpur Sahib. Akali Phula Singh born in 1761 and he was contemporary of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He participated in many campaigns of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. While Maharaja Ranjit Singh undertook significant efforts to modernize his army by incorporating European military practices, the Nihangs maintained their traditional methods and resisted such reforms. They were heavily armed with traditional weapons and refused European-style training, choosing instead to adhere to their established martial traditions. Although they would not submit to military discipline or training and insisted on pursuing traditional Sikh tactics rather than the new-fangled European system introduced by Ranjit Singh. Their leaders, such as Akali Phula Singh and Akali Sadhu Singh, commanded respect and wielded considerable influence within the Sikh military framework. Akali Phula Singh was instrumental in bringing together the Sikh Misls in Amritsar. His foresight and leadership greatly strengthened Sikhism and elevated the Khalsa Panth. Known for his fearless spirit, he was a formidable warrior who even the British deeply feared. Nihang Singhs attacked a British envoy and his escorts as early as 1809. Despite repeated efforts to capture him, his extraordinary bravery and sharp strategic mind made him unstoppable.

The relationship between the Nihangs and Maharaja Ranjit Singh's regular forces was complex. There were instances where the Nihangs engaged in conflicts with other segments of the Maharaja's army, highlighting tensions arising from differing military philosophies and the Nihangs' staunch independence. Even after the fall of the Sikh Empire in 1849, Nihangs refused to surrender to British rule. They fought against British rule under the leadership of Akali Naina Singh. They continued their independent way of life, preserving Sikh martial traditions and resisting colonial policies that sought to weaken Sikh identity. In addition to these central institutions, Nihangs have traditionally safeguarded smaller Gurdwaras and religious sites across Punjab and beyond [12–16]. They take special pride in upholding *maryada* (religious discipline) within these spaces, ensuring that proper recitation of Gurbani, care of sacred texts, and respectful conduct are always maintained. Modern Nihang Singhs also deny efforts to preserve the old texts like *Baba Santa Singh Ji*. Baba Santa Singh (1911–2008) was the 96th Jathedar (leader) of the Budha Dal, the premier organization of the Nihang Sikhs. His role in Sikh religious and political life became especially prominent during the turbulent period following Operation Blue Star in 1984 [17, 18]. After the Indian Army's attack on the Akal Takht Sahib inside the Golden Temple complex in June 1984, the Sikh religious institutions were left severely damaged – both physically and emotionally. In this crisis, Baba Santa Singh made efforts to preserve, restore, and protect Sikh religious institutions [19–21]. After the destruction of the Akal Takht during Operation Blue Star, there was an urgent need to rebuild it.

Baba Santa Singh took the initiative to reconstruct the Akal Takht Sahib starting in late 1984, without waiting for political debates or external permissions. He mobilized the Nihang Sikhs and used traditional Sikh architectural methods to ensure that the spirit of the original structure was respected. This act was seen by some as a courageous defense of Sikh sovereignty, although others criticized it as being carried out too soon under perceived pressure from the Indian government. Baba Santa Singh worked hard to keep the Nihang traditions alive, which are deeply tied to the martial and spiritual heritage of Sikhism. He maintained the Budha Dal as an independent force that resisted both political interference and dilution of Sikh martial practices. Although he was criticized by some factions for working with the Indian state, Baba Santa Singh always emphasized that the protection of Sikh religious sites must come above politics. He made it clear that restoring the Akal Takht was a religious duty, not a political endorsement of any government. Through his leadership, Baba Santa Singh preserved the martial identity of the Sikh faith, encouraging young Sikhs to learn traditional martial arts, horse-riding,

and arms training. In the aftermath of 1984, when Sikh institutions were leaderless or divided, Baba Santa Singh offered a stable and continuous line of authority for the Nihangs and other traditional Sikh orders, helping prevent a complete collapse of certain religious practices. A few Gurdwaras were constructed and a few others were renovated. Educational institutions were established, namely the Budha Dal Public school in the city of Patiala.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ratan Singh Bhangu, Sri Gur Panth Parkash, Singh Brothers, Amritsar, 2004 – Sri Gur Panth Prakash by Rattan Singh Bhangu provide foundational narratives of Sikh militarization and the emergence of warrior orders during the eighteenth century. Bhangu's work offers valuable insights into the Misl period and the collective ethos of the Khalsa, though it often reflects a devotional and panegyric tone rather than critical historical analysis.

- *J. D. Cunningham, A history of the Sikhs. New Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2004* (Original work published 1849) – J.D. Cunningham and Joseph Davey Cunningham approached Sikh military traditions from an administrative and imperial perspective. While Cunningham acknowledged the martial discipline and organizational strength of the Sikh community, his interpretation tended to frame Nihang warriors as irregular or undisciplined when measured against European military standards. Such assessments, though influential, often overlooked the ideological and spiritual foundations underlying Nihang warfare [21–24].
- *W. H. McLeod, Sikhism, London, Penguin Books, 1997*: W.H. McLeod's analytical approach to Sikh institutions has contributed to understanding the evolution of Sikh identity, although his interpretations of tradition have occasionally been critiqued by orthodox Sikh scholars [25].
- *Giani Gian Singh, Panth Parkash, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1970*: The text is particularly valuable for its detailed treatment of the militarization of the Sikh community, especially after the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev Ji and during the period of Guru Hargobind Sahib and Guru Gobind Singh. Panth Parkash provides rich descriptions of the evolution of the Khalsa, the doctrine of Miri-Piri, and the emergence of Sikh warrior groups such as the Akalis and Nihang Singhs. The author highlights the ethical and spiritual foundations of Sikh warfare, portraying martial activity as a righteous duty undertaken for the defense of faith, justice, and communal sovereignty.
- *J. Singh, Sikh Martial Tradition, Kaveri Books, New Delhi, 2011*: J. Singh's Sikh Martial Tradition (2011) is a significant modern contribution to the study of Sikh military culture and its religious foundations. The work seeks to trace the historical evolution of Sikh martial ethos from the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev Ji to the establishment of the Khalsa under Guru Gobind Singh and its subsequent manifestations during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Singh presents Sikh martial tradition not merely as a response to political oppression but as an intrinsic component of Sikh theology and identity.
- *J.S. Grewal, The Sikhs of the Punjab, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998*: The work examines the evolution of Sikh religious thought, social organization, and political authority within changing historical contexts. Grewal devotes significant attention to the transformation of Sikhism from a spiritual movement into a community with distinct political and military institutions. In particular, the discussion of the period from Guru Hargobind Sahib to Guru Gobind Singh provides crucial insights into the development of the doctrine of Miri-Piri and the institutionalization of the Khalsa, which laid the foundation for Sikh martial tradition.

CONCLUSION

- The historical and religious journey of the Nihang Singhs reveals their indispensable role in shaping, preserving, and defending the martial and spiritual foundations of Sikhism. Emerging under the guidance of Guru Gobind Singh, the Nihangs embodied the ideal of the Khalsa as saint-soldiers, committed equally to spiritual devotion and martial responsibility. Through centuries of political upheaval ranging from Mughal persecution and Afghan invasions to British colonial domination the Nihang Singhs remained steadfast guardians of Sikh sovereignty, religious

institutions, and martial traditions. This study demonstrates that the Nihang contribution extends far beyond military engagement. Their preservation of Shastra Vidya, adherence to Khalsa discipline, and maintenance of distinctive religious practices ensured the continuity of Sikh martial culture during periods when external forces sought to suppress or dilute Sikh identity. The integration of martial training with spiritual discipline, daily rituals, and ethical conduct reflects a holistic worldview in which warfare is governed by righteousness rather than conquest. Their resistance to colonial military reforms and political interference further underscores their commitment to preserving the original vision of the Sikh Guru. Equally significant is the Nihang role as protectors of Sikh religious institutions. From safeguarding the Akal Takht Sahib and Harmandir Sahib during the eighteenth century to preserving institutional continuity in the aftermath of Operation Blue Star in 1984, Nihang leadership has consistently prioritized the sanctity and sovereignty of Sikh religious authority. Leaders, such as Akali Phula Singh and Baba Santa Singh, exemplify this tradition of fearless leadership and institutional guardianship.

- In contemporary Sikh society, the Nihang Singhs continue to serve as living symbols of Khalsa resilience and continuity. Their presence in religious festivals, martial exhibitions, and training camps ensures that Sikh martial traditions remain vibrant and meaningful for future generations. Ultimately, the Nihang Singhs represent a living heritage in which faith, discipline, and valor converge, sustaining the enduring spirit of the Khalsa Panth and reaffirming the relevance of Sikh martial philosophy in both historical and modern contexts.

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