

SIKH WAR STRATEGIES: DEVOTION TO POWER**Kulwinder Kaur**
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Abstract:- *Recruitment based on skill, not birth, attracted diverse talent, including Hindus and Muslims, Incorporation of European military tactics, artillery, and training methods enhanced combat effectiveness. Maintaining cordial relations with neighboring powers like Afghanistan helped secure borders and focus on internal consolidation. A robust economy funded a well-equipped and well-paid army, crucial for sustained military power. This multi-faceted approach contributed to the Sikh Empire's rise as a dominant force in the Punjab region during the 19th century.*

Key Words: *Hit-and-Run Tactics, Modernization, Strategic Alliances, Economic, Strength*

In the Sikhism, Nihangs holds an important place. The relics of nihangs represent a unique identity of Sikhs¹. The Akali and the *Nihang ideologues of the Khalsa* and Maharaja Ranjit Singh. After the death of the Maharaja, there was a gradual decline of the 'pillars' of the Khalsa Misl, Sikh State and the Institution of Khalsa / 2 Empire and the paternal rule was replaced by the 'machine rule' of laws, codes, and procedures. There was spread of English education. Despite Punjabi being the dominant language of the province, Urdu was introduced as the medium of education in the government schools upto the matriculation level. The Christian missionaries, the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Dev Samaj, the Shuddhi movement, the 'Hindu nationalism', the Wahhabis, and the Ahmadiyah had deep-rooted impact on the Khalsa ideology. The Khalsa in the 19th century also witnessed the Nirankari, Namdhari (Kukas), and the Singh Sabha Movements. However, the British government recognized the valour of the Khalsa and their proportion in the Indian army was raised to a very large extent. The Nihangs usually use this quote:

*JAT GOT SINGHAN KI DANGA
DEGA INN SATGUR TE MANGA*

Singh were perfect in all the war strategies however, nowadays Gatka is the one of the famous strategy of war². *Gatka* is a traditional martial art form associated with the Sikh community. It has deep historical and cultural significance, particularly in the context of the Sikh warriors known as Nihangs. Gatka is characterized by its use of various weapons, fluid movements, and a spiritual component that emphasizes self-discipline, meditation, and the defense of righteousness. According to Bhai Gurdas, he had written in his 32 stanza that while travelling to macca, Guru Nanak devji had a stick in his hands...

*BABA FER MACCA GYA NIL BASTAR DHAREY BANVARI
ASA HATH KITAB KUCH KUJA BANG MUSLA DHARI*

(He hold staff in his hand, pressed a book under his armpit, caught hold of a metal pot and mattress)

Guru nanak did not teach war strategies and weapon learning to their Sikhs but he gave blessing to Baba Buddha to teach the use of equipment; weapons to their Sikhs³. The Sikh military tradition is renowned for its effective war strategies, developed and refined over centuries of conflict. Rooted in the principles of righteousness and justice,⁴ these strategies were integral to the survival and success of the Sikh community, particularly during periods of persecution

¹ *Amrit Kirtan Gutka*, Khalsa Brothers, Amritsar, July 2011, Edi-40, p243

² Satnamsingh Khalsa, Sri Amritsar ji de Darshan, Ishnan and 500 sala da Itchhasik Directory, p64.

³ Santokh Singh (bhai) GurPartap Suraj Granth, Jild Satvi, Dr, Bhai Veer Singh, Bhasha Vibagh, Punjab, Second edi, 2011, p.2376

⁴ Tejasingh, Dr. Ganda Singh, A Short History of the Sikhs, vol-1, p.38, publication beerruo Punjab university, 2016

and warfare. Here's an overview of the key war strategies employed by the Sikhs:

1. Guerrilla Warfare (DharamYudh):

- **Hit-and-Run Tactics:** Sikh warriors, especially under leaders like Banda Singh Bahadur and later, the Khalsa under Guru Gobind Singh Ji⁵, utilized hit-and-run tactics to disrupt and weaken much larger enemy forces. These tactics allowed smaller, mobile groups to strike quickly and retreat before the enemy could effectively respond.
- **Knowledge of Terrain:** Sikh fighters had an intimate knowledge of the local terrain, particularly in the Punjab region, which they used to their advantage. They often operated in dense forests, mountains, and river valleys, using these natural features for ambushes and cover.
- **Surprise and Deception:** Surprise attacks at night or during unexpected times were common. The element of surprise was a critical factor in many Sikh victories, allowing them to overcome numerically superior forces.

2. Fortification and Defense:

- **Construction of Fortresses:** Sikhs built strong fortresses (such as Anandpur Sahib and Lohgarh) in strategic locations. These fortresses served as bases of operations, providing protection and a place to regroup after raids or battles⁶.
- **Defensive Walls and Trenches:** Sikh fortifications often included multiple layers of defense, such as walls, moats, and trenches, which slowed down and exhausted enemy forces during sieges.
- **Supply Management:** Sikh fortresses were often well-stocked with supplies, allowing them to withstand long sieges. The ability to maintain supplies and morale during prolonged conflicts was crucial.

3. Psychological Warfare:

- **Moral High Ground:** The Sikhs were known for their commitment to righteousness (Dharma) in warfare, which included protecting the weak and non-combatants. This ethical approach often garnered support from local populations and demoralized enemies who were seen as unjust aggressors⁷.
- **Religious Inspiration:** Sikh warriors drew inspiration from their faith, often reciting prayers and hymns before and during battle. This spiritual dimension provided them with immense courage and determination, which intimidated their opponents⁸.
- **Exemplary Leadership:** Sikh leaders, particularly Guru Gobind Singh Ji, led by example, fighting alongside their soldiers. This not only inspired their own troops but also demoralized the enemy, who often faced a united and motivated force.

4. Strategic Alliances and Diplomacy:

- **Building Alliances:** Sikh leaders were skilled in forming strategic alliances with other groups, including local chieftains and even some Mughal factions⁹, to strengthen their position against common enemies.¹⁰
- **Diplomacy and Negotiation:** Diplomacy was used to buy time, divide enemy coalitions, or secure temporary peace. This allowed the Sikhs to regroup, rearm, and strategically plan their next moves.

⁵Satbirsingh, Guru BhariJivani Guru Hargobindji, publication beurreu,Punjab university Patiala second edii,2015,p.8

⁶Max Authrmeccalif, Sikh Dharam, Guru Sahiban, PavitarRachnavateRachnakar ed.5, DrDharamsingh, publication bearrau Punjabi university, 2015,p.8

⁸Sukhdysingh, Guru Hargobind Sahib, Jiwan, Yudh and Yatrava, publication bearrau Punjabi university, Patiala 1998,p.18

⁹Max Authrmeccalif, Sikh Dharam, Guru Sahiban, PavitarRachnavateRachnakar ed.5, DrDharamsingh, publication bearrau Punjabi university, 2015,p.56

¹⁰Prof.MadanjitKaur, Guru Gobind Singh and creation of Khalsa, Publication Department, Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar, 2000,p.4

- **Use of Espionage:** Sikh commanders often used spies to gather intelligence on enemy movements, strengths, and weaknesses, which informed their strategic decisions.

5. Mobility and Flexibility:

- **Cavalry Dominance:** The Sikh armies, particularly the Khalsa, were known for their highly mobile cavalry units. These horsemen could cover large distances quickly, striking in multiple locations almost simultaneously.
- **Rapid Deployment:** Sikh forces were adept at moving quickly from one area to another, often outmaneuvering larger but slower armies. This mobility allowed them to maintain the initiative and keep their enemies off balance.
- **Flexible Command Structure:** The Sikh military command was often decentralized, allowing for rapid decision-making and adaptability on the battlefield¹¹. Leaders in the field had the autonomy to adjust tactics as needed, which proved critical in dynamic combat situations.

6. Use of Symbolism and Identity:

- **Khalsa Identity:** The formation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh Ji in 1699 established a strong collective identity among Sikh warriors. This identity, symbolized by the five K's (Kesh, Kara, Kirpan, Kanga, Kachera), fostered unity, discipline, and a sense of purpose¹².
- **Distinctive Battle Attire:** The Sikhs wore distinctive battle attire, including the turban and often blue robes (Nihang dress), which not only protected them but also made them easily identifiable as warriors of the Khalsa¹³.

7. Training and Discipline:

- **Martial Training:** Sikh warriors were rigorously trained in various martial arts, including Gatka, archery, swordsmanship, and horsemanship. This training made them highly skilled and versatile fighters.
- **Discipline and Code of Conduct:** The Sikhs adhered to a strict code of conduct in battle, focusing on maintaining discipline, loyalty, and the ethical treatment of enemies and civilians alike.

8. Adaptation and Innovation:

- **Adapting to Technology:** Sikhs were quick to adopt new technologies, such as firearms and cannons, and integrate them into their traditional warfare strategies¹⁴.
- **Innovation in Strategy:** Sikh commanders were known for their innovative strategies, such as feigned retreats to lure enemies into traps or using river crossings to outflank opponents.

The NihangSinghs have the right of carry the more weapons but the five weapons are compulsory for a singh . "The Khalsa were "Commanded to pay particular respect" to the five weapons, that is a sward, a bow, a musket, dagger and either a lance or quait.

These strategies collectively contributed to the Sikh community's resilience and success against formidable adversaries, including the Mughal Empire and later, the Afghan invaders.¹⁵ The legacy of Sikh military strategy continues to be studied and revered in both historical and

¹¹GurbachansinghKhalsa, Sri GurmukhParkash, p.100

¹²Kulbirsingh Sidhu, Baba Banda Singh Bahadur, LokgeetParkashn, Chandigarh,2010,p.15

¹³AakritiKohli, Constructing the Ideal Sikhs: Historiography of Sikh martial traditions, Intellectual Reasonance, vol3, issue no,4ISSN: 23212594,P.185

¹⁴KhalsaNitnem(parka) Singh Sahib Jathedar Baba Santa Singh, ShromaniPanthAkali Buddha Dal,p.305

¹⁵Sukhdysingh(Dr) Khalsa di JanamBhumi Sri Anandpur Sahib,23

military contexts. Weapons hold a significant and multifaceted place in Sikhism, reflecting both the faith's martial heritage and its spiritual teachings. The importance of weapons in Sikhism can be understood through historical, cultural, and religious perspectives.

1. Symbol of Divine Justice and Righteousness:

- In Sikhism, weapons are seen as symbols of divine justice and the protection of righteousness. This belief is deeply rooted in the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, particularly Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the tenth Guru, who emphasized the importance of defending the oppressed and upholding justice.
- The concept of **DharamYudh** (righteous war) in Sikhism permits the use of weapons to combat injustice, tyranny, and oppression when all other means of resolving a conflict have failed.

2. Historical Significance:

- The Sikh community has a rich martial history, shaped by centuries of conflict, particularly against Mughal persecution and Afghan invasions. The Sikhs used weapons not only for self-defense but also to protect the freedom of religion and the rights of others.
- Guru Hargobind Ji, the sixth Sikh Guru, introduced the concept of **Miri and Piri**, symbolizing the temporal and spiritual authority of the Sikh community. He carried two swords representing these aspects, highlighting the balance between spiritual and worldly duties.
- The establishment of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh Ji in 1699 formalized the Sikh martial tradition. The Khalsa was instructed to always carry weapons, particularly the Kirpan (a ceremonial sword), as a reminder of their duty to protect righteousness.

3. Spiritual Significance:

- Weapons in Sikhism are not merely tools of war but are also considered sacred objects imbued with spiritual power. They are often treated with great respect and veneration.
- The Kirpan, one of the five Ks (Kakars) that every baptized Sikh (Amritdhari) is required to carry, symbolizes the Sikh's duty to defend the weak and promote justice. It is worn at all times and is a reminder of the Sikh's commitment to righteous conduct and the protection of the defenseless¹⁶.
- Sikh warriors historically have viewed their weapons as extensions of their commitment to God and the protection of humanity. This view is encapsulated in the prayer known as the **Ardas**, where Sikhs seek divine blessings for their weapons and the courage to wield them justly.

4. Cultural and Ceremonial Importance:

- Weapons play a central role in various Sikh ceremonies and rituals. During religious festivals, especially **HolaMohalla**, weapons are displayed and used in mock battles to commemorate the martial tradition of the Sikhs.
- In Gurdwaras, particularly at Takhts (Sikh thrones of authority), weapons are often displayed as part of the historical and religious heritage. These weapons include swords, spears, and other traditional arms that were used by Sikh warriors.
- The concept of **ShastarVidya** (the science of weapons) is an ancient martial art form that is still practiced by some Sikhs. This art includes the training and discipline associated with the use of various weapons, passed down through generations.

5. Symbol of Sovereignty and Independence:

- The Sikh emphasis on weapons also reflects a broader commitment to self-reliance and independence. Guru Gobind Singh Ji's transformation of the Sikhs into a warrior community was a response to the

¹⁶Simarjitsingh , GurmatParkash, aank 1, April 2012,p.26

oppressive regimes of the time, and the carrying of weapons became a symbol of sovereignty and the rejection of tyranny¹⁷.

- The Khalsa, as a sovereign body of warriors, was instructed to be "Saint-Soldiers" (Sant-Sipahi), embodying both spiritual purity and martial prowess. The weapons they carried symbolized their readiness to defend their faith and their community.

6. Philosophical Perspective:

- Sikhism advocates the use of weapons not out of aggression but as a last resort in the defense of justice.

This approach is encapsulated in the Sikh principle of "*SantSipahi*" (Saint-Soldier), where a Sikh is encouraged to be both spiritually enlightened and prepared to take up arms in defense of righteousness and the oppressed. The philosophy emphasizes that the true use of weapons is to protect, rather than to conquer or oppress. Guru Hargobind, in many ways can be credited for militarizing his followers in his encouragement to take up arms, in the display of weapons in his court, and in the performance of military prowess and the rising of an efficient army. According to the Guru Teg Bahadur sahib, he always use to say that a soldier always came back from war after getting a new experience. This strength of war got Sikhs. There is a famous quote: "sir kayamjungkayem(if the head is intact then the battle goes on.) Ate Marey to shahid, marey to Gaji" if I die I am a Martyr, if I kill the enemy I am a hero.

Guru Gobind Singh was himself well versed in Indian classical language, Puranic Literature, Hindi Poetics, Persian, Arabic, Punjabi and various arts of Indigenous education. Besides, he had attained excellence in martial arts, hunting and horse riding.

¹⁷ Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, Mahankosh, Lahor Books, Ludhiana,p.385