

## Sikh Martial Arts and the Youth

While neither preaching nor condoning violence, I would like to consider firstly the events of the recent past and then take a brief look into Sikh history in order to analyse the concept of Sikhs and the martial arts. The period around 1984 has been and will be subjected to objective and subjective interrogation. The results and implications of such an investigation are as confusing as ever. The Sikhs were put under the spotlight during those days. Their martial and spiritual strengths were tested. Whether they were defeated or got away with it depends on one's own value judgements. Fully accepting my limited knowledge of Sikh affairs and subjective approach, my conclusion is that the Sikhs were humbled. The Sikhs failed to protect their lives, property, liberty and above all their honour. My remarks may seem derogative, hurtful and pessimistic, but I'm sure many Sikhs would agree that they felt that their very existence was under threat.

What were the reasons for the failings that I have outlined? To begin to answer this question we must unfold the pages of history and study the heritage of the Sikhs. Authentic historical records tell us that Guru Angad Dev Ji (2<sup>nd</sup> Guru) was a very keen wrestler who encouraged people to keep fit all his life. He institutionalised 'Akharas' (gymnasiums) and wanted his followers to participate in body building exercises and organised games after morning prayers. In this context it is worth mentioning the name of another prominent Sikh figure, Baba Buddha Ji, who was alive from Guru Nanak Dev Ji's (1<sup>st</sup> Guru) time. Baba Buddha Ji was fencing master to Guru Arjan Dev Ji (5<sup>th</sup> Guru).

During his imprisonment by the rulers of the day, Guru Arjan Dev Ji issued a 'hukumnama' (or decree) to his followers to learn martial arts and carry weapons. His son Guru HarGobind Sahib Ji (6<sup>th</sup> Guru), having taken over his fathers' seat openly began to arm his followers and arrange for their training. It was probably at this stage in Sikh history that the martial art of Gatka began to be taught and widely practised among the Sikhs. The practice of Gatka always went hand in hand with Nitnem (daily prayers). Guru HarGobind Sahib Ji fought and won at least 5 major battles in his time. The ninth Guru, Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji was supposedly seen practising Gatka alone by the Mogul army, his speed and accuracy was both an alarming and surprising experience for them.

Guru Gobind Singh (10<sup>th</sup> Guru) is probably the best known among the ten Guru's for his martial achievements. It is assured that his father and his followers taught him Gatka from a very young age. He had great athletic abilities, was an amazingly accurate archer, a master of weaponry and a superb tactician in the battlefield. With very limited men and weapons he won countless battles against the rulers of the day. He placed a significant emphasis on martial skills and always honoured and awarded the Sikhs who excelled in this area. It was Guru Gobind Singh Ji who outlined the circumstances under which a violent response was justified. He writes, "When there's no other course open to man, it is only righteous to unsheathe the sword." It is appropriate to point out once again that the addition of martial skills into Sikh lives was not at the cost of the daily prayers (Nitnem) and meditation.

Hence, the ideal human being was visualised and then presented to the world by the collaborative endeavours of the ten Gurus during a time span of over two centuries. For the sake of simplicity it is safe to say that the ideal person embodies the twin-interlinked qualities of saint and a soldier. Towards this end the Gurus invested heavily in the martial arts and physical fitness programmes along with the spiritual upliftment of their followers. The goal of spiritual and physical fitness thus became the Sikh way of life forever. The imbalance between the two has always proved

dangerous for the Sikhs, as was shown in the concluding two decades of the last century. The Sikhs had ignored the martial part of their heritage for too long and paid a heavy price.

Gatka is the martial art system the Gurus employed effectively to defend the religious beliefs of the Sikhs and also those of other religions. It is an art that had been practised in the northern part of India for many centuries, even before the Sikh religion was founded. In fact the roots of Gatka are in Shastra Vedia, a part of the vast Vedic tradition which dates back nearly ten thousand years. Shastra Vedia is the complete science of war from hand to hand combat to battlefield strategy. It was exported to the orient along with Buddhism and became the foundation for the Chinese and Japanese martial art tradition. The word Karate for example is a variation of the phrase 'Kar Ahat' or hand assault. Gatka is a martial art, which the Sikhs have adopted as their own. It is preserved to this day by the Nihang Singhs. They are Sikhs who believe in the importance of preserving the type of dress (Bana) and weaponry as was worn by the Gurus. It is worth mentioning that martial arts equivalent to Gatka are practised and preserved in South India especially in Kerala.

Just as in the many varieties of martial arts such as Karate and Kungfu, Gatka also requires a high level of physical fitness, self-discipline and mental alertness. The Sikhs have had these qualities instilled in them by the Gurus. Any Gatka practice is preceded by Ardas i.e. prayer, thus emphasising the need for spiritual alertness. Gatka is an essentially simple and practical art. It is all based upon a single movement called the 'Panthra'. (Paintra in Punjabi literally means tactics, but in Gatka it means footwork and tactics used to effectively go for defence and offence). The Panthra is practised initially for hours (using no weapons) to help develop the accuracy of footwork needed to keep the body in balance when using weaponry. It can be practised in all different ways, i.e. circular motions, simple forward and backward motions and also more complex motions such as star shapes. Gradually a practitioner of Gatka can move on to practise the Panthra using a range of up to 18 different weapons.

The effectiveness of the Panthra and Gatka skills can be demonstrated by recounting the story of a Sikh soldier in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army. At the time of signing the treaty between the East India Company and Lahore Durbar at Ropar, the British displayed their disciplined soldiers conducting military manoeuvres. When Ranjit Singh was asked to demonstrate the skill of his soldiers he smiled and suggested that the skill of only one Nihang Sikh would be enough. So, a Nihang Sikh was asked to stand atop a charpai (literally, four-legged bed) with a stick in his hand. A crow was released under the charpai and the challenge was not let the crow fly away. With swift Gatka footwork atop the charpai and skilful agility with his Gatka stick the Nihang Sikh kept the bird (known for its swift reactions) boxed underneath the charpai for more than half an hour to the stunned silence of the British onlookers.

Gatka specialises in the sword (called shaster) and shield fighting, but includes other weapons, including the lathi, or staff. Other weapons of interest, which are unique to Gatka, are the 'chakram', or quoit, and the exotic 'chakar'. The chakar looks like a wagon wheel with weights at the end of each spoke. It is wielded by grasping the centre (the "hub" of the "wagon wheel") and spinning it around, scoring impact damage upon anyone foolish enough to come too close to the spinning weights, and providing protection for the wielder. The chakram, or quoit, is basically a flat steel hoop, where the outside edge is honed to a sharp edge. The Gatka practitioner spins the chakram around the index finger, then lets it fly to its target.

Sikh history demonstrates the effectiveness of Gatka on the battlefield, but what about on the street as a method of self-defence? Well the stories are countless; I will give just two short examples here. After the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister, Indra Gandhi, in India, an eighty year old man was attacked whilst riding his scooter in Delhi by a mass of 3000 people.

He was forced to defend himself and so took out his Kirpan (sword) and using his knowledge of Gatka, seriously injured and killed many of his attackers. When the police arrived at the scene the attackers fled, one of the officers present at the attack reported "all I could see was an old man standing sword in hand and numerous dead body's lying around him." Even here in Britain, around the same period angry individuals in their hundreds rioted outside a Gurdwara in Dudley, and two Nihang Singhs successfully defended the Gurdwara, and reports have it that not one attacker was able to set foot in the Temple.

Using Gatka individuals have been able to defend themselves and their property even when heavily out numbered. They have not only prevented injury to themselves and others but they have prevented further trouble, such are the mesmerising qualities of Gatka. So clearly the effectiveness of Gatka has been proved for centuries, not just by the Sikhs, but also by the earlier practitioners of this art. However it is taught by the masters of this art that, Gatka, either when fighting in a battle or in simple self-defence is absolutely useless without 'Gurbani'. This is because a higher level of spiritual consciousness is needed rather than just sheer knowledge.

A community so overtly committed to the preaching and practising of martial arts, nurtured on spiritual nourishment, should naturally develop into a martial race. Perhaps relying on similar assumptions Sikhs claim themselves (of course arguably) to be counted among the leading martial groups of the world. Such professed credentials gain added plausibility if we acknowledge the Sikhs incessant involvement in the eradication of socio-political injustices and oppression in India. This struggle against injustice lasted the whole of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries leading to a disciplined display of chivalry during the two World Wars. It may seem curious, but it is worth pointing out, that while fighting for the British Empire the Sikhs continued in their efforts to dismantle the unjust British occupation of India. This example of fighting injustice on two fronts serves as evidence in the Sikh claim to be a martial race.

The martial traditions of the Sikhs need to be preserved and developed. But the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed the gradual erosion of this process. Sikhs have succumbed to the conspiracy of over-confidence and their demonstrative behaviour has lacked spiritual direction. A corrective action is needed to get rid of this unpleasant phenomena, thus enabling them to retrieve their glorious past whilst maintaining their distinctive identity. Pro-activeness in this field should take the teaching and learning of the martial arts to the grassroots. This effort should help the Sikh masses to assimilate spiritual and martial values into their way of life. In the prevalent unhealthy social conditions where use of violence and drugs is ever increasing, the need for a determined approach is vital.

Today Gatka is becoming more and more common around the world. In Britain alone there are major clubs, in places such as London, Birmingham, Dudley, Nottingham, Walsall and Manchester. Publicity about Gatka is also progressing very well, since a number of demonstrations take place in Universities and Gurdwaras. An introduction to Gatka, on Sky television (Sky Sports), has also been shown of a demonstration that took place in Paris.

In the last few years Sikh Nihang, Bhai Nanak Dev Singh, an American has helped to spread Gatka around the world, especially around America and Europe. He has helped to write and publish a book in English, called 'Gatka', which teaches the basic's of this art. It is the first ever book about Gatka to be published anywhere in the world. An organisation also exists called the International Gatka Federation (IGF) whose purpose is the advancement of Gatka. It is dedicated to research, teacher training and the promotion of Gatka, including classes, workshops and camps. I would not hesitate to say that the resources for learning Gatka are limited and this is an area worth looking into.

## Sikh Study Forum

### Way Forward

- Each Gurdwara should provide facilities for learning the Sikh martial arts.
- Audio-visual materials should be produced.
- Along the lines of kabbadi – competitions should be arranged at national level to encourage Sikh youngsters to participate in a more purposeful way.

I started my talk by discussing the failings of Sikhs over the last two decades. I have attributed these failings in part to an imbalance between martial and spiritual qualities. Indeed many would argue that both were lacking. When the time comes again for the Sikhs to defend their principles - and that time will come - we should be spiritually and martially prepared. That has been the challenge for the Sikhs in the past and it will be the challenge in the future.

(This essay is a synthesis of a number of articles about Gatka found on the World Wide Web. The main sources of information were web pages containing articles written by Harkirat Singh, Serjinder Singh and the International Gatka Federation.)

Web sites of interest:

[www.sikhi.demon.co.uk](http://www.sikhi.demon.co.uk)

[www.gatka.de/](http://www.gatka.de/)

[www.sikhnet.com](http://www.sikhnet.com)