



## THE NIRANKARI SECT IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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**Abstract:** *Dissension in the early Sikh Panth progressively took the shape of several major or minor sects during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Perhaps, due to the universality and egalitarian nature of the message of Guru Nanak and his successors. The early Sikh dissenters and their followers generally cropped up due to their conflict with the Sikh Gurus over the issue of succession. Resultantly, this led to the emergence of various religious denominations such as the Udasi, the Minas, the Dhirmalia and the Ram Raiyas etc. Various other Sikh sects also appeared on the scene of Sikh and Punjab History during 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Remarkable among these were the Sewapanthis, the follower of Bhai Behlo, the Nirmals, the Nirankaris, the Kukas, the Gulabdasis and the Hiradasis etc. Even a cursory survey of historical writings on medieval Sikh history would clearly show that the historians were mainly interested in writing history of the mainstream of Sikhism, the Sikh Gurus, Sikh Struggle during 18<sup>th</sup> century, the founding of the Khalsa Raj and its collapse. In this paper the nature, character, and status of the Nirankaris have been discussed.*

**Key Words:** Nirankari, Sect, Hukumnama, Adi Granth, Anand marriage, Keshdhari

**Intoduction:** The Nirankaris was born out of the changing fortunes of the Sikhs, out of their rise from rustic poverty to sovereign affluence and then out of their reduction to a subject people under an alien race. In the first phase, power produced wealth and wealth irreligiousness and in the second phase, the loss of power roused passion to recreate the golden age that had passed. This is how Khushwant Singh has understood the emergence of these sects as a result of changing fortunes of the Sikhs during the 19th century.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, according to W.H. Mcleod, the Nirankaris sect developed in North West Punjab during the later years of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. John C.B. Webster has understood the Nirankaris as a particular system of religious worship, especially with reference to its rites and ceremonies and a group having a sacred ideology and set of rites centering around their sacred symbols.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the scholars and historian have different perspectives on the Nirankari Sikh sect, also termed by some as socio-religious movement.

During the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Hindus of Western Punjab came under the influence of Sikhism. A few accepted the *pahul* and enjoined the Khalsa and most others continued to describe themselves as Hindus but gave up the worship of Hindu gods and the recitation of the Vedas, and started reading the Granth and joining the congregations at the Gurdwaras. Among these Hindus, there grew a custom of bringing up at least one son as a *Kesadhari* Sikh. This half- Hindu, half-Sikh community belonged to the Khatri, Arora, or Bania castes. However, they

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<sup>1</sup> Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs, 1839-1988*, Vol.II, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1991, p.121.

<sup>2</sup> John C.B., Webster, *The Nirankari Sikhs*, Macmillan, Delhi, 1979, p.7.

continued to marry within their castes regardless of the change in their religious beliefs.<sup>3</sup>

The Nirankari Sikhs should not be confused with the Sant Nirankaris Mission who was involved in the happenings at Amritsar in April, 1978. These are two separate and very different groups. The first owes adherence to Baba Dyal, a contemporary of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Their headquarters are at Chandigarh. The Sant Nirankaris Mission owe their faithfulness to Baba Avtar Singh, who founded a separate group in the 20th century.<sup>4</sup>

The Nirankaris claim that they were the first among the Sikhs to insist on the revival and adoption of peculiarly Sikh ceremonies connected with birth, marriage and death. This claim is generally conceded by the historians and the Nirankaris are presented as religious reformers. Their reverence for the ten Gurus of the Sikhs and their belief in the Guru Granth Sahib as the Guru brings them still closer to the Singh Sabha Movement which is regarded as the most orthodox in terms of its conformity to the early Sikh tradition. Baba Dyal, the founder of the Nirankari Movement, was the man who gave the first push to the process of reforms in the Sikh community in the early 19th century. With Nirankar always on his lips, he came to be known as 'Nirankari' or the worshipper of Nirankari, the formless One.<sup>5</sup>

Not much is known of the Nirankaris. However, some works written on the Nirankaris are available. John C.B. Webster's *The Nirankari Sikhs*<sup>6</sup> is a brief account on their history, based upon limited primary sources. Ganda Singh has also briefly discussed some facts of the movement in his articles.<sup>7</sup> There is no single comprehensive work available on the subject. The references to the Nirankaris which we find in the recent histories of the Sikhs or of the Punjab, appear to be based upon either the Census material produced much earlier or upon recent Nirankari Tracts rather than upon independent study and observation. However, much of our understanding of the Nirankaris is based upon the later 19th or 20th century evidence, which does not appear to be very helpful in understanding the beginning of the movement, and its initial character. Fortunately, the successors of Baba Dyal, have preserved a *hukamnama* issued by his first successors, Baba Darbara Singh in 1856.<sup>8</sup> This document tells us much more about the nature of the Nirankari Movement than all the secondary works put together.

Baba Dyal, the founder of the Nirankari Movement, was the first among Sikh religious reformers to preach against the evils that had crept into the Sikh social and religious life.<sup>9</sup> He was determined to bring about a religious revival, and to re-

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<sup>3</sup> Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs 1839-1988*, Vol. II, p.123.

<sup>4</sup> John C.B. Webster, *The Nirankari Sikhs*, Macmillan, Delhi, 1979, p.IX.

<sup>5</sup> E.D. Maclagan, *The Punjab and Its Feudatories: The Census of India, 1891*, Vol. XIX, pp.156-57.

<sup>6</sup> John C.B. Webster, *The Nirankari Sikhs*.

<sup>7</sup> Ganda Singh, "Sikhism and the Nirankari Movement", *The Punjab Past and Present*, Vol XII-I, Punjabi University Patiala, 1978, pp.12-22.

<sup>8</sup> *Hukamnama* Baba Darbara Singh.

<sup>9</sup> Mohinder Singh, *The Akali Movement*, Macmillan, Delhi, 1978, p.6. According to Fauja Singh the founder of the Nirankari Movement was the Hindu who had recently come under the influence of Sikhism. Being fresh entrants into the fold of Sikhism, the light of faith in them burned more brightly than it did in most of the older Sikhs. The falling Sikh values made their hearts extremely sore and they

establish religious purity among the Sikhs. For that he started his mission with vigour, sincerity and earnestness.

It is traditionally known that Baba Dyal was born at Peshawar on May 16, 1783. He was the only son of his parents.<sup>10</sup> It is said that his ancestors belonged to Kabul, before they had shifted to Peshawar where his father Bhai Ram Sahai Malhotra, ran a banking shop dealing with the exchange of currency. His mother, Ladki, was the daughter of Vasakha Singh, whose father, Bhagwan Singh, was believed to have remained in charge of the *golak* (treasury) of Guru Gobind Singh.<sup>11</sup> It is believed that Baba Dyal learnt a lot from his mother, Mata Ladiki, who nurtured in him the best spirit and traditions of Sikh heritage. She regularly attended the morning service at the Gurdwara of Bhai Joga Singh along with her son. Soon, the young Baba Dyal himself became a regular visitor to the Gurdwara, becoming deeply involved in religious bend of mind.<sup>12</sup> Baba Dyal was deprived of parents at an early age. He lost both his parents. On the advice of his maternal uncle, Milkha Singh, Baba Dyal moved to Rawalpindi, and started earning his living as a shopkeeper<sup>13</sup>. Rawalpindi in those days was one of the commercial centres of the Punjab in a Muslim dominated area. The Sikh inhabitants were very few in numbers.

In March 1809, Baba Dyal went to Bhera on a business tour. There he met Bhai Charan Das Kapur and his wife. The couple was highly impressed by his religious inclination and piety. They offered the hand of their daughter, Mool Devi, in marriage to him.<sup>14</sup> He accepted the offer. But no Brahman was ready to perform the marriage ceremony, as it was the month of Chaitra which was considered inauspicious for marriage. Young Dyal talked to Sant Buddhu Shah, a respected Sewapanthi Sadhu of Bhera, about the performance of his marriage ceremony.<sup>15</sup> The marriage was

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raised their voice of protest against the oncoming rot. Their words fell on receptive ears and gradually a number of people began to rally around them' *Some Aspects of State and Society under Ranjit Singh*, Master Publishers, New Delhi, 1982, pp.290-291.

<sup>10</sup> *Nirankari Tract No.12*, p. 8: we don't have any exact data available about the population of Peshawar at that time. But on the basis of 1869-70 census reports we can say that the Sikhs were a minority community there at that time. According to the report the population of Peshawar at that time as follows: Sikhs - 2,014; Hindus-27,408; Muslims- 4, 81, 447; Others-8,817.

<sup>11</sup> Sher Singh Sher, *Short History of Nirankari Movement*, Youngmen's Nirankari Association, Chandigarh, 1972, pp.6-7.

<sup>12</sup> Surinder Singh Nirankari (ed.), *Nirankari Gurmati Prarambhata*, Nirankari Youngmen's Association, Chandigarh, 1950, p.13.

<sup>13</sup> E.D.Maclagan informs that 'Bhai Dyal Das, the founder of the Nirankari sect, was a Dhaigarh Khatri of Peshawar, who settled in Rawalpindi, as a shopkeeper some fifty years ago', *Census of India 1891*, Vol.XIX, p.156.

<sup>14</sup> According to the information recorded in *Census of Punjab 1881*, Vol. I, P.296, 'The most important in point of social rank were the Mehrotras or Mehra, the Khanna, the Kapur and the Seth': So one can say that being a Malhotra Baba Dyal belong to the uppermost rank of the Khatri (Dhaigarh). He was married in equally high social rank Khatri family for example the Kapurs. However, this caste group enjoyed higher prestige than Kapur.

<sup>15</sup> Bhera was a flourishing business centre in those days: It was also a centre of the Sewapanthis, a prominent missionary order of the Sikhs in the 19th century. The Sewapanthi order was founded by Khanniya a prominent Sikh devotee of Guru Tegh Bahadur, who served in the *Guru Ka Langar* and used to serve water to the visitors. During the time of Guru Gobind Sing Ghanniya continue to serve Langar. During the battles of Anandpur Sahib he served the water to the wounded soldiers even to the enemies' side. The Guru appreciated his humanism and bestowed a *bakhshish* upon him and appointed him as his representative for preaching Sikhism. Ghanniya was successful in establishing a number of missionary centers in northern Punjab. Subsequently, two of his prominent followers Addanshahis and Sewa Ram established missionary orders which were known after their

performed in the Dharmshala of Sant Buddha Shah in the month of Chaitra itself with the recitation of Anand and other hymns from the Adi Granth, followed by the ardas Sikh Prayer. This marriage is very significant in the history of the Sikhs for its simplicity, freedom from Brahmanical rites and devotion to the holy word of the Gurus. It also made Baba Dyal something of a practical reformer.<sup>16</sup> From this marriage, Baba Dyal had three Sons Darbara Singh, born on 11th April, 1814; Baba Bhag Mal, born in 1820 and Rattan Chand born on 25th March 1830.<sup>17</sup>

After his marriage, Baba Dyal became more serious as a preacher. He mastered not only the Sikh heritage, but also the Adi Granth, and started preaching openly.<sup>18</sup> He was against *man-mat* or *unmat* (non-Sikh beliefs and practices). His direct attack was on the Brahmins and hypocritical saints, who were the cause of perversions in Sikh society. Baba Dyal taught that the Gurus are to be revered only as high priests of one Single and invisible God, that the Hindu deities are not divine, that pilgrimages and offerings are useless and Brahmins and cows are not to be revered, and that animal life is scrupulously respected and use of flesh as food abandoned.<sup>19</sup>

The message of Baba Dyal was based on the teachings of Guru Nanak. The basic features of Baba Dyal's message were simple and clear. Of these, the first and most important was that God is one and formless (*nirankar*). According to John C.B. Webster, 'it was this conviction which led Baba Dyal to reject not only idol worship but all the deities of the Hindu pantheon as well'. The next fundamental feature of Baba Dyal's message was that salvation is to be obtained by meditation on God. The followers of Baba Dyal regarded Guru Nanak as their saviour in as much as he taught them the way of salvation. The Adi Granth was the only sacred book of the followers of Baba Dyal. He advised his followers to meet daily for congregational worship (hearing and reading the Granth) in their *Dharmshala*.<sup>20</sup>

Near contemporary sources not only confirm these observations regarding the teachings of the founder of the Nirankaris, but also mention a few others. For example, it is mentioned that they believed in widow remarriage, and the founder advised his followers to become morally strong. To tell lies, to cheat, and using false weights were strictly prohibited by the Nirankari reformer.<sup>21</sup>

There is no information regarding the number of followers of Baba Dyal. J.H. Orbison that 'there are several hundreds of them in the city of Rawalpindi, perhaps four or five hundred, and a few scattered in some of neighbouring towns.'<sup>22</sup> It

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names as: Addanshahis and Sewapanthis. The Sewapanthis concentrated at Bhera, at present their chief centre is located in Sant Pura, District Jammunanagar and is known as Baba Nichhchal Singh Ashram.

<sup>16</sup> Ganda Singh, "Sikhism and the Nirankari Movement", *The Punjab Past and Present*, Vol XII-I, Punjabi University Patiala, 1978, pp.381-382.

<sup>17</sup> Sher Singh Sher, *Short History of the Nirankari Movement*, Nirankari Youngmen's Association, Chandigarh, 1972, p.11.

<sup>18</sup> Hira Singh Dard (ed.), "Nirankari Sampardai", *Phulwari*, July 1928, p.779.

<sup>19</sup> *Census of the Punjab*, 1881, p. 138.

<sup>20</sup> *The Twentieth Annual Report of the Ludhiana Mission*, 30 September 1854, p.22.

<sup>21</sup> H.A. Rose, (Ed.), *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province*, Vol.III, p.171.

<sup>22</sup> 'Affairs at Rawalpindi', *The Home and Foreign Record*, July 1861, p.212.

is said that the majority of Baba Dyal's followers came from the business communities of Khatri and Aroras of Pothohar, Dhanni, Peshawar and the North-West Frontier in general. Most of them were shopkeepers and he exhorted another tenet to them in the word '*Sacch Bolo, Poora Tolo*'<sup>23</sup> His following increased gradually, yet the large majority of the Sikhs and Hindus excommunicated him and his followers. He was compelled to make a separate shrine, called *Darbar*, and to dig separate wells for drinking water. The situation became so grave that the Nirankaris were ostracized in matrimonial relations. They were teased and tortured in many inhuman ways, but Baba Dayal did not lose heart and fearlessly continued his work.<sup>24</sup>

Opposition brought not only personal boycott of Baba Dyal and his Nirankari associates, but also closed the doors of *Peshawarian di Dharamsala* of Baba Dyal. So, Baba Dyal purchased a piece of land on December, 1851 on the bank of the *layee* stream to the southwest of Rawalpindi to set up a Gurdwara, which came to be known as Nirankari Darbar. With this, The Nirankari Movement gained a permanent footing. The followers and admirers of Baba Dyal began their work of reform with greater zeal. The manuscript volume of Guru Granth Sahib of 1748 was also brought from *Peshawarian di Dharamsala* and in spirit of the opposition of Nihal Singh and Taru Rai, two eminent leaders of Hindu Sikh orthodoxy, reform-minded Sikhs gathered at the new Nirankari Darbar in increasing numbers.<sup>25</sup>

Baba Dyal died on 30 January 1855. He urged his relative and followers not to mourn his death by weeping and dirges, and advised them recite *Gurbani*, read Adi-Granth and pray joyously, thanking the Nirankar.<sup>26</sup> His body was entrusted to the running waters of *layee* at the place he selected, as the people would not allow his cremation at the public cremation ground. That place came to be called Dyalsar.<sup>27</sup> Baba Dyal was, thus, the man who gave the first push to the process of religious reform in the community in the early 19th century. The importance of his Movement lies in the fact that it initiated purely Sikh ceremonial rites which implied a sense of separateness, checking the process of the absorption of the Sikhs into Hinduism.<sup>28</sup>

A day before his death, Baba Dyal had appointed his son Darbara Singh (1855-1870) as his successor to continue his mission. According to Ganda Singh, Darbara Singh was of the view that Brahmanical influence was doing almost harm to Sikh vitality, and the need of the hour was to create strong defenses. Hence, he laid particular emphasis on reforming the marriage ceremony and discarding of the useless Brahmanic rituals which had no meaning in Sikh religion. Besides, the Brahmanic rituals were very expensive for the ordinary man. Similarly, the presence of Brahmanic priest on the marriage ceremony was also to be discarded, because they

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<sup>23</sup> Sher Singh Sher, *Short History of the Nirankari Movement*, p.10.

<sup>24</sup> Ganda Singh, "Sikhism and the Nirankari Movement", p.383.

<sup>25</sup> *Nirankari Tract No.12*, p.19.

<sup>26</sup> Ganda Singh, "Sikhism and the Nirankari Movement", p.385.

<sup>27</sup> *Nirankari Tract No.12*, p.22.

<sup>28</sup> Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, Vol.II, p.125.

were extracting money and gift from their clients on the basis of superficial social institutions which the founder of Sikhism had already denounced.<sup>29</sup>

Baba Darbara Singh called the conference of his followers and admirers on March 12, 1855. There, he explained the teachings of the Great Gurus and the Sikh way of life. He denounced un-Sikh practices which had with passage of time crept into the Sikh society under the influence of their neighbours dominated by Brahmanical priests. For a practical demonstration of the Sikh marriage ceremony, Baba Darbara Singh called out for a girl and a boy. Nihal Singh offered his son Bhola Singh, and then Hara Singh Adhwalia offered his daughter Nihali. The couple was married in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib with recitation of sacred hymns and Anand. The couple walked round the Holy Scripture four times to the accompaniment of the four hymns of *lawan* and then bowed to it in submission to its teachings. This simple marriage ceremony sanctified by teachings of the Gurus is known as *Gurmat Viyah* or *Anand Viyah*.<sup>30</sup> This was an invitation and an inducement to his followers to simplify the marriage ceremony so that it could be performed without unnecessary expenditure upon either of the parties.<sup>31</sup> Baba Darbara Singh then undertook an extensive tour of the surrounding towns and villages in Pothohar and performed several marriages in accordance with the rites started by him.<sup>32</sup>

In 1861, Baba Darbara Singh paid a visit to Amritsar in order to perform the marriage of a couple in front of the Akal Takht in the precincts of the Golden Temple. But the Jathedar Sahib did not permit him to do that. This was the state of affairs in the holiest of the holy Sikh shrine. So predominant was the Brahmanical influence that he had to find another place in the city, the *dharmsala* of Mahant Dyal Singh, to perform the marriage according to *gurmat*.<sup>33</sup>

This news of this unique innovation of Anand ceremony got wide circulation. The orthodox, traditionalist and priestly class showed open hostility. The priestly class was repulsive because the Anand ceremony was direct attack upon the monopoly right to perform a marriage and earning out of it. Baba Darbara Singh was declared outcast by the community. The severest punishment by the society was to excommunicate a person or group or group of persons, so that they become

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<sup>29</sup> Ganda Singh, "Sikhism and the Nirankari Movement", p.385: 'It was dominated by the Brahmanical priests, where at the fire worship *havan*, the priest recited some verse in Sanskrit which nobody in the assemblage understood. Even the priest himself, at times, did not understand them. He only repeated what he had learnt by heart. Moreover, Sikhism did not allow fire- worship or worship of any gods goddesses.'

<sup>30</sup> Ganda Singh, "Sikhism and the Nirankari Movement", pp.384-385.

<sup>31</sup> G.S.Chhabra, *An Advanced History of the Punjab*, Vol.II, Parkash Brothers, Ludhiana, 1962, p.367.

<sup>32</sup> Surinder Singh Nirankari (ed.), *Nirankari Gurmat Prarambita: Satguru Dyalji's Red Flag Revolution and Brahmanical Decadence*, Tract 19, Youngmen's Nirankari Association, Chandigarh, 1974, pp.21-22.

<sup>33</sup> Sher Singh Sher, *Short History of the Nirankari Movement*, Nirankari Youngmen's Association, Chandigarh, 1972, p.12: A letter written by Khem Singh Bedi, a prominent Sikh leader of the time, to a devotee who enquired about the latest reforms in the marriage ceremony well demonstrate the Brahmanical influence: "Further you have enquired about marriage and death ceremonies. If any change decided upon, *Hukummama* (encyclical) will be issued by us. For the time being follow the prevalent customs. All the rituals according to Vedic customs must be observed there may be no hesitation and doubt. You may also recite Shabds and Sakhis. If you do not invite Brahmans, it would produce rift, which should be avoided." Nirankari Tract No. 12, p.21.

untouchable. But Baba Darbara Singh and his followers had resolved to struggle hard and to face dangerous situations to re- establish *gurmaryada*.<sup>34</sup>

Under Baba Darbara Singh, the Nirankari Movement began to grow rapidly both in number as well as prominence. He established about 40 Nirankari *Beerahs* (centres) at various places to preach the Nirankari way of life.<sup>35</sup> Baba Darbar Singh died on February 1870 and was succeeded by his youngest brother Rattan Chand, popularly known as Baba Ratta (1870-1909).<sup>36</sup> Baba Ratta was Sahejdhari Sikh and was known for his piety and tranquility of mind. He used to recite *katha* of *Gurbani* among the congregations (*sangats*) at Rawalpindi for 40 years.<sup>37</sup> To strengthen the Nirankari Movement, he issued a letter of authority in the capacity of the leader of the Nirankaris on April 11, 1873. This religious order was popularly called *Parwana*. The purpose of this religious order was to enforce the teachings of his predecessors very rigorously. He would not forgive any defaulter unless he apologized to the *sangat*.<sup>38</sup>

The progress of the Nirankari movement can be estimated from the *Wasiyatnama* or the Will of Sahib Rattaji, which he wrote in 1903<sup>39</sup>. Baba Ratta died on 3 January 1909. He had appointed his son, Sahib Gurdit Singh as his successor to carry out his mission. And at the same time declared that Sahib Gurdit Singh in turn be followed by his son Hara Singh.<sup>40</sup> Sahib Gurdit Singh's main contribution was the reconstruction of Nirankari Darbar at Rawalpindi in 1922. This was the most exquisite marble building in Pothohar.<sup>41</sup>

Under Sahib Gurdit Singh's patronage, the young men formed an association under the name of "Young Men's Nirankari Association," which made efforts to record Nirankari history and to organize functions.<sup>42</sup> He also worked vigorously for the enactment of Anand Marriage Act of 1909.<sup>43</sup>

Sahib Gurdit Singh died on 26th April 1947 and was succeeded by his elder son, Sahib Hara Singh. He was man of devotion.<sup>44</sup> After the partition, his main job was to re-establish the Nirankari Darbar. For this purpose, he got in touch with Nirankaris scattered all over the country and he succeeded in organizing the Annual Nirankari function in January 1948 at Delhi.<sup>45</sup> He purchased a piece of land (10

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<sup>34</sup> *Nirankari Tract No.12*, p.41.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>36</sup> *Nirankari Tract No.12*, p.41.

<sup>37</sup> Sher Singh Sher, *Short History of the Nirankari Movement*, pp.13-14.

<sup>38</sup> Ganda Singh, "Sikhism and the Nirankari Movement," p.386.

<sup>39</sup> Sukhdeep Kaur, *Religious Diversity and Sikh Identity: The Case of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Sikh Sects*, Ph.D Thesis, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 2018, pp.238-240 .

<sup>40</sup> Surinder Singh Nirankari (ed.), *Nirankari Gurmat Prarambita*, p.23.

<sup>41</sup> Sher Singh Sher, *Short History of the Nirankari Movement*, p.14.

<sup>42</sup> Surinder Singh Nirankari (ed.), *Nirankari Gurmat Prarambita*, p.24.

<sup>43</sup> John C.B.Webster, *The Nirankari Sikhs*, pp.103-104

<sup>44</sup> Sher Singh Sher, *Short History of the Nirankari Movement*, p.16.

<sup>45</sup> Information given by Dr Man Singh Nirankari.

*kanals*) for the reconstruction of Nirankari Darbar at Chandigarh. The foundation stone of this Nirankari Darbar was laid by Maharaja Yadvindra Singh of Patiala on 21 February 1960. Later on this Darbar building was completed under the supervision of Baba Gurbakhsh Singh.<sup>46</sup> Baba Hara Singh died at Amritsar on 15 January 1971 and was cremated at Chandigarh on the premises of the Nirankari Darbar. He was succeeded by his elder son, Baba Gurbakhsh Singh, who became the head of the Nirankaris.<sup>47</sup>

Starting from a small group of few followers, the Nirankaris developed into an effective socio-religious reform movement within a short span of 30 years in the Western Punjab in the second half of the 19th century. The main factor in the success of the movement was in fact an elaborate organization under the leadership of the Guru. The establishment of a separate Nirankari centre (Nirankari Darbar) in Rawalpindi in 1851-52 by Baba Dyal was a major step taken in that direction. It provided his followers a central place for worship, which in turn had a direct bearing on the increase in their numbers.

Under the first two successors of Baba Dyal, the number of followers increased considerably, though it is difficult to know the exact number. To this effect, they had broadened their field and formed sub-centres known as *biras*, with efficient personalities to look after the affairs of Nirankari sangats, other than the one at the headquarters. These representatives appointed by the Nirankari Gurus were given the dignified title of *biredars*. The office of the *biredars*, like that of the Guru, tended to be hereditary in practice, although not probably in theory.<sup>48</sup> The *biredars* became an essential link between the Nirankari Guru and the local *sangats*. On Magh 15-16 (January 30-31), the day of Baba Dyal's death, all *biredars* along with their local Nirankari followers visited Dyalgarh (Rawalpindi), and reported the progress of their propagational work.<sup>49</sup>

Under the leadership of the third Nirankari Guru, the number of the local Nirankari missionary centres increased.<sup>50</sup> These Nirankari missionary centres were mostly in the Rawalpindi Division in the West Punjab. These were in the districts of Rawalpindi, Jehlam, Gujrat, Attock and Mianwali. The majority of these were in the Rawalpindi city and its surrounding areas. These sub-centres were not confined to cities and towns; some of them were situated in villages. Rajarh Batal, Mujahad, Bangoo, Gakhar, Humak, Wani, Mahuta and Jhang were such villages in Fatehjang tehsil of District Attock.<sup>51</sup>

For congregational worship and community meals the Gurdwaras were constructed in all those cities, towns and villages, where Nirankari sangats were to be

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<sup>46</sup> Sukhdeep Kaur, *Religious Diversity and Sikh Identity: The Case of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Sikh Sects*, p.89.

<sup>47</sup> Sulakhan Singh, "Towards Understanding Schism(S) in Religion And History: The Case of Sikhism", *Punjab History Conference*, Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala, March 14-16, 2014, p.56.

<sup>48</sup> John C.B. Webster, *The Nirankari Sikhs*, Macmillan, Delhi, 1979, p.11.

<sup>49</sup> Jasmitar Singh, *The Nirankaris (1849-1947)*, p.30.

<sup>50</sup> *Tract No.12*, Young Men's Nirankari Association, Rawalpindi, 1932, p.21: Baba Ratta encouraged the establishment of some fifty Nirankari missionary centres in Dhanni and Pothohar areas.

<sup>51</sup> Claim Report preserved in Nirankari Darbar, Chandigarh.

found. Along with a copy of the Adi Granth, a copy of Nirankari *hukumnamas*, Nirankari code of conduct and a Nirankari flag, Nishan Sahib, were given to the *biredars*.<sup>52</sup>In all these Nirankari Gurdwaras, there was a regular reading of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, in addition to the recitation of *Sukhmani Sahib* and the other hymns. The service came to an end with *ardas* (prayer). On every alternative Sunday, it was imperative for the leader of the local congregation, the *biredar*, to read out the Nirankari rules of conduct (*hukumnama*) to keep the sangat reminded of their duties and responsibilities. The evening service in the Gurdwara consisted of *Rahiras* and *Sohila* in addition to *kirtan* or singing hymns from the scripture.<sup>53</sup>

All the *biredars* were expected to be enthusiastic propagators of Nirankari way of life. A source of information reveals that after the death of Baba Darbara Singh, these *biredars* had become lax in their duties and failed to regularly read as desired by Baba Darbara Singh, the instructions or *hukumnamas* issued from the Nirankari headquarters (Nirankari Darbar Rawalpindi). As a measure of recovery, the third Nirankari Guru issued a letter, *Parwana*, in 1873, carrying the instructions for *biredars* to put themselves on the right path of the Nirankari programmers. This letter was issued to be returned to the Guru after implementation. The letter itself proves that the *biras* were under the command of the Guru. As a proof of this argument the signatures of many *biredars* are on the said letter (*parwana*).<sup>54</sup>The *hukumnamas*, as the source of Nirankari code of conduct, issued by one central authority and bearing the same contents, had a unifying effect on the overall organization of the Nirankaris. Similarly, the *parwana* bearing the same contents sent to all *biredars*, as a measure to stop deterioration that was entering into working of some of these *biras* (sub-centres), was another step taken by the third Nirankari Guru to strengthen the organization of the movement.<sup>55</sup>Because of the lack of source material during the time of the fourth Nirankari Guru, we do not have sufficient information regarding the *biredars*. However, there is a note of the "Young Mens Nirankari Association", formed in the days of this Guru, to carry out the functions of the central shrine (Nirankari Darbar Rawalpindi).<sup>56</sup>

The Sources are silent in respect of finance to strengthen the organization itself. However, it is known that Maharaja Ranjit Singh during his visit to the central shrine at Rawalpindi sanctioned a grant for the upkeep of the shrine<sup>57</sup>. Other sub-centres had been established out of this facility. The Nirankaris themselves offered gold, silver and money to the shrines, particularly to the central shrine at their annual function on the death anniversary of Baba Dyal. Furthermore, money was collected for arranging constructions and functions from time to time. The Guru at the centre was the pivot round which the whole movement revolved. He was considered to be

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<sup>52</sup> Nirankari Tract No.12,1932, p.19.

<sup>53</sup> Ganda Singh, "Sikhism and the Nirankari Movement", pp.386-387.

<sup>54</sup> Sukhdeep Kaur, *Religious Diversity and Sikh Identity: The Case of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Sikh Sects*,p.236.

<sup>55</sup> Sher Singh Sher, *Short History of the Nirankari Movement*, p.14.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>57</sup> Ganda Singh, "Sikhism and the Nirankari Movement", p.382.

the chief of the whole movement. After its initial success, this movement did not flourish due, among other things, to weak leadership and low financial resources.<sup>58</sup>

## II

**THEIR BELIEFS AND PRACTICES:** Baba Darbara Singh issued a *Hukumnama* (encyclical) in A.D.1856. The following points emerge clearly from this *Hukumnama*. At the same time there were some positive injunctions to be followed by the Nirankaris, or the followers of Baba Dyal and Baba Darbara Singh, who believed in the formless One (*nirankar*) as the supreme deity, like Guru Nanak. They were to remember the Nirankar and to worship Him in congregation in presence of the Guru Granth Sahib. They were to earn their bread honestly. They were to take good care of their parents. Not only this, they even eulogized and extolled his spiritual image and that of his successors by using honorifics such as "*Sri Satguru*"(the true Guru) and "*Sri Hazur Sahib*" (his holy eminence).<sup>59</sup> Moreover, their reverence for the sacred (Adi-Granth) Sikh scripture is also half- hearted or uncompleted, as they do not fully adhere to the Sikh's idea of word (*Sabad*) as Guru or their dual Sikh doctrine of *Guru-Granth* and *Guru Panth*<sup>60</sup>.

None of his followers was to consult the Brahmans to perform the birth, marriage and death ceremonies; or to give any feast to them at the time of death anniversaries. All these ceremonies were to be performed in accordance with injunctions enshrined in the *Adi Granth*. The women were not to be treated as unclean at childbirth as they were supposed to be in the Brahmanical tradition. Dowry at marriage was not to be displayed. Death was not to be mourned in loud lamentation but to be accepted as a part of Divine dispensation.<sup>61</sup>

The aim of the movement was undoubtedly to reform the prevailing social and religious conditions by influencing the Sikhs in particular and the Hindu in general. At the same time it also affected the Muslims, a few of whom actually became the followers of the movement. The Nirankari Movement took its birth at a juncture when the common people were burdened with empty rituals and complicated social ceremonies. The Nirankari Gurus tried to replace the prevailing social and religious practices by simple social ceremonies. They stood for simple and truthful living, deriving inspiration from the *Adi- Granth* to spread the original teachings of the Gurus. They tried successfully to simplify the birth, marriage and death ceremonies and also preached in favour of widow remarriages.<sup>62</sup> Contemporary sources support the view that widow remarriages were not only allowed but actually took place as these were encouraged by the Nirankari Gurus. The practice of sati was condemned by the Nirankaris. All these efforts had a fruitful impact on the masses and the result

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<sup>58</sup> Jasmittar Singh, *The Nirankaris (1849-1947)*, M.Phil Dissertation, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar,1983, p.34.

<sup>59</sup> Sukhdeep Kaur, *Religious Diversity and Sikh Identity: The Case of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Sikh Sects*,p.23

<sup>60</sup> Sulakhan Singh," Towards Understanding Schism(s) in Religions and History: The Case of Sikhism",p.57.

<sup>61</sup> Sukhdeep Kaur, *Religious Diversity and Sikh Identity: The Case of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Sikh Sects*,pp.226-235

<sup>62</sup> Niharanjan Ray, *The Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Society*, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1970,p.166.

was that a significant number of people came into the fold of the Nirankaris.<sup>63</sup> The Nirankari Tracts tell us that the number of the followers went on increasing day by day under the effective guidance of their Gurus.

Because of lack of sufficient information, we cannot say anything about the exact number of the Nirankari under their first two Gurus. In 1861, Orbison estimated that there were 'several hundreds of them in this city of Rawalpindi, perhaps four or five hundred, and a few scattered in some of the neighbouring towns.'<sup>64</sup> Their strength in the last quarter of the 19th century was 50,726 which included 38,909 Keshdhari Sikhs and 11,817 Sehajdhari Sikhs.<sup>65</sup> The Nirankari's assert that their number went on increasing, and before partition their total number was about 70-80 thousands. Although Nirankaris were to be found all over the Punjab, their Gurus confined their activities mainly to the Pothohar side and areas adjoining it including N.W.F.P. and Kashmir.<sup>66</sup> Prior to the Partition, they were heavily concentrated in the Pothohar region. But after Partition they were scattered all over North India from Amritsar to Calcutta and Bombay.<sup>67</sup>

The Nirankaris mainly belonged to the business and trading communities like the Aroras and the Khattris. Moreover, as their Gurus were against caste and class prejudices, a large number of people from lower section of society were also attracted towards the new movement and became its followers.<sup>68</sup> Even today many Nirankaris come from the lower classes of society. We don't have any contemporary or sufficient evidence on the question of patronage. However, the secondary sources tell us that a jagir was offered by Maharaja Ranjit Singh to Baba Dyal who declined the offer. The Maharaja granted the same jagir in the name of their Gurdwara at Rawalpindi. No other patronage of any kind was enjoyed by them.<sup>69</sup>

There were many Keshadharis among them, wearing uncut hair, they did not fully subscribe to the baptismal, *khande- ki- pahul* ceremony and symbolism of the Khalsa. It may significantly be noted that even two of the first four Nirankari Gurus were not baptised as Khalsa.<sup>70</sup> Later on, the fifth Guru Baba Hara Singh encouraged his followers to grow hair and become regular Singhs. At one place when he came to know that some of the Sehajdhari Sikhs were selling the forbidden tobacco, he advised them not to deal in it in future and to observe the *rahit* of the Khalsa.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, in their invocation recited at the end of daily prayer, they substitute the word 'nirankar' for 'Sri bhagauti' in the orthodox Sikh prayer. Also, they have their

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<sup>63</sup> John C.B.Webster, *The Nirankari Sikhs*, pp.Appendix A

<sup>64</sup> 'Affairs at Rawalpindi', The Home and Foreign Record (July 1861), NAI, pp. 211-12.

<sup>65</sup> *Census of India, 1891*, pp.836-837.

<sup>66</sup> Surinder Singh (ed.), *Nirankari Gurnat Prarambhita*, p.41.

<sup>67</sup> John C.B.Webster, *The Nirankari Sikhs*, p.39.

<sup>68</sup> *Nirankari Tract No.12,14,48,59& 66*

<sup>69</sup> Ganda Singh, "Sikhism and the Nirankari Movement", p.382; G.S.Chhabra, *An Advanced History of the Punjab*, Vol.II,p.368; S.S .Ashok, *Panjab Dian Laheran*, Ashok Pustak Mala, Patiala, 1974,p.8.

<sup>70</sup> *Nirankari Tract Nos.12*, pp.29-33 &51-52.

<sup>71</sup> Ganda Singh, "Sikhism and the Nirankari Movement", p.390.

own greeting slogan *dhan nirankar*, instead of Sat Sri Akal of the Orthodox Sikhism.<sup>72</sup>

Moreover, the Nirankaris strict adherence to the tradition of a living Guru and his indispensability in their way of life is quite contrary to the orthodox Sikh idea of unity of Guruship as well as its impersonal nature and character. In this way, their own line of succession till date is in extreme contradiction to the Sikhs belief in Guru-Granth as their Guru after the death of Guru Gobind Singh.<sup>73</sup>

Not only the common people but also some of the leading religious and political figures were inspired by the reforms introduced by the Nirankaris. Baba Ram Singh, the Namdhari leader visited Nirankari Darbar and discussed with Baba Darbara Singh the Nirankari way of life. He was immensely impressed by some of the practices followed by Nirankaris. Baba Darbara Singh then humbly requested him to popularize those practices in his own area. Some of the active Singh Sabha leaders inspired by the simple ceremonies of the Nirankaris paid visits to the Nirankari Darbar from time to time and stayed there with the Nirankari Gurus, particularly with Baba Ratta.<sup>74</sup>

Maharaja Hira Singh of Nabha also got interested in the activities of the Nirankari Gurus and paid a visit to Nirankari Darbar at Rawalpindi. He was so much impressed by the Nirankari Gurus that on his return to Nabha, he asked his son Tikka Ripudaman Singh, the member of the Viceroy's Council in 1909, to help legislation regarding the Anand Marriage ceremony, a major problem faced by the Sikhs at that time. This was done by the initiative taken by Tikka Ripudaman Singh in the Viceroy's Council.<sup>75</sup>

The Nirankaris stress on truthful living and simple social ceremonies had a deep impact on the people of the Punjab, high and low. Although their activities remained confined to a particular region, and the number of their followers was not very large, their indirect influence appears to have been of considerable significance.

**Conclusion:** The Nirankaris appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as reform movements within the Sikh community. The Sikhs had been lapsed into Hinduism. In this context, the Nirankari Sikh tradition was founded by Dyal Das, a Khatri Sikh Malhotra sub caste of Peshawar. His followers, who were largely drawn from Khatri Arora or Bania caste, came to be known as the "Nirankari" or the believers in the worship of only the formless One, *Nirankar*. Further, they too, had been directed to reject idolatry and to discard all Brahmanical way of life in contrast to the standardized Sikh pattern of living, their position, functioning at the periphery of the mainstream, becomes somewhat clear.

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<sup>72</sup> Sulakhan Singh, "Towards Understanding Schism(S) in Religion and History: The Case of Sikhism", p.57.

<sup>73</sup> Sulakhan Singh, "Towards Understanding Schism(S) in Religion and History: The Case of Sikhism", p.57.

<sup>74</sup> Ganda Singh, "Sikhism and the Nirankari Movement," p.389.

<sup>75</sup> John C.B. Webster, *The Nirankari Sikhs*, pp.103-104 : also see *Appendix I*.

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