

# ***Késang***



ਛੱਕੇ ਛੋਭ ਛੁੱਟੇ ਕੇਸ ॥ ਸੰਘਰ ਸੁਰ ਸਿੰਘਨ ਭੇਸ ॥

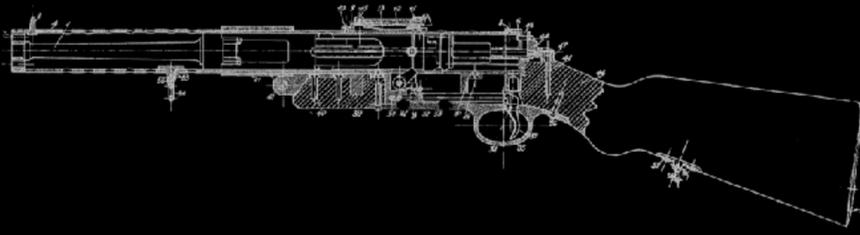
*Highly infuriated with their **Kés** flowing loose,  
the enraged warriors appear like lions*

SIKH EMPIRE SOLDIERS WITH KÉS FLOWING IN BATTLE



***Kés:** unshorn hair on top the head*

***Késadari:** One who adorns long hair and beard*



*“Growing up in an age of security, we shared a yearning for danger,  
for the experience of the extraordinary.”*

*Ernst Jünger*

As Punjabi youth leapt into the storm of steel amidst *Jung-Hind Punjab* (1984), they began receiving baptism by sword en masse from militant *jathas*, mirroring 18th-century *misdars* initiating eager young men into the Khalsa *misls*. The Sikh pursuit of power has always begun with the violent figuration of offering one’s head and rebirth ensuing.

ਸਿੰਘਨ ਪੰਥ ਦੰਗੈ ਕੇ ਭਇਓ | ਸਿੰਘਨ ਜਨਮ ਸੰਗ ਸ਼ਸਤ੍ਰਨ ਲਇਓ । ਸਿੰਘਨ ਪਾਹੁਲ ਖੰਡੇ ਕੀ ਦਈ । ਸਿੰਘਨ ਗੁੜਤੀ ਖੰਡੇ ਕੀ ਲਈ |  
*[Brothers], the Panth of Singhs is one of war. The Singhs take birth through weapons. The Singhs are given the sword baptism. [Just like a newborn’s first meal is sugar], a Singh’s first meal is sugar stirred by the Khanda.*

The Panth Prakash narrates the Guru’s declaration, “ਛੜੀ ਰੂਪ ਸੁੰਦਰ ਅਤਿ ਲਾਰੇ । ਕੇਸ ਸੀਸ ਸਿਰ ਬਾਂਧੈ  
ਪਾਰੇ । **Thus, my Sikhs will adopt the form of warriors, with kes and turbans on their head.**” In this remaking of man, he adopts two units, *kés* and *shastar*. *Shastar*, the device of sovereigns, the world-mover. And *kés*, the identity marker.

So as the youth of the 1980s declared sovereignty, so did they grow their *kés*. Of course there were zealots preceding the conflict. However, for many others in Punjab, their metanoia began with the emergence of threat. And to this excitement, the growing of *kés*, symbolized their leap into the storm.



In 1984, the state issued an official notice:

*“Any knowledge of Amritdharis who are dangerous people ... should be immediately brought to the notice of the authorities.”*

An ex-officer describes what the police force was looking for in the 80s, ***“During those days, the police randomly abducted individuals on suspicion. If someone had a beard, tied a nice turban, or wore a Kara [steel bracelet], they would be abducted, assuming they were militants.”***

A recent convert of that time caused confusion amongst his devoted Sikh family members, who once knew him to be irreligious, but who was now fitting the Khalsa form. The convert told them, ***“ਹੁਣ ਤਾਂ ਰੱਖਣ ਦੀ ਲੋੜ ਹੈ, ਅੱਗੋਂ ਜਦ ਸ਼ਾਂਤੀ ਹੋ ਗਈ ਫੇਰ ਬੇਸ਼ੱਕ ਕੱਟਾ ਲਾਂਗੇ // Now, [when the Khalsa form is inviting great risk] it matters to keep it [the kés]. And in the future when it's peaceful, then perhaps I'll cut it again.”***

Blasphemous. Yet the fighter smirks, fully understanding what the Késadari is—  
a man of action.

Father Monserrate, a guest within emperor Akbar's court, notes the history and culture of Punjab and the Indus Valley region,

***“The original inhabitants of this kingdom were the Getae, whom the ancients called Geretae. They regard it as a sin to cut the hair or the beard, since these are the chief and distinctive signs of manhood.”***

Ancient texts linked to the Punjab region describe Kés adorning Godmen,

*“हरिश्मशारुर्हरिकेश आयुसस् || the yellow-bearded, yellow-haired, iron-hearted Indra.”*

*“We offer these prayers to Rudra the strong, whose hair is braided, who rules over heroes.”*

Many early Khalsa texts even compare the visual imagery of Guru Gobind Singh and the Khalsa to the gods, *“ਜਮ ਗੋਪਨ ਮਧ ਕਾਨੁ ਬਿਰਾਜੈ । ਤਿਮ ਸਤਿਗੁਰ ਸਿੰਘਨ ਮਧ ਛਾਜੈ । As Krishna used to sit amongst his consorts, the Guru started sitting as such amongst his (armed) Singhs.”* (Another name for Krishna is Késáva, translating to “the one with long hair”)

The understanding of the Godman Késadari existed in Punjab prior to the Sikhs. Hence, when Guru Gobind Singh attempts to radically transform his followers, the Khalsa's *kavis* suggest the physical identity bears roots in this understanding.





*Various Khalsa Sikhs*

**[SIKH TEXTS]**

ਬਿਨਾ ਸਸਤ੍ਰ ਕੇਸੰ ਨਰੰ ਭੇਡ ਜਾਨੇ । ਗਰੇ ਕਾਨ ਤਾਕੋ ਕਿਤੇ ਲੈ ਸਿਧਾਨੇ । ਇਹੈ ਮੇਰ ਆਗਿਆ ਸੁਨੇ ਲੈ ਪਿਆਰੇ । ਬਿਨਾ ਤੇਗ ਕੇਸੰ ਦਿਵੇ ਨ ਦਿਦਾਰੇ । *[Guru Gobind Singh addressing the Durbar] Without kés and weapons, a man is a sheep, grabbed by their ear they can be dragged anywhere. Listen to my command oh beloved ones, without the sword and kés do not come and see me.*

*(Gurbilas Patshahi Dasvi)*

ਸਸਤ੍ਰ ਕੇਸ ਬਿਨ ਪਾਉ ਲਖਹੁ ਨਰ । ਕੇਸ ਧਰੇ ਤਬ ਆਧੇ ਲਖਿ ਉਰ । ਕੇਸ ਸਸਤ੍ਰ ਜਬਿ ਦੋਨਹੁ ਧਾਰੇ । ਤਬਿ ਨਰੁ ਰੂਪ ਹੋਤਿ ਹੈ ਸਾਰੇ । *Those without kés and weapons, understand them to be a quarter of a man. If he has only kés then understand him as only half of a man. When one has adorned themselves with both (kés and shastar), then he becomes fully a man.*

*(Suraj Prakash)*

Both Monserrate's observations and the ancient texts reverberate through Khalsaic reasoning, but the 10th Guru takes it further, formally standardizing and fusing the késang and shastar, two inseparable base elements of the Khalsa's physical identity. The fusing signals a man of action—a warrior, rajan, sovereign.



## [RITUAL VS ACTION]

*The 10th Guru's criticism of the ascetic reveals the difference in Sikh understanding of identity*

### DASAM GRANTH

“ਪਖਾਣ ਪੂਜ ਹੋ ਨਹੀਂ ॥ ਨ ਭੇਖ ਭੀਜ ਹੋ ਕਹੀਂ ॥ *I do not worship stones, nor I have any liking for the spiritual guise.*”

“ਜਟਾ ਨ ਸੀਸ ਧਾਰਿਓ ॥ *I do not wear matted hair on my head*” (matted hair: marker of an ascetic)

“ਛੜੀ ਕੇ ਪੂਤ ਹੋ ਬਾਮਨ ਕੇ ਨਹਿ // *I am the son of a Kshatriya (warrior) and not of a Brahmin.*”

ਛੱਕੇ ਛੇਭ ਛੁੱਟੇ ਕੇਸ ॥ ਸੰਘਰ ਸੁਰ ਸਿੰਘਨ ਭੇਸ ॥ *Highly infuriated with their Kés flowing loose, the enraged warriors appear like lions*

Lines within the Dasam Granth, narrating the imagery of the *kshatriya*, sit alongside the rejection of ascetic practice (*Sant Matt*), which at its core is a critique of the inaction and apolitical life that this form of spiritualism brews.

The undertone of the Dasam Granth, and many early Khalsa texts, is to lead a life oriented around action, engagement in the *Maya*-filled world, and in the extreme, suggests Sikh rulers will even engage in perceived *sin*. The Khalsa's physical form is crafted to match this mission. **ਯਰੈ ਕੈ ਠਾਯੇ । ਤਬੈ ਸ਼ਿਸਟਿ ਆਯੇ । ਭਏ ਕੇਸ ਧਾਰੀ । *For fulfilling his mission, the Guru arrived. For this, did he take birth in this world. For this, he kept his hair unshorn.*** (Gur Sobha, 1711)

Adorning *kés* reinforces in oneself, and communicates to the onlooker, the commitment to action—the leap into the storm.

## [STANDARDS]

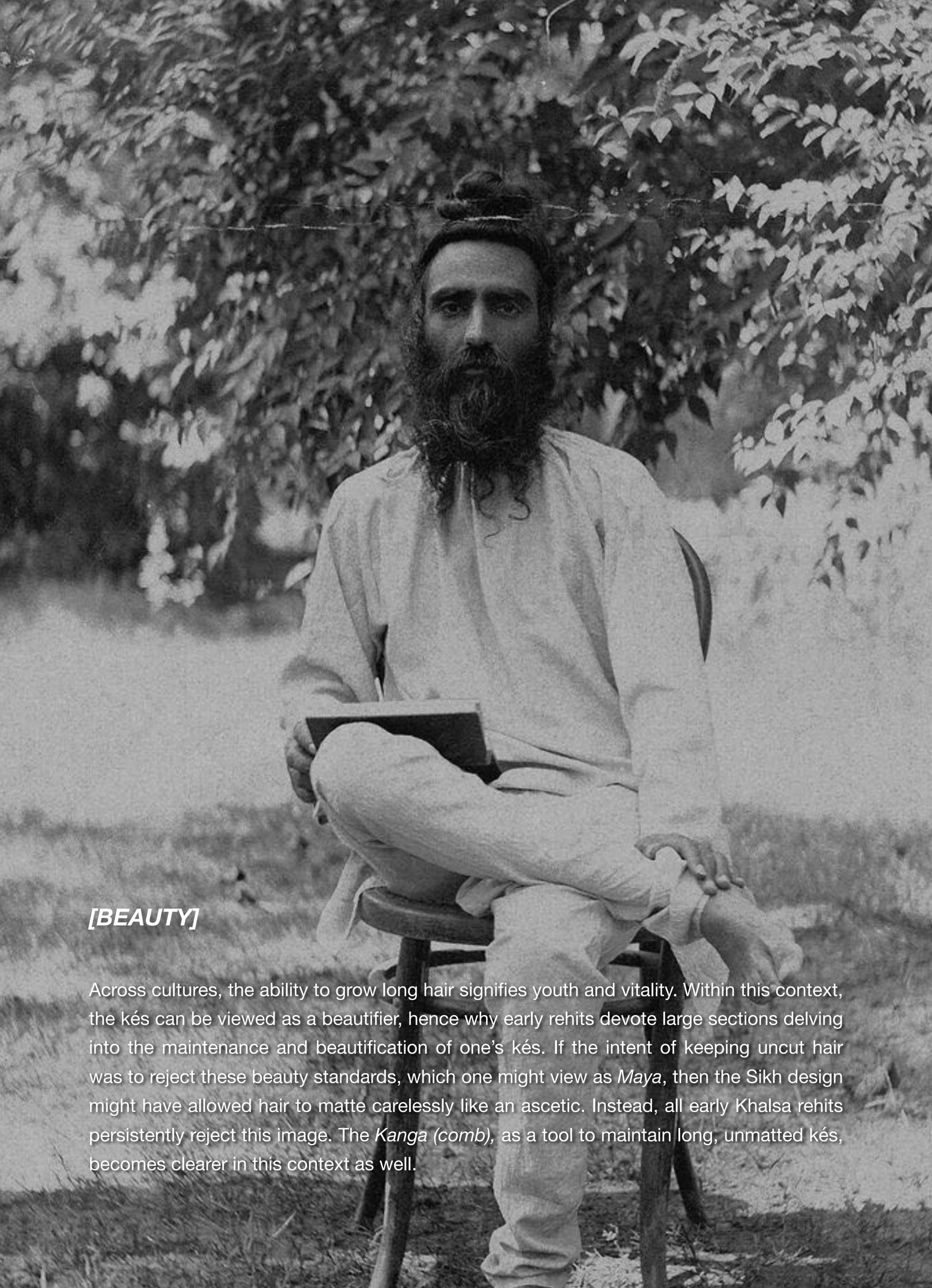
Certain punishment standards in early Khalsa rehits and Sikh Empire practice exemplify a more militaristic and beauty-driven understanding of kés. An early rehit, the *Prem Sumarag*, alongside other historical texts suggest cutting the hair of a man who has committed certain transgressions. The intention is to emasculate the wrongdoer, to reduce him to *mona* after having violated Khalsa codes.

***“The British may have thought of themselves as the pinnacle of ‘morality and masculinity’ but in Sikhs’ eyes, a ‘clean-shaven pink face’ was the ultimate effeminate, sexually enervated man.”***

The kés itself is a marker of beauty and virility, while the cutting of hair for men is seen as weak and effeminate. In this world it is obvious why one keeps kés, as it becomes the norm under a politically and culturally dominant Khalsa. This is precisely what occurred during the reign of Ranjit Singh, with members of the political class and beyond, Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, and even European, adorning kés.

*Alexander Gardner, a Késadari Irish-American Colonel of the Sikh Empire*





## **[BEAUTY]**

Across cultures, the ability to grow long hair signifies youth and vitality. Within this context, the *kés* can be viewed as a beautifier, hence why early rehits devote large sections delving into the maintenance and beautification of one's *kés*. If the intent of keeping uncut hair was to reject these beauty standards, which one might view as *Maya*, then the Sikh design might have allowed hair to matte carelessly like an ascetic. Instead, all early Khalsa rehits persistently reject this image. The *Kanga (comb)*, as a tool to maintain long, unmatted *kés*, becomes clearer in this context as well.



[MODERN TIMES]



As Sikhs set their roots in new lands, the existential crisis of assimilation and identity emerge stronger than ever. Parents become distraught at the inevitable, when their child comes home having put scissors to their head.

Some will accept this as modernity, but an alternate view is much harsher:

*“...Nau Nidh said to Guru Gobind Singh [on keeping kés], “What you have said is true, however times have changed.”*

*The Guru replied, “How have times changed? The same sun remains, the same moon, water, wind, fire and Earth remain. How can you blame time? Blame yourself for not being able to keep Kés, speak the truth. You do not have the strength to keep Kés so you dismissively blame the times for changing.” (Suraj Prakash)*

Bhangu’s eugenic worldview following the *Vadda Gallughara* echoes, “ਤੱਤ ਖਾਲਸੇ ਸੇ ਰਹਯੇ ਗਯੇ ਸੁ ਖੇਟ ਗਵਾਇ ॥ *The True Khalsa remained while the false perished.*” **Some might be too weak to retain kés.**

But recent generations, having largely failed to fully convey the aesthetic rationale behind the Khalsa’s image, share culpability in the reduced number of Késadaris. Additionally, and perhaps a comment on the state of the Sikhs, the retaining of Kés en masse has historically been intimately connected with a broader understanding of what the Khalsa’s mission actually is.

## [YOUTH REBELLION]



One narrative from Sikh history is that the Khalsa has always been in possession of the young. Throughout history, young men have joined the radical Khalsa in spite of sharp resistance from their families.

Sukha Singh, the famed co-slayer of Massa Ranger, joined the newly born Khalsa as a young man despite resistance from his parents. Fearful their son's decision would endanger him, Sukha's parents cut his Kés while he slept. In response to this, Sukha leaves his home and joined his militant brethren in the jungles.

*“By preaching they [Khalsa Sikhs] recruit followers by removing them from their families. On such occasions sons-daughters and wives cry as do the parents and kins. All relatives get together and create a ruckus”*

*“Pandit Har Kishen, son of Pandit Madusudan, came to the Maharaja [Ranjit Singh], who asked him to take Pahul first, and after he would be given command over some troops... He got ready to accept the Pahul and his father began to shed tears on that misfortune and the Raja Kalan advised and counseled the boy to desist, but all was in vain.”*



## **[THE YOUNG GURU'S REBELLION]**

A young Guru Gobind Singh may have standardized the Kés as a form of rebellion against the Kshatriya tradition *Mundhan*, the temporary shaving of a boy's head. This ceremony was traditionally performed under two occasions, first at a child's birth and then when his father died.

ਮਾਤਿ ਪਿਤਾ ਮਰੇ ਜੇ ਕੋਈ । ਤਉ ਭੀ ਕਹਿਤ ਨ ਭੱਦਰ ਹੋਈ । ਮਾਤ ਪਿਤਾ ਗੋਬਿੰਦ ਹਮਾਰਾ । ਏ ਸੰਸਾਰੀ ਝੂਠ ਪਸਾਰਾ ॥

*Even when one's own parent sheds his mortal fame, even then must he not shave his own head. Gobind Singh is his only parent. All other worldly relationships are counterfeit. (Gur Sobha, Sainapati)*

Sainapat, a poet of the 10th Guru's court, explains how the young Guru refused to perform *Mundhan* following his father's death and instead retained his Kés, defying previous traditional norms. The choice to keep kés signaled that he would not mourn his father's death, and instead embark on the path of sovereignty and rebellion, a command which he then gave to the Sikhs. The author notes that Sikhs in Delhi of upper caste resisted adopting such an edict, as it meant leaving previous traditions. In these circumstances, it was the radical young who left their homes to join Guru Gobind Singh and his political machinations.



*“The disciples of of Nonock had permitted the growth of the hair of the head and beard. An edict was therefore issued, compelling Hindoos of every tribe to cut off their hair”*

### **[TARU'S STAND]**

The epic sacrifice of Taru Singh sounds in the pantheon of Sikh martyrs. In 1745, the famed Mehtab Singh and his warband of 50 Singhs, took refuge in the jungles. Taru Singh, a farmer, provides financial support to his brethren who sought to upend Mughal rule. For this involvement, he is arrested by the state which was actively hunting the rebel Khalsa.

The Panth Prakash claims that Taru Singh could have bribed his way out of custody, as his village had managed the release of his sister, neither having been accused of a violent crime. But he chose to challenge the state regardless. While incarcerated, Taru Singh expressed to his family that Guru Gobind Singh once sacrificed everything *“for the glory and expansion of the Khalsa Panth // ਪੰਥ ਬਧਾਵਨ ਖਾਤਰ ਤਾਈਂ,”* and he was inspired to do the same. During imprisonment, Taru Singh's captors order his kés to be cut, which he refuses, and instead demands they remove his entire scalp so his kés can remain intact, ultimately causing him to lose his life.

Taru Singh's sacrifice is not only a story of unwavering faith in his Guru, but an unshakable commitment to the cause of Sikh sovereignty which he and his brethren were pursuing. His kés, his beacon of sovereignty, remaining intact at the cost of his life, was the ultimate challenge and middle finger towards the Mughal and Hill rulers, foreshadowing the Khalsa gunning for their throne.

## **[NO FEAR]**

Relevant in the present day, is the understanding that a Khalsa Sikh was designed to stand out amongst the world. Upon hearing that no Sikh spoke up prior to the 9th Guru's execution, the 10th decided his Sikhs will adopt an identity that will never allow them to hide amongst the crowd, an appearance to rid cowardice. (Suraj Prakash)

Of course this outward physical appearance invites danger, especially for a power-seeking Khalsa. The legendary Sukha Singh once had his kés cut by his terrified parents as he slept. He would become a martyr many years later fighting on the battlefield. Forward to the 1980s, the state mimics the 18th century bounties, and begins killing Sikhs on a large, systematic scale, targeting mostly young men by their outward Khalsa identity. And yet, many began wearing it in these circumstances.

The overarching lesson from Sikh history is that especially in this environment of risk, one *should* keep the kés, as the convert once said. Of course it is difficult, but it is through overcoming this difficulty that gives rise to an inner strength that a Sikh ought to feel and project as a sovereign. The Késang can only be understood through this experience. So if it feels difficult, keep it.

ਏਕ ਓਰ ਭਯੋ ਖਾਲਸਾ ਏਕ ਓਰ ਸੰਸਾਰ ॥

***"The Khalsa stands on one side; the world on the other"***



*“In the midst of the engagement, we observed a Singh withdraw briefly and sit beside us. He had removed his dastār and his kesh hung loose. We remarked, ‘Singh Sahib, you have left the fight.’ He replied calmly, ‘Only for a moment.’*

*The Singh then set about carefully combing his hair and retied his dastār with deliberate composure. Turning to us, he said, ‘Khalsa Ji, accept my Fateh. With the Guru’s grace, you shall now behold the Khalsa in its true form.’*

*He rose, re-entered the fray with a resounding cry of jaikāre, and struck with such ferocity that the British line visibly recoiled. We saw with our own eyes that he cut down sixty or seventy of the enemy before attaining martyrdom.”*

Testimony of an elder who witnessed the Battle of Baddowal (via Kharagket\_ on X)





## *[SOURCES & INSPIRATION]*

DASAM GRANTH, PANTH PRAKASH (RATTAN SINGH BHANGU), GUR  
SOBHA (SAINAPATI), SURAJ PRAKASH, GURBILAS PATSHAHI 10,  
NAVEEN PANTH PRAKSH, PREM SUMARAG, BANSAVALINAMA

