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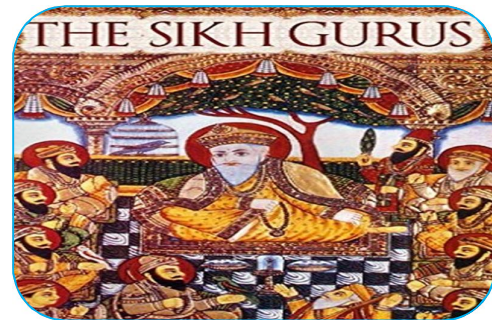
## SIKH GURUS AS HARBINGER OF A RENAISSANCE ETHOS IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

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### ABSTRACT:

*The concept of renaissance is generally associated with periods of intellectual awakening, social reconstruction, cultural renewal, and the emergence of new visions of humanity. Although the term is most frequently applied to developments in Europe, several transformative movements in India exhibited similar characteristics of renewal and reform. Among these, the movement initiated by the Sikh Gurus occupies a distinctive place. Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Sikh Gurus introduced a comprehensive worldview that challenged social inequality, religious orthodoxy, moral stagnation, and political oppression. Their teachings emphasized human dignity, spiritual equality, rational reflection, ethical responsibility, and collective welfare. Through the establishment of institutions such as Sangat and Langar, the promotion of honest labour, and the creation of the Khalsa, they transformed religious principles into social realities. The Sikh movement generated a new consciousness that encouraged individuals to transcend inherited divisions and participate in the creation of a just and compassionate society. This article argues that the Sikh Gurus functioned as architects of a renaissance ethos in Medieval India by fostering humanistic values, rational spirituality, ethical citizenship, and collective empowerment. Their contributions extended beyond religion and initiated a broad process of social and moral transformation that reshaped the cultural landscape of India.*



**KEYWORDS:** *Sikh Gurus, Renaissance, Humanism, Medieval India, Spiritual Reform, Ethical Citizenship, Khalsa, Social Transformation.*

### INTRODUCTION:

The history of civilizations reveals recurring moments when societies experience profound intellectual, moral, and cultural renewal. Such moments often emerge during periods of crisis when existing institutions fail to address the aspirations of the people. Renaissance movements challenge outdated assumptions, encourage new ways of thinking, and create fresh possibilities for human development. They are characterized by a revival of human dignity, the questioning of inherited authority, the promotion of knowledge, and the reconstruction of social values. Although the European Renaissance remains the most familiar example of such transformation, the idea of renaissance should not be confined to a single geographical region or historical experience. Different societies have witnessed their own forms of awakening and renewal shaped by local conditions and cultural traditions. Medieval India presented circumstances that demanded such a transformation. Society was burdened by rigid caste distinctions, social exclusion, religious dogmatism, economic inequality, and political instability. Human worth was frequently determined by birth rather than character, while

spiritual life was often overshadowed by ritualism and sectarian divisions. The masses were deprived of opportunities for meaningful participation in social and religious life. In this environment, the Sikh Gurus emerged as visionary leaders who offered a radically different understanding of humanity, society, and spirituality.

Beginning with Sri Guru Nanak and continuing through Sri Guru Gobind Singh, the Sikh Gurus developed a tradition that challenged structures of exclusion and promoted a new vision of collective life. Their teachings encouraged individuals to recognize the divine presence within every human being and to organize society according to principles of equality, justice, and service. They rejected social hierarchies, questioned ritualistic practices, and emphasized moral action as the foundation of spiritual life. More importantly, they translated these ideas into institutions and practices that transformed everyday social relations. The renaissance significance of the Sikh movement lies in its ability to create a new ethos that combined spiritual depth with social responsibility. The Sikh Gurus did not merely propose theological doctrines. They cultivated a new moral consciousness that empowered ordinary people to participate in the reconstruction of society. Their emphasis on human dignity, rational spirituality, ethical citizenship, and collective empowerment generated a transformative process comparable to renaissance movements elsewhere in the world.

This article examines the Sikh Gurus as architects of a renaissance ethos in Medieval India. It argues that their teachings and institutions initiated a comprehensive movement of social and spiritual renewal that challenged prevailing structures of inequality and inspired a new vision of human potential. Through an analysis of humanism, rational spirituality, ethical citizenship, and collective empowerment, the study demonstrates how Sikh thought contributed to one of the most significant processes of renaissance in Indian history.

### **I. Renaissance as a Concept and Its Indian Manifestation**

The term renaissance literally signifies rebirth or renewal. Historically, it refers to periods in which societies undergo significant intellectual, cultural, and social transformation. Renaissance movements typically arise when individuals begin questioning inherited traditions and seek new foundations for knowledge, morality, and social organization. Such movements encourage independent thinking, emphasize the value of human life, and promote the development of institutions that support collective progress. The European Renaissance is frequently associated with the revival of classical learning, the growth of humanism, and the emergence of new forms of artistic and scientific inquiry. However, the essential characteristics of renaissance extend beyond specific historical events. At its core, renaissance represents a transformation of human consciousness that liberates individuals from restrictive structures and inspires new forms of creativity, dignity, and social participation.

When examined from this broader perspective, the Sikh movement displays many of the defining features of a renaissance. The Sikh Gurus challenged social and religious practices that limited human freedom and dignity. They rejected inherited hierarchies that divided society and encouraged people to think beyond conventional boundaries of caste, religion, and status. Their teachings inspired a new understanding of the relationship between the individual, society, and the divine. One of the most significant aspects of renaissance thought is the restoration of human agency. Medieval societies often conditioned individuals to accept predetermined social roles. The Sikh Gurus challenged this mindset by emphasizing the capacity of every human being to achieve spiritual and moral excellence. They encouraged individuals to become active participants in their own development rather than passive subjects of social conventions.

Another defining feature of renaissance movements is the democratization of knowledge and spiritual experience. In many societies, religious and intellectual authority remained concentrated within privileged groups. The Sikh Gurus dismantled such monopolies by making spiritual wisdom accessible to ordinary people. Their teachings were communicated in languages understood by the masses, ensuring that religious understanding was not restricted to a select elite. This democratization contributed to the emergence of a more inclusive intellectual culture. The Sikh movement also embodied the renaissance principle of social reconstruction. Rather than accepting existing inequalities

as inevitable, the Gurus sought to reshape society according to ethical principles. Institutions such as *Sangat* and *Langar* provided practical models of equality and collective participation. These institutions transformed abstract ideals into lived social realities and demonstrated that alternative forms of social organization were possible.

Furthermore, renaissance movements often seek harmony between spiritual and worldly life. The Sikh Gurus rejected the notion that spiritual fulfilment required withdrawal from society. Instead, they encouraged active engagement with social responsibilities while maintaining spiritual awareness. This balanced approach contributed to the creation of a dynamic and socially engaged religious culture. The renaissance ethos developed by the Sikh Gurus was therefore not a simple imitation of developments elsewhere. It emerged from the specific conditions of Medieval India and addressed the challenges facing Indian society. Nevertheless, it shared fundamental characteristics with renaissance movements across history, including humanism, rationality, social reform, and the affirmation of human dignity. The Sikh movement may therefore be understood as a distinctive Indian manifestation of renaissance consciousness.

## II. Humanism and the Reclamation of Human Dignity

One of the most important characteristics of renaissance thought is its emphasis on the value and dignity of the human person. Renaissance humanism challenged systems that reduced individuals to predetermined social categories and instead affirmed their inherent worth and potential. The teachings of the Sikh Gurus display a similar commitment to human dignity and represent one of the most significant expressions of humanistic thought in Medieval India. At a time when Indian society was deeply divided by caste distinctions, the Sikh Gurus proclaimed the essential equality of all human beings. Guru Nanak rejected the belief that social status should be determined by birth. He argued that moral character and righteous conduct, rather than inherited identity, constitute the true measure of an individual. This perspective challenged one of the most deeply entrenched structures of Medieval society and introduced a radically inclusive vision of humanity.

The humanism of the Sikh Gurus was rooted in the conviction that all human beings share a common divine origin. Because the same divine reality resides within every person, no individual can claim inherent superiority over another. This spiritual understanding provided a powerful foundation for social equality. It encouraged people to look beyond external differences and recognize the shared humanity that unites all individuals. The correlation between Sikh thought and renaissance humanism becomes particularly evident in their common concern for the dignity of ordinary people. Renaissance thinkers sought to restore confidence in human potential and challenged systems that denied individuals opportunities for self development. Similarly, the Sikh Gurus empowered marginalized communities by affirming their spiritual worth and social importance. Individuals who had long been excluded from positions of dignity found recognition and respect within the Sikh community.

The institutions established by the Sikh Gurus translated these humanistic principles into social practice. The institution of *Sangat* created a community in which individuals from different backgrounds gathered as equals. Social distinctions that dominated the wider society lost their significance within this collective space. Participation was based on shared commitment rather than inherited status. The institution of *Langar* represented an even more visible expression of human dignity. In the communal kitchen, people from all social backgrounds sat together and shared the same meal. This practice directly challenged assumptions about purity, pollution, and social superiority. It demonstrated that equality was not merely a philosophical principle but a practical reality that could reshape everyday social interactions.

The Sikh understanding of labour further reinforced human dignity. Many forms of manual work were considered inferior within Medieval social hierarchies. The Sikh Gurus rejected such prejudices and affirmed the dignity of honest labour. Through the principle of *Kirat Karo*, they taught that productive work contributes to both personal development and collective welfare. This recognition of labour reflected a broader commitment to valuing every individual regardless of occupation. Another important dimension of Sikh humanism was its universal outlook. The Gurus did not restrict dignity

and compassion to members of a particular community. Their teachings emphasized the unity of humanity and encouraged concern for the welfare of all people. This universal perspective resonates strongly with renaissance ideals that sought to transcend narrow divisions and cultivate a broader sense of human solidarity. The reclamation of human dignity achieved by the Sikh Gurus represented a transformative development in Medieval India. Their teachings challenged structures of exclusion and offered a new vision of society based on equality, respect, and shared humanity. In doing so, they contributed to the emergence of a renaissance ethos that placed human worth at the centre of social and spiritual life.

### III. Rational Spirituality and Intellectual Liberation

A defining characteristic of renaissance movements is their challenge to intellectual stagnation and their encouragement of rational inquiry. Renaissance thinkers questioned inherited beliefs, examined accepted traditions critically, and sought to restore authenticity to human knowledge and experience. A similar process of intellectual and spiritual liberation can be observed in the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. Their approach to religion represented a profound departure from the ritualistic and dogmatic tendencies that dominated much of Medieval religious life. By emphasizing inner spirituality, moral conduct, and reflective understanding, they initiated a transformation that bears a strong resemblance to the intellectual awakening associated with renaissance thought.

During the Medieval period, religious practice was often dominated by elaborate rituals, ceremonial observances, and rigid forms of orthodoxy. Many individuals believed that spiritual advancement depended upon external actions rather than inner transformation. Religious authority frequently rested in the hands of intermediaries who claimed exclusive access to divine truth. Such conditions limited individual spiritual autonomy and discouraged independent reflection. The Sikh Gurus challenged these assumptions by insisting that genuine spirituality arises from personal awareness of the divine rather than mechanical participation in rituals. Guru Nanak repeatedly criticized practices that lacked ethical substance and spiritual sincerity. He questioned the value of pilgrimages, fasting, ceremonial displays, and ritual observances when they were disconnected from moral conduct. According to his teachings, true religion is expressed through honesty, compassion, humility, and devotion rather than external performance.

This emphasis on inner authenticity parallels one of the central concerns of renaissance thought. Renaissance intellectuals sought to move beyond unquestioned traditions and encourage individuals to engage actively with knowledge and truth. Similarly, the Sikh Gurus encouraged people to think critically about religious practices and to seek spiritual understanding through reflection and experience. They did not reject religion itself. Rather, they sought to restore its ethical and spiritual essence. Another important aspect of Sikh spirituality was its rejection of superstition and irrational beliefs. Medieval societies often relied upon astrology, magical practices, and supernatural claims to explain human circumstances. The Sikh Gurus discouraged dependence on such practices and emphasized personal responsibility. Human beings were encouraged to cultivate wisdom, discipline, and ethical awareness rather than seek solutions through superstition. This emphasis on reason and responsibility contributed to intellectual liberation and strengthened the individual's capacity for independent judgement.

The correlation between Sikh spirituality and renaissance rationality becomes particularly visible in their shared commitment to freeing individuals from fear. Fear often sustains systems of domination by discouraging questioning and critical reflection. The Sikh Gurus sought to liberate people from fear of social authority, religious dogma, and inherited prejudice. Through spiritual awareness, individuals developed confidence in their ability to engage directly with truth. This liberation from fear enabled the emergence of a more active and self-conscious society. The concept of Naam Simran further illustrates the intellectual depth of Sikh spirituality. The remembrance of the divine name was not intended as a mechanical exercise but as a process of self-transformation. Through continuous awareness of the divine presence, individuals cultivated clarity of thought, emotional balance, and ethical sensitivity. This practice encouraged self-examination and personal growth rather than passive

conformity. In this sense, Sikh spirituality promoted the development of reflective individuals capable of contributing positively to society.

The Sikh Gurus also challenged religious exclusivism. They rejected the notion that truth belongs exclusively to a single tradition or community. Their teachings emphasized the universality of spiritual wisdom and the shared moral aspirations of humanity. This openness fostered dialogue and mutual respect among different religious communities. Such inclusiveness resembles the broader intellectual openness associated with renaissance culture, which encouraged engagement with diverse sources of knowledge and experience. The compilation of the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* further strengthened this spirit of intellectual and spiritual pluralism. The inclusion of compositions from saints belonging to different religious and social backgrounds demonstrated a remarkable commitment to universality. Truth was valued regardless of its source. This approach encouraged a culture of dialogue rather than dogmatism and reinforced the renaissance ideal that wisdom should be sought wherever it may be found. Through their emphasis on rational spirituality, ethical reflection, and intellectual openness, the Sikh Gurus transformed religious consciousness in Medieval India. They liberated spirituality from excessive ritualism and restored its connection with moral responsibility and human development. In doing so, they created a spiritual renaissance that empowered individuals to become active participants in the pursuit of truth and justice.

#### IV. Ethical Conduct and Collective Responsibility

Renaissance movements are not limited to intellectual renewal alone. They also reshape the relationship between individuals and society by promoting active citizenship, social responsibility, and collective participation. The Sikh Gurus contributed significantly to this dimension of renaissance consciousness through the development of a moral framework that linked personal spirituality with public responsibility. Their teachings encouraged individuals to become ethical citizens whose actions contributed to the welfare of the broader community. The foundation of this ethical vision can be found in the three central principles of Sikh life *viz.*, *Naam Japo*, *Kirat Karo*, and *Vand Chhako*. Together, these principles created a comprehensive model of citizenship that integrated spiritual awareness, economic responsibility, and social cooperation. Rather than separating religious devotion from everyday life, the Sikh Gurus demonstrated how spiritual values could guide social conduct and civic engagement.

*Naam Japo* emphasized constant awareness of the divine presence. This principle encouraged individuals to cultivate humility, self discipline, and moral integrity. A person grounded in spiritual awareness was expected to act responsibly toward others and contribute positively to society. Spiritual growth was therefore inseparable from ethical behaviour. *Kirat Karo* introduced another important dimension of renaissance thinking by affirming the dignity of productive labour. The Sikh Gurus rejected social attitudes that associated honour with inherited privilege rather than personal effort. Honest work became a moral obligation and a means of contributing to collective welfare. This emphasis on labour reflected a broader commitment to personal responsibility and social participation. The principle of *Vand Chhako* further expanded the ethical horizon of Sikh thought. Individuals were encouraged to share their resources with others and support those in need. Wealth was not regarded as a purely personal possession but as a trust that carried social obligations. Through sharing and generosity, social bonds were strengthened and economic inequalities were reduced. This principle fostered a culture of cooperation and mutual support that contributed to social harmony.

The relationship between these teachings and renaissance ideals is particularly significant. Renaissance thinkers often emphasized civic virtue and the responsibility of individuals to contribute to the common good. The Sikh Gurus articulated a similar vision in which personal fulfilment was inseparable from social responsibility. Individuals were encouraged to participate actively in community life and work toward collective welfare. The institutions established by the Sikh Gurus reinforced this culture of participation. *Sangat* provided opportunities for discussion, worship, learning, and collective decision making. Members of the community gathered not merely as followers but as active participants in a shared moral enterprise. This environment nurtured habits of cooperation, responsibility, and mutual respect.

Similarly, the practice of Seva became an essential component of Sikh citizenship. Selfless service encouraged individuals to place community welfare above personal gain. Through acts of service, people learned to recognize the dignity of others and contribute to the creation of a compassionate society. Seva transformed ethical ideals into practical action and demonstrated that social progress depends upon collective effort. The Sikh Gurus also emphasized courage as a civic virtue. Ethical citizenship required more than personal morality. It demanded the willingness to confront injustice and defend the rights of others. The sacrifices of Sri Guru Arjan and Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur illustrate this commitment to moral courage. Their actions demonstrated that ethical responsibility sometimes requires resistance to oppression and personal sacrifice for the greater good. By linking spirituality with social responsibility, the Sikh Gurus created a distinctive model of ethical citizenship. Their teachings encouraged individuals to become morally conscious participants in the reconstruction of society. This vision contributed significantly to the development of a renaissance ethos that valued active engagement, collective welfare, and civic responsibility.

## V. Khalsa as the Institutional Expression of Renaissance Values

The creation of the Khalsa by Sri Guru Gobind Singh in 1699 represented the culmination of the renaissance ethos developed by the Sikh Gurus over more than two centuries. The Khalsa was not merely a religious community. It was a transformative institution that embodied the principles of equality, dignity, courage, responsibility, and collective empowerment. Through the Khalsa, the ideals of Sikh renaissance were translated into an organized social force capable of defending justice and promoting human welfare. One of the most important features of the Khalsa was its rejection of inherited social hierarchies. Members came from diverse castes, occupations, and regions, yet all were united by a common identity. This rejection of caste distinctions represented a direct challenge to one of the most deeply rooted structures of Medieval Indian society. The Khalsa affirmed that human worth derives from character and commitment rather than birth or social status.

The common surnames Singh and Kaur symbolized this new vision of equality. By removing caste based identifiers, Sri Guru Gobind Singh reinforced the principle that all members of the community possessed equal dignity and responsibility. This reform represented a practical realization of the humanistic ideals that had been articulated by the earlier Gurus. The Khalsa also reflected the renaissance emphasis on individual empowerment. Renaissance movements seek to awaken human potential and encourage active participation in social transformation. Sri Guru Gobind Singh empowered ordinary individuals by entrusting them with responsibility for defending justice and protecting the oppressed. People who had previously occupied marginal positions within society acquired confidence, dignity, and a sense of purpose.

Another important renaissance dimension of the Khalsa was its integration of spiritual and temporal life. Members were expected to cultivate both moral excellence and social courage. This ideal became known as the Saint Soldier tradition. The *Saint Soldier* was committed to spiritual discipline while remaining actively engaged in the defence of justice. Such integration of contemplation and action reflects the broader renaissance aspiration to harmonize personal development with social responsibility.

The Khalsa also strengthened collective identity and participation. Its members were united by shared values rather than inherited privilege. This sense of common purpose encouraged cooperation and solidarity across social divisions. The community became a vehicle for social transformation and collective empowerment.

Most importantly, the Khalsa institutionalized resistance to oppression. Renaissance movements often challenge structures that limit human freedom and dignity. The Khalsa embodied this principle by preparing individuals to confront injustice and defend fundamental human rights. Its members were expected to protect the weak, resist tyranny, and uphold moral principles regardless of personal consequences. The creation of the Khalsa therefore represented far more than a religious development. It was the institutional expression of a renaissance vision that had been evolving since the

time of Sri Guru Nanak. Through the Khalsa, the Sikh Gurus transformed ideals into social reality and created a community capable of sustaining the values of equality, justice, and human dignity.

## CONCLUSION

The Sikh Gurus occupy a unique place in the history of Medieval India because they initiated a comprehensive movement of spiritual, social, and moral renewal that transformed the consciousness of their age. Their contributions extended beyond religious reform and generated a renaissance ethos that reshaped human relationships, ethical values, and collective identity. By challenging caste discrimination, ritualistic orthodoxy, social exclusion, and political oppression, they created new possibilities for individual and collective development. The humanism of the Sikh Gurus restored dignity to ordinary people and affirmed the equality of all human beings. Their rational spirituality liberated religion from excessive ritualism and encouraged reflective engagement with truth. Their emphasis on ethical citizenship connected personal morality with social responsibility and inspired active participation in community life. Finally, the creation of the Khalsa transformed renaissance ideals into a living institution dedicated to justice, equality, courage, and service.

The correlation between the teachings of the Sikh Gurus and the essential characteristics of renaissance thought is both profound and consistent. Like renaissance movements elsewhere, the Sikh movement promoted human dignity, intellectual freedom, ethical responsibility, and social reforms. Yet it did so within the cultural and historical context of India, producing an indigenous model of renaissance that addressed the specific challenges of Medieval society. The Sikh Gurus should therefore be understood not merely as religious leaders but as forerunners of a renaissance ethos that transformed Medieval India. Their legacy continues to demonstrate that genuine social progress emerges when spiritual insight is combined with human dignity, moral courage, and collective responsibility. The renaissance they initiated remains one of the most significant examples of social and spiritual renewal in Indian history.

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