

Introduction and Early History

The Sikhism which has about 23 million adherents all over the world, is one of the youngest but least well-known of the world's monotheistic traditions. Majority of the Sikhs live in the North westerly Indian state of Punjab.

Sikhs (the word Sikh means a disciple or learner) are the followers of Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and the nine successive Gurus ending with 10th Guru, Gobind Singh (1666-1708) who passed the Guru ship to the Holy Scripture Adi Granth, thus giving it the status of Guru Granth which became perpetual Guru of the Sikhs. During his time, Guru Nanak traveled far and wide; this period spread over two decades and his travel extended up to Dacca (In present day Bangladesh) and Assam in the East, Sri Lanka in the South, Himalayas up to Tibet in the North and Mecca, Medina, Baghdad and Istanbul in the West. This phase of traveling ended in the early 1520s, when Guru Nanak began to give his "mission" of spreading divine glory its final form. He founded Kartarpur and established a new community. Here, Nanak was revered with the title of "Guru" and his followers were called the Sikhs. Congregational prayers constituted the heart of Sikh devotional life and Sikh men and women gathered and sang the praises of the Creator, expressed in the compositions of Guru Nanak, accompanied by musical instruments. After Guru Nanak, his successors continued to compose verses that highlighted the Guru as the medium of revelation. By the end of the sixteenth century the Sikhs were well entrenched in central Punjab. Sikh "Manjis" (In essence seat of authority) were established in towns such as Bukhara, Kabul, Lahore, Delhi, Agra, Banaras and Patna which were all situated on the trade route connecting central Asia with eastern India. There are also references of Sikhs living in coastal towns in the south and Kashmir in the north. The self-definition of the Sikh community developed considerably, and by the start of the seventeenth century, it had a sacred text, a sacred mythology, a sacred geography, and a sacred calendar with a leader who decided their belief system and practice, and was empathic that his path was distinct from those followed by Hindus and Muslims.

Beliefs

The Sikh call their beliefs 'Gurmat' (Guru's Thinking), and they are constructed around two basic assumptions. First, the content was revealed to the Gurus and is thus of divine origin. Second, the search for and the knowledge of truth are important, but living with these aims is the paramount goal of Sikh life. A belief that does not find expression in practical action has no place in Sikh thought.

• God

In Sikhism God by himself is the one Ultimate, Transcendent Realty, without attributes, Timeless, Boundless, Formless, Ever-existent, Immutable, Ineffable, All by himself and even Unknowable in His entirety. God in Sikh Scripture has been referred to by several names, picked from Indian and Semitic traditions. Some traditional names are Ram, Narayan, Gobind, Gopal, Allah, and Khuda. He is also addressed in both Negative and Positive terms. God is both

Transcendent and Immanent. One ejaculatory phrase Waheguru (Wondrous Enlightener), expressing awe, wonder and ecstatic joy of the worshipper, as he comprehends the immenseness and grandeur of the Lord of Creation is the Sikh Mantra to address God. The Sikhs believe in the unity and unique nature of Waheguru. God has no relatives, no mother, no father, no wife, no son, and no rival who may become a potential contender. God is omnipotent and omnipresent, transcendent Sovereign (GG. 597)

• Creation

A single divine call resulted in the rise of complicated structures with the sky, the earth, and all the myriad of forms of vegetation and life. For the Sikhs, the universe by definition represents divine immanence. It cannot reach the purity of divine attributes, and is not true or eternal when compared to the reality of Waheguru, but as the divine creation, it enjoys a high level of truth and beauty (GG, 463, 580)

• Human Beings

For Guru Nanak, human life is a precious jewel (GG,156) and its goal is to attain liberation, which is to be one with God by having respectful place in the divine court (GG,942). The search for liberation works at two distinct levels – spiritual and temporal – which are closely interwoven. The first level concerns a relationship with Waheguru while the second concerns a relationship with fellow human beings and the world in general. For Sikhs, the Guru is a special being, the bearer of the divine word. He is like the sandalwood tree, which imparts fragrance to whoever comes near it. The Human mind suffers from a fundamental flaw of self-centeredness or Ego and as a result, human beings tend to see themselves as masters of their own destiny. This state of mind prevents them from recognizing their humble place in this universe created by Waheguru. The mind is naturally fickle and tends to be attracted to and involved in material pursuits. For this reason, bringing the mind under control becomes pre-requisite to effect spiritual elevation. In the writings of the Gurus, liberation is not achieved in isolation or renunciation, but with the context of family and domestic responsibility (GG, 61). Family ethic is further expanded to include obligations toward the good of the community, which implies a life of high social commitment. Religious life demands the qualities of hard work, as well as the need to share the fruit of their labor with others (GG, 1215). The need to show kindness toward all people as well as natural world would shape Sikh views on socio-political-ecological ethics.

Worship and Devotional activity

Sikhs are supposing to worship only one primal being or Waheguru, the Guru Granth is their source of divine knowledge. In Sikh devotions, men, women, and children submit themselves to Waheguru (GG,474), sing and listen to the divine praises (GG,2), give thanks for the gift of human birth and the bounties that accompany it (GG,414), and seek help with the problems that may confront them(GG,519). The experience of prayer is both personal and congregational, though the Sikhs firmly believe that the collective supplication of a congregation never goes unfulfilled. Place of Congregational worship is known as Gurudwara, where in the main hall Holy Scripture is placed on an altar under a canopy, an attendant or a scripture reader who can be of either Gender sitting behind Guru Granth with a ceremonial flywhisk. As a mark of respect men, women and children cover their head and submit themselves to the presence of the divine word

by touching their forehead to the ground in front of the text. Congregation sits on the side or in front of the scripture to listen to the singing of the hymns with music from the devotional singers and discourses by the preachers explaining the verses of Guru Granth... The prayers are followed by the distribution of the Karah Prasad (Blessed wheat pudding) prepared from equal quantity of flour, sugar and clarified butter.

Sikh Scriptures

• Guru Granth

The holiest of the Sikh scriptures is Guru Granth Sahib. It was called Adi Granth (first scripture) until Guru Gobind Singh conferred on it the title of the Guru in 1708, after which it was called Guru Granth Sahib and nothing can be added or changed in it. The text was compiled by 5th Guru Arjan in 1604 which included hymns of his 4 predecessors and his own along with the writings of Sikh Bards and non Sikh 'Bhagtas' (Devotees or Saints) whose writings conform with Gurus' thinking, they all belonged to various regions, were Hindus and Muslims, of higher and lower castes or social order. Guru Gobind Singh, later (1706), added the hymns of 9th Guru Teg Bahadur in it and declared it to be the Guru of the Sikhs.

• Dasam Granth

Tenth Guru Gobind Singh did not include his own poetry or writings in Guru Granth Sahib. Dasam Granth which was written after his death is revered by Sikhs and many of its writings are accepted as that of the 10th master but it is not accepted in its entirety by all as the authenticity of several writings in it and their association with Guru Gobind Singh is questionable.

• Others

o Varan Bhai Gurdas

Varan Bhai Gurdas is the name given to the 40 Varan (Chapters) of writings by Bhai Gurdas, the first scribe of Guru Granth Sahib and a scholar of great repute. His writings are considered 'Key to Guru Granth Sahib'.

o Bhai Nand Lal's Work

Nand Lal was a scribe and Persian scholar of Guru Gobind Singh's time and was closely associated and devoted to the Guru. His writings, mainly in Persian poetry is another text which is often quoted by preachers and sang by the devotional singers at the Gurdwara services.

Important, Sikh Festivals

• Guru Gobind Singh's Birthday, Celebrated in January

o Guru Gobind Singh was born in 1666 in Patna (Bihar) India

• Baisakhi or Vaisakhi, Celebrated in April as Birth day of Khalsa

o On this day in 1699, Tenth Guru Gobind Singh formed the order of Khalsa some time also called the tradition of Saint – Soldier. He instructed his Sikhs to follow a certain code of conduct and gave them external articles of faith to keep, which are Kesh (Unshorn Hairs), Kara (Iron Bracelet), Kanga (Wooden Comb), Kachha (Baggy Short) and Kirpan (Sword) the word Kirpan itself means "mercy, grace, or magnanimity", each of these articles of faith symbolizes certain moral and spiritual values. Every male Sikh was given the name Singh and every female the name Kaur to shun caste distinction and symbolizing equality.

- **Guru Arjan's Martyrdom**, Celebrated in June
- Fifth Guru of Sikhs who first compiled the Sikh Scripture Adi Granth and constructed Harmandir (Golden Temple) Amritsar whose foundation stone was laid by Sufi Saint Mian Mir, in 1588. He was tortured and killed on the orders of Mogul King on May 1606 at Lahore, Pakistan
- **Installation of Guru Granth Sahib**, Celebrated in October
 - o 10th Guru Gobind Singh stopped human lineage of Guru ship and bestowed Guru ship to the Holy Scripture in October 1708 at Hazur Sahib (Nanded), Maharashtra, India
- **Diwali**, Celebrated in November
 - o Sikhs celebrate Diwali to commemorate the arrival of 6th Guru Hargobind at Amritsar from Gwalior where he was imprisoned by the Emperor who after realizing his mistake, released the Guru who also got released 52 innocent petty hill rulers imprisoned there.
- **Guru Nanak's Birthday**, Traditionally celebrated in November
 - o Guru Nanak was born in 1469 at Talwandi, the place now known as Nankana Sahib in Pakistan
- **Guru Tegh Bahadur's Martyrdom**, Celebrated in November/December
 - o Ninth Guru of the Sikhs, who stood for human rights of every one to practice his or her religion of choice, was arrested under the order of Mogul Emperor Aurangzeb, was tortured and beheaded in November 1675 at Delhi, India.