



SIKHISM

Sikhs reject the assertion that Sikhism is a reform movement of Hinduism and Islam. Instead, they say that it came from the divine inspiration of Guru Nanak and the nine gurus who succeeded him. All sects follow the belief in one God and the teachings and scriptures of the ten gurus.

Origins and Development

Sikhism was founded by **Guru Nanak** in the Punjab, India, in the late fifteenth century CE. An adherent of the faith is called a **Sikh**, which means "**follower**" in Sanskrit. There are roughly **nineteen million Sikhs**, the majority of them are in the **Punjab** in the northwestern part of India. About two million have emigrated to live and work in the United States, Europe, or in parts of what used to be the British colonies.

Sikhism, which is, comparatively speaking, a young religion, is a **monotheistic** one. Sikhs believe in one God called **Waheguru** (great teacher). Scholars have indicated that they think Sikhism evolved as a Hindu reform movement or as a mixture of Hinduism and Islam. The Sikhs reject that theory. Nevertheless, Nanak was born a Hindu in Punjab in 1469. When he was young he worked for a local Muslim politician and it's recorded that he impressed everyone with his wisdom and learning. He was part of a group that would sit by the side of a river to pray and discuss religion.

At one point he was absent from this routine for three days. When he came back, he didn't speak for a day. When he did, he said, "There is neither Hindu nor Muslim, so whose path shall I follow? I shall follow God's path. God is neither Hindu nor Muslim and the path I follow is God's."

After his revelation in his late twenties, he left his wife and two sons to travel in search of truth and wisdom. After about twenty years, he acquired farmland and settled in central Punjab where he founded the town of **Kartarpur** and became Guru Nanak. The Sikh religion was born and Nanak was its first guru.

The Path of Guru Nanak

Guru Nanak followed the not unusual path of the prophets who preceded him. He traveled and taught in far outlying areas and set up communities of followers along the way. He spoke out against what he saw as inequities (the Hindu caste system, for example), and he stressed that all people were equal.

Nanak's childhood friend, **Mardan**, a professional musician, accompanied him on his travels. Nanak liked to sing and did so in the form of hymns. So, he and Mardan entertained the local populace while getting the message out. As part of his message, Nanak wore a mixture of Hindu and Muslim clothes when he and Mardan, as it were, toured.

Many of the Hindu and Muslim audiences became followers of the fledging religion. As he gathered followers around him, his spiritual ideas bore fruit until his composed hymns, which were written down, eventually became the core of the Sikh sacred text: the **Adi Granth** (first/original book).

In the final phases of his life, Guru Nanak returned from all the traveling to his established Sikh community at **Kartarpur** and settled down with his wife and sons. It was time for him to consider a successor. Most people thought he would appoint one of his sons. But, his insistence on the principle of equality that he had been teaching for years and had made part of the religion made him choose **Lehna**, a man who had become an ardent disciple. Nanak blessed Lehna and gave him a new name, **Angad**, and he had him anointed with a saffron mark on his forehead. When Guru Nanak gathered his followers together for prayers, he invited Angad to occupy the seat of the Guru. In that way Guru Angad was ordained as the successor to Guru Nanak.

The myth of Guru Nanak's death says that Guru Nanak asked for flowers to be placed on either side of him, from the Hindus on his right, from the Muslims on his left. He explained that those whose flowers remained fresh the next day would have their way. He then asked his disciples to pray, and he lay down and covered himself with a sheet. In the early hours of the next morning, **September 22, 1539**, Guru Nanak merged with the eternal light of the Creator.

Central Beliefs

To understand how the Sikhs developed it helps to get to know **The Ten gurus**. The word **guru means teacher**, but when the Sikhs speak of the **Guru** they mean god, the **Great Teacher**. Pieces of Sikh history

can be related to a particular guru. Each one of them had an influence on the beliefs of the religion, and some of them had political influence. As we know, the first guru was Guru Nanak who lived from 1469 to 1539. The period from the first to the last, the tenth guru, was, roughly speaking, from the mid - 1500s to the early 1700s.

Guru Gobind Singh (1675-1708), the tenth and last guru, was the most famous after Guru Nanak. He organized the Sikhs to oppose the tyranny of the Mughals and established a military defense group known as the **Khalsa** (brotherhood of the pure), which still remains. The Khalsa are considered a "chosen" race of **soldier-saints** willing to give up their lives to uphold their faith and defend and weak. Guru Gobind Singh gave all Sikhs the name "**singh**" (lion) for men and "**kaur**" (princess) for woman, to do away with all traces of the caste system. He also decreed that the writings of the Guru Granth Sahib would be the authority from which the Sikhs would be governed. The book is treated almost like a human being. Wherever it is moved, it is attended by five Sikhs who represents the Khalsa. In his efforts to oppose the Mughals, he lost his two sons and was finally assassinated. He has been called "**the most glorious hero of our race.**"

Sikhs developed a warrior attitude because of the violence against them by the Mughals. This attitude was reinforced when the Khalsa was founded and the five tenets known as **Ks** were instituted: **kesh** (uncut hair), **kangha** (comb), **kirpan** (sword), **kara** (steel bracelet), and **kachch** (short pants for use in battle). As a result Sikhs wear long uncut hair with a comb in it and a steel bracelet on the right wrist. The sword and short pants are usually reserved for battle.

Sikhism is based on the discipline of purification and overcoming of the five vices: **greed, anger, false pride, lust, and attachments to material goods**. At the end of a person's life, the good and the bad conduct are balanced out and the result determines the family, race, and character of the person when reborn. There is no direct belief in heaven or hell as places, but those who have been selfish or cruel in the current life will suffer in their next existence. Those who acted with compassion and honesty will be better off in their next incarnation. The soul develops as it passes through the many incarnations until it becomes united with the infinite one.

Sikhs are opposed to the idea of **austere asceticism**; they emphasize the ideal of achieving saintliness as active members of society, Sikhism prohibits idolatry, the caste system, and the use of wine or to-

bacco. Stress is placed on the importance of leading a good moral life that includes loyalty, gratitude for all favors received, philanthropy, justice, truth, and honesty.

Holy Writings and Worship

There is only one canonical work, the **Adi Granth** (first book) also known as the **Guru Granth Sahib**, which was compiled by the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan, in 1604. There were at least three versions of the book, but the one recognized as authentic was revised by Guru Gobind Singh in 1704. The Adi Granth has about 6,000 hymns composed by the first five Gurus: Nanak, Angad, Amar Das, Ram Das and Arjan.

The Adi Granth occupies a focal point in all Sikh temples. The **gurdwara** (doorway to the Guru) contains a cot under a canopy on which a copy of the **Adi Granth** is placed on cushions and covered by elaborate decorations. All who enter the gurdwara in the temple must cover their heads and take off their shoes and wash their feet (especially in India). Services may take place at any time; there is no special time of worship. Worshippers will bow in front of the **Guru Granth Sahib** and during services prayers will be said, there will be a sermon, chanting of hymns, and finally a communal meal. In accordance with the principles of equality in Sikhism, men and women share the tasks of preparing and serving the **langar** that is made available after most services to anyone who wishes to indulge.

The chief gurdwara is the magnificent **Harimandir** (the Golden Temple) at **Amritsar** in Punjab state. However, in the average gurdwara there may be readings, Sikh music, study classes, and even physical activities.

In their homes, most Sikhs will set aside a room to hold a copy of the Guru Granth Sahib. The room is also called a gurdwara. Daily readings are part of the duties of the household. Many Sikhs will recite verses during their daily activities. Because not every person or family has the accommodations to set aside a separate room for the Guru Granth Sahib, they will instead, have a copy of the excerpts, which are known as the **Gutkha**, from which to say morning and evening prayers.

Rituals and Customs

Birth and naming are carried out in different ways by different faiths:

The Christians have christening, the Jews circumcision, and the Sikhs have the naming ceremony.

After the birth, the parents take the child to the gurdwara. Hymns are sung that express gratitude for the birth of a baby. The Adi Granth is then opened at random and the child is given a name beginning with the first letter of the first word in the left page. The parents take some time to think about it, then they chose what they want the name to be. Then more hymns are sung.

Marriage

Marriage can still be an arrangement between the families of the bride and groom. But, Sikhs now accept the right of the men or the women to reject the person chosen for them. However, marriage is still seen as the joining of two families.

Traditionally, the bride wears red and gold; her head is covered with a red scarf, her hands and feet decorated with patterns, and she wears lots of gold jewelry. The groom wears a colorful turban and scarf, and carries a long sword.

The Sikh conducting the marriage ceremony will explain the ideals of marriage to the couple. The father of the bride will pass one end of the groom's scarf to the bride. This signifies the passing of responsibility for the care of his daughter to the bridegroom.

A wedding hymn, the *Lavan* of **Guru Ram Das**, is sung. While that is happening, the couple will walk around the Guru Granth Sahib four times. As they finish each circuit they will bow to the holy book. The families will follow the couple to show support for them. The bride and groom are then free to go to their new home.

Death

Death could be a new beginning for Sikh because they believe in the cycle of reincarnation. They are taught, therefore, that it is not necessary to mourn excessively since the deceased lives on in another body.

Festivals and Ceremonies

Many ceremonies are held to celebrate the birth and death of the ten gurus, two to commemorate the deaths of martyrs, and a festival for the anniversary of the Baisakhi, the date the Khalsa was founded (1699), which was originally a harvest festival. The five major observances include **Baisakhi**, the birthdays of Gurus **Nanak** and **Gobind**

Singh, and the martyrdom of Gurus **Arjan** and **Tegh Bahadur**.

All the Sikh festivals are marked by continuous forty-eight-hour readings of the Guru Granth Sahib.

Diversification into Modern Society

The history of the development of the Sikhs over the past 500 years has, at times, been tumultuous and bloody. The involvement of the British only propagated the violence fighting between the Sikhs and the Hindus. The subcontinent was partitioned into India and Pakistan in 1947. The Sikh population was divided equally on both sides of the boundary line.

The separatist movement has the establishment of an independent Sikh state to be called **Khalistan** (land of the Pure) as its goal.



The **Khanda** consists of three objects: A Solid Circle, Two Interlocked Swords, One Double-edged Sword in the Center.

The two-edged sword (which itself is known by the name Khanda), circled by the solid circle known as a Chakra. The right edge of the Khanda symbolises freedom and authority governed by moral and spiritual values. The left edge of the double-edged sword symbolizes divine justice which chastises and punishes wicked oppressors. The two-edged sword at the centre of the Khanda also symbolises disintegration of false pride and vanity and demolition of the barriers of caste and other inequalities.

The Chakra being a circle without a beginning or an end exhorts the Sikhs to make the whole creation as the object of their compassion and activities. It signifies the symbol of **Ek Om Kar**, the Oneness of God, who is without beginning or end. The circle signifies oneness, unity, justice, humanity and morality.

The two **Kirpans** (swords) flanking the Chakra represent the two swords of Guru Hargobind signifying the spiritual and temporal leadership of Gurus. The left side signifies the sword of spiritual sovereignty or **Peeri**. The right sword signifies the sword of political sovereignty, **Meeri**.