

What is Sikhism

The word 'Sikh' means a 'disciple'. A Sikh is a person who believes in one god and teachings of the Ten Gurus, enshrined in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh Holy Book. Additionally, he or she must take Amrit, the Sikh Baptism.

Brief History

The Sikh religion was founded by Guru Nanak, who was born in 1469 AD in the village Talwandi, now called 'Nankana Sahib' near Lahore (Pakistan).

Right from his childhood his keen mind would not accept all the groundless rituals, superstitions and dogmas which passed for religion in those days.

Guru Nanak and the nine Gurus who succeeded him, set a wonderful example of living spiritually, while yet taking an active and secular part in the world.

The Tenth and the last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708 AD) initiated the Sikh Baptism ceremony in 1699 AD, and thus gave a distinctive identity to the Sikhs. The first 'Five Baptised Sikhs were named *Panj Pyare* (Five Beloved Ones), who in turn baptised the Guru on his request - an event hitherto unknown in the history of the world.

Shortly before passing away, the Guru ordained that *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh Holy Scripture would be the ultimate spiritual authority for the Sikhs and the temporal authority would vest in the *Khalsa Panth* - The Sikh Commonwealth, *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh Holy Scripture was compiled and edited by the Fifth Guru, Guru Arjan in 1604 AD. This is the only Scripture in the world which has been compiled by the founders of a faith during their own life time.

Guru Arjan also built the world famous Gurdwara - *Darbar Sahib*, at Amritsar which is the nucleus of Sikhism.

During the eighteenth century the Sikhs were subjected to various suppressions and persecutions by the authorities of the

time, motivated by communal fanaticism. They had to make supreme sacrifices to protect and preserve their faith and separate entity. The Mughul Empire was on the verge of disintegration. The Afghans had started invading the country under Ahmad Shah Abdali. The Sikhs availed of this opportunity to establish their own kingdom which they ultimately achieved under Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1708-1839 AD). The Sikh Empire lasted for half a century and was annexed by the English in 1849 AD.

During the freedom struggle of India a large number of Sikhs kissed the hangman's noose, faced all the brutalities and braved the bullets and suffered long term imprisonments in order to liberate the country. Although the Sikhs constitute only 1.7 percent of India's population, yet they have made a name for themselves in almost all walks of life such as armed forces, agriculture, sports, industry, education, medicine and engineering, etc., through sheer dint of hard work and with a missionary dedication. Their adventurist and enterprising nature has taken them to almost all countries of the world.

Religion and Philosophy

The Sikh religion is strictly monotheistic, believing in one Supreme God, Absolute yet All-pervading, the Eternal, the Creator, the cause of causes, without Enmity, without Hate, both Immanent in his creation and beyond it. It is no longer the God of one nation, but the GOD OF GRACE. That being so, He creates man not to punish him for his sins, but for the realisation of his true purpose in the cosmos and to merge in from where he issued forth

'O my mind, thou art the embodiment of Light; know thy essence'

'O my mind, the Lord is ever with thee; through the Guru's Word enjoy His Love.'

'Knowing thy essence thou knowest thy Lord; and knowest thou the mystery of birth and death.'

(Guru Granth Sahib, p.441)

The basic postulate of Sikhism is that life is not sinful in its origin, but having emanated from a Pure Source, the True One abides in it. Thus sayeth Nanak:

'O my mind, thou art the spark of the Supreme Light; know thy essence.'

Not only the whole of Sikh philosophy, but the whole of Sikh history and character, flows from 'this principle'.

The Sikhs do not recognise the caste system nor do they believe in idol-worship, rituals or superstitions. The

gods and goddesses are considered nonentities.

This religion consists of practical living, in rendering service to humanity and engendering tolerance and brotherly love towards all. The Sikh Gurus did not advocate retirement from the world in order to attain salvation. It can be achieved by any one who earns an honest living and leads a normal life.

'He alone, O Nanak, knoweth the way, who earneth with the sweat of his brow, and then shareth it with the others.'

(Guru Granth Sahib, p.1245)

Guru Nanak gave new hope to the down-trodden mankind to join his fraternity as equals. He is a creator of the NEW MAN in the New World supported by a New morality.

Riches and personal possessions are not hindrance in living by spiritual ideals. Sikhism does not believe in the maxim 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eyes of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God.' On the other hand the Sikh dictum is as under:

'They, who are attuned to the Lord, by the Guru's Grace, Attain to the Lord in the midst of Maya,(ie. wealth).'

(Guru Granth Sahib, p.921)

Sikhism does not accept the ideology of pessimism. It advocates optimism and hope. The maxim, 'Resist not evil but whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also', does not find any place in Sikh way of life. On the other hand it enjoins its followers: 'When an affair is past every other remedy, it is righteous, indeed, to unsheathe the sword.'

(Guru Gobind Singh)

Distinctive Personality

A Sikh has a distinctive personality. This distinction is represented by five symbols, popularly known as Five K's, because the first letter of each symbol begins with the letter 'K'. These are *Keshas* (long and unshorn hair), *Kangha* (a comb), *Kara* (a steel bracelet), *Kachha* (pair of shorts) and *Kirpan* (a sword).

People who wear a uniform and who are imbued with disciplined outlook, are better able to achieve unity of purpose and acquire a real sense of brotherhood than those who have set no particular standards. A Sikh without these symbols is a nonentity.

Those who cut their hair or trim their beard commit a breach of the Cardinal Rules of the Order, and are considered as 'apostates'.

Sikh Baptism

Amrit (The Sikh Baptism) is a must for every Sikh. No minimum or maximum age is stipulated for getting baptised. A Sikh undertakes to uphold the principles of its faith and Code of Conduct as prescribed by the Gurus.

Any man or woman of any nationality, race or social standing, who adheres to the principles of the Faith has a right to receive baptism and join the Sikh Commonwealth - *The Khalsa Panth*.

Sikh Code of Conduct

The Sikh Code of Conduct is known as '*Sikh Rehat Maryada*'. It is based upon the teachings of Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh traditions and conventions. These rules are meant for carrying out the religious ceremonies and enforcing the discipline of the Faith in a uniform manner throughout the world.

No individual or organisation, whosoever important it may be, has a right either to amend these rules or to frame new ones. This power rests with the *Panth*, ie., the community as a whole acting through their Beloved Five (Panj Payare). Any rule which over-rides the basic teachings of the Faith is ultra vires. All intoxications such as alcohol, tobacco and all its derivation, Trimming of the Keshas, Eating the meat(Kutha) prepared as per Muslim rites (Hallal) are forbidden. Adultery is considered as a sin. A Sikh should regard another man's wife as his sister or mother; and another man's daughter as his own daughter. The same rule is applicable to the Sikh Woman also.

Woman in the Sikh Society

Woman is regarded as a significant part of the Sikh community. She receives the utmost reverence for her role in the family and society. The birth of a daughter is not considered

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inauspicious nor does there exist any

Married and family life is considered honourable,

brotherhood. It is here that the high and the low, the rich

Personal Law.

custom like sati - the burning of the widow with her husband's dead body on the funeral pyre. Rather a widow has a right to remarry if she so desires.

A woman is considered to have the same soul as man and she has an equal right to grow spiritually and to attend religious congregations and recite divine hymns in the Sikh Temple. She is also eligible to participate and perform all ceremonies including Baptism.

Sikh women do not put on *veil* (purdah). Dowry and divorce are not permitted. Wearing of clothes which expose the body and breed lustful thoughts are considered dishonourable.

Ceremonies of the Sikhs

The important ceremonies among the Sikhs are those associated with Birth, Naming the child, *Amrit* (Baptism), *Anand Karaj* (marriage) and the Death ceremony. The most important among all these is the *Amrit* (Sikh Baptism) ceremony.

No special rituals are attached to these ceremonies. The only important aspect is recitation of shabad (hymns) from *Guru Granth Sahib*.

The dead amongst the Sikhs are cremated and their ashes are thrown into the nearest canal or river. No sanctity is attributed to any particular river. It is forbidden to erect monuments over the remains of the dead. All these ceremonies have a common objective, namely, to remind us of one's relation with God. These are conceived as means to an end i.e. the union of soul with the Lord.

Marriage in Sikhism

Marital bond according to Sikh religion is a sacrament - a holy union and not a contract.

'They are not wife and husband who only sit together. Rather are they wife and husband who have one spirit in them.'

(Guru Granth Sahib, p.788)

Sikhism does not believe in celibacy.

natural and ideal.

'O my mind, keep thyself detached even in the household, If thou practisest the Truth, and holdest thy desire and, doest good deeds, thy mind is illumined by the Guru's Grace.'

(Guru Granth Sahib, p.26)

The marriage of Sikh couple is solemnised by circumambulating four times around the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Each time a Shabad - Epithalamium, which is a part of the marriage service is recited by a Sikh priest who performs the marriage ceremony. The priest tells them to mould their conjugal relations as per the model laid down in these Four Shabads (Hymns).

The same ceremony is performed at the remarriage of a widow or a widower.

Fairs and Festivals

The Sikhs celebrate the following days:

The birth and death anniversaries of the Ten Gurus.

The installation of the Holy Granth Sahib as the Spiritual Guide (Guru) of the Sikhs.

The birth of the Khalsa, i.e. Baisakhi day which generally falls on the 13th of April each year.

Martyrdom days of the prominent Sikhs who died for the sake of their religion or in defence of the oppressed.

The days connected with the important events of the Sikh history.

The Daily Life of a Sikh

Every Sikh is expected to get up in the morning before dawn. After taking bath he should meditate on the Name of God.

'Rise thou early and meditate on the Name, Yea, dwell on the Lord night and day; Then, thou sufferest not sorrow; and all thy woes depart.'

(Guru Granth Sahib, p.255)

The following five compositions are recited every day:

Morning: *Japji Sahib*, *Jaap Sahib* and *Ten Swiyyas*

Evening: *Rehras*

Night : *Sohila* (before going to bed)

A Sikh is required to attend Gurdwara - the Sikh Temple - as a part of daily routine.

Sangat and Pangat

The two important features of a Gurdwara are *Sangat* - congregation, and *Pangat* - Community Kitchen, also known as *Guru-ka-Langar*. This community kitchen is meant for providing food to all devotees, pilgrims and visitors. It is a symbol of equality, fraternity and

and the poor, the learned and the ignorant, the kings and the paupers, all share the same food sitting together in one row. This kitchen is run by the common contributions of the Sikhs. The institution of *Langar* (Common Kitchen) is instrumental in creating social equality among the whole mankind.

The Gurdwara

The Sikh Temple is called Gurdwara. In every Gurdwara the Sikh Holy Scripture is installed in the main hall, which is used for prayer and daily service.

Every person irrespective of caste, creed, culture or nationality can visit it. Before entering the Gurdwara one must take off his shoes and cover his head. On entering the main hall every one approaches the Holy Book and bows before it in reverence and takes his place.

A Granthi, or Sikh Priest conducts the prayer and or performs the Congregational services. Services begin with the singing of hymns with the musical instrument. Called Kirtan, it is the most important aspect of the Diwan. The Sikh Holy book is 1430 pages of poetry rendered complete with original music, rag and taal scores. Granthis or Ragees sing the hymns in the same musical scores. On special occasions, singing is intercepted with lectures, poems, or other compositions highlighting events from Sikh history. The services are concluded with Ardas - the prayer, which invokes God's blessings in granting peace, prosperity and protection to all mankind. After the prayers a Shabad-hymn is read from the Holy Scripture and then *Karah Parshad*, a sweet semolina - pudding made from flour, sugar and butter is distributed to the congregation.

On each Gurdwara *Nishan Sahib*, a flag of yellow colour, surmounted with a *Khanda* - a double edged sword is erected. This symbolises the combination of temporal and spiritual aspect of Sikh life.

Each city or town has Gurdwaras according to their requirements. All of them have the same sanctity. There are some Gurdwaras which in addition to being a place of prayer have also historic importance. The five most important Gurdwaras are known as TAKHATS/thrones or seats of authority. These are Takhat Patna Sahib in Bihar, Takhat Kesgarh Sahib at Anandpur Sahib, and Takhat Damdama Sahib at Talwandi-Sabo in Punjab, Takhat Hazur Sahib at Nanded in Maharashtra and Akal Takhat Sahib at Amritsar, which is also the supreme seat of authority. Religious as well as temporal injunctions are issued from here from time to time for the guidance of the community. These injunctions are known as *Hukam Namas* and have the binding force of Sikh

There is no such class as priesthood in Sikhism. However, the one who performs the daily service is called the Granthi.

The hymn-singers are called Ragis and the singing of hymns is called Kirtan, i.e. praise of the Lord.

We conclude this brochure with the following words from our daily prayer.

'O God, give us light, give us understanding, so that we may know what pleaseth Thee, And may all (the whole mankind), prosper by the Grace. Waheguru ji ka Khalsa, Waheguru ji ki Fateh'(Hail God's Khalsa, Victory be to God)(Sikh Salutation).

Sikhism is a practical religion - a faith of hope and optimism. Its ideals from a large part of the more progressive elements in humanity today. It shows mankind how to lead a worthy and useful life in the world, which elevates it to the status of Universal World Faith.

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