



Chapter Overview

Emerging in the western Indian state of Punjab, the Sikh religion is the youngest of the native Indian traditions. There are about 25 million Sikhs worldwide, with 5 million living outside of India.

The Sikh tradition was founded by Guru Nanak (1469–1539), who was born in a village near Lahore. In his day, the Punjab region was very diverse, featuring cultural elements from the Middle East, Central Asia, and India. Religiously, too, there was great diversity: the area was shared by Sufis, Jainas, Nath yogis, North Indian sants, and Hindus. Guru Nanak had a mystical experience at the age of 30 and then went on a pilgrimage, engaging in discussions with different masters from the various religions. After this period, in 1519, he established a village named Kartarpur along the Ravi River in central Punjab. He declared that there was neither Hindu nor Muslim from a higher perspective and established a unique path, free from either major religion. Over time he composed 974 hymns, which became the foundational scripture for the Sikhs. Guru Nanak was well versed with the other religious traditions in the region, and his verses made a clear distinction between his teachings and those that came before them. He also established Sikh rituals, practices, and principles including meditation on the One God’s name, devotional singing, reverence for the gurus and scriptures, egalitarianism, tolerance, service to others, and a righteous life in the world.

There are ten gurus in the Sikh tradition. In chronological order they are Guru Nanak, Guru Angad, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan, Guru Hargobind, Guru Har Rai, Guru Harkrishan, Guru Tegh Bahadur, and Guru Gobind Singh. These ten gurus steered the Sikh tradition through many challenges in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries including persecution, martyrdom, and internal diversities. Furthermore, each of the gurus made significant contributions to the tradition including composing various scriptures, regulating different disciplines, sanctioning festivals, and establishing temples—the most important being the Darbar Sahib, or Golden Temple, at Amritsar. After the tenth guru, the authority of the gurus was invested in the scriptures and the community of believers, producing a sophisticated understanding of the notion of “guru.”

Sikhs hold that there is “One Supreme Being, the Eternal Reality, the Creator, without fear and devoid of enmity, immortal, never incarnated, self-existent, and known by grace through the Guru.” Their name for this god is Akal Purakh, the Eternal One. Human life is important because humans have the ability to discover their true nature. Karma is subject to divine order and can be overridden in the name of justice by Akal Purakh’s grace. Humans tend to be driven by the five evils (lust, anger, covetousness, attachment, and pride) and can be liberated in one lifetime by discipline and by remembering the divine Name. Sikhs also focus on ethics, with an emphasis on justice. These ethical

principles include cultivating virtues like contentment, humility, truthfulness, justice, temperance, love, forgiveness, charity, purity, fear of Akal Purakh, and wisdom. Both congregational and individual worship is taught in Sikhism. The Khalsa (“pure”) order was created in 1699 by Guru Gobind Singh to provide a common identity based on attire, loyalty, and discipline. There is an initiation ceremony during which the initiate is “reborn” in the house of the Guru. On a personal level, the Khalsa initiation is extremely important, but not all Sikhs participate.

The encounter with the modern world, first under British rule in India and then through the advent of globalization, has produced both reform movements and conservative movements in the Sikh tradition. The Sikhs are challenged with the changing situation in India, both politically and economically, as well as by the millions of Sikhs who live around the world and are facing situations that are vastly different than those of the culture in which their tradition arose. However, with the dynamics of this tradition and a strong history of adaptation, the Sikh tradition is thriving in the twenty-first century.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you are encouraged to

- explore the historical context in which the Sikh tradition originated, the founder (Guru Nanak), the lineage of ten Gurus, and formation of the Khalsa;
- learn about Sikh sacred texts, doctrine, notions of Guruship, and ethics;
- discover the daily and annual cycles of ritual practice;
- examine the Sikh encounter with modernity and various reform movements;
- appreciate Sikh cultural expressions such as music, art, and literature;
- trace the Sikh interactions and adaptations through the twentieth century, in India and globally;
- explore recent developments in Sikh responses to pluralism and technological changes.

Key Terms

Adi Granth The “original book” first compiled by Guru Arjan and invested with supreme authority. (p. 106)

Akal Purakh “The One Beyond Time”; God. (p. 106)

Dasam Granth The second sacred collection of texts. (p. 120)

Five Ks The five marks of Khalsa identity: uncut hair (*kes*), wooden comb (*kangha*), sword (*kirpan*), wrist ring (*kara*), and short breeches (*kachh*). (p. 118)

gurdwara The “guru’s door”; the Sikh place of worship. (p. 112)

Guru “Teacher”; either a spiritual person or the divine inner voice. (p. 106)

Khalsa The “pure” or “crown estate”; an order of Sikhs bound by a common identity and discipline. (p. 117)

kirtan The singing of hymns from the scriptures in worship. (p. 110)

Mul Mantar The “Basic Formula”; the opening creedal statement of the Adi Granth declaring the eternity and transcendence of God. (p. 120)

nam “The divine Name.” (p. 108)

nam-simaran The “Remembrance of the divine Name,” especially the devotional practice of meditating on the divine Name. (p. 122)

Panth The “path,” and hence the Sikh community. (p. 110)

rahit The code of conduct for the Khalsa. (p. 117)

Study Questions

See below for answers with page references.

1. Which religions contributed to the dynamic situation in Punjab in the fifteenth century?
2. What mystical experience did Guru Nanak have and how did he understand his mission after this?
3. Who was the fifth Guru and what did he accomplish?
4. What is the Khalsa?
5. What is the fundamental statement of Sikh belief?
6. In Sikhism, what is the value of human life?
7. What are the four notions of “Guru” in the Sikh tradition?
8. What is the Sikh sense of justice?
9. What are the five aspects of the morning liturgy for a Sikh?
10. What were the reasons for the Nirankari and Singh Sabha reform movements?
11. What did the wife of the second guru contribute to the Panth?
12. How has Sikh devotional literature continued to be relevant in modern Sikh writing today?
13. What was “Operation Blue Star?”

14. Why is religious pluralism not necessarily perceived as a threat to the Sikh tradition?
15. What efforts has Balbir Singh Seechewal made in bringing awareness to environmental issues and how does he relate this to the Sikh tradition?

Reflection Questions

1. What elements of the Nath tradition may be reflected in Guru Nanak's experiences and teachings?
2. How does the Sikh understanding of divine grace fit within a worldview that advocates karam and sansar?
3. The Guru Panth suggests that the divine is found within the assembly of Sikh practitioners and that the community is the path of the Guru. How does one conceive of an imminent divine presence within the community?
4. Traditionally, Sikh children are named through a ritual that integrates the writings of the Adi Granth. Assuming you are not of the Sikh tradition, can you envision naming your child by leaving the first letter of his/her first name "up to chance?" Would a Sikh practitioner see it this way?
5. Purity of the tradition is an element found within Nirankaris reform movement thinking. What are the pros and cons of such a position?

Research Paper Topics

1. What is Max Weber's concept of an "ethical prophet" and how does Guru Nanak's founding of the Sikh tradition reflect Weber's theory?
2. How is Guru Gobind Singh's transfer of spiritual authority significant to the further development of the Sikh tradition?
3. The notions of karam (karma) and sansar (samsara) are common to all traditions that emerged from ancient India. How do the Sikh understandings of these concepts differ from those of Hindus, Jainas, or Buddhists? In what way are they the same?
4. The Sikh tradition holds four notions of the Guru. How are these various understandings of the Guru reflected in the belief and practice of the tradition?
5. Why are the hours between 3:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m. known as the "ambrosial hours" and why is this considered to be the best time for an hour of devotional prayers? What are the five morning prayers and how is their content reflective of the early morning?

6. Research all the life-cycle rituals that are performed during the life of a Sikh practitioner. How are these rituals tied specifically to the Guru Granth Sahib? What is the significance of experiencing each life-cycle ritual?
7. Who are the Sehaj-dharis? How do they differ from Khalsa Sikhs and what relationships did they form with both the Khalsa Sikhs and Hindu Indians? How have their relationships changed over time? How have the relationships changed in the Sikh diaspora?
8. Explain the connection between the Akali movement and the SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee). How have the SGPC fared throughout the twentieth century? As the world becomes increasingly globalized, how will diaspora communities and the Internet impact the SGPC?
9. Research three North American gurdwaras through their Internet websites and scholarly case studies. What changes have these communities made in order to adapt to the North American context? What are the continuities between the North American diaspora communities and those in India?
10. In recent decades, many organizations have formed in response to Sikh visibility and subsequent discrimination and hate crimes. Research the Canadian Sikh Coalition and Sikhs for Justice. How are these groups assisting Sikhs? How are they affecting dialogue between Sikhs and non-Sikhs? How is this similar and different from pluralist India in which the Sikh tradition emerged?

Additional Resources

Audio-Visual

Sikhism: The Guru's Wisdom. 2012. 20 minutes. Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

World Sikhism Today. 49 minutes. Films for Humanities and Sciences.

Print

Dhavan, Purnima. 2011. *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Traditions, 1699–1799*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jakobsh, Doris. 2010. *Sikhism and Women*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nayar, Kamala. 2012. *The Punjabis in British Columbia: Location, Labour, First Nations, and Multiculturalism*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press.

Internet

www.sikhs.org

www.sikhnet.com

Study Questions: Answer Key

1. With the blending of cultural elements from the Middle East, Central Asia, and India, many religious traditions existed in Punjab at that time. These included Sufism, Jainism, Nath yogis, and Sants, as well as Hindus devoted to Shiva, Vinshnu, and Devi. (pp. 106–108)
2. While bathing in the Vein River one morning, Guru Nanak disappeared for three days before reemerging from the water proclaiming, “There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim.” This is understood to mean that at the higher levels these distinctions do not exist. For Guru Nanak, his experience was the beginning of a divine mission wherein God had given him the job of spreading the teachings of the holy Name. (pp. 109–110)
3. Guru Arjan (1563–1606) was the fifth Guru. Arjan built the Golden Temple, organized the scriptures, helped develop a cohesive Sikh identity, and became the first martyr in the Sikh community. This last event pushed the Sikh community towards self-consciousness, separatism, and militancy. (pp. 115–116)
4. Because Sikhs present at the martyrdom of Guru Tegh concealed themselves out of fear, Bahadur, the tenth Guru, imposed outward signs on his followers to make Sikhs recognizable. Guru Gobind Singh founded the Khalsa, an order of loyal Sikhs bound by a common identity and discipline. These individuals must undergo an initiation, and are given new names, new birthplaces, and new homes. The five signs for recognizing a Sikh are unshorn hair, a wooden comb, a miniature sword, a wrist-ring, and short breeches. (pp. 117–118)
5. “There is One Supreme Being, the Eternal Reality, the Creator, without fear and devoid of enmity, immortal, never incarnated, self-existent, known by grace through the Guru. The Eternal One, from the beginning, through all time, present now, the Everlasting Reality.” (pp. 120–121)
6. One is blessed with the rarest opportunity of the human birth through the grace of the Guru. One’s mind and body are dyed deep red (with the love of the divine Name) if one is able to win the approval of the True Guru. Thus, human life is important for realizing our true spiritual nature. (p. 120)
7. God as guru or the inner guru is the first notion. The second notion is the teacher as guru, who is a channel for the voice of Akal Purakh. The scripture as guru is the third notion, and, finally, the community as guru is the fourth notion. (pp. 122–125)
8. The Sikhs see justice as the primary duty of rulers and administrators. They regard violations of human rights as a serious moral offence. For them, justice consists of respect for the rights of others and a lack of exploitative behaviour. Only when all methods and means have been tried to bring about justice and have failed is the use of force allowed. (p. 125)
9. The early morning order is (1) *Japji* (“Honoured Recitation”), (2) *Jap Sahib* (“Master Recitation”), (3) the Ten *Savayyas* (“Ten Panegyrics”), (4) *Benati Chaupai* (“Verses of Petition”), and (5) *Anand Sahib* (“Song of Bliss”). (p. 126)

10. The Nirankari movement was founded by Baba Dayal Das (1783–1853) and was devoted to purging Hindu influences from Sikhism. It emphasized the One Formless God, recognized personal gurus descending from the founder, and accepted orthodox doctrine. The Singh Sabha movement was established in 1873. It sought to reestablish Sikh identity under casual threat from reversion to Hindu practices, actively proselytizing Christian missionaries, and Hindu Arya Samaj followers. It focused on education and strengthening the Khalsa position, and contributed to two legal changes in Indian law: the legal recognition of the distinctive Sikh wedding ritual in the Anand Marriage Act of 1909, and the re-establishment of direct Khalsa control of the major gurdwaras through the formation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak committee, to which control of all the gurdwaras was passed. (pp. 132–133)
11. Mata Khivi was the wife of the second guru. She developed the *langar* tradition where people of every caste can gather after a celebration and eat together. (p. 135)
12. Sikh devotional literature is written in Gurmukhi script. These devotional hymns were written by various gurus and are recorded in the Adi Granth. These early writings continue to be a source of inspiration for some contemporary writers who integrate passionate exegetical texts, such as Harinder Singh Mehboob's work. (pp. 136–137)
13. "Operation Blue Star" was a military assault launched by the Indian government against a group of Sikh radicals. The group of Sikhs were armed and occupying the Akal Takhat building of the Golden Temple. Many Sikhs were killed during the assault, including the leader. This contributed to further hostilities between Sikhs and the Indian government on both political and religious grounds. (pp. 137–138)
14. The Sikh tradition emerged in a religiously pluralist environment, with Jainas, Hindus, Muslims, and Sufis active in the same area. Rather than advocating a path of renunciation, the Sikh tradition formed dialogues with the various religions. They were willing to learn from other traditions but also promote their own individual identity as a separate religious community. The writings found in the Adi Granth suggest a four-part theory of religious pluralism. (pp. 107–108, 139)
15. Balbir Singh Seechewal is an environmentalist who uses Sikh narratives to engage people in environmental issues. For example, it is believed that the Sikh founder, Guru Nanak had a mystical experience while bathing in a river. Balbir Singh Seechewal uses this story to appeal to people's interest in restoring the river to a cleaner state. (p. 140)